

Applying to Graduate Programs in Creative Writing

As a creative writing or English major interested in the literary arts, a graduate degree in creative writing might sound appealing. What could be better than two to four years devoted to the development of your creative writing with mentors and peers who all share the same passion? This gift of time and community can be inspiring and energizing for a writer, but it's also important to recognize what creative writing graduate programs directly offer and also what they cannot promise.

The Masters of Fine Arts degree is exactly what it sounds like—an advanced practice of the fine arts. This is not a professional degree nor is it a degree in publishing (or a guarantee of published work). While graduate programs at the MFA level can help students better understand the publishing landscape and assist them in strengthening their artistic work, the primary function of MFA programs is dedicated time to study literary craft and write within a community.

The PhD in creative writing is more often than not a traditional literature PhD with a creative dissertation and additional craft and workshop coursework.

While both the MFA and PhD are considered terminal degrees in creative writing for the purposes of teaching in higher education, one of the primary considerations (and typically a requirement) for tenure-line employment (and many other opportunities such as national grants and fellowships) is a strong record of publication (often a published book and/or a body of published work in competitive literary journals). But teaching is just one of many paths that graduates of creative writing programs pursue. Many go on to work in publishing, leveraging journal editing experience during their graduate program, or work in associated fields such as advertising/marketing, journalism, or public relations.

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 2-4 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. Many programs also offer experiences with literary journal editing and/or book editing.
- 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. This option allows students to maintain full-time employment elsewhere while pursuing an advanced degree.
- 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. Essentially, this is a PhD in literature that might offer the option for a creative dissertation.

Note: It should often be a priority for graduate school applicants to take funding into serious consideration. Many traditional MFA and PhD programs offer a tuition waiver and a stipend in exchange for teaching undergraduate courses (or sometimes performing administrative tasks). While these waivers and stipends can help significantly offset the cost of graduate school, applicants should research cost of living, institutional fees, and moving expenses.

Aside from program rankings, the best school is the one that meets your needs (including the financial considerations mentioned above). You can research programs by visiting the Associated Writing Programs database at www.awpwriter.org or other databases such as one provided by Poets and Writers Magazine at www.pw.org/mfa. In addition to degree type, other 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
- 6) *Program Artistic Aesthetic* - it is often beneficial to consider who teaches in a particular graduate program and the kinds of writers a program typically produces. While many programs would welcome an array of writing and writers, it is often the case that certain genres of writing may not be as welcome or fully supported. There are also certain programs that are unofficially known to embrace genre writing or experimental writing.

Preparing a Graduate School Application

It is important to keep in mind that entry into creative writing graduate programs is intensely competitive, so it is often a good idea to apply to several programs and to cast a wide net. 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, although a few MFA programs may require this.)
- 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.) – Note that many MFA programs do not require the GRE, so do double check this requirement with your list of schools.

What next? Contact a creative writing faculty member during the Spring semester of your Junior year and/or early in 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.")

Publishing Internship Programs

Publishing Certificate Programs, which often last anywhere from a few weeks to a couple of months, can be an appropriate option for those students who are particularly interested in pursuing a career in publishing. While MFA and PhD programs might offer some training in this regard, these programs' sole focus is on training industry professionals (not writers). Notable programs are housed at Columbia, Emerson College, New York University, the University of Denver, and Oxford University.

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 a creative writing professor to discuss your interests 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.