

MFA STUDENT HANDBOOK

Graduate Program, Department of English, The Pennsylvania State University



A few preliminary words of clarification and advice, especially for new students:

- You are here because the faculty members in your genre were impressed with your high level of undergraduate academic work, the strength of your writing, and our sense of your potential to grow and thrive as writers and scholars in a very demanding program.
 - This handbook is meant to be a tool for planning, but it cannot substitute for regular conversations with the MFA director, who is your official adviser and, later in your career, your Project adviser. Nor can it substitute for conversations with the MFA EGO representative and other MFA students who have managed to navigate the waters before you. To that end, you can also knock on the door of the associate MFA director, **Sheila Squillante**, who is also a graduate of the program. The English Graduate Office will also assist you in course selection, scheduling, and other institutional matters.
 - Successful students learn to focus simultaneously on three distinct but related areas: graduate course work, teaching, and their own writing, culminating in the Final Project. During the course of your studies, the portion of time and attention you grant to each of these areas will vary, depending on the configuration of your schedule and your place in the program.
 - The most capable students familiarize themselves with the curriculum and teaching requirements and plan their programs accordingly. Careful planning will gain you the most flexibility in choosing required and elective courses that support your personal, academic, and artistic interests, and will enable you to reserve ample time in the last year to complete the Final Project. With careful planning, you may also be able to build an area of academic concentration by selecting courses that reflect your research interests or career goals (e.g., composition studies, African-American lit. or a dual degree in women's studies).
 - Students in this program can also find numerous opportunities to gain teaching experience in various kinds of writing—in academic and non-academic settings—and through internships in writing, editing, publishing, mass media, and other related areas.
 - Another key to success in this program is to do things in good time—plan ahead, meet deadlines, and don't wait until the last minute. It is wise to begin thinking about the Final Project early in the program so that you may find useful connections between workshop writing, academic research, internship experience, and work toward the Final Project.
- ⌘ Summer is a valuable time to read, write and, teach or take a course.

COURSE WORK

IN order to graduate with the Master of Fine Arts degree, you must:

- **complete a total of 48 credits** (for students enrolled before 2009) or **42 credits** (for students enrolled in 2009 or after), and
- **produce a book-length final project** (with an introduction) in your area of specialization.

Students typically enroll in 6 seminar and workshop courses per year; the minimum course credit requirement for a student with a Teaching Assistantship (TA) is 9 credits **per semester** (maximum 12 credits). The addition of a **summer** of teaching and/or course work enables students to better manage their time and finances. Select courses with your future in mind—do you imagine teaching composition or secondary education? Editing? Ph.D. study?

A. Typical Schedule for an MFA Student/Teaching Assistant (enrolled in 2009 or after)

first semester	1 workshop (3 credits), 1 seminar (3 credits), 501 (3 credits), 602 (1 credit)	teach one course (ENGL 15)
second semester	1 workshop, 1 seminar, 1 elective, 602 (1 credit) craft seminar (1-3 credits)	teach two courses (ENGL 15)
third semester	1 workshop 1 seminar, 6-12 thesis credits 590 (1 credit)	teach one course
fourth semester	1 workshop 1 seminar, 6-12 thesis credits	teach one course

B. Typical Schedule for an MFA Student/Teaching Assistant (enrolled before 2009)

first semester	1 workshop (3 credits), 1 seminar (3 credits), 1 elective (3 credits), 602 (1 credit)	teach one course (ENGL 15)
second semester	1 workshop, 1 seminar 602, 597: "Introduction to the Profession" (2 credits)	teach one course (ENGL 15)
third semester	1 workshop 1 seminar, 1 elective	teach one course (ENGL 15 or 50)
fourth semester	1 workshop 1 seminar, 1 elective	teach two courses
fifth semester	1 workshop 6 project credits	teach two courses
sixth semester	1 seminar 6 project credits	teach one course

COURSE REQUIREMENTS FOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS

- Teaching Assistants (TAs) must take the teacher-training courses (602) in **addition to** the requirements for the MFA degree. These courses DO NOT count toward your overall credit requirement for graduation.
- **Individuals with Teaching Assistantships are required, as a condition of the assistantship, to be enrolled in AT LEAST 9 credits each fall and spring semester.**
- Teaching Assistants who wish to teach creative writing courses must enroll in the one-credit English 590 (Seminar in Teaching Creative Writing), in the first semester of the second year. After completion of the course, students do not have to repeat 590 to teach additional creative writing courses.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MFA

Workshop seminars (12 credits for A, 15 credits for B)

Of these, four must be in the student's primary genre. Additional workshops may be taken for elective credit.

