

2008-2009

*Western Connecticut State University
MFA in Professional Writing*

Student Guide

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Note: This pamphlet is provided for informational purposes only. In any case where there is a conflict between this document and the published policies of the university, the information provided here must defer to university policy.

Section I: The Program

Western Connecticut State University is proud to have you as a participant in the *only* MFA in Professional Writing. In our selection process, you have been recognized as the type of student who can benefit from a program designed to help you meet your creative goals and your career goals—you are self-driven, talented, and committed to excellence, and we know you take pride in your work. We also hope you'll take pride in the fact that you are pioneering an educational frontier that will be populated by many universities in the coming years.

We trust that you will make close connections with some of the faculty you work with in the program; we know that you will enrich many of their lives as much as they will enrich yours and that those connections may grow into long-lasting mentoring relationships that help you find internships, teaching opportunities, freelance jobs, permanent writing positions, and, eventually, careers as professional writers.

The MFA Coordinator and the program secretary are available to help you achieve all of those goals. Whatever the program-related problem you're having—whether it's communication with faculty or peers, curriculum questions, residency questions, or anything else—feel free to contact them any time.

Program Objectives

The program's objectives are (1) to provide a period of intense, focused, and steady study under the guidance of established professionals; (2) to deepen and to broaden the development of individual writing ability and style in more than one genre of writing, including not only the traditional creative genres, but also creative nonfiction and “practical” writing genres such as varieties of journalism, technical writing, public relations, marketing, or advertising; (3) to attune writers to the subtleties of the process required to move from a proficiency in one genre of writing to proficiency in another; and (4) to establish a network of mentoring and collaborative relationships among writers.

The MFA program is a central player in WCSU's goals (1) to become the leading intellectual, cultural, and academic resource in the region, and (2) to serve as the center for the arts in Western Connecticut.

Program Structure

Low-Residency

The MFA in Professional Writing is a low-residency program with two one-week residencies (first week of August and first week of January), which inaugurate the Fall and Spring semesters, respectively. Following each residency, there is a two-week research period, during which students and faculty collaborate on course syllabi. Once

syllabi have been completed and approved by the Coordinator, the semester begins officially and continues until the final day of the semester as determined by the university academic calendar.

All study outside the residencies is conducted by distance-learning methods. The Online Multigenre Workshops and the Internship/Practicum courses are conducted as online courses via WebCT Vista. All independent study courses (which includes all courses other than the WebCT Vista courses) are conducted in a manner outlined in each independent study syllabus. Independent study courses usually involve student/faculty communication by email, mail, phone, WebCT Vista, in-person meeting, or some combination of those methods.

Currently, all residencies occur in the Danbury area, primarily on one or both of the WestConn campuses.

Course Registration and Assignment of Incompletes

As of the August 2007 residency, students have the option of registering in the program as a full-time or part-time, according to the plan that best fits their needs. For part-time students, some courses will be registered as intersession courses in the Summer or Winter Intersession, but those courses have an extended duration and will run concurrently with Fall/Spring courses.

All Online Multigenre Workshops will be registered as Fall/Spring courses.

Section II: Program Faculty

The MFA in Professional Writing operates with several levels of faculty involvement—permanent faculty, Writers in Residence, and Writing Mentors. At all levels, these faculty members are in the program to teach independent study mentorships, offer workshops, deliver lectures and readings, and advise thesis projects.

A complete list of program faculty is available at the program website:
<http://www.wcsu.edu/english/mfa>

It is a goal of the program to ensure that every student has the opportunity to work with a Writer in Residence in at least one course in their primary genre during their four semesters; whenever possible, students will be allowed to enroll in additional courses with Writers in Residence.

In the first semester of the program, the Coordinator will make faculty assignments generally without student input. In semesters thereafter, you will be allowed to request faculty assignments. The Coordinator will attempt to meet as many of those requests as possible when making student/faculty assignments for coursework.

