

Grad School Information Session, 10/7/08

Session Notes

Applying to graduate programs in English and Creative Writing

I. MA/PHD: Professor Kate Cummings, Director of English Graduate Studies

What makes an ideal candidate? What are graduate programs looking for?

- Someone who has a *specific focus* and can map out his or her intellectual trajectory for the admissions committee – it is NOT enough to say that you love reading, you love writing, and that you want to be a professor.
- Someone who is *impassioned* about graduate study, and for whom that graduate work itself is the *primary* motivation; someone who loves investing time in the study itself, with career considerations (teaching and research in academia) being secondary: the job market in academia is a difficult one at best, and a number of PhDs end up working outside the academy. The six- to seven-year level of extreme commitment required to complete a PhD in English is a very inefficient use of time and energy for someone whose primary motivation is a career credential;
- Someone who is self-motivated, self-disciplined, intellectually engaged, and interested in talking about literature;
- Someone who has some understanding critical theory, who is somewhat familiar with theorists and able to engage in the critical conversation (if you've taken ENGL 302, that's good; it's even better if you take another theory course such as ENGL 304);
- Someone whom the committee and the faculty would like to have as a colleague;
- Someone who can demonstrate the ability to design his or her own program of study, in collaboration with faculty mentors;
- Someone who is *not* interested in making a fortune.

The most important pieces of your application packet are the Critical Writing Sample and the Personal Statement/Statement of Purpose. These are the “make or break” elements for graduate admissions committees. Grades and GPAs matter, letters of recommendation matter, test scores can matter, but these are all secondary to your personal statement and your critical writing sample.

The Critical Writing Sample

Your critical writing sample should be your *best* work. Definitely take the time to review, edit, and revise! Submit a clean copy: do NOT submit your original paper with your professor's comments or grade on it. Proofread carefully, and ask others to proofread for you.

The sample (generally 20 to 30 pages – check *each* program's web site and abide by their guidelines) should be ONE long paper, *not* multiple papers that add up to the number of

pages requested: you need to demonstrate that you can engage a complex argument that you're able to sustain and develop in detail.

The writing sample, ideally, should exemplify the research area you have identified in your personal statement. For example, if you say that you want to pursue questions related to 17th century metaphysical poetry, don't submit a critical writing sample that focuses on some aspect of post-WWII American political culture. If your focus area and your critical writing sample do not coincide, then the application package will be much less cohesive.

Nevertheless, your critical writing sample should be, above all, your *best* writing. If you must submit a sample that is not related to your stated focus area, you should address this in your statement of purpose – if there is a tie somehow, at least in your own mind, you need to make that explicit. (Perhaps you might consider rethinking your area of focus if your best work lies outside that realm.) This is one argument for taking a year off between your undergraduate and graduate studies: your best work will probably occur during the last few quarters of your undergraduate experience (especially if you are writing an undergraduate thesis) – you will not have this work available if you're applying to programs in December or January of your senior year.

The sample itself: You need to “grab” the reader on the first page: remember that faculty admissions committee members are reading hundreds of papers. Early on, your paper should answer some fundamental questions: What is the overall argument and what are its parameters going to be? What are the stakes, for you *and* for the reader? Show faculty committee members why they should *want* to read your paper, why your paper matters, what insights it will provide, why your paper might be important intellectually, socially, politically, etc. Employ useful critical theory in ways that are meaningful to your argument. Your best models will be good academic essays that have impressed you as a reader. Spend some time investigating recent publications in your interest area or articles by faculty with whom you've worked or who teach at your target schools.

- **The Personal Statement**

Prepare

Professor Cummings strongly suggests that applicants attend our annual (Autumn) workshops on Statement of Purpose writing. The English Department Writing Center is another good resource. Be prepared to put your statement through a rigorous drafting process. This is the “map” that you present to faculty as a guide to your application package.

Follow Guidelines

Check the requirements for each program to which you're applying, and follow their guidelines for your personal statement. If they have a page or word limit, adhere to it. If they ask specific questions, address them. If you're in doubt *after carefully reviewing their application guidelines*, contact the graduate program staff with specific questions.

