

Information about Creative Writing Samples:

We understand that you'll have questions about your application to the undergraduate emphasis in creative writing. While it's not possible for us to discuss your individual application materials in detail, we can pass along a general sense of what we're looking for.

First of all, please understand that decisions about acceptance to the creative writing emphasis are based only on your writing sample. We check transcripts to make sure that you have completed the prerequisites, but we do not take grades into consideration. We know that final grades in creative writing classes are based on a variety of factors in addition to the stories, essays, or poems you produced (participation, creative exercises, papers, presentations, effort at revision, and so on), but when we read applications for the creative writing emphasis, we take only the creative writing itself into consideration.

We judge the applications based on the following criteria: how well the writing demonstrates that the writer has learned the basic lessons of the introductory class in each genre; how well we think the writer will fare in the upper division classes in each genre, particularly in classes at the 400-level; and how the writing compares with the writing of other students applying to the emphasis at the same time.

The most basic criteria we look for in the writing sample include: in prose, an ability to consistently write clear and grammatical sentences, an avoidance of genre fiction (see below for a brief discussion), and an ability to use concrete, sensory details; and in poetry, an ability to use concrete sensory details rather than only abstract language, an avoidance of clichéd or hackneyed language, and an ability to create original or knowledgeable images, metaphors, and forms. As more and more students apply to the emphasis, we may at times move beyond these basic criteria in order to come to our final decisions. In all cases, we aim to ensure that students enrolled in the emphasis can graduate in a timely manner and receive a challenging and rewarding education in creative writing.

Sincerely,
Maya Sonenberg
Associate Professor of English
Director, Creative Writing Program

Genre fiction: "Literary fiction...strives to reveal its meaning through the creation of unexpected or unusual characters, through patterns of action and turns of event that will surprise the reader. Genre fiction, on the other hand, tends to develop character stereotypes and set patterns of action that become part of the expectation, the demand, and the pleasure of the readers of that genre..... In any case, the many genres, including but not confined to adventure, spy, horror, thriller, romance, detective story, western, science fiction, and fantasy, each have their own set of conventions of character, language, and events. Note again that the very naming of these kinds of fiction implies a narrowing; unlike mainstream fiction, they appeal to a particular range of interest. Many—perhaps most—teachers of fiction writing do not accept manuscripts in genre, and I believe there's good reason for this, which is that whereas writing literary fiction can teach you how to write good genre fiction, writing genre fiction does not teach you how to write good literary fiction—does not, in effect, teach you 'how to write,' by which I mean how to be original and meaningful in words. Further, dealing in the conventions and hackneyed phrases of romance, horror, fantasy, and so forth, can operate as a form of personal denial, using writing as a means of avoiding rather than uncovering your real concerns." --Janet Burroway, *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*