It is also a goal of the program for students to work with a wide variety of faculty members in a variety of genres. The wide range of workshops at the residencies is valuable in meeting this goal, and we encourage you to take advantage of that variety when making workshop requests.

If you are interested in working with any particular faculty member as either a primary or second thesis advisor, discuss the idea with both the faculty member and the Coordinator. The end of your second semester is the best time to start thinking about who you want to work with on your thesis. The Coordinator must approve all thesis advisor requests.

Permanent Faculty

The MFA Coordinator is a full-time member of the university faculty. Other full-time members of the university faculty who are qualified by publication and/or education may also teach courses in the MFA program. Some full-time faculty members have played central roles in planning and shaping the program.

Writers in Residence

The MFA program usually employs six Writers in Residence in a given academic year. Writers in Residence are not full-time employees of the university, and they have the following duties:

- Teach 10 courses (individual study mentorships) over the course of the academic year (two residency periods)
- Attend both residencies during the academic year
- Give one workshop or seminar, one lecture, and one public reading during the year
- Serve as an ambassador for the program

In some cases, it may be possible or necessary to split a Writer in Residence line between two faculty members, in which case the duties and residency attendance will be divided.

Writing Mentors

The only responsibility of Writing Mentors is to teach individual study mentorships. Writing Mentors are not required to attend residencies, but are invited to attend.

Writing Mentors may also be invited by the Coordinator to offer workshops, readings, or lectures during or outside the residencies for additional compensation.

Section III: Residencies

The August and January residencies compose the heart of the MFA program. At the residencies you will make valuable connections to faculty and to your peers that will carry through the program and beyond.

Residency Location and Accommodations

While the residency weeks are rewarding and entertaining, they also are grueling. The day begins by 9 a.m. and doesn't end until 9 or 10 p.m.—and that's before the optional late-night socializing. For that reason, we encourage all students who live more than 20 minutes away to stay in the residency dormitory or hotel.

The full residency fee, which goes toward the cost of your room, food, and other incidental residency expenses, is required *regardless of whether or not you stay in the dormitory or hotel.*

During August residencies, the residency dormitory will be one of the university dormitories on the Westside campus. These dormitories feature suites of private rooms, so you will never have to share a bedroom with another student. Even if you decide not to stay on campus during the August residency, a room will be reserved for you; you may use this room for afternoon rest, as a quiet work space, or not at all, as you see fit.

In January, the residency dormitory is a hotel near campus. This arrangement is necessary due to the unavailability of rooms on campus.

Travel to Danbury for Residencies

If you need to travel to Danbury over long distance, you have several airport options. You will probably want to fly into one of these airports:

- Westchester County (half an hour away)
- New Haven (half an hour to 45 minutes away)
- Stewart International Airport, Newburgh, NY (about 45 minutes away)
- Bradley International (Hartford—45 minutes to an hour away)
- New York LaGuardia (1.25-1.5 hours away)
- New York Kennedy (about 1.5 hours away)
- Newark (about 1.75 hours away)

You can take a shuttle from these airports to Danbury, but it doesn't cost much more (less in some cases) to simply rent a car. The program secretary can help you coordinate your travel with other arriving students so that ride sharing can be arranged.

The New York City Metro North rail line runs a Danbury line out of Grand Central Station. The Danbury line connects to the New Haven line in South Norwalk, so you can get to Danbury by train from either New Haven or New York City. The Danbury train

station is about six blocks from the Midtown campus; you will most likely need to take a cab or arrange for a ride from the Danbury station to the Westside campus. Information on Metro North is at <http://www.mta.nyc.ny.us>

If you are interested in car-pooling to Danbury, the program secretary may be able to help you coordinate with other students interested in car-pooling.

Meals

The program provides breakfast, lunch, and dinner every full day of the residency. There are also snacks and drinks available throughout the day and refreshments at the evening events.

