

AWP Hallmarks of an Effective Low-Residency MFA Program in Creative Writing

Since the first low-residency MFA program in creative writing was developed in the 1970s, higher education has established over thirty such programs. With various combinations of residencies, workshops, lectures, online workshops and classes, study abroad, correspondence, and one-on-one mentoring, low-residency programs vary; however, their chief attributes are individualized instruction and structural flexibility for students. Low-residency programs require at least two years of study. Students study literature and craft by writing original fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, translations, screenplays, or plays; by analyzing contemporary and canonical works of literature; and by writing critical papers. Programs also require culminating projects focused on the craft of writing—an extended craft essay, a lecture, or the teaching of a seminar. The centerpiece of the course of study is a creative thesis, an original literary work in the student’s chosen genre(s).

With its mentoring relationships involving one teacher and one student, or with small online workshops and seminars, the low-residency program excels in expediting the development of a writer. Students in low-residency programs tend to be older than traditional graduate students. Many students enter these programs intending to continue in their already established careers; these students find that their professional work is often improved by the skills they acquire in their artistic avocations. Low-residency programs have a strong record of preparing graduates for careers in teaching, editing, publishing, public affairs, advertising, and administration.

To facilitate, structure, and focus a program’s periodic self-evaluation or independent assessment, the AWP Board of Directors has established these hallmarks, which are also addressed to administrators who seek to establish low-residency programs at their institutions. The hallmarks are meant to be aspirational rather than prescriptive, reflecting current best practices. Specific details associated with some of the following hallmarks are included because of the relative newness of the low-residency model, still unfamiliar to many academics and administrators. As these details are considered, one should bear in mind that one program’s particulars may differ dramatically from another’s, even as both achieve goals common to most programs.

Hallmarks: A successful low-residency MFA program has a rigorous curriculum, accomplished writers as teachers, talented students, strong administrative support, and the infrastructure and complementary assets that distinguish a generally excellent academic institution.

Rigorous and Extensive Curriculum

Two primary models for low-residency programs have been established: those that conduct mentoring for distance learning and those that conduct classes through electronic media for distance learning. Some programs utilize a hybrid of both models. AWP encourages variety in the structure of courses so long as the program remains rigorous and demands extensive reading assignments, practice in critical analysis, productivity in frequent writing and revision, and a residency component.

The quantification of requirements outlined below provides general illustrations only. Individual programs and their faculty will exercise flexibility in the number of assignments as their varying natures and difficulty justify.

Typical curricula for the two primary models of low-residency programs are described below.

Low-Residency Programs Based on Mentoring

Mentor-based low-residency MFA programs typically involve two main components: *residency* and *mentoring*. During the residency, students attend intensive workshops, lectures, panel discussions, seminars, and literary readings. At the residency, a student often develops a reading list and study-plan for the upcoming semester. During the off-campus mentoring period, students work one-on-one with a faculty writer who guides the student's study of literature and craft; the mentor also provides written commentary on the student's work.

Mentoring addresses two general goals:

- Development of each student's creative work and writing skills. There is a regularly scheduled exchange in which the student submits original creative work, critical responses to reading assignments, and responses to the mentor's critiques and advice about that work. These exchanges are often called "packets."
- Development of each student's analytical reading skills in individually tailored instruction in craft, literature, aesthetics, and criticism. Typically, student and mentor establish a challenging list of literary works and texts on the craft of writing, and the student regularly submits critical papers or analyses for the mentor's commentary.

Residencies address themselves to three general goals:

- Broadening and deepening each student's knowledge of diverse artistic

sensibilities. This is provided by lectures, panel discussions, and seminars on canonized and contemporary literary authors, by the study of literary criticism and theory, by writing workshops, and by a reading series involving faculty, students, and visiting authors.

- Developing a literary community that provides students with peer review, encouragement, and criticism. This is provided in the residency's workshops, in seminars, and in informal discussions outside of class.
- Educating students about publishing and editing by regularly bringing magazine and book publishers, editors, and agents to residencies for panel discussions and informal conferences with students.

