

THE MFA PROGRAM FOR WRITERS

at Warren Wilson College

First Semester

Welcome to the first stage in what is sure to be a transformative two years for your writing. Everything is new right now, and likely overwhelming, but you have plenty of resources and sources of support: your faculty supervisor, the MFA office staff, the Program Handbook and all of the other reference materials in the student-access area of the program website. And you'll have a semester counseling session near the end of the residency, in which you'll have the chance to ask questions and to hear from two students who just completed their initial term. Please review this document in advance of the meeting and bring your questions.

First-semester deadlines. (All of these are noted on your Deadline Schedule. You're responsible for meeting all deadlines, but we'll send reminders.)

- **Project Study Plan:** due at the conclusion of the residency, January 13.
- **Greensheets:** Prior to the pandemic these were always due on the last day of the residency; we allowed additional time during our Zoom residencies to allow for those who were catching up with recordings. We're narrowing the window now that we've resumed in-person residencies: they will be due by January 15.
- **Enrollment form and workshop preference form for July 2024:** March 13.
- **Midterm:** midterm evaluations are due March 20. (Faculty typically aim to schedule 3 packets before, and 3 after, this date.)
- **Worksheets for July 2024:** 20 pages of fiction or 4 pages of poetry, due April 31.
- **Final evaluation:** due May 22.

What to expect in the non-resident semester:

- *You will need to adjust your schedule.* Ours may be a low-residency program, but program demands and expectations are equal to any residential MFA program. Incorporating 25 hours of program work per week into a busy life will be challenging, but it's one of the gifts of the program that you'll learn about your own creative process as well as new strategies and tools to make that process more effective. You should have received a blank, weekly calendar grid to help you identify your best times for creative and critical work and for reading. Stick to it, but also be flexible and make changes as necessary.
- *Again, the expectation is 25 hours per week,* not a specific number of stories or poems, although you and your supervisor are likely to set those goals. Those hours will be devoted, also, to reading, to mastering annotations, to substantial revision. It will be evident to your supervisor in the quality of the work and the substance of the correspondence as well as the rest of the packet that you're putting in the requisite hours.
- ***Ask about anything you don't understand.*** If a supervisor is using unfamiliar terms, ask them to be defined. If you have Program questions, *we encourage you to please contact the MFA Office rather than ask fellow students.* It's never an imposition—we're here for you, the door is always virtually open, and you'll be certain of getting correct information. Problems occur when students don't address a difficulty they're having.
- *Please keep communications to packet exchanges.* There are obvious exceptions to this: when you need clarification in order to proceed effectively with the next packet, or if you need to notify your supervisor that your packet will be delayed for some reason. We otherwise ask that you respect the many demands on our faculty's time, and limit your communication to those packet dates which your supervisor has reserved for full attention to your work.
- *You and your supervisor are embarking on a semester that's wholly unique,* tailored to your goals and needs and that faculty member's pedagogical style. This is to say, faculty members all work differently, and you'll have a different experience each term. Be open to each, and avoid comparing supervisors' responses and approaches (especially in terms of letter length). The aim—and it's realized for nearly everyone—is the sense that you'll have exactly the right supervisor at the right time.
- *Post-residency transition:* You may experience some difficulty in shifting into the non-resident semester after our intensive, heady days together and the presence of so many like-minded writers. There are multiple ways to stay in touch with your fellow students, however, and to draw support from that network. The friendships you're building now will stay with you for years to come.

About your writing

- *Make full use of the correspondence.* The letters are central to this program's experience; they're meeting place, practices space, and classroom, so make the most of the opportunity they provide for instruction, musings about your reading, and questions about the writing life. Don't be afraid to be direct if a supervisor is responding in the manner that's most helpful to you. That said, if you pose pages of weighty questions, faculty must be selective. Please keep in mind, too—as noted above—that correspondence is meant to be limited to packet exchanges. Between-packet communication should be confined only to clarifications, pressing questions, or scheduling issues. Finally, do not wait for a supervisor's response after you've sent off your packet—get to work on the next.
- *Don't think of this program as an editing or critiquing service, which is to say, **don't send old work!*** This program is not for emptying the virtual desk drawers but about developing the skills, in new drafts and revisions, that will serve you the rest of your writing life. And after receiving the supervisor's responses, don't send subsequent drafts without revising or at least responding to the comments/ suggestions. You may not be able to act on the suggestions right away, but if you don't acknowledge the supervisor's work, there can be no true dialogue. This exchange is meant to be active and ongoing, and concerns process more than product.
- *Do not be wedded to an existing project* (a novel, a particular story, a particular sequence of poems); the emphasis has to be on the craft lessons you need to learn, and that might very well mean (very often does) setting aside some particular project. In the same way that you don't want to learn how to use a nail gun by doing the finishing carpentry in your new house—you want to practice in a workshop with scrap wood—you may be better off working on some training pieces, or specific assignments your supervisor will suggest. Our focus is on your life's work.
- *Keep your log up to date.* Please list everything you send, identify all titles of creative work and annotations, all page counts creative/critical work and your letter, indicate what's new and revised, and send this document with each packet. For guidance, see the example in your program handbook on page 10.