Literature seminars (12 credits for A, 15 credits for B)

These may be chosen from offerings within English, Comparative Literature, literature in translation, or in another language, as long as the course is designated as a graduate course at the 500-level. MFA faculty members occasionally teach seminars that meet the literature requirement, such as the permanent course offering in book reviewing, the writer in the community, and various craft topics courses.

Electives (3 credits for A, 6 credits for B)

These may be chosen from within or outside the department, and may include advanced undergraduate classes, at the 400-level. The 600-level pedagogy courses do not count toward elective credit. Undergraduate-level internship credits, which can be arranged through Liz Jenkins, satisfy the elective requirement.

Final Writing Project (6-12 credits)

Designated **ENGL 596**, these credits should be reserved for later in the program and primarily represent the independent work done with the project adviser.

FINAL WRITING PROJECT

The Final Project must be a book-length manuscript in the area of the student's specialization. In fiction and creative non-fiction, approximately 150-200 pages are suggested for students enrolled before 2009, 100-150 for those enrolled after; in poetry,

approximately 40-50 pages are suggested. (On the rare occasion that a student wishes to create a final project in two genres, the minimum requirement for both genres must be satisfied.)

Project Adviser and Second Reader

Usually after spring break, the MFA director will ask students who anticipate their final year to submit their preferences for project adviser and second reader. The adviser is a member of the MFA faculty in the student's area of concentration and often the second reader is, too; the second reader *may* be an MFA faculty member from another area, or from the broader English Department. Students may wish to discuss their project ideas with faculty members and ask whether they will be available, but the ultimate decision regarding the appointment of advisers and second readers is the responsibility of the MFA director. By the end of the year, students will know who will oversee their Final Projects, and they should schedule a meeting to plan reading and writing for the summer before the final year. Scheduling meetings with the thesis adviser and second reader is the student's responsibility, and the student should understand the expectations of both readers well in advance of the thesis deadline. The second reader should be involved in the thesis project by the beginning of the final year, at least, and should be engaged in both the drafting and revision process.

Preparation of the Final Project—Format and Schedule

Each successful MFA Project will be bound and deposited in the Grucci Room library and must follow specific schedule and format guidelines to ensure graduation and successful completion of the project.

Format Guidelines:

- Guidelines and page templates are available online from Graduate School: <http://www.gradsch.psu.edu/current/thesis.html>. Note: Our format varies slightly from the rules on the Graduate School website; most importantly, MFA students do not need to submit their thesis to the Thesis Office or Graduate school for review—only the English Department. Nor is a permission-to-copy page required. The thesis is not submitted electronically.
- Printing the final project: paper must be minimum 25% cotton with watermark. The manuscript need not be hardbound; local copy shops and UPS offer spiral and flat end binding for a nominal fee.
- Margins should be 1.5 inches on the left, .75"-1" on the right, and 1" top and bottom. Use standard font and size. Prose thesis text must be double- or one-and-a-half-spaced. Single spacing is allowed in certain limited cases: the table of contents, block quotations, headings, table titles, and references. Poetry may be single-spaced. Print on only one side of the paper.
- The creative work will begin as pg. 1. All front pages should be numbered with lower case Roman numerals; do not show a number on the title page.
- Order the project as follows (again, see website for templates):
 - 1) Title pg.

- 2) Signatory pg. (ii.)
- 3) Committee pg. (iii.)
- 4) Table of Contents
- 5) Acknowledgements (optional)
- 6) Dedication pg. (optional)
- 7) Creative work (starts at pg. 1)

Signatures: Three signatures are needed on the signature page for the English Department copy: the two readers and the director of the MFA Program.