An effective curriculum in a mentor-based low-residency program will often have the following characteristics:

1. A Studio/Research Course of Study. Typically, an integrated course of study of at least 48 semester hours consistent with the “studio/research” program as defined by *The AWP Guidelines for Creative Writing Programs and Teachers of Creative Writing*. One must become an expert reader before one may hope to become an expert writer. A studio/research program requires a student to study a variety of canonical and contemporary literary works, and it requires the student to create original fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, translations, screenplays, plays, or other literary writing. The program provides an enabling balance and progression of both practice and study in the literary arts in order to prepare the student for a life of letters and to equip the student with the skills needed for writing an original book-length creative work.

2. A Substantial Number of Days in Residence During the Student's Course of Study. For example, many two-year/four-semester programs include five residencies of ten days each, for a total of 50 days in residence overall. (Although the half-year duration of study from residency to residency may not coincide with the calendars of an institution's traditional semesters, they are still referred to as semesters here.) With the exception of the student's final semester (which includes a second residency at the term's conclusion), such programs typically require one ten-day residency at the beginning of each term. However, the number of days scheduled for each residency may vary among programs, depending on the number of semesters required to complete the program, as well as the number of residencies required per semester. Students are required to fully participate in each residency.

3. Challenging Individualized Assignments. Over the course of a six-month mentor-based semester (which includes a residency and an off-campus mentoring period of up to five months duration), a student will typically do creative and critical work equivalent to the following:

- read at least ten books, or their equivalent
- produce craft-based analytical writing in each packet
- draft and revise 3 to 5 short stories, or a novella, or equivalent sections of a novel; or 15 to 20 poems; or 3 to 5 short nonfiction works, or equivalent sections of a book

A typical packet from the student will include such things as:

- new and/or revised creative work
- a bibliography of the reading the student has completed
- critical analysis of the reading
- responses to directions and questions posed by the mentor in the previous exchange of packets

In the third or fourth semester of many programs, the assignments change in order to facilitate the students' preparations of an essay and a lecture. This work necessarily displaces some of the reading and writing assignments quantified above.

A typical packet from the mentor will include:

- a holistic critique of the student's creative work with suggestions for new and substantially revised work
- a return of the student's manuscripts with marginalia and line-specific suggestions
- comments on the student's critical analyses of reading assignments
- suggestions for related reading, especially books that provide models of craft pertinent to the student's particular ambitions and style of learning
- individualized instruction about specific aspects of craft

4. Frequent Exchange of Packets. When a student works with a mentor by exchanging packets, clear guidelines are provided for regularly scheduled exchanges and substantive critical responses from the mentor. For a mentoring period roughly equivalent to five months (excluding the residency), students should typically submit packets and receive corresponding critical responses from their mentors at least once a month.

5. Attentiveness to Revision. In addition to frequent reading and writing, the mentor requires frequent revision of student work. The mentor provides suggestions for improving the work as well as references to literary models that may be helpful. During the residencies, workshops also focus on specific suggestions for revision of creative work.

6. A Variety of Mentors and Workshop Leaders. A student typically studies with a different accomplished writer each semester, and with a different workshop leader each residency, thus exposing the student to a variety of artistic sensibilities and pedagogical approaches in the study and practice of literary writing.

7. A Variety of Residency Lectures, Seminars, Panel Discussions, and Readings.

The residencies broaden the student's knowledge of literary techniques and aesthetics through craft lectures, seminars, panel discussions, and readings by the faculty, visiting writers, scholars, and other students.

8. Strong Thesis Advising. Faculty members excel in providing both holistic and line-specific suggestions for revision of each student's thesis. In order to graduate, the student must demonstrate expertise in at least one genre and produce a substantial original literary work.

9. Cross-Genre Study. Many mentor-based programs allow the student to work for one or more semesters in a genre other than the student's declared specialty. In some programs, working in a second genre may increase the number of semesters required to graduate.

10. Student Lecture and Essay. In addition to required creative work, mentor-based programs typically require students to write at least one substantial essay on an issue of literary craft or tradition, and to give a public lecture. During the student's final two semesters, mentors help students prepare for these assignments.

Low-Residency Programs with Electronic Classrooms

Programs with electronic classrooms typically involve two main components: *residency* and *classes online*, but some programs require mentoring as well. During the residency, students attend intensive workshops, panel discussions, lectures, seminars, and literary readings. During the classes online, students work in small discussion groups, in writing courses, and in literature courses.

