

Thank you for your interest in the University of South Florida's MFA program. We are delighted to hear from you and hope that the following information will answer some of the questions you may have about our program and about the application process for MFA programs in general. Also included below is information we have prepared for our own undergraduates who hope to pursue graduate studies in creative writing.

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NOTE: Some of the following advice represents my personal opinion. I encourage you to speak with other faculty members to get their feedback.

### **Advice to USF MFA Applicants**

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1. **What are some of the highlights of USF's MFA program?**

The students and faculty here are friendly and supportive and our workshops are conducted in a positive atmosphere. Our teacher training is superb. We are one of the few programs in the country to offer training in creative writing pedagogy. All of our students are offered the opportunity to teach lower-level creative writing courses. Graduates of our program are well-prepared for the difficult academic job market. Students in our program may concentrate solely on their chosen genre, or they may take workshops outside of their genre. We encourage our students to experiment and to push boundaries, to participate in our many student-oriented events such as the annual Creative Writing Symposium, Writers' Harvest, and National Poetry Month celebration,

and to gain valuable editorial experience working on *Saw Palm*, USF's Florida-themed literature and art magazine.

2. **Where do your current students and alumni publish?**

Our students are publishing in top journals--*The Sun*, *Quarterly West*, and *Epoch*, to name just a few--and have won prestigious prizes such as the AWP Intro Award, the NEA fellowship in literature, and O. Henry Award. Among our more successful graduates are fiction writer Karen Brown (winner of the AWP Award in Fiction, the Prairie Schooner Prize in Fiction, and the John Gardner Award), young-adult novelist Alicia Thompson (author of *The Psych Major Syndrome*), poet John Nieves (winner of the Elixir Poetry Prize for *Curio* and assistant professor at Salisbury University), poet and translator Daniele Pantano (author of *The Oldest Hands in the World* and translator of *The Possible Is Monstrous: Selected Poems by Friedrich Dürrenmatt* and *The Collected Poems of George Trakl*) and Jaquira Diaz (winner of a Pushcart Prize and the Carl Djerassi Fellowship at the University of Wisconsin, and now associate fiction editor of *West Branch*).

3. **What financial aid do you offer students in your MFA program?**

We are able to offer all of our accepted MFA students a strong financial-aid package that consists of a 100-percent tuition remission (less student fees) and a graduate teaching assistantship that pays approximately \$13,000 in the first and second years and approximately \$14,000 in the third year of the program. First-year graduate assistants typically teach a 2/2 load of freshman composition. Second-year and third-year graduate assistants all are assigned to teach beginning-level courses in creative writing. Many of our graduate assistants also serve as tutors in our Writing Center. All graduate assistants are eligible for group health insurance.

4. **How competitive is your application process?**

Each year we receive between 70-100 applications. We typically accept between 7-9 students each year.

5. **What is the average age of the students in your MFA program?**

We are blessed to have a full range of ages in our program--with students ranging from 22 on up to those in their fifties and sixties. All ages are welcome.

6. **How diverse is your program?**

Our students come from a wide variety of racial, ethnic, religious, economic, and social backgrounds. We love having a great mix of students in our classes and honor the opportunity to learn from one another.

7. **How geographically diverse is your program?**

We welcome out-of-state applicants and currently about one-third of our students are classified as out-of-state residents. The remaining students in our program are Florida residents--but a good guesstimate is that two-thirds of them have grown up elsewhere.

8. **I have a family--as a parent, will I be out of place in your MFA program?**

Absolutely not. Many of our MFA students have children and/or other family responsibilities. Moms and Dads have a lot to write about.

9. **On the general USF website, it says that some graduate programs will waive the GRE requirement. Will the MFA program waive my GRE requirement?**

Yes. The GRE is optional. There are some university scholarships that require the GRE but for admissions into the MFA program, you do not need to take the GRE.

10. **May I visit campus or attend a class prior to applying to the program?**

Like every other MFA program in the nation, we receive a lot of inquiries; each year our applicant pool becomes larger and larger. We are not in a position to host all prospective applicants prior to their application to the program. However, we make every effort to respond quickly to our applications--in general, we are able to notify accepted students in early February. Once you are accepted into the program, we will invite you to visit campus to meet with students and faculty and attend class. We know you'll like what you find here!

