APPLYING YOURSELF: CRAFTING THE MFA APPLICATION

EGL 37 W

Online Writers’ Studio: Fall 2012

Instructor: Joe Fassler

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Increasingly, emerging literary writers flock to graduate MFA programs. It makes sense: an MFA provides access to world-class instructors, talented peers, and publishing gatekeepers. The degree can offer teaching opportunities and stable income for a few years. Most importantly, an MFA gives you time to write.

But many writers find the application process intimidating and mysterious. In this three-week course, students will build their portfolio for constructive critique; in addition to the traditional feedback, we’ll also discuss manuscript specifics like order, excerpts, inclusion, and omission. We will demystify the selection process, learning how to craft a manuscript that grabs a reader and makes the cut. Finally, we’ll take on that most confounding of genres—the personal statement—sharing examples and workshopping drafts. In addition to an online community of other writers, students will gain admissions tools, resources, advice, and the benefit of behind-the-scenes experience. If you’re gearing up for MFA application season, this is the course for you.

REQUIRED READING:


COURSE OVERVIEW:

This course is designed to give you what every prospective MFA student should have: a wealth of application resources, a source of good advice, some helpful examples, and a community of peers who read (and help improve) your work. Throughout the course, our primary focus will be on workshopping student writing samples; however, each week will focus on one crucial component of the application process. In Week 1, we’ll discuss what readers look for in a writing sample. In Week 2, we’ll discuss specific MFA programs and help you refine your list. In Week 3, we’ll discuss personal statements. By the end of the course, you’ll have a clearer sense of how the application process works, a significant amount of practical advice, some crucial resources, and—most importantly—a sense of how a sample group of attentive readers responded to your writing.
HOW THIS WILL WORK:

Some of you will not have taken an online course before. That’s okay. This class has several components.

I’ll give a weekly “lecture” on the week’s theme, found under the schedule section.

I’ll assign supplemental readings that address the weekly topic. These are prescribed to help demystify aspects of the application process, and I’ll pull them from the course text, The MFA Handbook, as well as online and PDF sources.

In order to enrich and expand our discussion, I’ll post one or two discussion questions on one aspect of the weekly theme. Post your responses and follow-up questions in the forum.

Depending on the size of the class, you’ll read 1-2 MFA writing samples per week, and will provide constructive feedback to your peers. In return, you will receive feedback on your own writing.

GIVING FEEDBACK IN THIS COURSE:

This course is somewhat unusual in that we’re reading stories as application materials, not just as literature. This creates some additional considerations in our work as peer critics; as a result, I’m going to ask you to format your approach a little differently (I’ll explain the reasons for my choices in my Week One lecture).

When you read a person’s sample, I’ll ask you to write a one-page (single spaced) letter that does the following.

1. Describe what you like best, or what engages you most, about the material. Please:
   a. write a brief, general assessment of the sample’s merits on the whole. What excites you about this author’s writing? What might an admissions committee respond to? (One paragraph will do.)
   b. Tell the writer which piece you liked best (choose only one).
   c. list the 2 - 3 sections or passages that most excited or engaged you.

2. Describe any aspects of the manuscript you feel could use improvement.
   a. Are there any “triage” sections were you feel the author is really not putting his or her best forward, or where the quality seems lower than elsewhere in the manuscript?
   b. were there any sections where your attention started to drift?
   c. if the author had time to address only one issue before submitting, what should he or she privilege?

3. Make a case for order.
   a. How would you suggest the author order this material? Most importantly, what should come first?
   b. Is the sample too long, or too short? Is there anything you would suggest omitting?

4. Finally, end with a few words of encouragement. MFA applications are a long, difficult process, and we can all use a little boost.
WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM ME:

I’ll be online and actively responding to new posts in the classroom every weekday. I also check my email at least once a day and respond as promptly as I can. This is the advantage of an online course: we can all work when our schedules permit, whether you’re an early bird or night owl. Feel free to chime in, submit, ask a question whenever it’s convenient for you.

I will hold a one-hour chat session—think of it as a digital office hour—once a week. Participation is not mandatory, but it’s important that you have a chance to contact me in real time should you wish to.

Finally, please see me as a resource—ask all your burning questions and I’ll be as specific as I can. If you feel the answer is something your peers may benefit from, or want to chime in, please post in the Discussion Forum; but feel free to ask me individual questions by email, too.

GRADING:

More than anything, your participation determines your grade in this course. I am not grading the “quality” of your work; I’m grading the quality and effort you put into your contributions to discussion and peer feedback. If you bring energy and enthusiasm to the course, you’ll do well. Remember that in a course like this one, you get back what you put in. The more constructive feedback and support you provide, the more other students will be motivated to help you succeed.

All reading is required, but in the end these reading assignments are for your benefit. If you feel you are already familiar with a topic, or simply don’t have time one week, that’s your call. Same goes for discussion topics: if a certain topic doesn’t engage you, there’s no need to chime in.

That being said, you must respond to all student work to receive a good grade in the course. And you must participate in at least some of the class discussion. If you have a busy few days, though, and would rather spend your time reading student work than commenting online, that’s fine. Do what you can, when you can.
CLASS SCHEDULE

Week 1. (10/1 – 10/7): THE APPLICATION PROCESS

Read my lectures “Introduction” + “What I Learned Reading MFA Applications.”
Read “If knew then what I know now,” from The Creative Writing MFA Blog.

Post any discussion questions you have about MFA basics, the application process, or course protocols, in the discussion section (optional).

Read and critique Group Member #1’s application, due Sunday, October 7th.
Group Member #1, read and critique Group Member #4’s application.

Week 2. (10/8 – 10/14): THE PROGRAMS

Read my lecture, “The Places You'll Go: Creating a List of Programs.”
Read Seth Abraham’s MFA Rankings from Poets and Writers.
Read “What to Look For” and “Criteria” in the Handbook (p. 17 – 25).

Post your list of schools in the discussion section (due October 14.)
Post questions/concerns about specific programs or your personal list (optional).

Read and critique Group Member #2’s application, due Sunday, October 14th.
Group Member #2, read and critique Group Member #4’s application.

Week 3. (10/15 – 10/22): THE STATEMENT

Read my lecture, “Demystifying the Personal Statement.”
Read sample personal statements (provided by PDF).
Look back at the Handbook’s guidelines for the personal statement (p. 117 – 122).