

HOW TO SUCCEED AND THRIVE AS AN MFA STUDENT AT VIRGINIA TECH

The members of VT's MFA community have assembled a list of activities, advice, and resources in this document to help you as you matriculate through our program.

1. REMEMBER: YOU ARE FIRST AND FOREMOST A WRITER

- Congratulations! You're officially a student at the MFA program at Virginia Tech! That's an accomplishment in and of itself (only 4% of applicants can say that each year).
- Once you land in Blacksburg, write this on a piece of paper and tape it somewhere where you'll always see it: "Whenever possible put your art—your writing!--first, before anything else." There will be a number of distractions, requirements, varieties of coursework, and volunteer opportunities that may or may not seem related to your work as a writer. But no matter what, the fact remains: the art you produce while you're here is of the utmost importance and should be your primary focus. It can be tempting to throw yourself into theory in 5004 or get caught sucked into teaching requirements, **but you are here to write**. If you should ever feel overwhelmed, please reach out to your fellow students, your advisor, and other faculty members who can help you better strategize, brainstorm, and plan for the ways you continue to balance your workload as a student and teacher in this program.

2. BE A GOOD LITERARY, DEPARTMENTAL, & UNIVERSITY CITIZEN

- Know and add important departmental and university dates to your calendar (with alerts). Academic calendar [here](#). MFA deadlines [here](#).
- If you're curious, you can read more about the [expectations](#) that Virginia Tech has for graduate students.
- Org chart:
https://www.vt.edu/content/dam/provost_vt_edu/provost-organizational-chart/provost-staff-chart.pdf
- English Department is part of the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences. In addition to the three graduate programs, we offer a number of UG majors: Creative Writing, English (literature), & Technical & Scientific Communication. We also offer minors in each of those areas as well as Language Sciences (linguistics). The department offers a limited but fairly diverse amount of 4000-level lit courses and it may be possible to make substitutions from other departments, like Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures. Independent studies are also possible, depending on whether or not the department offers a course in what you're keen to study and whether the professor you'd like to work with is amenable.

- As faculty we expect you to attend all Visiting Writers Series events, all classes, and all professional development sessions.
- *Check your email daily during the week and respond in a timely fashion.* If a faculty or staff member asks you for information, please reply with said information within 24 business hours of receipt of the request.
- If a fellow student asks you for information or to fill out a survey, please reply with requested information within 24 hours of receipt.
- Begin learning, if you already haven't, about publishing venues, [post-graduate opportunities & fellowships](#), and award possibilities for your work. (The [Bookends](#) YouTube podcast with two successful literary agents is also a great resource.) Also, don't forget to inform your fellow students and program director when you have good news to share. Resources like [New Pages](#), [Poets & Writers](#), writer Erika Krause's [website](#), and Clifford Garstang's [site](#) are great places to start to learn about venues for publishing your work. Just as important: READING the magazines and journals where you'd like your own work to appear. Other publishing list resources: <https://heavyfeatherreview.org/calls/> and <https://chillsubs.com/>
- Practice, to the degree that you are able, resiliency: attempt to navigate everyday conflicts & challenges with empathy, grace, and flexibility, and avoid being judgmental or uncompromising. Whenever possible, approach conflict with compassion.
- Understand that Virginia Tech is an incredibly large university, an institution, a company, and a brand. One might think of it as a kind of giant ocean liner. VT serves a great many people and employs a vast number of faculty and staff. It is powerful and mind-bogglingly large. Which means it can't turn on a dime. It's not a sailboat. It's not exceptionally fast. Patience, then, in dealing with the university, will often be a virtue.
- Resist competition and embrace camaraderie by practicing empathy: how can you inspire and connect with and understand your fellow students, professors, and staff of the MFA program and the English department in which it lives? As a former MFA said recently, "As MFA students, you aren't adversaries. Yeah, you might be on different planets but you can still help each other and make each other's planets way cooler than they already are."

3. ESTABLISH RESIDENCY

A. Establish Domicile in Virginia

Residency Requirement: You must live in Virginia for at least one year prior to the start of the term in which you wish to receive in-state tuition. The primary purpose of residing in Virginia must be for reasons other than attending school.