11. **Is there any money available for accepted students to travel to campus?**

This varies from year to year and budget to budget. If we have funds available, we will let you know as soon as possible so you can make appropriate travel plans.

12. **I am a United States veteran--will I qualify for G.I. Bill assistance?**  
Veterans or active-duty military personnel are urged to contact USF's Veterans Services office for information regarding G.I. Bill Assistance: <http://www.veterans.usf.edu>.
13. **Can I attend the MFA program part-time?**  
The MFA is a full degree program and must be completed within a specific time frame. Although we have accepted one or two students per year who attend part-time (usually six credits per semester), we are actively seeking students who can commit to the program for full-time work (nine credits per semester).
14. **Do you offer online classes?**  
No, all courses for the MFA program meet on the Tampa campus between the hours of 3:30-6:15 p.m. and 6:30-9:15 p.m.
15. **Do you offer courses on all of the USF campuses?**  
No, the MFA program must be pursued on the Tampa campus.
16. **Is there a time limit for completing the degree?**  
The MFA must be completed within 5 years. Most students finish in three years.
17. **May I apply to the program if I do not have an undergraduate degree in English?**  
Yes, provided your undergraduate degree is in a related field in the humanities or if your undergraduate transcript shows that you have taken adequate course work in the humanities. Accepted students who are deficient in literature courses may be asked to take one or two survey courses in literature at the discretion of the graduate director.
18. **I've never taken a creative writing course before. Am I still a good candidate for the degree?**  
In general, our accepted applicants have studied creative writing before either as undergraduates or at well-respected writing workshops across the United States (such as Breadloaf, Sewanee Writers Conference, etc.). Although there are exceptions to every rule, applicants who have never participated in a workshop most likely are not prepared for graduate work in creative writing.
19. **What is the number-one thing that can make or break my application?**  
We are most concerned with your writing sample and your personal statement. Send us your best work.
20. **Will MFA students get help finding an agent or publisher?**  
Our courses concentrate on the craft and writing of fiction, but faculty members are happy to assist students with query letters, synopses, and publishing opportunities.
21. **I want to teach after I get my degree. What are my job prospects if I hold an MA or an MFA?**  
If you hold an MA, you are qualified to teach on the community-college level or in a private school that does not require its teachers to hold state-certified credentials. But be aware that more and more community colleges are seeking job candidates who hold a Ph.D.  
If you hold an MFA--which is considered a "terminal degree"--you are qualified to teach at a four-year college or university. However, there is no guarantee that you will find a teaching position upon graduation. The job market in teaching is extremely tight. To be considered for most teaching positions at colleges and universities, you need a terminal degree and "significant publications"--which in most cases now translates into "a book of stories or poems, or a novel, which has been accepted for publication by a reputable commercial press." Without a book, you most likely will be teaching as an adjunct instructor, paid class by class without medical benefits. Be aware of this now. To increase your chances of employment after graduation, try to gain skills in tutoring, technical writing, or editing that will give you a competitive edge in the professional world.
22. **I would like to get a Ph.D. after I get my MA or MFA. Is this possible?**  
Students who hold MAs or MFAs in creative writing are good candidates to pursue the Ph.D. in creative writing. They generally are not considered good candidates to pursue the Ph.D. in literature or rhetoric/composition, because they have not completed the proper scholarly coursework required for these programs.
23. **Which universities offer a Ph.D. in creative writing?**

Consult [www.awpwriter.org](http://www.awpwriter.org) to find these programs. Be aware that these programs are highly competitive and that only those students who demonstrate excellence in both creative and scholarly work will be considered good candidates for the Ph.D. in English with a creative dissertation.

24. **How do I apply to USF's MFA program?**

Please visit our website page for prospective applicants and click on the MFA link: <http://english.usf.edu/graduate/prospective/>.

### General Advice to Creative Writing Graduate Program Applicants

Below please find general advice we have prepared for USF undergraduates hoping to pursue graduate work in creative writing. We hope you find this information useful.