Due Date: The project must be submitted to the Graduate Office on or before the last day of classes.

GRUCCI WORKS-IN-PROGRESS (WIP) SERIES

During the spring semester, final-year students present and discuss their projects to an audience of fellow MFA students, faculty and friends in the Grucci Room. Each student is introduced by the faculty member who serves as first reader of the final project. Typically two students share an afternoon presentation, followed by a casual reception with light refreshments. The Grucci Room Curator will contact students in the fall semester to begin scheduling presentations.

Third Year in Absentia (B)

If a student enrolled before 2009 completes the course requirements in two years and finds s/he must finish the Final Project in absentia, s/he must inform the MFA director prior to the third year. Mutually agreeable arrangements to meet regularly or otherwise exchange writing and response must then be made with the adviser and second reader.

TEACHING ASSISTANTSHIPS

During the first year, all graduate student teaching assistants teach two sections of ENGL 015, a writing course required of almost all students at the University, and take ENGL 602 (Supervised Experience in College Teaching). The 602 explores practical and theoretical pedagogical issues that arise in the teaching of writing at the college level, and involves classroom observation. After the first year, TAs may request to be assigned to other courses and programs administered by the department. Students who are selected to teach more specialized writing courses such as ENGL 004 (Basic Writing Skills), 005 (Writing Tutorial), 202A (Writing in the Social Sciences), 202B (Writing in the Humanities), 202C (Technical Writing), 202D (Business Writing) are required to take a section of ENGL 602 designed for those courses. (Students interested in teaching at the college level after they graduate have found that experience teaching 202C and 202D is especially valuable.) The Associate Head of the department handles assignments (not the MFA office), and the Undergraduate Administrative Assistant implements scheduling for these courses.

MFA students have the special opportunity to teach one section of ENGL 050, an introductory creative writing course, and most MFA students are later selected to teach a creative writing

course in their area of concentration, such as ENGL 212 (Fiction), ENGL 213 (Poetry), and ENGL 215 (Non-fiction). Scheduling for the courses is also handled by the Associate Head of the Department in consultation with the MFA Director.

TAs admitted in 2009 and after teach 5 courses over a 2-year period. MFA students can enhance their academic profiles by tutoring in the Writing Center (ENGL 005), teaching a range of composition courses, or working as a research assistant in the department.

Leaves of Absence

In the event that students need to leave the program for a semester, they must notify the MFA director immediately. It is not difficult to resume course work after a brief leave, but students should not assume that teaching assistantships will be reserved without special provision.

Health Insurance

The University requires all Teaching Assistants to have health insurance and TAs are automatically enrolled in a health insurance package with the assistantship appointment. The University assumes 80% of the premium cost and the remaining 20% is deducted from the monthly stipend. Students who wish to add coverage for spouses and/or dependent children may enroll them in this plan by contacting the Student Insurance Office in 320 Grange Building. Those already covered by a private plan who wish to waive the University coverage will need to submit a copy of their policy for review by the Student Insurance Office with the request for insurance waiver. Information on the Graduate Student Association's plan with Blue Cross/Blue Shields is available in 111 Kern Building.

Teaching Observation/ Letters of Recommendation

Students who think they may apply for teaching jobs after graduate school should be sure to have their teaching observed and request letters to be written on their behalf. It is appropriate to ask the instructors or mentors in a 602 course and/or the adviser and second reader of the Final Project to observe a class and write a letter, preferably **before** the final semester. For a small fee, these confidential letters may be filed with Associated Writing Programs (awpwriter.org) or the Career Services Office at Penn State (101 MBNA Career Services Center), and a dossier will then be sent for each academic job application.

The Graduate School Teaching Certificate

The Graduate School Teaching Certificate is a self-directed program designed to recognize a basic level of achievement in the area of college teaching and is available to all currently enrolled graduate students. To earn the certificate, MFA students must attend the teaching orientation session, complete two semesters of ENGL 602, complete ENGL 590, and develop a Web site that includes a statement of teaching philosophy and demonstration of the ability to develop a Power Point presentation. For the certificate to be issued, students must request that the MFA director write a letter to the Graduate School verifying completion of the requirements.

