



an mfa to-do list

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As a third-year student at UMass-Amherst's three year Creative Writing program, I'm considered an expert. First-years ask for my advice. Second-years quietly sip their beers as I rant and rave about different aspects of the curriculum. The department's administrative assistant has often asked me to contact prospective students in order to discuss the program, answer any questions they might have.

Secretly, I laugh at the idea that I'm supposed to be an expert on *anything* that has to do with writing or a writing course of study. I must have been the least prepared candidate to ever enter an MFA program; and I still, often, feel like the most clueless person here. But, as they say, hindsight is 20/20, and I know I'd do things differently if I ever had a second chance. As a matter of fact, here's a list of things I'd do if time ever rewinds and I'm afforded the chance to prepare for graduate school all over again.

- 1. Read, Read, Read** | Writers are readers, this is true. I started reading at 4 years old and couldn't stop. Before applying to grad school, I was reading a lot. I read Harry Potter books, "Dawson's Creek" teleplays, and any title on Oprah's book club list. I read the occasional piece of literature on my own: Sons and Lovers, Anna Karenina, and Jane Austen novels. But since I wasn't an English major as an undergrad, and never took a university-level literature course, I hadn't read many of the "classics". Sure, I'd seen several movie adaptations of Great Expectations, but I'd never *read the book*.

Also, I never read short stories. When I came to the program, I had no idea who Alice Munro or Lorrie Moore is. I wasn't familiar with many literary movements, terms or devices. I wasn't sure I could recognize what others were calling a typical "New Yorker" story, as I'd only ever read *two stories* published in The New Yorker. On my shelf, I had tons of books written by authors I'd often hear about: Gabriel García Márquez, James Joyce, and Thomas Hardy. But I never got around to them. This proved to be a disadvantage for me; and, if I'd known then what I know now, I'd have read more—and more *widely*—before seeking out MFA programs.

2. **Write, Write, Write** | I wrote one short story before coming to grad school. It wasn't very good; but, instead of revising and improving it, I packed it away. Later, I decided to enter an MFA program because I wanted to learn how to write well. I didn't know, then, that the only way to learn how to write well is to write *poorly*, for a while. Writing several stories in various tenses, from various points of view, would have demonstrated the freedoms and restrictions of each writing choice. The only way to improve that story was to re-write and revise it until it was better. Perhaps that story would never have been very good. Perhaps I'd have, ultimately, trashed it. But, at least, in the process, I'd have learned something about writing. This is what an MFA program is all about: the time and opportunity to, now and again, write poorly. I just wish I'd given myself a head start before arriving.

3. **Research, Research, Research** | I like my program, I do. Is it perfect? Not nearly! Do I regret coming to this school? Not at all! But do I wish I would have researched more schools before I made my final application and acceptance decisions? Certainly. You see, I was living in Los Angeles, 3000 miles away from my family, when I applied to grad school. I'd moved far away from everyone I loved in order to work in the film industry; but, now that I was planning on taking a break from that world, I thought I might as well move closer to home. My family lives in New York and Vermont, so I only solicited schools in or around New England. The fact that I held a somewhat biased belief that East Coast schools are the best, and that I had a silly fantasy about attending a school with ivy climbing its austere brick buildings, didn't help matters.

Sure, I heard that University of Iowa housed the best MFA program in the nation. But who wants to live in Iowa? Then, there were the programs at University of Texas-Austin and University of California-Riverside. But the West Coast couldn't hold me any longer. I didn't want to live in the South, so I didn't bother researching Florida schools, either. In the end, I only applied to three schools. I was accepted into two of them, and matriculated at the one that offered me the most money.

Now that my MFA days are almost over, I wonder what would have happened if I'd taken any of the other schools seriously. Maybe living in Iowa City wouldn't have been so bad. I hear great things about the Austin program. Also, although I'm generally afraid of Texas, I hear the city of Austin is like an oasis in the desert, a hip burg in the midst of Republican conservatism. Who knows? I might have *liked* one of the Florida schools if I'd taken the time to research it. So, although the people I've met and the lessons I've learned, here, lead me to believe that this is where I'm meant to be, I sometimes wonder if that's by fate or default.

