

THE MFA PROGRAM FOR WRITERS

at WARREN WILSON COLLEGE

Second Semester

You may have heard this described as the ‘easy semester,’ and that’s true in a relative sense. You’re not ‘new’ now: you’ve got your working rhythms established, you understand the arc of a semester, you know what annotations are, and you’re likely to observe a growing connection between those investigations and their application in your work—and neither are you yet in the ‘degree year,’ with their project deadlines. This semester allows for continued exploration and experimentation, wide reading in your genre and in craft essays, and the further honing of your critical skills. This remains a generative period, but also a semester in which you’ll naturally place a much greater emphasis on revision, with the long-term goal of having potential thesis material. All this said, be prepared for growing pains—and if they arise, embrace them; it means you’re moving toward the breakthroughs the essay will help facilitate in the semester that’s to come.

Second semester key dates:

- **Midterm/Packet 4:** You should begin discussing, if you haven’t already, possible essay topics with your supervisor. The director will also send sample essay proposals to 2nd-semester students and their supervisors around this time, as well, so you’ll have examples to consult.
- **May 22:** Your three well-formulated, relevant essay proposals will be submitted with your final evaluation.

Second semester tips and reminders

- Be open to your new supervisor’s approach; it may be very different from your previous supervisor’s. It’s a benefit of the program to learn from so many different voices, aesthetic inclinations, and teaching styles.
- As before, **make full use of the correspondence.** The letters are your classroom, meeting space, practice space. Your ongoing dialogue with your supervisor is especially valuable in this semester, as you work together to identify and develop potential essay topics.
- As is the case in every semester but the essay, you’re required to read **15-20 books a semester** (roughly a book a week). We highly advise the reading of **craft essays** (you were given a substantial list of recommended volumes on your annotation-class handout last residency) to add to your critical lexicon, to inform your annotations, and to serve as models of analytical prose.
- Please get into the habit of regularly observing **MLA style** (9th ed.) in your annotation citations, and maintain a running bibliography in MLA format, with complete entries (whether full volumes or isolated poems/stories/essays) in alphabetical order by author in a single alphabetical continuum. The bibliography should use a hanging indent and maintain double-spacing throughout. **Full guidelines are in your handbook** or available online. Students typically just indicate the newly added books read in the most recent packet period by boldface or with an asterisk.
- Please be sure to keep **complete logs.** Include the page-counts for the letter, and titles and page counts for each poem/story/novel excerpt and annotation. Please include titles of all annotations and each poem/story/novel excerpt—and indicate new or revised for your poetry/fiction enclosures.

Annotations

In the second semester, as you hone your critical skills, annotations typically begin to dovetail more beneficially with challenges you face in your own fiction and poetry. They’re thus excellent preparation for the essay semester that lies ahead (see below). Though you’ll likely continue to focus on single issues of craft at the outset of the term, you’ll gradually extend your range with **double annotations** in the second half of the term, if not before. Double annotations allow you to work on a larger canvas, and practice sustaining an argument.

Double annotations involve comparisons of the same craft issue in two poems or pieces of fiction, **or** an exploration of two craft issues in a single work. The page count does not determine a “double”—the annotation must clearly demonstrate a dual element in craft lenses or texts—but they typically run 7-10 double-spaced pages. Accepted double annotations are counted as 2 toward your semester minimum requirement of 12.

Regarding proposals for the upcoming essay semester

We ask the faculty to participate actively in developing your essay topics, but, ultimately, you need to determine what seems most relevant to your own work, most pressing for your development. Potential topics will arise from investigations in your annotations, from your reading, and from dialogue with your supervisor. They should issue from recognized craft challenges (i.e., not just a ‘good topic,’ but a topic particularly useful for *your* development generally or your current project specifically), and *not* from an attachment to a particular text. You also shouldn’t avoid relevant topics because you feel they’ve already “been done” or texts because they’re frequently discussed in degree essays; those are actually testaments to the value of the topics and texts. Each student brings a unique perspective and the possibility of new discoveries.

Remember that you must submit three viable topics with your final evaluation in May each topic accompanied by a paragraph describing its relevance to your work and a list of possible texts (which are always subject to change--be flexible and open to input from your next supervisor as well). While essay proposals vary in their degree of specificity, the more thought you give to these topics in advance, the more prepared you’ll be to get underway with essay planning at the next residency.

As noted above, you’ll receive sample essay proposals around the midterm to help you prepare. If you’d like to see a list of past essay titles as well, those are available from the MFA office.

Please note that if you’re entering a leave of absence next winter, you must still formulate three topics in conversation with your faculty supervisor this semester, and submit them with your final evaluation, just as if you were entering the essay next summer. Sometimes priorities change or new discoveries emerge during the leave; you’ll have the opportunity to revise or submit new topics next May, before you resume your studies in July.