If you have any special dietary needs or requests, please inform the program secretary well in advance of the residency.

What to Bring

The program secretary will send you a packet of information prior to the residency. The packet will include a parking tag and a list of items you'll need to bring with you, such as linens and a data cord for your laptop.

Residency Schedule

Prior to the residency, the Coordinator will send you a complete residency schedule, which will include appointments for meetings with your instructors who will be in attendance at the residency.

*The evening events during the residency are free and open to the public. If you live in the area, we **encourage** you to invite friends and family to these events.*

Section IV: Academics

The academic regulations of the university pertain to the MFA in Professional Writing, and the structure of the MFA curriculum is designed to conform to the guidelines established by the university.

Students and faculty will be informed in writing of any changes to the curriculum proposed by the MFA Coordinator and the MFA Committee.

Course Assignments

Student/faculty course assignments are made by the Coordinator and are based primarily on student demand across the program for particular genres and instructors. The program has made a commitment to assign as many students as possible to work with a Writer in Residence in the Writing in the Primary Genre courses during the first semester and the third semester of the program.

The Semester

Each semester begins with the residency (August residency begins the Fall semester, January residency begins the Spring semester) and consists of three phases: residency, research (the two weeks immediately following the residency during which students research their courses and compose their syllabi), and the active semester (from the end of the research period to the last official day of the semester per the university academic calendar).

Student/Faculty Contact

Communication is obviously the primary challenge in a low-residency program. The university provides Blackboard, an online educational communication package, as one option for student/faculty communication, and a course space can be set up in Blackboard for every MFA course. Blackboard training is provided during your first residency. If you and/or your instructor choose not to take advantage of Blackboard, you may communicate via email, post, phone, or some combination thereof. Students and faculty who live in close proximity may choose to meet in person at an agreed-upon location, if both parties are amenable to the idea.

Just as there is no required writing output for any course, there is no required frequency of contact. Students and faculty will agree upon the appropriate amount of contact during composition of the syllabus. Average frequency of contact among MFA courses is about once every two weeks. The MFA program strongly encourages at least two phone conversations or in-person visits per course.

We ask that you keep a log of contact with all of your instructors. The log need not be minute in detail, but should record date, time, and duration of contact. It is not necessary to keep a separate log of email contact—the email exchanges themselves will suffice.

You and Your Course Plans

Students in the MFA in Professional Writing come from a wide array of backgrounds, experience, and educational level. Some of you come to the program directly from an undergraduate experience; some have been out of academic settings for many years. Most of you are primarily attracted to two aspects of the program: the flexibility of the low-residency structure and the concentration on professional development.

The low-residency structure is convenient for students who want to engage in the degree program while maintaining other full-time commitments such as work and family. Many of you do have full-time commitments outside the program. So it is important to remember during the syllabus construction phase that in addition to your careers and families, you will also have up to four courses to manage.

Most of you, however, are highly driven and want to drain as much as possible out of the program. So you must walk a fine line between challenging and educating yourselves on one hand and overloading and burning yourselves out on the other.

The best way to manage this dilemma is to do your best to avoid overloading in the first semester (scheduling due dates every week in all of your courses, for example), then trust your instincts on how much work you can handle in subsequent semesters.

Courses

Please see **Section V: Course Descriptions**.

The Syllabus

The Coordinator will provide each student and faculty member with course templates for all of their courses in a given semester. The appropriate course template should be used to compose the syllabus; it provides space for the student and faculty member to indicate reading lists, writing assignments, due dates for assignments and feedback, method of contact, frequency of contact, and grading expectations.

Grading

Grades are generally due within a week of the last official day of the semester.

Midterm grades are not required in the MFA program, but some students may request an informal midterm grade as a progress report. If your instructor agrees to a midterm grade, it should be written into the syllabus.

Final authority on grade assignment rests with faculty member. A student who is dissatisfied with the grade awarded by faculty and feels that there is evidence that a different grade is warranted may appeal the grade via the process described in the Graduate Catalog.