4. **Prepare to be poor** | I had to make several adjustments surrounding the life-changing decision to come to grad school. I moved from sunny California weather to the variable and often below freezing Massachusetts climate. I moved from the second largest urban center in the U.S. to a small college town. I'd been out of school for six years, so even the seemingly insignificant practice of carrying a heavy book bag instead of a fashionable purse took some getting used to. The hardest acclimation, for me, was transitioning from making a yearly \$48,000 to a little over \$12,000. It was, in a word, rough.

In Los Angeles, I easily paid for a nice apartment and the accompanying utility and heat bills; a car payment; car insurance; home phone, cell phone; gym membership; and Internet access. I went to dinner and a movie with my girlfriends whenever I wished. I also took two or three domestic trips a year to visit family and friends. I knew that I wouldn't be living as comfortably in Amherst as I did in Los Angeles. However, I wasn't quite prepared for just how broke I'd be.

During my first year of grad school, I worked fifty hours a week just to pay the bills. After classes, this didn't leave a lot of time to write. It seemed ironic and cruel that I had to work so hard to stay here, yet never got a chance to do exactly what it was I *came* to do. After living in the area for a year, I was able to find a cheaper apartment. I got rid of my home phone and learned to rely solely on my cell. I take the bus to campus from Monday through Thursday, using my car only on the weekends, saving on gas and parking fees. I use my student discount whenever and wherever I can. Financially, things are much better but still pretty tight. The good news is that all of my friends are broke as well, and we've learned to *cheaply* have fun.

If I had to do it all again, I might have waited until my car was paid off before applying to UMass. I would have saved more money before leaving my well-paid job. I would have found these financial solutions earlier in my MFA career so that I wouldn't have spent so much time trying to make ends meet. If only I knew then what I know now, I would have been better prepared to be poor.

5. **Decide to be a writer** | If anyone were to watch my life my first two years, here, s/he might assume that I was in an Education program because of the dedication I had to my students. Or s/he may think that I was studying Social Justice, Public Policy, or Political Science because of all of my hard work on behalf of the Graduate Student Senate. Someone who watched very closely might have noticed all the literature courses in which I enrolled and guess that I was in the English department. But in the *MFA* program? A *writer*? There was no evidence of *that*.

I don't know if it was because of how unprepared I was for grad school and the amount of time and effort it took me to adjust, or my fragile ego and fear, but I didn't write much the first two years, here: the beginnings of a nebulous novel, two short stories, a handful of poems. Everything else in my life seemed to take priority. Yes, it's true that working is necessary to living, and living is necessary to writing. It's also true that the literature courses on which I was so focused were degree requirements. Furthermore, it was important to me to keep a good G.P.A., participate in several committees, and teach various types of classes on expository writing, creative writing, and literature so that I could graduate with the best possible Curriculum Vitae. After all, I would need to land a job, after all was said and done. Writing always came last, and sometimes not at all.

Although I'm sure it was more obvious to others, it took me two years to realize that writing should be my focus. I could hustle and struggle in Los Angeles teaching courses. I didn't uproot my life and move 3000 miles to work at Women of Color Leadership Network or the Graduate Student Senate. I decided to apply to grad school because I wanted to *write*. Once here, I had to *decide* to be a writer. Sure, I can be a great teacher and an active member of the campus community. But being a writer had to remain first and foremost in my sights.

I've come a long way during these last two years and, sometimes, I feel discouraged by the fact that it took me so long to get where I am. It seems that my learning curve was much greater than those of my colleagues because of my lack of experience with literature and writing. I've decided to stay in the program for a fourth year in order to focus on my writing and finish my thesis, and I occasionally feel ashamed that I couldn't complete the program in the three years that are prescribed. Although, I'm grateful for the lessons I've learned, I wonder why I didn't know these things before. But, usually, I don't have time to reflect on all my mistakes and mishaps because I'm too busy writing.