Proof of Residency: You must demonstrate your intent to remain in Virginia indefinitely. This can be shown through various actions such as obtaining a Virginia driver's license, registering to vote in Virginia, filing Virginia state income taxes, registering a vehicle in Virginia, and establishing a permanent residence in the state.

B. Submit a Domicile Determination Form

You'll need to complete the Domicile Determination Form and submit it to the Office of the University Registrar. This form requires detailed information about your residency status, financial independence, and other factors that contribute to your eligibility for in-state tuition.

C. Provide Supporting Documentation

Along with the Domicile Determination Form, you will need to submit supporting documentation that proves your Virginia residency and intent to remain in the state. This may include copies of your Virginia driver's license, lease agreements, utility bills, voter registration, tax returns, and other relevant documents.

4. KNOW YOUR RESOURCES

- Familiarize yourself with [our program website](#).
- Check out the VT graduate school's [academic calendar](#).
- Get to know your faculty: The MFA faculty are your teachers and mentors; each one of them has decades of knowledge and practice in their fields and are happy to schedule visits during their office hours and otherwise. They are first and foremost your advocates, and will be a great help and inspiration to you during your time here. Want to know what classes to take—and which to avoid? Need help with a query letter? Want to know what a query letter is? Have other questions about professionalization and publishing? Ask a faculty member!
- Familiarize yourself with other English Department faculty in our other areas: Literature and Rhetoric & Writing. You may end up taking courses in either of those areas (definitely Literature) and students sometimes end up asking faculty outside of Creative Writing to serve as readers on their theses.
- Introduce yourself to Donna Eastwood, Assistant to the Department Chair; Melissa Hafer, receptionist in the main office; Eve Trager, our technology guru; and Marie Trimmer, Graduate Programs Coordinator. These beloved staff members play incredibly important roles in our department and getting to know them and what they do (and what they don't) is important. And please do treat them with respect and kindness.
- Know about VT's [cultural and community centers](#).

5. GRADUATE PUBLISHING CERTIFICATE PROGRAM

Core Components

The certificate consists of four courses providing hands-on experience with real publications:

ENGL 5784: Foundations of Editing & Publishing

- Industry fundamentals and editing skills
- Copyright law and publishing ethics
- Business operations overview

ENGL 5754: Editing a Literary Journal I ENGL 5764: Editing a Literary Journal II

- Digital literary journal management through *The New River*
- Manuscript evaluation and digital workflows
- Author relations and content management

ENGL 6664: Small Press Publishing

- Small press operations via *Noemi Press* and *FENCE*
- Contract negotiation and distribution
- Marketing and business operations

Recommended Course Sequencing

Standard Two-Semester Track:

Fall Semester:

- ENGL 5784: Foundations of Editing & Publishing
- ENGL 5775: Editing a Literary Journal I

Spring Semester:

- ENGL 5776: Editing a Literary Journal II
- ENGL 6664: Small Press Publishing

Why This Sequence Works:

- **Prerequisites:** Editing II requires Editing I (5775)
- **Skill Building:** Foundations provides industry overview needed for specialized courses
- **Workload Management:** Fall courses are foundational; spring courses are production-intensive

- **Publication Cycles:** *The New River* follows academic year cycle; *Noemi Press* aligns with spring timeline

Alternative Scheduling Options

Option 1 - Staggered Foundation:

- Year 1: Foundations + one other course
- Year 2: Complete remaining two courses

Option 2 - Journal Focus First:

- Year 1 Fall: Editing I
- Year 1 Spring: Editing II
- Year 2: Foundations + Small Press Publishing

Option 3 - Full Spread:

- Take one course per semester over four semesters

Time Commitment: 12 credit hours (flexible scheduling over 1-4 semesters)

Prerequisite: Graduate standing **Certificate Completion:** Must finish all four courses within graduate program timeframe

6. SOFTWARE

As a graduate student at Virginia Tech, you can access Microsoft Word and other Microsoft Office applications for free through the university's licensing agreement with Microsoft. Here's how you can get Microsoft Word for free:

