

Applying to Graduate Programs in Creative Writing

You love to read and to write. After you graduate from St. Olaf, you want to hone your craft and produce the next great American novel, memoir, or book of poetry. Or maybe you want to move to New York and work in publishing, discovering the next poet laureate or Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist. What might you do? A graduate program in creative writing might be for you.

Graduate Programs

There are a variety of graduate program options and navigating them to decide the best fit for your interests can be daunting. Generally speaking, there are four types:

- 1) *Master of Fine Arts (MFA)*: A 2-3 year terminal studio degree focusing on the craft of writing literature. Some MFA programs combine seminars in literary studies with genre workshop experiences or take an interdisciplinary fine arts approach with critical theory seminars.
- 2) *Low-Residency MFA*: A 2-year program in which students correspond with instructors through distance learning technologies. Students are annually in residence at the college campus for a short, concentrated period of time to attend seminars, readings, workshops, etc.
- 3) *Master of Arts (MA)*: A 2-year non-terminal degree oftentimes awarded while students are en route to the Ph.D. There are some MA programs that do not require enrollment in a Ph.D. program, and these offer an affordable alternative to the MFA. In recent years, some MA programs have trained students for publishing jobs and community writing opportunities.
- 4) *Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing/Ph.D. in Creative Writing*: A 5-7 year program depending on whether students have a MFA or MA prior to enrollment. Graduate students learn genre craft and critical theory and oftentimes intend to join the professoriate following graduation.

Aside from program rankings, the best school is the one that meets your needs. You can research programs by visiting the Associated Writing Programs database at www.awpwriter.org. In addition to degree type, other key considerations include:

- 1) *Opportunities outside of the classroom* (e.g. magazine editorial internships, graduate travel stipends, etc.) to enhance your graduate experience and to enable you to participate in a thriving writers' community
- 2) *Funding options* (including summer stipends or graduate assistantships) to sustain your attention to your studies and creative writing
- 3) *Teaching experiences* to train you in the undergraduate instruction of creative writing and/or writing studies
- 4) *Quality relationships* between students and professors to facilitate your growth as an emerging writer
- 5) *Alumni network* to inform you about the program's post-graduate placement record and support

Preparing a Graduate School Application

Now that you've found a list of possible programs, how do you get started? Graduate applications generally consist of the following components, which are ranked below in order of significance:

- 1) *10-20 pp. creative writing sample* (You will typically apply for graduate study in a genre. Usually programs ask for 10-12 pp. of poetry and 15-20 pp. of fiction or nonfiction.)
- 2) *Statement of purpose* (Unlike an undergraduate admissions essay, the statement of purpose should describe your creative writing interests and direction of scholarly/artistic study, your preparation to undertake graduate study, and your reasons for selecting a particular program.)
- 3) *15-20 pp. critical writing sample* (This component is typically required for a Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing or a Ph.D. in Creative Writing program only.)
- 4) *Letters of recommendation* (You will need letters from professors who can talk about your creative writing and your aptitude for graduate study, but also include a letter from a humanities or fine arts professor who can comment on your critical/artistic skills.)
- 5) *GRE/GRE Subject Test* (For the Master's level, you should take the GRE. For the Ph.D. level, you will need to submit both GRE and GRE Subject Test scores.)

What next? Contact a creative writing faculty member early during the Fall semester of your senior year to discuss your interests in graduate school. You might work with this professor to finalize your creative writing sample and statement of purpose. Both documents will update your professor about your creative writing and artistic/scholarly interests and so help her/him to prepare a persuasive letter of recommendation on your behalf. (Please refer to the English Department's "How to Ask a Professor for a Letter of Recommendation.")

Internships for Creative Writers

If you are interested in publishing your work or the work of others, interning at a small literary press can be a rewarding experience to learn more about contemporary audiences and the ins and outs of how manuscripts become books. Contact Professor Richards at richardr@stolaf.edu and visit the Piper Center for more information about opportunities in the Twin Cities and beyond. You might also research publishing and writing internships at www.bookjobs.com.

Other relevant opportunities include nonprofit internships at literary arts organizations such as the Loft Literary Center. Visit with Sandra Malecha at the Piper Center to learn more!