1. [What is the difference between the MA and MFA in creative writing?](#)
2. [What is a graduate certificate in creative writing?](#)
3. [How do I find out about MA and MFA Programs?](#)
4. [If I am accepted to USF's certificate program in creative writing, will I be accepted to the MFA at a later date?](#)
5. [I got my BA in creative writing at USF and I want to stay here to get my MFA. Is this a good idea?](#)
6. [I am a Florida resident and hope to take advantage of in-state tuition to pursue my graduate education in creative writing. Are there other MFA programs in Florida I might consider?](#)
7. [Should I apply to two or three writing programs?](#)
8. [I got bad grades as an undergraduate. Should I still apply?](#)
9. [Some programs ask me to write a "personal statement" to accompany the application. What should I say?](#)
10. [What will the faculty look for in my writing sample?](#)
11. [I write genre fiction \(fantasy, horror, mystery, science fiction, romance\). Is there a writing program that is hospitable to this kind of work?](#)
12. [What kind of financial aid can I expect to receive?](#)
13. [When are the application deadlines for most programs?](#)
14. [I need three recommendations from my current or former professors. How do I request that a professor write me a letter?](#)

1. **What is the difference between the MA and MFA in creative writing?**

Every program has different requirements, but here are some general distinctions between the two degrees. A master's (or MA) program usually requires fewer credit hours (average: 32-36), and a higher proportion of these may be in literature courses than in actual writing workshops. A creative thesis is required (average: 60-100 pages). Some MA programs allow students to dabble in all genres: poetry, fiction, screenwriting, and nonfiction. Others ask students to declare an emphasis in one genre. A master of fine arts (MFA) program usually requires more credit hours (average: 45) and most of those hours will be spent in writing workshops. Most MFA programs require that students concentrate in one genre only. The thesis for an MFA program usually is expected to be a complete story collection or a novel (150-plus pages), a collection of personal essays, or a full-length poetry manuscript.

2. **What is a graduate certificate in creative writing?**

A graduate certificate program, such as the one offered by USF's Department of English, requires 15 credit hours (or more, depending on the program) in both writing workshops and literature. A certificate program provides a structured learning environment and supportive atmosphere for students who do not wish to pursue a traditional MA or MFA in creative writing. The certificate does NOT qualify candidates to teach community-college or university courses; those who aspire to teach on this level MUST pursue a full-degree program.

3. **How do I find out about MA and MFA Programs?**

You should begin by consulting the website for the Associated Writing Programs at [www.awpwriter.org](http://www.awpwriter.org). Click on the button that says "Looking for a writing program?" This online guide provides information on admission requirements, course requirements, faculty, and financial aid for every creative writing program that is a member of the Associated Writing Programs. It also contains information on writers' colonies, conferences, and centers. You also may contact individual programs directly via the internet.

4. **If I am accepted to USF's certificate program in creative writing, will I be accepted to the MFA at a later date?**

There is no guarantee that certificate students will be accepted into the MFA program. Those certificate students who are interested in pursuing the MFA must make a formal application to the MFA program by the January 1 deadline. Certificate students accepted into the MFA may bring a maximum of 12 credits of coursework into the degree.

5. **I got my BA in creative writing at USF and I want to stay here to get my MFA. Is this a good idea?**

In a word: no. If you hope to obtain a teaching position at a college or university, it is not a good idea to take multiple degrees from one institution. This is frowned upon for the following reasons: hiring committees wish to see evidence that the job candidate is willing to make moves to further his/her career, is willing to take risks, and has studied with faculty members who hold varied perspectives. With that said, we acknowledge that there are some students who may be geographically bound due to personal circumstances. These students should make every effort to gain additional administrative or editorial experience that will make them more desirable job candidates for teaching positions.

6. **I am a Florida resident and hope to take advantage of in-state tuition to pursue my graduate education in creative writing. Are there other MFA programs in Florida I might consider?**

The following public universities offer the MFA in creative writing: University of South Florida, Florida State University, University of Florida, Florida International University, University of Central Florida, and Florida Atlantic University. The University of Miami is a private institution offering an MFA program. The University of Tampa offers a low-residency program ideal for those who wish to continue their education while still working full-time.

7. **Should I apply to two or three writing programs?**

If you have your heart set upon attending a graduate program in the upcoming year, you should apply to at least seven to ten programs. At least one of those programs should be considered a "safety"--a program where you believe you stand a very good chance of being accepted. Although it is expensive to apply to several programs, you will be luckier if you cast a wide net. You may get accepted into all of your choices with full financial aid packages. You may only get accepted into one with financial assistance, or you may just receive an offer from two or three programs without an offer of financial assistance.