1. **Microsoft 365 Education:** Virginia Tech offers all students, including graduate students, a free subscription to Microsoft 365 Education. This subscription includes Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and other Office apps.
2. **Accessing Microsoft 365:**
 - Visit the [Microsoft 365 Education](#) website.
 - Sign in using your Virginia Tech email address (e.g., yourPID@vt.edu).
 - Follow the prompts to download and install the Office apps on your computer or use the web-based versions directly through your browser.
3. **Virginia Tech Software Distribution:**
 - You can also find links and additional information on how to access Microsoft Office through the Virginia Tech Software Distribution page. This site provides instructions and support for downloading and installing software available to students.

You are also eligible to receive the New York Times [for free](#).

7. FINANCES

- Stipends: For 2025-26, stipends for first year MFA students are \$25,524; for second year, \$25,524, and third years, \$26,086. Pay periods are (more or less) the 1st and 16th of each month. Your first paycheck will be issued September 1; your last paycheck will be issued May 16th.
- Go [here](#) to apply for in-state status (to reduce student fees) – 2025-2026 Student Fees:
 - \$3,474 for out-of-state students (\$1,737 per semester) and \$2,870 for in-state students (\$1,435), deducted from your payroll on a bi-monthly basis (once you indicate this on HokieSpa)
 - Fees cover technology services, student activities, health services, athletic facilities, bus service, and recreational sports, among other things
 - If you obtain a Virginia driver's license and register to vote here this year (if you weren't already a resident of VA), then in your 2nd year, you can [apply for in-state status](#)
 - This will save you \$604 per year in student fees for your 2nd and 3rd years
 - To have your student fees taken out of your stipends you must indicate this on HokieSpa (registration blocks, vaccinations)
- Food pantry: <https://www.foodpantries.org/ci/va-blacksburg>, Media Building, 4th floor lounge in Shanks

8. AWP CONFERENCE

We try to fund 3rd year students who want to travel to AWP, as long as they commit to manning our booth or table at the bookfair. This is contingent on our budget, which fluctuates year to year.

9. READINGS, ARTS, & CULTURAL EVENTS

Visiting Writers Series 2025-2026:

Mackenzie Kozak (TBD)

Beth Macy, nonfiction writer: October 27-29 (with keynote on October 28)

Roz Chast, *New Yorker* cartoonist, October 22

Other Readings:

- Be on the lookout for information about the **Glossolalia Literary Festival**, which will take place in Spring 2026. Glossolalia is an undergraduate registered student organization that partners with graduate students to bring a variety of authors to campus for a reading that features select undergrads and graduates.

- Sign up to read at the [MFA Salon, hosted by Blacksburg Books](#).

Virginia Tech Center for the Arts

- Student tickets are always \$10 with ID for any show in any seat
- Text “arts” to 31996 for free rush tickets and they’ll text you the day of the performance (or you can just check at box office day of performance)

10. FITNESS & RECREATION

- **Fitness Center:** [McComas Hall](#) houses one of the university's main fitness centers, featuring cardio machines, weight training equipment, and group exercise classes.
- **Membership:** All enrolled students have automatic access to McComas Hall as part of their student fees. Includes access to an indoor swimming pool, group exercise classes, showers, and locker rooms. McComas offers outdoor equipment rentals, which include items for camping, hiking, and other outdoor activities.

[War Memorial Hall](#): has multiple gymnasiums, a swimming pool, racquetball courts, a climbing wall, and locker rooms and showers.

11. FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF W/ CAMPUS

Virginia Tech is a beautiful campus, filled with verdant plants, abundant trees, and inspiring spaces. You might, on any given day:

- Get to know Newman Library. American and English literature books are located on the third floor. When searching for book titles, go to [catalog.lib.vt.edu](#) (rather than the library homepage, which can be confusing!). When looking for titles in journals and magazines, it’s best to go first to “Databases” (on the home page) and then select “EBSCOhost” for your search.
- Visit Virginia Tech’s [Special Collections](#) (in the first floor of Newman Library, near the cafe) or contact them to set up a tour.
- If you’re curious about art and architecture, pay a visit to the [Art & Architecture Library](#) in Cowgill Hall (they have a lot of great graphic novels!).
- Take a break inside [War Memorial Chapel](#): this small chapel, located beneath VT’s iconic [pylons](#), is usually open to the public and is almost always empty. It can be a nice space to find your breath, take a moment to reflect, and—if you know how—to play the piano (there’s a grand piano there, not always tuned perfectly, but still).
- Study/write in [Torgersen Hall](#) bridge.