Discuss Your Proposed Studies Specifically

In your Statement of Purpose, or Personal Statement, you should develop a narrative that maps your intellectual trajectory. What work and what questions have been important to you as a scholar, and how will they inform your proposed graduate studies?

You must discuss your *specific* area of focus. It is not enough to express an interest in American literature, or even in late 19th C. American literature, a group of authors, or a body of texts: you *must* discuss the specific questions you would like to pursue, the specific problems you want to examine, and what has led you and prepared you to do so.

You should ground these questions and problems in an historical context, perhaps mentioning some major authors or texts that exemplify, for you, the questions you're engaging. You should provide an indication that you have some working knowledge of scholars who have looked at similar questions and some level of conversance with *relevant* critical theory. If you mention theorists or critics in your statement of purpose, make sure to do so in a *substantive* fashion. Don't just throw in names of theorists with an intent to impress.

You should be able to present a "game plan" for your studies that demonstrates your ability to design your own program under the guidance of faculty mentors.

It should be clear from your statement that you're able to imagine yourself engaged in the studies you're proposing, and it should also be clear what the stakes of those studies might be. Why are they important? Why should a graduate program invest in this particular work, and invest in you as the one to do it?

Show what you know, but don't "show off" – use relevant and meaningful terminology and discuss authors and texts, but don't drop names or sprinkle your statement with jargon.

Discuss Your "Fit" With the Graduate Program

In your statement, you should address questions about your "fit" or your "match" with the program. Why this particular graduate program? Why is it a good fit? Why are you a good fit? How does it support what you want to do? What can you contribute to it?

Look at program web sites – at faculty profiles, and, maybe more importantly, what courses they've been teaching recently. This will give you a sense of how your area of interest is being represented within a department. Match up your interests to courses

offered and to program faculty in *substantive* ways. Avoid name dropping. It can even be a good idea to make contact with professors you would be interested in working with. Begin a dialogue with them. Contact the Director of Graduate Studies with *specific* questions. (Do NOT send e-mail messages that say things like, “What can you tell me about your graduate program?”)

Do your research. Investigate the program’s strengths. Make contact with current graduate students when possible. Many programs have graduate student organizations that maintain web sites and blogs, even listing the interest areas of current students. Try to gain a sense of the program’s culture and community, intellectually and socially.

Remember that different programs, and different sub-groups within programs, are looking for different things when considering applicants. For example, if you’re proposing something in Medieval studies, it’s likely the faculty will expect to see that you’ve had some language preparation – perhaps not Old English (though that would be nice!), but at least some work in other relevant languages (e.g., Romance languages, Latin). If you’re interested in the 19th century and later, the admissions faculty will expect you to have at least some background in critical theory. If you’re proposing an area within language and rhetoric, you should have some relevant training in linguistics, composition theory, discourse analysis, or the like.

Including Other Information

It is good to weave in some *relevant* information that allows readers to make a distinction between you and the mass of other applicants – to put a “human” face on your application – an interesting story or life experience (*if* it somehow informed or is related to your proposed studies), or other personal information. Make sure that this information is relevant, however, and do remember that you are writing to strangers: humor, quirkiness, and extraneous information can be risky. In the context of your entire application package, make things as cohesive as possible, and talk most about what matters most.

If you’ve won awards or honors, presented at conferences, or gained other types of recognition, don’t attempt to list these in your statement (though you can certainly refer to anything that’s relevant to the work you’re proposing to do) – avoid sounding as if you’re bragging. Instead, include a *curriculum vitae* (c.v.) in your application packet where you can list your honors, awards, publications, academic service, teaching experience, etc., if you think these things are significant and important to your application.

- **Letters of Recommendation**

These are important, but not as important as your critical writing sample. Why? Because letters can be inaccurate, hyperbolic, or vague. A letter of recommendation could declare you to be the best student in the world, but if your writing sample isn’t impressive, then the letter won’t persuade the admissions committee.

