

What to Expect at the Residency

West Virginia Wesleyan MFA

*I was writing to save my life as I knew it
could be.*

—Irene McKinney, “At 24”

What to Expect Academically

The ten-day residency session is an important and exciting time because of your contact with other writers (both faculty and peers), exposure to various aesthetics, direct criticism of your manuscript, and stimulation for writing. The seminars, workshops, advising conferences, and readings make each session unified and intensive. Each residency also closes one semester and initiates another, thereby complementing the independent work. The dense residency schedule includes opportunities to share and evaluate completed work, to begin generating new work, to receive counseling about your plans, and to formulate a new project with your advisor. While the correspondence semester is a time for highly focused, individualized study with a single advisor, the residency offers you the broad context, with many resources, for that study.

To build this broad context, the residency curriculum is both interdisciplinary and genre-specific. All students, regardless of genre track, sit in on morning seminars. The interdisciplinary nature of the morning reflects the reality that writing is essentially interdisciplinary: prose and poetry don't happen without one another. The compressed musicality of a poem sharpens the paragraph, and the well-wrought narrative ever reverberates with the poetic line. The interdisciplinary morning is not a default of a small program, but rather an intentional curricular design: even if students will occasionally break out for concurrent genre-specific seminars, the program will maintain at least one all-cohort session per day in order to maintain the foundation for the ongoing residency-wide conversation. You can thus expect a wide variety in seminars: some lecturers will focus on nuts-and-bolts issues of craft, and some on theory. Although every seminar won't speak explicitly to all genres, each will still offer something for students of all genres, and students at the graduate level are expected rise to the occasion, to extrapolate and investigate, to listen intently. You are encouraged to approach lecturers to follow up and discuss applications to your particular genre; you may also raise these questions in workshop, or with your advisor in individual conferences. An added benefit to the interdisciplinary seminars is that, for students who plan to teach at the college level, often beginning their careers teaching multi-genre introductory courses, these morning classes provide background on genres outside of one's specialty.

The afternoon workshops are genre-specific and focused on student writing. In these small workshops, you can expect a supportive but rigorous atmosphere, analytical but not judgmental, noncompetitive, vigilant against workshop jargon or any preferred aesthetic. You can expect specific constructive feedback on workshop pieces and, depending on workshop size, additional writing exercises for generating new work. See the Handbook sections on workshopping for more details on workshop participation.

Regarding preparation for seminars and workshops, you will receive peer workshop pieces and pre-reading assignments for seminars (and occasionally brief writing assignments) one month in advance of the residency. All workshop samples and brief readings are distributed electronically, and you are responsible for printing the materials (or storing them electronically for ready access), as well as for locating any books assigned as pre-reading; at the residency, you are required to have in hand the materials relevant to the day's seminars. Lecturers are responsible for communicating, in their seminar descriptions and assignments, the nature of the pre-reading: whether it's background, for instance, or if a close reading is expected, or if specific sections are likely to receive more focus than others. That said, at the graduate level, you should not expect every reading to be explicitly parsed in each lecture;

because seminars are compressed to a 75-minute time frame in order that students be exposed to a variety of aesthetics and approaches, some extrapolation will be necessary for every seminar.

Because of the pace of the residency, you will need to complete all seminar and workshop preparation in advance of the residency. Read peer work carefully, make notes on all of the material for workshop, and compose responses to each of your workshop peers. During the residency, you may need to reserve some time the evening before in which to review the work of the student/s being discussed the next day. You will also want to have the Handbook with you for quick reference throughout the residency, and should prepare plans for the upcoming semester to share with your advisor.

What to Expect Intrapersonally and Interpersonally

The residency can be an experience of surprise. Students are often surprised by their creative breakthroughs, by their artistic capabilities, by their hunger to learn alongside other writers. But students can also be surprised by flashes of self-doubt or fear, or by the emotional reactions that result from exhaustion and the vulnerability involved in sharing one's work. Very few adults put themselves into these circumstances willingly: eating dorm food, living among strangers, sitting for long hours in hard desk chairs (bring a pillow!), and receiving critique about something that sprang from the depths of one's heart and mind. Needless to say, the situation can be stressful, so you'll need to take care of yourself.

You can expect to be worn thin at some point during the residency. Step back when you need to. Although consistent engagement is expected throughout the session, and *seminars and workshops are mandatory* for earning credit for residency courses, *evening readings have been made optional*, since now and then both students and faculty need a breather.

You can expect the residency to provide you a safe space to enhance your craft, to grow together with other writers, but every participant has to diligently safeguard that space. Faculty and students collaborate to maintain a nonaggressive, noncompetitive residency atmosphere. You may meet lifelong literary companions in this program; you may not like everyone; you may be offended by others' opinions and their work. However, the residency's supportive atmosphere is not maintained by natural affinity but by everyone's commitment to focus on the work at hand and by a spirit of humility and respect. Diversity of opinions is a given—and essential to aesthetic growth—so there will be disagreement and conflict. Students are expected to express disagreement respectfully, without damaging the confidence or participation of others; the supportive atmosphere of the residency cannot survive abrasive or condescending comments in seminar sessions or in workshop. It's normal to experience stress or have an emotional reaction to something—please deal with these reactions professionally, making no personal attacks. The workshop guidelines outlined in the Handbook, together with this what-to-expect document, provide a set of ground rules and standards for residency-wide interpersonal communication. The faculty pay attention to the dynamics and will intervene when ground rules are broken. You are also encouraged to seek out a faculty member to talk to about issues that come up.

Finally, on the topic of self-care and care for our communal spaces, please note that the program operates during the college's "off-season"—when the undergraduate semesters are not in session—which means that, although we do have custodial and staff support, resources are slightly slimmer and response time to our needs somewhat slower than they would be during the regular semester session. Please be mindful of spaces and clean up your own messes; communicate any support needs to the 24-hour security staff or the MFA Director.