Incompletes

If a faculty member determines at the end of a Fall/Spring semester that a student should receive an Incomplete grade, the faculty member may assign it. The faculty member must designate a default grade (the grade the student would receive if no more work were done) and the due date for completion of the work, at which time the faculty member must submit either a final grade for the student or request an extension of the Incomplete. If the faculty member does neither, the Incomplete will automatically convert to the default grade. The program secretary will assist with the Incomplete process.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the act of presenting the work of others as one's own, and both the MFA in Professional Writing and the university expressly forbid it. The university has established an academic honesty procedure to deal with suspected cases of plagiarism, and the MFA in Professional Writing will pursue that procedure to its greatest extent. Confirmed cases of plagiarism in the MFA in Professional Writing will not be tolerated and will result in course failure and expulsion from the program.

Evaluations

At the end of each semester, the MFA in Professional Writing will collect two types of evaluations—faculty evaluations of student performance and student evaluations of faculty performance.

Faculty Evaluations of Student Performance

These evaluations should use the form provided by the Coordinator and may be supplemented by a paragraph or two about the student's progress (or lack of progress). These forms will be used by the program as a tool in student learning outcome assessment and may be taken into consideration by the Coordinator during faculty evaluation.

Student Evaluations of Faculty

Forms for these evaluations will be provided to students by the Coordinator at the end of each semester and will be used during faculty evaluation.

These evaluations are *not* confidential unless you request that they be so. At the very least, they must be viewed by the Coordinator. You will have the opportunity to see what your instructors have written about you, and vice versa (unless you request confidentiality). You may, however, express confidential concerns about any of your instructors during or after the semester to the Coordinator by whatever method you are comfortable with.

Section V: Course Descriptions

First Semester

WRT 543 Online Multigenre Workshop I (4 credits)

The student will participate regularly with student colleagues and with an instructor in online discussion of student work in multiple genres. The course will help students to develop the capacity to analyze, edit, and discuss their own work and the work of others. It will also train them to benefit from editorial observations and critiques. The workshop instructor may also introduce outside texts and writing exercises.

WRT 536 Reading for Writers I (Primary Genre) (4 credits)

This guided, self-designed course provides the writer with a foundation of readings in the genre. Under the guidance of a professional writer in the genre, the student will develop a substantial reading list of “classics” of the particular writing field as well as the work of important contemporary practitioners.

WRT 539 Genre History, Criticism, and Theory (4 credits)

Under guidance of a professional writer or scholar in the writing field, the student will design a specific curriculum for achieving a working awareness of the history, range of criticism, and critical theory associated with the writing genre. Reading will certainly be a part of this, but papers or interviews, attendance at lectures, formal courses, or other modalities may also be a part of this course.

WRT 542 Writing in the Primary Genre I (4 credits)

With the guidance of a faculty mentor, the student will research, develop, and write a customized project or projects for the course.

Second Semester

WRT579 Online Multigenre Workshop II (4 credits)

The student will participate regularly with student colleagues and with an instructor in online discussion of student work in multiple genres. The course will help students to develop the capacity to analyze, edit, and discuss their own work and the work of others. It will also train them to benefit from editorial observations and critiques. The workshop instructor may also introduce outside texts and writing exercises.

WRT 576 Writing in the Primary Genre II (4 credits)

This second required course in the primary genre will further develop the writer’s skills. Again, students will research, develop, and write a project or projects for the course.

WRT 537 Reading for Writers II (Second Genre) (4 credits)

The rationale for this course is the same as that for Reading for Writers I. However, depending upon the student’s individual background and choices of genres, the second genre may be less familiar to the student and, therefore, may require extra attention. Under the guidance of a professional writer in the genre, each student will develop a substantial reading list of books the student should be familiar with.

