

So You're Thinking About Applying to Grad School in Creative Writing

Awesome. That's great. Grad programs in CW aren't the only way to continue developing your craft and building your community as a writer (after all, for hundreds of years writers haven't had the opportunity to get MFAs and still managed to write brilliant work), but they can be a good opportunity to continue your development as a writer, and to be around those who care about story and thought and language and beauty, and to connect with literary opportunities and communities that have been pre-built for you.

This is a brief document for students considering grad school in CW (MA, MFA, PhD) offered by the faculty in Creative Writing at the University of Arizona. None of this is meant to be definitive advice; it's meant as a starting point for further conversations with us. We're all happy to be helpful throughout this often-stressful process, but we hope that this can cover some frequently asked questions and best practices for your grad school applications, so when you talk with us you will have already had this orientation.

A Brief Intro to Graduate Creative Writing Degrees

MA programs in English (with a focus in Creative Writing): these (typically 2-year) programs are usually a little less competitive than the best MFA programs or PhD programs, and offer some combination of creative writing and literature classes. MA programs may or may not require a thesis (typically a draft of a book-length project), and are often ideal for students who've recently graduated from undergraduate programs.

MFA programs in Creative Writing: the MFA is the traditional terminal graduate degree for creative writers. There are approximately 280 different MFA programs, and they range from low-residency programs (where you do most of your work remotely aside from a couple weeks intensive session each year) to traditional programs. Some programs are more focused on art/workshops, and some are more academic (the most academic ones usually require the GRE general or subject tests). Most MFA programs usually take 2-3 years to complete, though at least one is a one-year degree, and at least one is four years.

PhD programs in Creative Writing / PhD programs in English with a creative dissertation: These are highly academic programs with a significant focus on theory and literature and are designed to professionalize students for careers in academia. Very few PhD programs in English or CW accept applicants who do not already have MA or MFA degrees, so they're best suited for those who have already done CW graduate degrees, are already publishing, and want to continue their studies, particularly with an eye toward teaching at the college level.

General advice: don't go into debt to go to grad school in creative writing. Prioritize applications to programs that fully fund students (which often means avoiding schools in major metro areas like NY or SF unless you *really* want to do the NY/SF thing). The top programs support the students they accept, typically through teaching or research assistantships or fellowships.

A graduate degree in creative writing is not a conduit to a job (though it does qualify you for some and is certainly a useful credential in many fields). Taking on a lot of debt for this degree is usually unwise.

If you apply to grad school and don't get in, or don't get in with funding, that may mean that either you're choosing the wrong schools (consider applying to a wider range of schools, and not just the top 5 programs in the country; or consider applying to some MA programs in addition to MFAs) or your application is not yet where it needs to be to be competitive. Most writers get better as they get older and read more deeply and widely, practice their craft more, and—simply—live more. It also helps to have more time to prepare your applications. Most writers are going to have a much stronger application to graduate school at age 27 than they will at 22. (Consider where you were just a couple years ago!) This makes a strong case for taking some time off between undergraduate and graduate study.

**The parts of a typical graduate school application,
in descending order of importance:**

The Manuscript

- 90% of the admissions decision to most graduate programs is the manuscript, typically < 15pp of poetry (no more than one poem per page) or < 30pp of (double-spaced) prose. This is the thing most admissions committees read first, and the importance of a good manuscript cannot be overstated. Everything else is secondary. It should ideally show some sense of the kind of work you do as well as the kind of work you want to be doing in the program you're applying to. So if you're primarily interested in the novel, present an excerpt of a novel. It's best to present yourself as honestly (but also as strongly) as possible, since admissions committees aren't just looking for promising work: they're really trying to determine which students are those that are the best fit for what their program *does*, and what their faculty and students offer. It doesn't serve anyone to misrepresent what you want to be writing!
- Quality is the most important thing, as well as ambition and a sense of some degree of technical mastery. Focus on quality, not quantity. (Including a mediocre second piece of writing with a good first piece does not make for a better application.)
- Poets: practices vary as to whether it's better to present cohesive sequences of poems vs a variety of different sorts of poems. Mostly, readers are looking for risk and originality,

and it's probably best to submit work that shows the sort of work you're most excited about writing.

- Prose writers: it can be valuable to show some range in an application, as long as you're not sacrificing quality.
- Proofread this very closely.