About your reading

- *Students are expected to read 15-20 books this semester, or roughly a book a week.*
- Your semester reading may involve poem selections, individual stories and essays: record everything in your bibliography. Those all contribute to the 15-20 book total. Your supervisor can determine equivalences if necessary.
- *Your initial bibliography may change* in the course of the semester; that's to be expected as you make new discoveries and find new kindred spirits on the page. But keep a running bibliography throughout the term (and for the rest of your time in the program) of everything you read for the program, not just what you annotate. Be sure to observe MLA style, with complete entries in alphabetical order by author; do not separate them into subsets by category or number them or put them in a table. Determine how you'll indicate newly added books (students typically use an asterisk or boldface). Additional guidance for bibliographic documentation can be found in your handbook or online.

A special word about annotations

- *Annotations are a key element of the program* and involve the examination of a single element of craft in a single piece of fiction or poetry (and often only part of a work). These are not book reviews, not lit-crit theme papers. They aren't formal essays or research papers. They should, however, observe MLA style with respect to citations and otherwise.
- *Try for one a week, 12-15 total.* Aim to get three in each packet; don't make the mistake of putting them off; these are meant to accompany and inform your creative efforts. That said, don't make the mistake of sending six annotations in your first packet, either. A steady balance of creative and critical effort is most effective; these aspects of the program are meant to work together. The average annotation length is 3-5 double-spaced pages. If they are much longer, they may have taken too much of your time; the length may also indicate insufficient focus.
- *If they aren't detailed, focused, craft-oriented analyses, the supervisor has the option to not accept them* and/or to ask you to revise them. There's a very strong chance that will happen this semester, as you work to learn the best use of the form.
- *Focus not on the author or subject, but on the work.* The biggest challenge for many first-semester students is the selection of a craft lens or finding the optimum lens for the work at hand. While it's helpful in the first semester to focus on fundamentals, because we all need to learn the basics, as you become more proficient at annotations, it'll be most useful to focus on craft issues *particularly relevant* to challenges you face in your own work. And as was

already stated in the annotation session, annos are not about the *what* (i.e., thematic concerns or lit-crit interpretations) but the *how*: How did the choice / application of that craft element produce that effect?

- *Double Annotations*: Please hold off on attempting these unless your supervisor gives the go-ahead. First-semester students should focus on mastering the **single** annotation. For the majority of students, whatever their educational background, that will take most of the term. This is not meant to be a dare for you to prove us wrong; this is about developing facility with the form, and that takes practice. If your supervisor approves, you might do a double in your final packet. Please be aware that page length alone does not determine a double; the annotation must either study a piece through two craft lenses, or compare/contrast a single craft element in two works.
- *Examples* of past annotations are available in the student-access area on the website.

Continuing the Quick Reference Guide to Program Documents

- *Project Study Plan*: As described in the reference guide you received in the pre-residency mailing, the Project Study Plan (aka the Semester Plan) lays out agreed-upon goals and dates for the months ahead, as well as a preliminary bibliography. You'll send your signed plan to your supervisor who will sign it and route it to the office. These are due on the last day of the residency.
- *Midterm Evaluation*: The midterm mailing will arrive in August, about a month before the evaluation is due. The midterm allows you the opportunity to assess your progress and your working relationship with your faculty supervisor. The midterm is read only by the Director and does not become part of your file. You do not send your midterm to your supervisor.
- *Worksheets*: (20 pages of fiction, 4 pages of poetry, due October 25). As always, you should select work you want response to and that is far enough along to be ready for feedback—not work you necessarily consider your most polished. Students tend to believe that supervisors determine whom they wish to work with based solely on the worksheets, but supervisors consider many things—and in fact, the style and ambition of the work is probably much more important than its state of completion.
- *Final evaluation and work sample*: At the end of the semester, you'll submit a work sample for your file, along with your final evaluation: this consists of **all** of your accepted annotations and a “sample” of your creative work—usually no more than 20-30 pages of fiction (one or two stories or chapters), or 10-15 pages of poems. It's critical that these be submitted on time. You will also send a copy of your final evaluation to your supervisor by the last day of the semester (November 15).