

Learning the Literary Life with a Low-Residency MFA

by Lori A. May

Note: This article was written in 2008 and, as such, there may be updates to some of the program offerings discussed below.

Literary pairings such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, or Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg demonstrate the long-standing tradition of inspiration and mentorship amongst writers. While many such relationships are developed organically through peer interaction and networking, finding a suitable writing mentor may be a challenge for an emerging writer who does not have immediate access to published authors. For emerging authors, then, one of the most appealing benefits of the Creative Writing MFA or MA is the opportunity to work under the guidance of established professionals. In particular, the low-residency MFA presents an incredible opportunity to develop intimate working relationships through the mentorship of publishing writers.

Offering the best of a traditional program regarding workshops, craft courses, and assigned readings the low-residency model provides flexibility for writers who prefer not to relocate for a full-residency program. On-campus and low-residency MFA programs are equal in that they generally each provide students with writing workshops, assigned readings, and culminate with the development of a thesis. Where the low-residency model differs for a student is in the distance studies relationship between faculty and peers. While students mingle with peers and faculty during a brief residency, often at the start of each term, the course work is completed from a distance primarily through correspondence and email. Many programs include an online component to allow for critiques, general comments, and peer interaction. As such, students and faculty can connect at any time of day to benefit from group discussions.

While the benefits of low-residency programs—including one-on-one mentorship with published writers and faculty—appeal to students who wish to focus on developing their writing craft, consideration must be given to two potential drawbacks: minimal funding and limited opportunities for teaching assistantships. However, the purpose of the Creative Writing MFA is not to gain pedagogical experience; rather, the primary purpose of the MFA is to devote time to the craft and enhance the career potential of an emerging writer. With this in mind, the low-residency MFA is an excellent option for career-minded authors who

wish to immerse themselves in the writing life as it most accurately emulates the real-world experience *after* the MFA.

The Creative Writing MFA is not a new academic option though it has grown in both number and options over the years. According to The Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP), there are now more than 300 creative writing graduate programs in the US, combining MA, MFA, and PhD options; however, less than ten percent are low-residency. Still, opportunities abound for those seeking flexibility in a graduate program.

Programs continue to grow, demonstrating innovation and offering emerging authors a multitude of options to consider. For example, the Seton Hill MA in Writing Popular Fiction offers a unique opportunity not often presented by traditional full-residency programs. In addition to learning to craft “marketable novels in popular genres like mystery, romance, science fiction, horror, and fantasy,” the Seton Hill program also focuses on effective marketing, encouraging students to seek publication in commercial markets. This is an excellent opportunity for commercially minded writers as few traditional full-residency programs offer courses or workshops in popular fiction.

The low-residency format also allows for innovations previously unheard of as programs evolve. Most notably is the Whidbey Island Writers Association, which began offering the Whidbey Writers Workshop (WWW) MFA in 2005. The WWW is the first graduate program offered outside the traditional college or university format. According to Director Wayne Ude, the WWW combines “the strongest features of low-residency and residential programs,” including craft courses, directed readings, and thesis development.

“The strongest feature of low-residency programs, of course, is the low-residency aspect, which allows students to leave home for a total of twenty days a year,” Ude says. “But another is the use of the residency to bring in visiting writers, editors, agents and publicists in greater numbers than any but the largest residential programs can afford.”

It is during the brief residency where students connect with program faculty to plan for the upcoming year. Author Scott McCabe, a graduate of the Lesley University low-residency MFA, credits the model as “a collaborative learning environment” as students are “responsible for helping determine their own curriculum.” The brief residency is often intense due to the amount of networking and academic planning covered within a short amount of time.

However, Stephanie Freele, author and *SmokeLong Quarterly's* writer in residence for 2008, credits the intensity as “fun.” Reflecting on her experience with WWW, Freele

says, “...you spend 10 days with everyone almost from 8am to maybe 9pm every day. You really get to know people, and then you continue the relationship online.”

Without a doubt, the low-residency MFA offers students the most accommodation in tailoring their academic plan to meet individual objectives. However, students who require substantial financial support in completing graduate studies will face a challenge with the low-residency format. Many traditional full-residency programs offer partial or full funding through teaching assistantships. As an example, all students in the full-residency University of Michigan MFA program receive a complete tuition waiver and stipend as part of their pedagogical experience. With the distance studies approach, low-residency programs simply do not have the same level of employment opportunities available to students.