Low-residency classes online address themselves to three general goals:

- Development of each student's critical reading skills in courses on craft, literature, aesthetics, criticism, and literary theory. Students regularly submit critical papers and Web board postings for the teacher's and students' commentary. In online workshops, students develop critical skills in evaluating the work of their peers.
- Development of each student's creative work and writing skills. In regularly scheduled exchanges, the student submits to an instructor or mentor original creative work, critical responses to reading assignments, and responses to the instructor's or mentor's critiques and advice about that work.

- Development of a literary community. In a successful low-residency program with electronic classrooms, students will learn from one another as well as from their assignments and their faculty. They also become acquainted with a greater variety of artistic sensibilities.

Residencies in electronic classroom-based programs address themselves to three general goals:

- Broadening and deepening each student's knowledge of diverse artistic sensibilities. This is provided by lectures, panel discussions, and seminars on canonized and contemporary literary authors, by the study of literary criticism and theory, by writing workshops, and by a reading series involving faculty, students, and visiting authors.
- Developing a literary community that provides students with peer review, encouragement, and criticism. This is provided in the residency's workshops, in seminars, and in informal discussions outside of class.
- Educating students about publishing and editing by regularly bringing magazine and book publishers, editors, and agents to residencies for panel discussions and informal conferences with students.

An effective curriculum in a low-residency program with electronic classrooms will often have the following characteristics:

1. A Studio/Research Course of Study. Typically, an integrated course of study of at least 48 semester hours consistent with the "studio/research" program as defined by *The AWP Guidelines for Creative Writing Programs and Teachers of Creative Writing*. One must become an expert reader before one may hope to become an expert writer. A studio/research program requires a student to study a variety of canonical and contemporary literary works, and it requires the student to create original fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, translations, screenplays, plays, or other literary writing. The program should provide an enabling balance and progression of both practice and study in the literary arts in order to prepare the student for a life of letters and to equip the student with the skills needed for writing an original book-length creative work.

2. A Substantial Number of Days in Residence During the Student's Course of Study. Programs that provide rigorous online classes, as opposed to more informal discussion groups, sometimes require fewer residencies than mentor-based low-residency programs. For this reason and others, the total number of required days in residence during the student's course of study (often around 30) is usually less than that of mentor-based programs. With the exception of the student's final semester (which includes a second residency at the term's conclusion), most programs require a residency at the beginning of each term. However, the number of days scheduled for each residency may

vary, depending on the number of semesters required to complete the program, as well as the number of residencies required per semester. Students are required to fully participate in each residency.

3. Challenging Online Assignments. Typically, a student will have an online writing workshop in tandem with one or more classes in literature. Over the course of a six-month semester (which usually includes a residency and a mentoring period of at least five months), a student will typically do creative and critical work equivalent to the following:

- read at least ten books, or their equivalent
- produce craft-based analytical writing
- draft and revise 3 to 5 short stories, or a novella, or equivalent sections of a novel; or 15 to 20 poems; or 3 to 5 short nonfiction works, or equivalent sections of a book
- write critical analyses of the reading assignments
- respond to directions and questions posed by the instructor on the Web boards or via email
- compose and submit formal written critiques of fellow students' work

Over the course of a typical semester of online teaching, the instructor will do the following:

- provide a holistic critique of the student's creative work and suggestions for revision
- return the student's manuscripts with marginalia and line-specific suggestions
- comment upon the student's analyses of reading assignments
- suggest related reading, especially books that provide models of craft pertinent to the student's particular ambitions and style of writing

4. Reliable Software to Host Virtual Classrooms. The software enables the instructor to post a syllabus, assignments, and responses to student work; it enables students to share work, comment upon reading assignments, the work of their peers, and questions posed by their instructor. The software also provides quantifiable data on student participation and attendance.

5. Strong Technical Support. Training in the software for distance learning is provided to new faculty and students in their first residency. The college or university has its own technical support staff to answer questions and resolve technical problems.

6. Frequent Assignments and Interchanges. Clear guidelines are provided for regularly scheduled exchanges and substantive critical responses from the instructor and for frequent exchanges and online discussions among students about their work or their assignments.

7. Attentiveness to Revision. In addition to frequent reading and writing, the instructor requires frequent revision of student work. The instructor provides suggestions for improving the work as well as references to literary models that may be helpful. During the residencies, workshops also focus on specific suggestions for revision of creative work.

