Writing

The Writing program offers a Master of Fine Arts in Writing (MFA) in three genres — creative nonfiction, fiction, and poetry. The primary faculty in creative nonfiction are Kathleen Finneran and Edward McPherson; in fiction they are Kathryn Davis, Danielle Dutton, and Marshall Klimasewiski; in poetry they are Mary Jo Bang and Carl Phillips.

We enroll 12 to 15 students each year. There is a single graduate workshop in each genre and students take their genre’s workshop all four semesters. Every student we enroll receives full and equal funding, and our funding package is among the best in the nation. Our students do not teach the first year, instead taking three courses each semester; in the second year they take two courses and teach one introductory workshop in their genre each semester. Applicants must apply to each genre separately and will be enrolled in only one. However, through themed craft courses, MFA students may take courses with faculty and students in other genres.

Each year our reading series brings a diverse group of poets, fiction writers, and nonfiction writers to the department. In addition, the Hurst Professor program brings in six distinguished visitors each year to present their newest work, lecture on the craft of writing, and work one-on-one with our MFA students. Edward P. Jones, Frank Bidart, Joy Williams, Jorie Graham, Aleksandar Hemon, Lucie Brock Broido, George Saunders, Louise Glück, Kelly Link, C.D. Wright, Richard Powers, Claudia Rankine, Deborah Eisenberg, Paul Muldoon, Charles Baxter, Timothy Donnelly, and Lydia Davis are just some of our recent visiting Hurst Professors.

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Professors

Mary Jo Bang  
MFA, Columbia University

Carl Phillips  
MA, Boston University

Assistant Professors

Danielle Dutton  
PhD, University of Denver

Edward McPherson  
MFA, University of Minnesota–Twin Cities

Writers-in-Residence

Kathryn Davis  
BA, Goddard University

Kathleen Finneran  
BA, Washington University

Marshall Klimasewiski  
MFA, Bowling Green State University

Director of Creative Writing Program

David Schuman  
MFA, Washington University

Degree Requirements

Master of Fine Arts in Writing

The Writing program leads to the Master of Fine Arts in Writing (MFA). It is a two-year program, requiring satisfactory completion of 42 semester hours, a thesis, and an oral examination dealing principally with the thesis.

Course Work

Of the 42 credit units required, 24 will consist of the graduate nonfiction, fiction, or poetry workshop taken every semester. The remainder will primarily be literature and craft courses from the English department, but in consultation with the Director of the Program, graduate-level courses from any department are acceptable as long as the student has the appropriate preparation and the permission of the instructor, and the course will enrich the student’s writing. Up to 6 units of playwriting or nonfiction prose workshops, and up to 6 units of independent study (providing instructors are available) may be counted among the academic courses.

In the first year, students enroll for 24 units: the graduate workshop in their genre (6 units) plus two additional 3-unit courses each semester. In the second year, while teaching, students will typically take a total of 18 units: the workshop each semester again (12 units), thesis hours (3 units), and an additional course. This pattern may vary for the students who are not teaching assistants, or for whom the director approves a different distribution of the workload.

First Year Review

At the conclusion of each workshop students will receive an evaluation from the workshop instructor; at the end of the first year there will be a review of overall performance in the program. At this time, students who show insufficient progress as writers may be dismissed even though their academic records are satisfactory (although such cases are rare). Students who are lagging in their academic work may be put on warning at this time or may be dismissed.
Thesis
The required work for the MFA culminates in a thesis, which may take different forms but is usually a volume (or most of a volume) of poems, stories or essays, or a novel (or most of a novel), or a memoir or other long-form CNF work (or most of one). Graduate School regulations require the filing of a “Thesis Title, Scope, and Procedure” form at least six months before the date of the degree-granting period. Students in the program, when filing this form, will select a committee of three readers (a thesis director and two other full-time members of the faculty). Generally, the thesis will be completed and defended in the spring of the second year. Under unusual circumstances, it is possible to complete the thesis out of residence and return for the oral examination.

Oral Examination
Near the end of the second year, after the thesis has been submitted in final form, the department will schedule an oral examination, dealing principally with the thesis.