Wayne Ude, Program Director of the WWW, concedes low-residency programs are costly: “It's nice to have a settled life and job when undertaking this kind of program, because we tend not to have teaching assistantships. On the other hand, no teaching assistantship will ever pay as much as does a full-time career.” While low-residency programs may not be able to offer full funding, students who wish to benefit from low-residency flexibility may still have financial aid available to them through student loans, needs-based grants and bursaries, or scholarships.

While traditional full-residency programs offer more funded teaching opportunities, several low-residency MFAs have begun to incorporate pedagogical training. Although the AWP regards the MFA as the terminal degree for creative writers, it is noted that “accomplished writers” are the hallmark of a successful program. Thus, emerging authors who may wish to pursue teaching in the future may best prepare themselves by first focussing on developing their writing careers rather than trying to juggle pedagogical training during graduate studies.

Still, low-residency MFAs are becoming more competitive by offering pedagogical training to those who would rather not miss out on the opportunity. As example, Spalding University has a teaching curriculum for its students, WWW offers an elective course in “Methods of Teaching Creative Writing,” and Lesley University offers a two-year Post-Graduate Senior Fellowship in Teaching.

Of his experience at Lesley, author Scott McCabe says, “Low residencies, or at least Lesley, do offer or help facilitate teaching opportunities and readings, etc., though in most cases a student will have to be more proactive about pursuing certain opportunities. In some

eyes this may seem a drawback but it can also be good preparation for how to manage the creative life once outside the shelter of academia.”

Whidbey Writers Director Wayne Ude also points out the variety of opportunities available. “Graduates of low-residency programs do teach, but more often at writers conferences or in literary centers such as The Loft in Minneapolis or Richard Hugo House in Seattle than as full-time faculty at colleges and universities. Having said that, I must also admit that four of our first graduating class of eight have already done some teaching, two of them for community colleges. But that's not our purpose; it's a nice fringe benefit.” Indeed, the purpose of the MFA is to foster growth in emerging writers, but opportunities abound for those who wish to incorporate pedagogical training as part of their study plan.

In addition to flexible learning modules, low-residency students have an opportunity to take advantage of superior one-on-one interaction with published authors. An award-winning author of six poetry collections, instructor Molly Peacock appreciates the “nurturing environment” of the low-residency MFA at Spalding University.

“It's a warm, intimate learning environment,” Peacock says. “I usually work with my students on the phone so I can sense whether they're understanding my comments. Students love the back and forth of the phone work.” In addition, Peacock says the low-residency model “provides students with many connections, some of them very long-lasting.”

Too, the Whidbey Writers Workshop MFA provides the possibility of making professional connections to students by offering additional seminars and courses during the brief residency. One example is a specialized course in “The Profession of Writing,” which Director Wayne Ude says, “brings to each residency editors of large and small magazines and presses, agents both regional and national, publicists, and writers who speak about their experiences as professionals seeking to make a living. This is something which few residential programs offer. Low-residency programs bring editors and agents, but most don't go so far as to offer a course focusing on the professional aspect of becoming a writer.”

In addition to this, Ude is proud of yet another innovation of the WWW program: “We also offer our graduating students a nine-day seminar on ‘pitching’ the books they've written as their creative theses, whether in fiction, non-fiction or poetry. These seminars are taught by poetry editors and literary agents and are intended to help our students move from publishing in periodicals to publishing in book form.”

Author Stephanie Freele has benefited from such seminars at WWW. “I’ve met some agents and editors at the residencies and got to know them on a personal level,” Freele says. “The networking and support from the faculty, board and fellow-students is extremely beneficial.”

As a result of these additional career development opportunities, WWW graduate students reap the rewards. “I would add,” says Ude, “that virtually all of our students begin publishing in periodicals by their second year in the program, and most by their second semester.”

Of course, the greatest flexibility in a low-residency program is the ability to complete a graduate degree at a distance. Students have a unique opportunity to participate in class activities any time of day from the comfort of their own home. This is especially beneficial to students who work during the day or want to work around family responsibilities. As such, students are better prepared for the day-to-day writing life.

Students pursuing a low-residency MFA need to establish a schedule to complete academic tasks, connect regularly with peers and mentors, and devote time to writing, editing, and submitting. Amidst the chaos of other life responsibilities, the low-residency student is required to set barriers, prioritize, and manage time wisely. Author Scott McCabe says the format provides “a terrific primer on what it's like to be a working writer out on your own.”