MORE USEFUL INFORMATION FOR MFA STUDENTS

English Graduate Organization

EGO is the representative body of English department graduate students, and it includes a representative from the MFA Program. Its main purpose is to communicate to the faculty and to department administrators the interests and concerns of the graduate students and to elect graduate representatives to appropriate department committees. Other duties include sponsoring and advising new graduate students and teaching assistants, reviewing and evaluating graduate programs and degree requirements, holding job sessions, selecting one teacher each year for the EGO Teaching Award, and organizing book sales and social activities.

Grucci Room

A special lounge dedicated to poetry and creative writing in the English Department at Penn State, this space provides a venue for intimate readings and informal gatherings. It houses a collection of current literary magazines, sample creative writing text books, and other materials for your use. It is a restful, common space to read or relax during its hours of operation posted on the door. As MFA students enter their final year, they are invited to apply for the position of Grucci Room curator, a paid internship that involves maintaining common hours for the room, setting up for events, and assisting with readings and writers' visits.

Readings

THE MARY E. ROLLING READING SERIES is the official series of the MFA Program and is sponsored by the English Department, The Rolling Fund, The University Libraries, and the College of the Liberal Arts. The readings are listed on the department master calendar at the English web site and on the MFA blog. Students and faculty of the MFA program are strongly encouraged to attend these events.

MFA STUDENT READING SERIES

Traditionally, the second-year students have run a reading series that features first- and third-year MFA students in the University Club. These events are excellent opportunities for students to gather and are generally well-attended by those from within and outside the program. Watch for e-mail reminders from the student organizers about upcoming authors, venues and dates.

RED WEATHER READING SERIES

The Red Weather Reading Series, coordinated by MFA alums features readings by emerging and local writers. MFA students are encouraged to suggest possible readers and are invited to talk with the organizers about possible administrative involvement in the series.

WEBSTER'S & OTHERS

Webster's, the coffee shop/café at 128 S. Allen Street, frequently hosts formal and open mic readings sponsored by members of the English Department and others in the wider State College Community. Readings of poetry, fiction and non-fiction are also featured through other areas of the University, including a long-standing noon series of readings and lectures sponsored by the Comparative Literature Department, readings hosted by the Library's Pennsylvania Center for the Book, the Palmer Art Museum, and various student organizations.

STAFF

Graduate Office, (136 Burrowes)

Director of Graduate Studies: **Mark Morrison**, 136 Burrowes

MA Director, Internships Coordinator: **Elizabeth Jenkins**, 137

Secretary: **Peg Yetter**, 136

(Peg facilitates registration, submission of the Final Project, and is often the best link between students and the broader University.)

Composition Program (134 Burrowes)

Director: **Stuart Selber**, 126

Associate Director: **Gregg Rogers**, 132

Assistant Director: **Diana Gruendler**,

Composition Staff Assistant: **Christi Daniels**, 102

Scheduling (108 Burrowes)

Scheduling: **Bob Burkholder**, Associate Head, Burrowes 109

Scheduling Administrative Assistant: Burrowes 108

(The Administrative Assistant schedules your teaching assignments, room assignments for classes, and can also help you find appropriate 602 sections.)

MFA Program (113A Burrowes)

Director: William J. Cobb (fiction & non-fiction writer), 137 A Burrowes

(Bill serves as your academic adviser until you are assigned a first reader for the Final Project.)

Associate Director: Sheila Squillante (poet & non-fiction writer), 143 Burrowes

(Sheila is a graduate of the program, experienced teacher, and a good guide for the mystified.)

MFA Faculty:

Robin Becker (poet & non-fiction writer), 36 Burrowes

William J. Cobb (fiction & non-fiction writer), 137A Burrowes

Charlotte Holmes (fiction & non-fiction writer), 32 Burrowes

Elizabeth Kadetsky (visiting writer, non-fiction & fiction)

Julia Spicher Kasdorf (poet & non-fiction writer), 35 Burrowes

Toby Thompson (non-fiction writer), 114 Burrowes

(The *MFA Handbook* is an impromptu, unofficial document designed to serve student needs; corrections and suggestions for forthcoming editions should be sent to the MFA director.)