At least two out of the three letters of recommendation should be able to talk about your potential for the kind of graduate work you want to do. If all three of them do, that's even better.

Request letters from people who know your work well. Either TAs or regular faculty are fine, though it's good to have at least one letter from faculty. Choose recommenders who can discuss you and your work in detail and in a *substantive* and *specific* way.

It is best to request letters while you are engaged with those faculty: it will be more difficult for someone to write a good, detailed letter if some time has passed and he or she no longer remembers what you wrote about or what your interests were.

Most schools (including the UW) have a Letters of Recommendation service: usually for a fee, you can establish a file, typically with the school's career center, where faculty can send their confidential letters of recommendation. When you are ready to apply to graduate school, you simply contact that center and request that they forward your portfolio of letters to particular programs. In this way, you avoid having to ask faculty to print out and seal multiple copies of letters, or to locate and reprint (or reconstruct) a letter they wrote for you in the past.

If you do have to go back to faculty at a later date and ask for letters, it is helpful if you can provide them with papers you wrote or other work you did in their classes. It can also be helpful to provide them with a copy of your personal statement draft so that they're able to see what you've said about your work and your interests and thus elaborate on those interests or that work in their letters.

- **GRE Scores**

The importance of earning a high score varies from school to school. UW English Graduate Studies does not tend to find GRE scores very important, but these scores are, along with your GPA, one of the first things the committee sees. There are certainly some faculty in some programs who have a tendency to fixate on GRE scores and GPAs and form snap judgments based on them.

The average verbal score (General test) for our program is around a 650. Even a score in the high 500s can be fine, as long as your writing sample and other parts of your application are strong; if your score is below a 500, you should probably retest.

Most English Graduate Programs have dropped the requirement for the GRE Subject Test in Literature. You should make sure you know, however, what the requirements are for *each school* to which you plan to apply and schedule appropriate preparation time for tests. One good way to prepare for the Subject Test in literature is to review the Norton Anthologies, which provide short prefaces discussing various literary periods and important authors. Being familiar with major trends and major figures in critical theory is also important.

Very few programs have an official GRE/GPA cut off; Stanford University is one of the few. Do check *each* program's web site to see if there is a minimum score, or even a recommended score. If there is a firm minimum (as with Stanford), then don't waste your time and money applying, as your application won't be reviewed if you're below that minimum. (Programs like Stanford receive hundreds of applications and accept only a very small number of students. This is true of most English MA/PhD programs at "R1" research universities.) If the school has a range or an average (e.g., the average here is about 650 on the GRE Verbal), then don't worry overmuch if your score is not in that range; again, the GRE scores are not "make or break" factors in the admission decision.

- **How do I decide which schools to apply to? How do I choose a program?**

Apply to half a dozen schools ranging from your top choices/dream schools to your safety schools/schools where you're pretty sure you have a good shot at admission. Talk with your faculty in your area of focus: they can make the best recommendations.

Make your choices based on the program's character and resources. Finding out something about the graduate community you'd be joining will be important. Contact graduate students to find out something about the culture of the program. You should be looking for a vibrant intellectual community made up of people whom you can respect as future colleagues.

Investigate a program's funding for graduate students. What percentage of students are funded by TA/RA-ships, fellowships, and the like? This information is often available on the program's web site, but if it's not, it's perfectly appropriate to contact the program and to ask.

If you've been offered admission, particularly if you've received multiple offers, it is important to visit the schools if you can. ASK: "Is there funding available for travel?" Some programs have a limited amount of money they can use to assist you with the expense of visiting their school. Ask right away because this money is limited and can go quickly.

Take offers that include financial support. There are no guarantees that you'll get a job right away when you finish an MA/PhD program.

After you've been offered admission, you can ask about the job placement ratio for graduates of the program; it's best not to do that during the application process.

- **Should you apply to the MA program or the MA/PhD Program?**

Schools like the UW with an MA/PhD program are looking for applicants prepared for, and committed to, at least at the onset, the goal of completing the PhD. Programs invest

heavily in their graduate student populations, both academically and financially. If a program does not have a “terminal” MA degree, and you are not willing to pursue a PhD, you will be much less attractive to that program, which, after training and funding you, will hope that you’ll stick around for more than the typical two years it takes to complete the MA portion of the program. RI research universities are interested in training scholars who will contribute to the discipline, and two years is just not enough time to complete that training.

