

# THE MFA PROGRAM FOR WRITERS

## at WARREN WILSON COLLEGE

### Essay Semester

It will sound obvious, but it's worth repeating: the degree essay is the focus and goal of the Essay semester. Creative work should be *set aside* until that goal is accomplished. Students sometimes enter the semester thinking they'll get the essay "out of the way" so that they can get back to the "real work." Or they'll privately plan to continue working on their poetry or fiction throughout the semester. The essay, however, *is* the real work of this term, and it will play an essential, pivotal role in everything that comes after. As such, it merits your full and undivided attention; deep investment yields deep rewards. You will gain from immersion in the analysis of instructive fiction and poetry, you'll gain from the lessons in structure the essay will provide. and you'll benefit from the shift in perspective. The new insights and efficiencies gained will ensure that no time is lost on the creative endeavor.

#### *Essay semester deadlines to note:*

- **Midterm evaluation (March 20):** By the midterm, you'll need to confirm the texts you're using.
- **Essay is due April 10.** (See below, "Submission guidelines," for more.) This is more than a month before the end of the semester to ensure that you do have some time for your creative work, or time for revision of the essay if required.
- **Last possible submission date: May 1**

#### *Preparing for a successful essay semester*

- *Schedule:* expect to devote at least 4 packets to the essay; nearly all students require 4 or 5, with the last packet consisting of final editing, polishing and proofreading. This leaves 1 or 2 packets for creative work. The key to a successful semester is to get a solid start on the essay from the outset, working with your supervisor during residency conferences to get a clear sense of the topic and texts.
- *Focus:* aim for a narrow topic, to limit texts, and to focus the analysis. This means limiting your examination to one to three poems, one or two stories, or select passages from one novel. You may decide to reduce the number of texts, once you're underway; this is common (but please notify the program director about the change). It's best to focus your thinking at the outset and to create an outline, rather than hope that organization will arise out of exploratory studies. The semester really doesn't provide enough time for leisurely inquiry. The more targeted your focus from the start, the better chance you have for clarifying your structure, solidifying your argument and polishing your prose over the course of the semester.
- *Relevance:* choose a specific element of craft or technique that is not just an interesting topic but is important to your work. You may want to address this relevance directly in the essay, though that isn't required.
- *Tone:* Just as in annotations, there is a wide range of tone and approach. Your inquiry should be serious, but not necessarily formal or overly academic. You may use first person and may draw from personal experience; some students find that that provides a beneficial entry into the topic. But inclusion of the personal element ("why I chose this topic") is not required.
- *Approach:* You and your supervisor will determine these together. Some people write preliminary annotations, some set a page or section per packet goal, some write complete drafts and revisions. Determine how you work best and proceed accordingly.
- *Topic:* You can't change the topic without seeking and receiving approval from the director, who will confer with the Academic Board as necessary. As noted above, you should also contact the director if a change is made in selection or number of texts. Please note also that faculty poetry or fiction may **not** serve as an essay text for analysis. You certainly may draw upon faculty craft essays, however.

### Extensions

- Students may, and routinely do, request an extension to complete the essay. If another week or two will allow the essay to realize its full potential, you should allow yourself that additional time.
- There is no form or special process for requesting an extension: just email the director and, if possible, provide the projected submission date. The office will relay this to the second reader so that they may plan for that change in their own schedule.
- **The last possible date for essay submission is always 2 weeks prior to the last day of the term**, to allow the second reader the evaluation time they would have had if the essay had arrived on the scheduled deadline. This semester, that date will be **May 1**.

### Readying the essay for submission

- Proofread carefully. An error-free paper is your responsibility, not your supervisor's.
- Use MLA format (9<sup>th</sup> edition) for documentation throughout. Consult your handbook, as well as the separate documentation guidelines handout you'll receive around midterm. (If you do have MLA-related questions, feel free to contact the office.)
- Please follow the formatting guidelines in the handbook, and in particular, adapt the template provided in the handbook on page 16 for your **title page**. Do not put your name/date/supervisor name on the essay's first page as you would for an undergraduate paper. *The first page of the essay text (not the cover page) should be numbered page 1.*
- Respect the page-count parameters. This is a **30-50 pp. essay** (apart from any front/back matter, such as a dedication page or your Works Cited). That minimum-maximum range is firm.

### Evaluating the essay

- Essay reports are submitted by your supervisor and by the second reader who determines the outcome.
- Your supervisor's evaluation will describe your process of writing the essay, and the product, but does not recommend for or against acceptance; that's left to the second reader, who offers a more objective view. Second readers are determined at the residency, but students aren't aware of their identity in advance; we don't want you to consciously or unconsciously write for them.
- If there are disagreements between the supervisor and second reader about whether an essay should pass, the Academic Board may assign another reader. Such instances are rare; in nearly all provisional or fail decisions, all faculty readers are in agreement.
- Three outcomes are possible:
  - **Pass.** Your essay is accepted as is and requires only minor typo or formatting corrections.
  - **Provisional pass.** The essay is approved in substance but there are noteworthy compositional or structural issues that can be addressed in the time remaining in the semester. You'll receive a letter detailing what must be done for the full pass; the revised essay must be resubmitted by the last day of the semester. A \$100 fee will be assessed. The reader for the revised essay is the Director.
  - **Fail.** If your essay is not accepted, an extra semester will be required for its revision and resubmission. Also, if your essay is turned in after the final deadline and requires revision, you may be required to take either an extra semester in which to complete it. Students should not rush revision; an essay may be submitted only twice.
- Regardless of outcome, you'll receive only a letter from the program director which will draw together quotes from both supervisor and second reader reports.

### Looking ahead

- You and your supervisor might have time for some initial exploration of potential graduate class topics before the semester is over. As with the essay topics, your class topic should address challenges you face in your own work. You might, in fact, end up choosing one of the essay proposals you didn't choose as the topic for your graduate class, if it's sufficiently different from your essay. The graduate class must focus on something *other* than what the essay investigated.