The Personal Statement

- This is, first, a chance to demonstrate why you, specifically, are applying to this specific program.
- It's also an opportunity to show your personality and a sense of who you are as a person and a writer. The more of you that can show through this (and through the generalities that most people start with: "I've always loved to write," etc.), the better. Nerding out can be a good option if that's how you roll.
- You certainly don't need to name-drop specific faculty you'd want to work with (though it can sometimes be useful in framing your app and showing your work), but it's important to talk about why you chose to pay the application fee to apply to this particular program. What do you hope to do there? What makes it seem like a good fit for you?
- Poets, especially: our faculty looks for a statement that shows that you can write fluidly (varied sentence structures, no jargon, etc), and that the candidate can identify and reflect in an engaging way on what makes their story or candidacy unique, idiosyncratic, etc. In that regard, most app readers are interested in your life experience. Generally, they like seeing that a candidate has taken some time to meet challenges and grow outside of a K-16 education structure OR that a candidate can show maturity, independence, and resiliency in some other way.
- Different programs have differing expectations as to what the personal statement should do. We've heard of one program's poetry application review committee that reads the personal statement first, and values applicants who can provide some engagement with contemporary traditions in poetry or poetics. At the same program, the fiction faculty reads the personal statements only after the manuscript samples and doesn't have any particular expectations for the statement. All to say that practices vary. Pay attention to the instructions on each application.
- Many of the most successful applicants are those who have found ways to keep their writing and reading and learning growing outside of academic structures. If you're applying to a grad program in order to write, and you haven't been writing on your own, then you may not be ready for the work that graduate programs often require and the opportunity that grad programs can provide.
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- Don't squander your very limited word (remember, most committees are reading hundreds of applications) on re-stating the obvious. Yes, you're applying the MFA at Blank Blank University. The committee knows that already. Get to the reasons why quickly.
- Be specific and use precise language. What exactly about place or identity or memory or other people are you excited to write about?
- Don't use the statement of purpose to point out your weaknesses or failures. That's all the reader of the application will come away with as far as a first impression is concerned.
- Name a key influence or two. Let the committee have a sense of what books and writers you care about and how those projects speak to the ones you're passionate about writing yourself.
- Let the committee know that you're thinking about the physical geography of where you'll be for the next couple of years. How might that function in your writing?
- Let the committee know that you're familiar with the faculty's work. How might your work be informed by these experts?

Letters of Recommendation:

- Typically you'll need three letters of recommendation. These don't necessarily need to all be from writers, or teachers, or teachers of writing with whom you've studied or worked closely. It's best if at least one of them can speak to your work and work ethic as a student of writing, but the primary role of the LOR is to speak about your qualities as a student and a human. We'd recommend against using family members or close friends, generally speaking. You want folks who can vouch for you professionally. A LOR from a well-known writer can be useful in helping your application stand out, but a mediocre LOR from Famous Writer X Who Doesn't Know You Well is much less helpful than a great letter from Less Well Known Teacher Y.
- If you're applying to a program that funds students with teaching assistantships, it can be also be helpful for at least one of your recommenders to be able to speak to your potential as a teacher (based, perhaps, on presentations in class or whatever else).
- If you're taking time off between finishing an undergraduate degree and applying to grad school (very strongly recommended), it is a good idea to keep in touch with the faculty with whom you've worked, both because we want to hear from you, and because it's good to make sure that we remember you when you ask us for a letter of recommendation. So check in with us once every year or two...
- **Ask for Letters of Recommendation at least a month in advance of the deadline.** If your recommender says yes, usually, you'll want to provide them a copy of your resume

(especially if it's been a while since you worked with them), a draft of your personal statement, and a draft of your manuscript sample.

- And do let your recommenders know where you're applying, and keep them posted about the process and when you hear back from schools. (Sometimes some of us can help sing your praises through back channels: it won't get you in, but it could help move you a little bit up on a waitlist.)
- A thank you note for doing this work is always a welcome practice.
- If your recommenders are your instructors, they can also be good resources for you as you navigate all aspects of the application and decision (hopefully) processes.

The Resume or CV

- This is one of the less important parts of your application, but it can highlight experience that may be relevant to your long-term goals re writing, publishing, arts administration, or whatever. If you're applying to a program that has a lot of opportunity for editorial work, for instance, it's probably helpful to have some editorial experience (that also helps to explain in your personal statement why you're applying to *this* program).

The Transcript

- An unofficial copy is usually fine until you're accepted. This isn't a particularly important part of the application, but if your transcript shows that you have been less than a brilliant and dedicated student, then that's something you would be wise to address in your personal statement. You want to be able to show at least that you can bring it academically when you need to, or when you're studying something that you love in a serious way.

GRE test scores: general or subject

- Neither the general nor the subject GRE is required for many graduate programs, but some programs do require these tests. You can sometimes get away with not taking them and still make an application to a school that requires them if you have good reasons for not taking them. Whether a program requires these test scores also tells you about how academic, generally speaking, the program is likely to be. A program that requires the GRE Subject test in Literature is likely to be more focused on the study of literature than one that does not require any test scores at all. PhD programs are almost certain to require some of these test scores.

Resources for MFA Applicants

Poets & Writers (esp their fall MFA special)

AWP Listing to MFA programs

<http://post-mfa.tumblr.com/>

[The MFA Draft Facebook Group](#)

[The MFA App Review](#), a group of volunteers who want to see more QTPOC writers admitted to fully-funded MFA programs, and offer personalized consultation to writers who self-identify as such