Some schools have both a terminal MA track and an MA/PhD track. (There are also schools that offer a terminal MA because they do not have a PhD program.) In those cases, your application to the MA program will be more competitive; however, you should investigate the program thoroughly: what if you change your mind and decide to continue your work and pursue the PhD? Can you do that in their program? Do you have to fulfill special requirements or be involved in a highly competitive process to determine which MAs can go on to the PhD track? It can often be the case that, if you complete a terminal MA or an “MA track” program, you’ll be looking at applying elsewhere for your PhD, and this is perfectly okay – but you should know this ahead of time.

For an MA/PhD in English, the national average rate for completion is seven years. Our program is trying to reduce that to six years.

- **Some miscellaneous data**

The UW typically has around a 10% acceptance rate. (500 applicants, 40-50 offers, a class of 20-25 students.)

All applications get three readings: two faculty committee members, and then every application gets read by the Director. Each reader rates the applications: Recruit, Admit, Deny.

II . MFA Creative Writing: Professor Maya Sonenberg, Creative Writing Program Director

What is an MFA? Why might one pursue such a degree?

The MFA in creative writing is “really and truly an arts degree.” *Your decision to pursue an MFA should be based on your desire to spend two to three years intensely focused on the craft of writing.* Although many programs do have some ways of exposing students to teaching and to the “business side” of writing, the primary focus will always be on the development of craft.

Therefore, the MFA is even less of an immediate credential than an MA/PhD. Although you don't need a PhD to teach creative writing, most people don't get teaching jobs at four-year schools without *at least* one book. Recognition, awards, and fellowships are also important in terms of securing a teaching position. People graduate from MFA programs into a wide variety of jobs. Many have "day jobs" that support their work as writers.

In an MFA Program, you can expect to

- Take writing workshops in which the level of intensity is far different from undergraduate workshops;
- Learn to revise, revise, revise;
- Bring your manuscript to publishable level;
- Learn how to be a member of a community of writers;
- Be as committed and talented as everybody else in the room;
- Produce a creative thesis at the end of the program.

Resources for identifying writing programs:

- The Association of Writers and Writing Programs has a new free online guide to writing programs at: www.awpwriter.org The information is supplied by the programs, and there are no rankings. It is a very good place to begin, and it allows you to search by location, by specialty (e.g., there are many fewer programs that offer screenwriting), and even by faculty.
- Talk to your undergraduate faculty about your work and what programs might be good fits.
- Talk with graduate students at prospective programs. Find out what kind of community or culture exists.
- Consider location: do you need to be located in vibrant, urban area to do your best work, or will a more remote or rural location serve your needs better? Location may also determine the kind of community you'll find: students and faculty in large urban areas (such as the UW, which is a commuter-campus) will be less likely to form a closely-knit social group, if that's what you're looking for.

Applications and Funding:

- Apply to as many schools as you can afford (in terms of the application fees) in order to maximize opportunities for admission and support. MFA programs are very competitive.
- Apply to a range of schools, not just the most competitive. The UW program has an average acceptance rate of about 13%. Each year, roughly 300 apply, about 32 are accepted, and about 16 start the program every fall.
- In our program, about one third of an incoming MFA class is offered TA-ships. In the second year, one or two additional TA-ships may be offered. Offers of TA positions are based on recruitment: which writers do the faculty want to recruit most? Those are the applicants who'll receive the first funding offers. In our program, there is also some financial support for MFA students engaging in internships. Levels of support vary widely from one school to another. Some schools with very small programs do support

all of their students. You can usually find this information on a program's web site. If not, it is perfectly okay to contact the program and ask.

- The average student in our MFA program is 25 to 35 years old.