8. A Variety of Online Classes, Workshops, and Instructors. A student typically studies with a different workshop leader each residency, thus exposing the student to a variety of artistic sensibilities and pedagogical approaches in the study and practice of literary writing. The online literature classes are also diverse in subjects and literary periods.

9. A Variety of Residency Lectures, Seminars, Panel Discussions, and Readings. The residencies broaden the student's knowledge of literary techniques and aesthetics through craft lectures, seminars, panel discussions, and readings by the faculty, visiting writers, scholars, and other students.

10. Strong Thesis Advising. Faculty members excel in providing both holistic and line-specific suggestions for revision of each student's thesis. In order to graduate, the student must demonstrate expertise in at least one genre and produce a substantial original literary work.

11. Cross-Genre Study. Many online classroom-based programs allow the student to work for one or more semesters in a genre other than the student's declared specialty. In some programs, working in a second genre may increase the number of semesters required to graduate.

12. Student Lecture and Essay. In addition to required creative work, online classroom-based programs typically require students to write at least one substantial essay on an issue of literary craft or tradition, and to give a public lecture. During the student's final semester(s), mentors help students prepare for these assignments.

13. Compliance with State Accreditation Requirements for Distance Learning.

Hybrid Low-Residency MFA Programs

Hybrid low-residency programs include features from both mentor-based and electronic classroom-based programs, and add variations and innovations of their own. Strong hybrid low-residency programs are rigorous and demand extensive reading assignments, practice in critical analysis, productivity in frequent writing and revision, and a residency component. Their particulars vary in ways too numerous to list here.

Accomplished Faculty

Whether mentor-based, online classroom-based, or a hybrid model, every low-residency MFA in Creative Writing Program requires an effective faculty. An effective MFA in creative writing faculty has these characteristics:

- 1. Accomplished Writers Who Teach Well.** The program has a faculty of published writers who have distinguished themselves as teachers and as literary artists. As teachers, they command the respect of their peers, and they receive generally good to excellent student evaluations. Each faculty member has published significant work in one or more of the following genres: fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, playwriting, writing for children or young adults, or screenwriting. Each faculty member has published at least one book by a respected press, and that book is in the genre which the faculty member teaches. Each faculty member holds an MFA degree in creative writing or has achieved a level of publication that serves as the equivalent for that degree.
- 2. Timeliness in Mentoring and/or Online Instruction.** An effective mentor or online instructor in a low-residency program expedites the exchange of packets or online responses to work. A faculty mentor will typically respond to a student packet within ten days of its receipt. Likewise, the instructor of an online class will typically require frequent, regularly scheduled assignments and additions to the discussion boards, and the teacher will respond in a timely manner to student postings. Timeliness is especially important in facilitating revision of a student's creative work.
- 3. A Low Student-to-Faculty Ratio.** A successful low-residency MFA program typically has a student-to-faculty ratio of five to one. Because of this low student-to-faculty ratio, low-residency programs have the opportunity to receive frequent and extensive critiques of their work. A low student-to-faculty ratio is an essential component of a low-residency program.
- 4. A Large Faculty.** The faculty is large enough that it affords the student the opportunity to study with a different accomplished writer each semester and additional different writers in workshops during each residency.
- 5. Diversity in Artistic Sensibilities.** A strong program has a diverse combination of faculty members who provide expertise in various genres or subgenres of writing and approach their craft from a variety of perspectives, drawing on different aesthetic, literary, ethnic, cultural, and other backgrounds.
- 6. Continuity in Faculty.** In low-residency programs, the majority of faculty members are typically considered to be part-time, and their terms are contractual. This allows for versatility and diversity in the faculty, but the program retains from this same pool a

stable group of faculty who work in the program year after year. This continuity facilitates effective mentorship and advising for students.

7. Strong Service to the Literary Community and the Profession of Creative Writing. Faculty members contribute to the vitality of residencies, and they also do good works for the greater literary community. Faculty members are available outside of class for informal discussions. They are supportive of their colleagues and students. They work to preserve high morale and collegiality among students and faculty.

Excellent Students and Support for Students

An effective low-residency program includes these features in its efforts to serve its students well:

1. Selective Admissions. With generally high and selective admissions standards, the program sustains a high ratio of applicants to admissions.

2. Small Classes. Although numbers vary from program to program, in general:

- Residential workshop classes are no larger than twelve students.
- Online workshops are no larger than nine students.
- A mentor works with no more than six students a semester.