WRT 578 Writing in the Second Genre (4 credits)

The professional writer needs the ability to move from one genre of writing to another. The program, therefore, requires the student to concentrate on a second genre of writing. With the guidance of a faculty mentor, the student will research, develop, and write a project or projects for this course.

Third Semester

WRT 582 Online Multigenre Workshop III (4 credits)

The student will participate regularly with student colleagues and with an instructor in online discussion of student work in multiple genres. The course will help students to develop the capacity to analyze, edit, and discuss their own work and the work of others. It will also train them to benefit from editorial observations and critiques. The workshop instructor may also introduce outside texts and writing exercises.

WRT 577 Writing in the Primary Genre III (4 credits)

This third required course in the primary genre will further develop the writer's skills. Again, students will research, develop, and write a project or projects for the course.

WRT 569 Internship or Teaching Practicum (4 credits)

The program requires students to participate in an internship to gain hands-on experience in a chosen field or to share their understandings as writers with others who want or need to write by working as a teacher or coach of writing under the tutelage of a qualified mentor. The syllabus for the internship/practicum will also give attention the technology, production, and editorial processes affiliated with the genre at hand. The student will be required to keep a journal of his or her experience and/or to write a substantial evaluation of the experience; formal papers may also be a part of the course.

WRT 571 The Individual Aesthetic and Process (4 credits)

The program requires students to develop a sense of their own voices and to learn how to be self-critical about their writing. The student will compose a theory of writing that examines his or her own view of what makes effective and significant writing. The goal is to develop standards of value appropriate to the genre in which the writer wishes to excel. The writer must articulate a theoretical basis that involves awareness of critical perspectives on his or her principal genre.

Fourth Semester

WRT583 Online Multigenre Workshop IV (4 credits)

The student will participate regularly with student colleagues and with an instructor in online discussion of student work in multiple genres. The course will help students to develop the capacity to analyze, edit, and discuss their own work and the work of others. It will also train them to benefit from editorial observations and critiques. The workshop instructor may also introduce outside texts and writing exercises.

WRT 584 Thesis (8 credits)

The student will produce a book-length work in the primary genre, or the appropriate equivalent in genres where a book is not appropriate (a producible feature screenplay or play, for example). The writer will develop this thesis in consultation with a thesis director and second reader. The program requires students to complete the thesis in a publishable form as judged by the thesis advisor, MFA coordinator, and the MFA committee.

Section VI: General Guidelines for Interaction between Faculty and Students in the WCSU MFA in Professional Writing

1. The mode and schedule for interaction between faculty member and student should be spelled out in the course syllabus prepared at the beginning of the semester.
2. Possible interactive modes:
 - Face to face
 - Email
 - Telephone
 - Postal mail
 - WestConn's Blackboard
 - Web board through external server
 - Chat with or without webcam
3. Students will keep a log of contacts. The log should include date, time, mode, duration, topic of the interaction. The coordinator may request that the log be submitted at the end of the semester for review in the case of a grade dispute. Instructors are also *strongly encouraged* to log contact time and to submit the log at the end of the semester. These logs will assist the department with program assessment and may be useful to both faculty and students when it comes time for end-of-semester course review.
4. Expectations for the interactions between faculty and student will vary according to the course, student background, and projects, but the general plan for every course must be approved in advance by the MFA Program Coordinator. Once the student and instructor have completed the course template, they will submit it to the MFA Coordinator for approval. For the benefit of both students and faculty members, students are expected to adhere to the schedule that is established and approved. This is not intended to discourage the student and faculty from having informal exchanges between scheduled interactions if both parties agree to it; it is intended to protect faculty from student abuse of that privilege and to protect the student from unreasonable work demands from the instructor.
5. It will be up to the faculty member to determine how to evaluate the work during the semester, but the means of evaluation should be spelled out in the syllabus. At the end of the semester the student will be assigned a letter grade by the faculty member according to those guidelines.
6. Students will be held to a high expectation of quality in their work.