- Check out what's happening at [XYZ Art Gallery](#).
- Walk across the [Drillfield](#).
- Explore the [Duck Pond](#).
- Visit [Hahn Horticultural Garden](#).
- Attend a performance at [the Virginia Tech Center for the Arts](#).
- Visit VT's [Bug Zoo](#).
- Attend a performance at [Theatre 101](#).
- Go bowling, play pool, or other games at [Break Zone](#) in Squires.
- Walk through an old growth forest at [Stadium Woods](#).
- Visit [Smithfield Plantation](#).
- Visit the [Nicholas R. Anderson Observatory](#).

12. STAY HEALTHY

- Feeling sick? Take yourself to [Schiffert Health Center](#).
- [Sign up for health insurance](#) by August 31!
- Feeling overwhelmed and anxious? Book a session with a counselor at [Cook Counseling](#).

13. GET TO KNOW BLACKSBURG

- Some Restaurant Recommendations: The Cellar for pizza, Hamro Kitchen for Nepalese, Abby's for wings, Green's for sushi, Gilley's for vegetarian, Pupuseria Mari for pupusas, Joe's Diner for greasy breakfasts, The Coop for brussel sprouts & ahi tuna, Square 5 Public House for a chicken sandwich or burger (and generous pours), Cafe Mekong for Thai & Vietnamese, Spicity for Chinese, Next Door Bake Shop for cakes and other sweet treats, India Garden for Indian, coffee at Bollo's, and food and beer at Eastern Divide, Rising Silo Brewery (also brick oven pizzas), and the combo that is Feather Bone Provisions & Assembly and Moon Hollow Brewing.
- Watch an indie movie at [The Lyric Theater](#).
- Play games and throw axes at [540 Social](#).
- Observe a sunset at [The Hill](#), Blacksburg's municipal golf course and site of the town's highest point.
- Visit a [Community Garden](#).
- [Cox's](#) Driving Range, Miniature Golf, and Batting Cages
- Take a bike ride or stroll on the [Huckleberry Trail](#), a popular rails-to-trail non-vehicular-motor roadway that connects the towns of Christiansburg and Blacksburg.

14. & BEYOND

Outdoor Stuff

- [Pandapas Pond](#) (10 minute drive from Blacksburg on 460; miles of trails + pond + creeks)
- [HL Price Trail](#) (secluded trail with beautiful stream at the backside of a Prices' Fork neighborhood)
- [Angel's Rest](#) (Appalachian Trail segment near Narrows, VA)
- [Kelly's Knob](#) (nice trail in Giles County with view)
- [Cascades](#) (small fee–cash only–to park and enter, so take at least five single dollars with you!)
- [Mountain Lake](#) (Dirty Dancing was partially shot here, when there was a full lake, but the trails and views from Bald Knob especially are fantastic)
- [War Spur Trail](#) (past Mountain Lake, trail that leads to a nice lookout and a virgin stand of forest)
- [Wind Rock](#) (past War Spur Trail: short trail to one of the best outlooks in sw VA)
- [Glen Alton](#) (farm/ wetland area now owned by national forest)

Indoor Stuff

- [Taubman Museum of Art](#) (Roanoke art museum)
- [Pinball Museum](#) (in downtown Roanoke)
- [Roanoke Starcade](#) (same building as above)
- [Twin Valleys Roller Derby](#) (action packed roller derby)

15. ALL ELSE

Please share your accomplishments along the way!

- Any issues – see Matthew Vollmer, MFA Program Director, 403 Shanks Hall, vollmer@vt.edu, cell: 540-808-9562
- MFA Student Reps: Dylan Ever and Emelia Kamadulski/ Graduate Programs Assistant: Marie Trimmer