The Creative Writing Sample:

- The writing sample is *the single most important part of the application* and will trump all other features. In most cases, if the writing sample does not look sufficiently promising, the rest of the file will not even be reviewed.
- In our program, the faculty reading your writing sample do not even see the rest of your file until after the first "cut" is made. Any sample that receives at least one "maybe" vote makes the short list and goes on for further review and deliberation.
- Send your *best* work, not just something you're excited about right now, or something that is not finished.
- Don't think about it thematically, the way you would when putting together a book. Send your *best*; put the *best* of your best at the top of the stack.
- Whether you submit similar types of stories or poems, or individual selections that are quite different from each other doesn't matter as much, though some faculty do appreciate cohesiveness within the sample. Just make sure that everything you send is your best work!
- If you have to choose between sending one longer work or several shorter pieces, you should *still choose your best work*. If all other factors are equal, then it can be a good idea to submit more than one piece: admissions faculty do have different tastes and are looking for different things, and you cannot predict, from year to year, which faculty members will be reading applications.
- Submit complete works. If you are sending an excerpt of a longer work (e.g., part of a novel), provide a synopsis: we are looking to see that you can shape an entire work.
- Don't send a 500- page novel if they ask for a 30-page sample. Follow instructions!
- It is *not* important at the UW MFA Program to have published. In fact, people with a lot of publications are less likely to be admitted, because the faculty will wonder why they need to participate in an MFA program. There is some anecdotal information suggesting that other programs do value previous publications more highly.

Personal statement:

- Guidelines for the MFA personal statement are significantly looser than those for the MA/PhD, and the statement is of much less importance; again, your creative writing sample trumps everything else.
- The statement should attempt to put a "face" on your application to distinguish you from the hundreds of other applicants, and may include personal experiences that have influenced or informed your writing, but the statement should not be a tell-all memoir of trauma in your past, or a romp through the past two years you spent temping at Microsoft. Include experiences that are relevant to your "writerly" life.

- You are *writer*. Write an interesting statement (without being “gimmicky”). Most statements say the same things: I want to write, I must write, I love to read, I want to teach. If you can distinguish yourself from this pattern, that can be helpful. Talk about your work in terms of your development as a writer and what you hope to gain from the MFA program in terms of craft, but remember that MFA program faculty already expect that your writing will change drastically during this two- to three-year intensive experience: you do not need to assess your own writing in your statement, nor try to predict what directions it will take in the future.

Letters of recommendation:

- Letters are the second most important factor in admissions.
- The most helpful letters are from professors (or TAs) of creative writing. They can address how you responded to criticism, how you functioned as a “workshop citizen,” how you have developed as a writer. Choose teachers who know your work best, though it’s helpful to get at least one letter from regular faculty, perhaps for the “name recognition” factor.
- The second most helpful letters are from literature professors.
- Third in order of preference are professors in other disciplines, who can sometimes provide helpful insights.
- Employers and friends can write lovely letters, but these letters are typically completely useless.

Grades and GRE Scores:

- How have you done in creative writing courses? English? The Arts? Humanities? Don’t worry overly about grades, however.
- Most applicants who are admitted have taken some creative writing workshops, but that doesn’t mean applicants who have taken none are never admitted. Some great writers have never done formal course work. Workshop experience means you know how to function effectively in that environment.
- Although a GRE score is required here, it’s not considered important. Many MFA programs have dropped the GRE as a requirement altogether. In our program, the GRE score is considered only in those cases when, *all other factors being equal*, the faculty are trying to distinguish between two similar candidates when making decisions about offers of funding.

Critical writing sample:

- This is not a universal requirement, but UW does ask for it. The purpose is to make sure that MFA students have the ability to do graduate-level work in required literature courses. (Not all MFA programs have literature course requirements.)
- The essay should show that you are able to do a close reading of a text and make a cohesive argument. The faculty are NOT looking for theory or criticism.
- The critical sample should be 8-20 pages in length, but do check the web site for each program to which you’re applying and follow their guidelines.

A note on “low residency” programs: Warren Wilson is the “granddaddy” of them all; Bennington is also very respected. Degrees from the very best of these programs are highly valued; the newer ones, not so much.