Teaching and mentoring small numbers of students facilitates exchanges of critical analysis of student work and discussions of reading assignments.

3. Regular Evaluation of Faculty. The program is responsive to the needs of its graduate students, and students evaluate their instructors each semester. The program also conducts exit surveys of students after they have completed the program.

4. A Student Handbook. Students are given clear guidelines for the structure of a mentoring relationship or online coursework, which protect their right to consistent, regularly scheduled critiques and other responses to their work, and also provide appropriate means for redressing any grievances. The handbook also clearly defines the requirements for critical papers, the creative thesis, craft essay, graduating lecture or seminar, and any other major requirements.

5. A High Graduation Rate. A high percentage of matriculated students graduate from the program, and a small number of students drop out or transfer to other programs.

6. Literary Accomplishments in Post-Graduate Student Work. Many graduates go on to publish significant literary work and to win honors and awards for their writing.

7. Financial Aid. Low-residency programs may offer some financial aid in the form of scholarships, waivers, subsidized loans, or other forms of support in order to attract the best students.

Strong Administrative Support

An effective low-residency MFA program includes these features in its administration:

1. Strong Leadership. The MFA program director provides strong leadership in planning, in staffing, in devising curriculum, in training new faculty members, in recruiting the best students, and in advocating program needs to the host institution's administration.

2. Sufficient Autonomy. The institution's administration gives the program sufficient autonomy with regard to curriculum, admissions, budget, graduate support, physical facilities, and personnel to ensure quality, stability, flexibility, and the capability to take advantage of opportunities quickly.

3. Strong Financial Support. The institution provides financial resources to facilitate excellence in recruiting and retaining faculty, in providing services to students, in providing administrative support for the program director and other faculty, and in maintaining the facilities used by the program.

4. Good Departmental Relations. If the program is part of a department of English or another larger entity, the program has a mutually supportive relationship with that department.

5. Community Service. The program director, other local MFA faculty, and the institution's administrators seek, whenever possible, to establish a strong, positive presence in the local community. Typically, several events of each residency are open to the public.

6. Diligent Quality Control. The program director makes sure that students have the opportunity to evaluate their faculty annually, and that the students know that they have the right to a productive semester with a frequent exchange of packets, or to a rigorous online class that demands participation of the students, along with timely instruction, guidance, and responses from the teacher. The program director will take immediate action in counseling faculty members and in replacing faculty members if high standards of instruction are not consistently maintained. The program director regularly reviews faculty performance to ensure that the program remains rigorous and challenging. Just as the program holds faculty to high standards, the program holds itself to high standards as

well. The program has clear guidelines and policies for counseling a student for poor performance, and, should it become necessary, for removing the failing student from the program. The program director ensures that faculty and students observe these guidelines and policies.

7. Participation in Professional Networks. A strong program provides membership in AWP and other appropriate local, regional, and national associations to assure faculty members and students access to timely information about contemporary letters and the teaching of creative writing.

Other Assets and Infrastructure

An effective low-residency MFA program also has the infrastructure and assets that comprise any setting conducive to graduate work:

1. Strong Infrastructure. During the residency periods, classrooms, offices, and other spaces are adequate to conduct workshops, conferences, readings, and informal student and faculty gatherings. Spaces assigned to the program promote an atmosphere conducive to concentration, listening, social exchanges, and focused work. Students are housed in close proximity to each other, not in widely scattered locations, so there is more opportunity for them to develop the kind of lifelong friendships that are often crucial to sustaining the writing life after the completion of the degree.

2. A Strong Set of Additional Program Assets. These will vary from program to program, and from residency venue to residency venue. During residency periods for some programs, for instance, a computer lab is open at least 12 hours a day for students to work on manuscripts and conduct research on the Internet. In some programs, faculty and students will have access to a library with extensive holdings in canonical and contemporary literature. For programs with electronic distance learning, the library will have extensive online reading materials in literature and literary criticism, accessible throughout each term. Other assets may include a program bookstore, an affiliation with a literary publication, or some other opportunity that puts students closer in touch with the work of other writers or the world of publishing.

3. A Unique Educational Feature. The program or institution provides a special focus, resource, archive, project, or other opportunity for students that distinguishes the program from comparable programs. Such a feature might be a literary magazine, an emphasis on translation, a small press, special internships, or the archives of a literary author.