8. **I got bad grades as an undergraduate. Should I still apply?**

Did you get good grades in your English courses? If so, you may still be a viable candidate for an MA or MFA Program. If you received some Bs in your undergraduate English courses, you may think about taking two or three undergraduate courses beyond your degree in order to demonstrate to the admissions committee that you are "A" student material. If you consistently received Cs and Ds in your English courses, you are not a good candidate for a graduate program and should consider taking non-credit courses to pursue your interest in creative writing. If your undergraduate grade report is spotty, you should know that your writing sample must be that much stronger to make up for your iffy grade point average.

9. **Some programs ask me to write a "personal statement" to accompany the application. What should I say?**

You should address some of the following questions (not necessarily in this order): Why do you want to study fiction/poetry/creative nonfiction on the graduate level? What courses have you already taken in this area? Why do you want to study at program X?

What are your career goals? What special talents or skills do you bring into the classroom? What are your publication goals? What awards or prizes have you won in creative writing? What are your strengths and weaknesses as a writer?

When writing your personal statement, remember your audience. Show what you can bring to their program, but also acknowledge what their program can offer you. Don't brag about your accomplishments--but don't sell yourself short. Try to present yourself as a good match.

**10. What will the faculty look for in my writing sample?**

Originality. Freshness. A strong voice. Good command of the English language. In fiction, they will want to see a complete short story or novel chapter that demonstrates that the applicant understands the following elements: characterization, dialogue, plot, conflict, etc. In poetry, they will want to see a group of poems that demonstrates that the applicant understands rhythm, rhyme, word choice, tone, etc. Remember that your writing sample makes or breaks your application. Some writing programs receive hundreds of applications for a dozen slots, and the faculty will turn directly to the writing sample--without even looking at the rest of your application--just to make an initial cut.

**11. I write genre fiction (fantasy, horror, mystery, science fiction, romance). Is there a writing program that is hospitable to this kind of work?**

If you wish to write blockbuster commercial fiction, an MFA program may not be the place for you. With the exception of some specialty programs devoted to children's and young-adult writing, most graduate programs seek students who write mainstream literary fiction. There may be exceptions to this rule. Say someone on the faculty writes in a specific genre--then that program may be receptive to your work. Do your research and don't waste time applying to programs that specifically discourage such writing.

**12. What kind of financial aid can I expect to receive?**

Most programs offer scholarships, teaching assistantships, and/or editorial assistantships. Some programs support all of their students with aid, while others do not. If financial aid is an important consideration for you, apply to as many programs as you can to optimize the chances of your receiving a strong aid package.

**13. When are the application deadlines for most programs?**

Start early. Request information on programs in summer and early fall, as some programs have application deadlines as early as December 15. Most programs do not have "rolling admissions"--so if you miss the deadline, you must wait until the next year to apply.

**14. I need three recommendations from my current or former professors. How do I request that a professor write me a letter?**

Only request letters from professors who know you are capable of producing good work. Use your judgment: If you came to class late, skipped a lot of classes, held a bad attitude in class, or got a bad grade in a course, it is fruitless to ask the professor to recommend you. Remember that your professors do not owe you a good recommendation. You should have earned one before making the request.

Most schools now require that recommendations be entered online. After your professor has agreed to write for you, you should be sure to enter the professor's correct contact information on the application website. If the school requires a physical copy of the letter, bring all of the required materials to your professor's office in one packet.

Some programs ask the professor to fill out specific recommendation forms; other programs ask only that the professor write directly to the graduate school on letterhead. You must provide the professor with the proper recommendation forms. Address and STAMP all envelopes. Give your professor a vita or a list of your accomplishments so he/she can refer to your work beyond the classroom. Most important: Allow your professor plenty of time to prepare the recommendation letter. Four-six weeks before the deadline is preferable.

Most graduate schools will ask you, as the applicant, to waive/not waive your right to see the recommendation letter at a future point. You should always choose to waive the right. This permits the professor to write an honest assessment of your strengths and weaknesses. If you don't waive your right, the recommendation is worthless.