While most low-residency programs take place over one to three years, a few programs allow for part-time studies. For example, the WWW MFA allows students to take up to six years to complete their graduate studies. As Director Ude explains, a student “needs to be able to tailor the number of courses each semester to fit into his or her ongoing life.” This can be especially beneficial to students needing to spread out the financial cost or to students who need more freedom in balancing their academic and personal lives. Author Stephanie Freele discovered the benefits of her low-residency program in accommodating life’s unpredictability: “I got pregnant and had a baby in the middle of the program, so doing a low-residency turned out to be perfect.” Freele was unable to travel to the January residency, but the structure of her Whidbey Writers Workshop MFA—as with many programs of its kind—allows for real life to happen while pursuing a graduate degree.

Working as a writer amidst the demands and distractions of real life can be a challenge, but the low-residency model encourages writers to develop self-discipline and

manage time effectively. The low-residency MFA nurtures emerging writers while encouraging students to treat writing as a profession, not just a two-year program of study.

Scott McCabe emphasizes this importance: “I suppose one of the surprises for me, individually, was exactly how much good writing is a product of diligent, consistent, hard work. In many respects it's a job as any other and should be treated as such. And the best way to handle a revelation like that is to simply do the work, to keep yourself in that chair even when it's rocky going.”

Writers can often feel the weight of isolation, but it doesn't have to be that way in a low-residency program. For those “rocky” moments McCabe speaks of, the camaraderie established in a low-residency program can keep a student writer motivated. As WWW Director Wayne Ude says, “the encouragement of one's fellow students and of faculty is very valuable. I think encouragement is the key; it's a better term for what takes place than is motivation, though knowing there's an audience which is eager to read and discuss your work is certainly motivating.”

Author Stephanie Freele says isolation “isn't really an issue because you have to communicate constantly with your instructors and classmates.” Such communication can greatly assist in the more challenging moments with the built-in support of an online community. The low-residency format is indeed a community, as WWW Director Ude explains:

“I think one measure of our success in sustaining this sense of community is this: our first graduating class formed an alumni association at the residency a full semester before they graduated. One of their annual activities is ‘Alumni Weekend,’ when they gather at a Bed & Breakfast near our residency site to hold a reunion, workshop each other's writing, and attend that year's graduation. Alumni continue to have access to the conversation spaces on [the] course delivery site, and they continue to take part.”

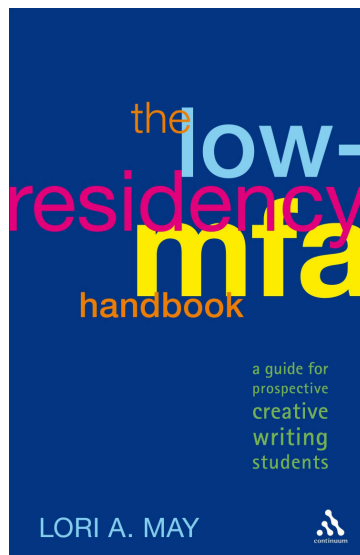
For career-minded writers the low-residency MFA is an exceptional immersion into the literary life—complete with its demands and obstacles—from which students may truly benefit with the ability to pursue a graduate degree at a distance.

While there is no such thing as a leisurely graduate program, the low-residency MFA prepares students to accommodate their writing career goals amidst the challenges of juggling family and work responsibilities. Through intimate mentorship opportunities with published writers and nurturing faculty, the student writer is able to develop lasting

relationships with a receptive audience who not only educates, but also encourages emerging writers on their path to professional success.

Under such guidance, graduate students are able to thrive in workshop settings and interact with like-minded classmates in the pursuit of developing their craft. Through the innovative development of low-residency programs, students have unique opportunities in pedagogical training, professional publication guidance, and editorial feedback from book and periodical publishers.

The low-residency MFA offers students the flexibility of learning at geographical distant institutions without leaving home for more than a week or two of intense on-campus residency each term. Thus, by focusing on developing their craft, graduate students in low-residency MFA programs are able to prepare for a lifelong writing career without moving to distant locations or asking their families to do the same. As such, the low-residency program presents a very flexible option for career-minded students on their path to publication.



For more information and up-to-date interviews with low-residency MFA directors, faculty, alumni, and current students, pick up ***The Low-Residency MFA Handbook: A Guide for Prospective Creative Students*** (Continuum Books, January 2011), available online at amazon.com or directly from the publisher: www.continuumbooks.com.