

Taking Notes

*We dedicate this space to share a member's experience of writing. **Author and Member Susan Mangiero** gives her account of pursuing a graduate degree in writing—and during the pandemic, no less! Thank you goes to Susan for sharing her beautiful and insightful essay on her path to the holy grail of creative writing—the MFA.*

Why I Pursued an MFA in Creative & Professional Writing

By Susan Mangiero, CFA, MBA, MFA, PhD

My pursuit of a graduate degree in the fine arts, at the height of the pandemic, astonished people in my circle. Given my extensive portfolio of business articles, books, and award-winning blog posts, friends asked me what more I expected to learn. Others cautioned me about giving up personal time. My husband, always supportive, simply observed, “Hemingway never pursued an MFA.” Even I had occasional doubts as I tried to flex my creative muscles while worrying about the mounting human toll of the COVID crisis.

Looking back on my two years of full-time study, with a June 2022 degree in hand, I'm glad I persevered. I learned about the craft of writing, the publishing industry's best practices, and the writing life. I met fantastic storytellers. I have the requisite credential to teach writing if I so choose. I honed my knowledge of story structure. I explored new genres and authors previously unknown to me. Most importantly, I gave myself the gift of possibility, something every writer needs to put pen to paper and keep it there. I understand the MFA is no guarantee of immediate commercial success. Nevertheless, I am better off for adding to my toolbox of literary devices, plot construction, and the all-important voice stylings of characters, fictional and real.

I am not alone in my appreciation for the MFA degree. As one of my esteemed MFA mentors, popular author (and Sisters in Crime member) Jane Cleland, says, “People were surprised that I enrolled in Western Connecticut State University's low residency MFA program since I was already well-published. (The sixth entry in my Josie Prescott Antiques Mystery series had just been published by St. Martin's Minotaur.) My motivation was to land a tenure track position, and for that, you need a terminal degree. That goal alone was reason enough to go back to school, but to my delight, I discovered two additional and utterly unexpected benefits. These benefits apply to all writers regardless of whether they're interested in teaching at the college level [or] whether they're at the start of their careers or seasoned professionals. First, I learned a ton about craft, aspects of characterization, structure, plotting, and drafting elegant prose that I didn't even know I didn't know. Second, I joined a small community of supportive and talented writers. I am forever grateful I earned that MFA, learned so much about craft, and found this wonderful group of writers. And yes, I landed that tenure track position!”

If you are interested in pursuing an MFA in writing, my advice is to carefully compare the attributes of competing programs. Most MFA programs require students to read volumes of articles and books every week, write on demand, regularly attend special topic workshops and residencies, meet with faculty, and contribute to peer critique groups. Notwithstanding similarities, MFA offerings can differ significantly from one another.

Some programs are genre-specific such as those focused only on children's literature, journalism, or screenwriting. Some programs include workshops and career tools to help students find jobs, agents, and editors. Other programs have a hands-on approach with faculty members providing line edits of student manuscripts and making personal introductions to agents. Teachers elsewhere are less involved, leaving responsibilities such as detailed editing and connecting with publishing professionals to their students. Some programs meet on campus every week versus "low residency" programs that meet once or twice per year in person and online in between.

Myriad offerings reflect tightly programmed course sequences. Other programs grant students a chance to build customized curriculums. My MFA alma mater, Western Connecticut State University ("WCSU") was ranked by Intelligent.com in 2022 as "most flexible" vis-à-vis competitors. This model worked for me because I wanted to sample a variety of genres that included journalism, mysteries, and comedy. Although my MFA required everyone to complete a one-semester internship, I still had sufficient latitude to design a project of my choosing. Given my background as a university teacher who loves technology, I happily designed my academic project for the Highlights Foundation to include product testing, interviewing children's fiction and nonfiction authors, and regularly meeting with the executive director about best practices for delivering online and in-person education.

Diversity is another crucial factor when deciding what MFA program makes sense for you. During my two years of study, I exchanged ideas with individuals from all backgrounds. According to Professor Anthony D'Aries, head of the WCSU MFA program, and another favorite mentor of mine, "One of the greatest strengths of our program is the students' versatility. Students of all ages and backgrounds can write and learn together in a wide variety of genres. Novelists are studying to be copywriters. Poets are developing skills as grant writers. Sci-fi and horror and mystery writers are training to become speechwriters and technical writers. While we offer pathways to careers in teaching, we also recognize that many students want to pursue work as full-time or freelance writers. This is one of the reasons our student success rate post-graduation is so high. A recent survey showed eighty-seven percent of our graduates went on to land book deals, pursue careers in education or professional writing, or both."

Student empowerment is yet another factor. During my MFA program, I repeatedly asked that a faculty member guide discussions in real time for each of our four required online multi-genre

critique courses. I was frustrated with giving and receiving asynchronous feedback from my peers. I sought a more personal touch, despite lockdown restrictions, to instantly ask questions and make comments about submissions. I am happy to report this required course has evolved to include real-time discussions for current students, led by the assigned teacher.

Creating stories is challenging work. There is no getting around the reality of being alone with a blank piece of paper, waiting for the magic to unfurl. Being part of a writing community and having to meet MFA deadlines helped me further my goals. If you are ready to expand your horizons, consider the discipline and freedom of an MFA in writing. Explore the MFA programs offered by various U.S. and international universities. Ask tough questions. Examine required courses. Check out the instructors and their publications. Determine whether you want handholding or prefer a *laissez-faire* approach.

It's never too late to augment your knowledge of story structure. Whatever you decide to do, have fun. Savor every moment of your writing life.

Susan Mangiero is a 25-year veteran of the financial services, financial technology, and insurance industries. She enjoyed an exciting business career as a Wall Street trader, a marketer for two financial services companies, an award-winning blogger, a digital education start-up entrepreneur, forensic economist, and university professor. Susan is currently writing a cozy mystery novel and looking for a publishing home for her humorous mystery short stories.

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