

THE MFA PROGRAM FOR WRITERS
at **WARREN WILSON COLLEGE**

ANNOTATION SESSION FOR NEW STUDENTS

January 2024

Please review, and bring your questions to our meeting on January 9 (4:30 pm in Robertson 1).

This session is meant to provide a general introduction to the annotation—what it is and what it’s for, how you might approach it and pitfalls you should try to avoid. This program is committed to the notion that a writer’s gifts are enlarged and deepened through broad reading, careful thought about that reading, and continuous efforts to articulate issues of craft. The emphasis we place on this analytical component, as an essential **accompaniment** to the creative endeavors of our students is, in fact, one of our distinctive hallmarks. The craft-based analysis we require in this program fuels and informs your creative development; they work hand-in-glove.

We provide a range of opportunities for critical inquiry: your green sheets, workshop, of course; the reflections and self-assessment you’ll engaged in on your midterm and for your final evaluation. The correspondence you’ll engage in with your faculty supervisors provide another arena for critical thinking. But those analytical skills are most acutely and specifically honed through the program’s requirement of annotations and, later, more extensively, in the degree essay and graduate class.

To draw from the Program handbook:

Annotations are, put simply, one writer writing to another writer about a third writer's work. They are meant to be neither scholarly efforts nor book reviews but analysis of texts—3-4 double-spaced pages of clear prose in which the student examines some aspect of craft in a poem, story or novel.

The role they’ll play develops as you progress through the program:

...in the first semester annotations help to develop skills in discursive prose and argumentation; in the second, to locate a fruitful essay topic; in the third, to generate rough draft material for the essay, or test the completed essay's premises on additional texts; and in the final, to prepare for the residency class.

Throughout, the annotations contribute to the ongoing dialogue between student and supervisor and should be a component of each exchange.

Requirements

- 12-15 accepted annotations per semester are required for semester credit; this translates to two per packet, though I’d encourage you all to aim for three in initial packets. This is a FIRM requirement, and must be met for semester credit. If you start out with more, and have to revise some, as you might well be asked to do, you’ll have more in the works toward meeting that minimum.
- 3-4 pp. double-spaced. Longer is not necessarily better.
- Use MLA style!—so, using parenthetical citation for your quotations (not footnotes or endnotes). Documentation guidelines are in your handbook and readily available online.
- We encourage you stick with **single annotations** in first semester; you will move to double annotations in second semester, in preparation for the essay. If your faculty supervisor feels you’re ready for that next step, fine—but not until late in the term.

Why do them?

The creative and critical work in tandem. Annotations should not be considered supplemental or extraneous; they're part and parcel of your creative development. In identifying craft choices at work in accomplished poetry and fiction and in articulating the effect of those choices and how those choices result in such an effect, you absorb the lessons and put them to work in your own writing. The more adept you become at them, the more you will be reading with an eye toward and writing annotations on those craft elements which most present a challenge for you.

What they are not:

Annotations are not literary criticism, not a book review or book report. They are not about theme or content or plot, they are not about interpretation or symbolism, but about craft. They are, in other words, **not** about *what happens* in a work, but a study of how specific craft choices—syntax, diction, imagery, figuration, shifts in point of view or modulations of narrative distance, management of time, repetition, use of white space, aspects of setting or characterization, formal elements such as meter, == produce the effects you perceive in the work, and what those effects are, so that you may apply these craft insights into your own work.

They are not research papers. They should not draw from or rely upon secondary sources, though you may well draw from our faculty craft books to define your terms or to buttress your claims. But these are meant to be your thoughts, your inhabiting of and engagement with the text at hand.

Approach:

- **Identify the craft lens through which you'll investigate the work.** If you're a poet, that might mean image or diction or syntax or line length or the use of repetition in a poem; if you're a fiction writer, it could be characterization or setting or shifting point of view or the use of flashbacks, for instance.
- **Cite, explore, and articulate the effect of the writer's choices.** Gather your examples, study them, convey your insights.
- **Keep focused on the selected craft lens.** It's easy to want to talk about every craft element you encounter, and we understand that no craft choice works alone, but do your best to confine your discussion to the topic you've selected.

Where to start:

- **With a craft topic suggested by the work you're reading**

Be alert as you read—what impresses you, what strikes you, what are you aware of as a particular achievement? Where do you say 'How did s/he pull that off?'

- **With a craft topic suggested by your own work**

[Annotate toward your challenges and defaults. If you always write first-person stories or always write poems with short lines, annotate fiction and poetry which does otherwise.

- **With a craft topic suggested by a lecture or class**
- **With a craft topic which rises out of your ongoing correspondence with your faculty supervisor**

After you've selected the topic and texts:

- Read the story or poem multiple times
- Identify and focus on the lines or passages most relevant to the chosen craft lens
- Analyze those passages or lines.
 - Describe what you see/hear
 - Describe the local effect of what you see
 - Explain how that local effect serves one or more of the story or poem's larger goals—that is, extrapolate from the isolated examples
 - Explore how it illustrates or enlarges your sense of the pertinent craft element

Here's a sample list of annotation titles from recent semesters. These titles may provide some ideas for your own craft analyses, if you're initially feeling stuck. You can also—if you truly feel adrift—ask your faculty supervisor for assigned topics. But being able to identify, yourself, a salient craft choice is part of what annotations teach. It's my hope that you're getting to see plenty of examples in Bookshop, and you can look at the examples available to you on the student-access area of the website:

FICTION

Dialogue in Sherman Alexie's "South by Southwest"
Indirect Speech in Rachel Cusk's *Outline*
Secondary Characters in Eudora Welty's "The Wide Net"
Strategic Release of Information in the Opening of *The Goldfinch*
Characterization through Setting in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*
Character Revelation in the First Chapter of Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*
Intertextuality in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*
Close Third-person POV Shifts in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*
Second-person Address in a First-Person Narrative in Robinson's *Housekeeping*
The Structure of a Twist Ending in Jorge Luis Borges' "The Shape of the Sword"
Narrative Distance in Chekhov's "Anyuta"
The Role of Narrator in Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider"
Manipulating Time Frames in Alice Munro's "Tricks"

POETRY:

White Space in Frank Bidart's "Name the Bed"
Prepositional Phrases in James Wright's "By a Lake in Minnesota"
The Sonic Weave of Seamus Heaney's "A Brigid Girdle"
Imagery in C.D. Wright's "Poem with a Dozen Cherries on a Ledge"
Enjambment in Susan Stewart's "The Clown"
Temporal Progression in Mary Szybist's "Too Many Pigeons to Count and One Dove"
Metaphor in Brigit Pegeen Kelly's "Three Cows and the Moon"
The Omniscient Speaker in Ellen Bryant Voigt's "Liebesgedicht"
Extended Analogy in Natasha Trethewey's "Enlightenment"
Charles Wright's Dropped Line in "Meditation on Song and Structure"
Achieving Closure by Means of Metaphor in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*
Pace (and Anticipation) in the Launch and Finish of Ada Limón's "Oh Please, Let it be Lightning"

Variations in style

Annotations in our program vary in degree of formality. Finding your own analytical voice is part of the endeavor. An informal style is fine; what matters most is clarity at the sentence level and structurally and in the definition of terms, succinct support of your observations with examples from the text, and drawing discoveries from identified examples of the craft lens.

Common Problems in the first semester

- Craft topic isn't clearly defined or detailed
- Focus is not maintained—too many craft elements are discussed
- Craft topic isn't sufficiently supported by examples from the text
- Annotation takes on too much material—better to look at a smaller sample in greater detail
- Annotation is largely plot summary or is overly thematic or explicatory in approach
- "Bean-counting" without extrapolation; cataloguing examples without analysis or commentary
- Emphasis on opinion rather than analysis
- Typos and formatting errors

Do be prepared for some annotations to be returned by your faculty supervisor for revision. This analytical form takes some practice, whether or not you have an English-major background. Toward that end, you may want to aim for more than the minimum of 12 annotations in your first semester, just to further develop your facility with this component of your MFA studies.

Double annotations: Applying one craft lens to two works, or two craft lenses to a single work. They count as 2 in your semester tally. Double annotations typically are undertaken by the midpoint of the second semester, in preparation for the degree essay. They're generally not recommended for first-semester students because we want you to develop a facility with the form first—to get in plenty of practice, to work with a variety of craft lenses and truly develop that essential ability to focus.

Always note full titles and page counts of all annotations in your semester log.

Observe MLA style (8th edition), with parenthetical citations, as noted in the Documentation Guidelines in your Program Handbook.

A Partial List of Recommended Craft Books

Barrett & Turchi, *A Kite in the Wind: Fiction Writers on Their Craft; The Story Behind the Story*

Charles Baxter, *Art of Subtext; Burning Down the House; Wonderlands*

Baxter & Turchi, *Bringing the Devil to His Knees: The Craft of Fiction & the Writing Life*

Robert Boswell, *The Half-Known World*

Maud Casey, *The Art of Mystery*

Christopher Castellani, *The Art of Perspective*

Stacey D'Erasmus, *The Art of Intimacy*

Margot Livesey, *The Hidden Machinery*

Joan Silber, *The Art of Time in Fiction*

Debra Spark, *Curious Attractions; And Then Something Happened*

Sarah Stone & Ron Nyren, *Deepening Fiction*

Peter Turchi, *Maps of the Imagination; A Muse and a Maze; (Don't) Stop Me If You've Heard This Before*

Marianne Boruch, *Poetry's Old Air; In the Blue Pharmacy; The Little Death of Self*

Carl Dennis, *Poetry as Persuasion*

Stephen Dobyns, *Best Words, Best Order; Next Word, Better Word*

Tony Hoagland, *Real Sofistikashun; Twenty Poems That Could Save America*

James Longenbach, *The Art of the Poetic Line; The Virtues of Poetry; How a Poem Gets Made*

Heather McHugh, *Broken English*

Alan Shapiro, *A Self-Forgetful Perfectly Useless Concentration*

Tobin and Triplett, *Poet's Work, Poet's Play*

Ellen Bryant Voigt, *The Art of Syntax; The Flexible Lyric*

Voigt & Orr, *Poets Teaching Poets*

Wilner & Manning, *The Rag-Picker's Guide to Poetry*

And our decades of program lectures provide a tremendous craft resource: they're available for download from our website's [MFA store](#) at \$5 each (all proceeds go to scholarships for our students). You can search by faculty member, residency, or craft topic. [Videos of craft conversations](#) between faculty are also available for download for \$5.

DURING OUR SESSION

Two of our graduating students will join us to talk about the evolving role of the annotation in their studies over the course of their enrollment, and the three of us will be ready to take your questions.