

Thinking about an MFA in Creative Writing?

A Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing is a 2- or 3-year graduate degree offering writers: a continuation of their education with writer-professors through coursework and thesis mentorship; time to write; community with fellow student-writers; networking with writers and possibly publishing professionals; exposure to a broad and deep list of books; and a completed thesis, which may become a first book.

An MFA isn't like a professional degree that prepares you for a specific career and won't guarantee employment or publication after completion. It is, however, one popular path for many writers for the reasons listed above – and particularly for writers who desire community, workshop, and structure. If you plan to teach creative writing at the college level, an MFA is essential (or, alternatively, a PhD, though MFA programs are still much more common in creative writing).

Deciding To Apply

Applying to any graduate program takes advanced planning. Competitive programs receive hundreds of applications for a few spots, so you'll want time to put together a strong application. (You also might need to take the GRE, though most programs no longer require it.)

Most MFA applicants are more successful when they don't apply right out of college, since it takes some time to build your writing portfolio to submit your best work. And many writers want to take more time to decide whether they want an MFA (a big decision!) – or want to work and save money for a future grad student life. In addition, many writers want to wait until a time in their lives when focusing intently on their own writing will be most beneficial and most treasured – often not when they've been full-time students so recently. Still, some students do decide that applying during their senior year is the best decision, so planning ahead is essential.

Here's an article about [why to apply](#), and here are several current MFA students talking about [when to apply](#). Here's another article covering both [the when and the why](#).

If you think you might apply in the future, the best thing you can do is continue to write, read, and seek and sustain positive relationships with other writers – including professors who may be your recommenders. ([Here](#) are the kinds of things applications ask recommenders to comment on.)

Choosing Programs

Some factors to consider:

- program size
- specific faculty you'd like to work with
- genres of focus
- location

- full-time, low-residency¹, or online
- opportunities for teaching or editing
- student experience/community
- funding.

Different applicants will prioritize these factors differently – however, unless you are in a position to pay for your MFA *without taking loans*, we recommend only seeking programs that offer funding. An MFA is not a pre-professional degree in the same way a medical or law degree is, and thus there's no guarantee you'll be in a position to begin paying off loans in a first job post-MFA. Individual finances differ, of course, but such is our recommendation. Most high-quality programs offer full funding or significant funding to full-time MFA students, often in a combination of fellowships and teaching assistantships.

Here are some articles about [different types of programs](#) and [what to consider](#).

There are a *lot* of programs, so leave yourself plenty of time to research them, and not all in one day. Start searching for specific program information [here](#) or [here](#).

Applying

Do your [homework](#): different schools require different materials. Start organizing your materials and deadlines early on. Pay attention to the instructions and tailor your materials to what each application specifies – and to what the school offers (i.e., if you apply in screenwriting to a school that only offers poetry and fiction, you won't be accepted).

Here's one view on how [admissions committees](#) might review your work and another [here](#).

Focus on your writing sample. It's unlikely you'll get into a program using a piece you wrote in a class years earlier, as-is. Spend time honing your best work and getting feedback if you can. Think about the different page requirements programs may ask for, as you might need different samples for different applications.

Don't rush through the other materials. Typos, sloppy work, or not submitting what's asked for can give admissions committees reasons to dismiss your work. When it comes to the personal statement/statement of purpose, common wisdom suggests “do no harm” – in other words, this essay probably won't make or break your application by itself, but use it to put your best writing foot forward and not take anything away from your application by not following the instructions, by submitting a rushed essay, or by not showing careful, engaging writing. Use the statement to allow the committee to begin to get acquainted with you and your writing. Have a few readers give you feedback on this essay – it's not a genre any of us writes often, and so it's a hard one in spite of being brief. The Writing Studio can provide appropriate feedback. Here's more advice about writing the [statement](#).

¹ Low-residency programs are primarily designed for writers who are working full-time while pursuing an MFA; they incorporate shorter residencies on campus with distance learning.

Ask your letter writers early! You should request recommendation letters *at least* a month before your first deadline. Your letter writers are very busy, especially around deadline season, and usually have lots of letters to write. You don't want them to be rushed in their writing or, worse, grumpy about your last-minute notice. You do want them to have plenty of time to review your materials and refer back to your work in classes with them in order to write the best letter possible. Plus, it's hard to enthusiastically recommend applicants for graduate-level work if they show themselves to be disorganized or unprofessional. Your letter writers will need to see your application materials to be able to write letters that speak specifically about why the program is a good fit for you and about the most important part of your application: the writing sample. (If you'd like feedback on your materials from recommenders, ask and give them as much time as possible – thoughtful feedback takes time, as does implementing the feedback.) [Here's](#) that article again about what your recommenders are being asked to do and how to handle the process. And [here's](#) some advice specifically from us about seeking recommendations.

You should also provide your recommenders a complete list of schools you're applying to with the corresponding deadlines; if you make changes to your list, notify your recommenders.

Don't forget to plan for application fees or, if applicable, requesting fee waivers.

Note: applying during your senior year is tough. If you plan to do so, definitely use the summer before to begin researching programs, getting materials together, and notifying recommenders.

Handling Notification Season

In deciding whether to accept an offer, feel free to ask questions. If a program is courting you, don't be shy about asking for information that will help you decide. You can even ask to be put in touch with current students to hear about their experiences. We can also help you talk through your options (even if you already graduated).

No one gets into all the programs they apply to, and frequently an applicant doesn't get into any programs even with a strong application. The unfortunate truth is that most programs receive applications from many, many more qualified applicants than they can accept in a given year.

Remember: you can apply again (lots of people do)! And, most importantly, whether or not you get accepted into the programs you've applied to is *not* a referendum on your writing (!!!). There are a lot of successful, brilliant writers who recount getting rejected from MFA programs. Any writer needs to develop a sense of belief in their own work that can outlast the rejections inherent in the writing life – whether that be applying to MFAs, submitting work for publication, or seeking grants/awards. [Here's](#) an article on thinking about MFA rejection.

Whatever happens, please notify your recommenders about your outcomes.

And remember that there's no one way to become a writer; a writer is someone who writes.