

THE RAINIER WRITING WORKSHOP
MFA @ PLU
Three-Year Overview

ENGL 504: Residency 1. Students and faculty gather on the PLU campus for the intensive 10-day residency. The residency schedule consists of workshops, lectures, classes, and other immersive activities. During the residency, each student will be paired with a mentor for the following mentorship year. The student and mentor will begin an initial discussion about the coming year: goals for the student's work, expectations on both sides, possible course of study and readings, and logistical details for the exchanges, including methods and deadlines.

ENGL 511: First Year Mentorship. The student is expected to submit 7 mailings to the mentor during the year. The emphasis—whether on ongoing projects or new and exploratory work—will be determined by the student and mentor collaboratively. There will be a strong emphasis on critical reading and writing, with the texts to be determined by the mentor and participant. Students are expected to read at least 3 books or substantial texts per mailing. During the year, the student is expected to produce approximately 40 pages total of critical writing, usually in the form of critical response papers.

The three-year span is meant to encourage both deepening and broadening for the student over the course of the three years. With the guidance of each mentor, the student in their first year can try out new genres, or new possibilities and techniques within the student's main genre. The basic goals for the year include the production of new work, renewed energy, and a growing sense of direction. Near the end of the year, the student should take stock of what has happened during the year, and articulate some interests or directions that they would like to focus on for the next year's mentorship and for the eventual thesis year.

Another important goal for the year is to gain facility in the tasks associated with the critical component of the program. The critical response papers should be discussed in detail with the mentor, especially in regards to each mentor's expectations and each student's understanding of the objectives that the critical response papers are meant to address. Initially, some students will be more comfortable with this analytical component than others. The vital point is that all students should find the critical work instrumental to the progress of their creative work. The response papers may range from the formal and scholarly to the personal and idiosyncratic, but should be in dialogue with the creative work.

ENGL 505: Residency 2. In addition to the regular offerings of the residency, an info session detailing the Outside Experience component of the program will be held. This session is intended for students entering their second year.

ENGL 512: Second Year Mentorship. The student is expected to submit 5 mailings during the year. The emphasis will be on furthering the creative work begun in the first year, with an eye towards the eventual Creative Thesis of the thesis year; implementing the Outside Experience; and preparing for the Critical Paper, which is due in the fall of the thesis year. A total of 25 pages of critical writing is expected, some of which can be initial drafts for the Critical Paper.

This is the year most second-year students fulfill their Outside Experience. (The Outside Experience may also be fulfilled in the first or third year, but these rare exceptions must be approved by the Program Director and the Outside Experience Coordinator.) The goal for the Outside Experience is to invite other voices and energies from beyond the program. Even though the student will consult with the Outside Experience Coordinator at important points during the process, the experience is meant to be an independent project generated by the student.

An important part of the dialogue between mentor and mentee will involve the possible topics for the student's thesis-year Critical Paper. Looking back at the critical work produced by the student so far will help the student identify the best topic for exploration in the Critical Paper. When the topic is directly aligned with an issue that has a bearing on the student's creative work, the essay will often prove especially valuable for the student. At the least, there should be a well-defined topic at the end of the second year. In some cases, it's advisable to have portions of the eventual Critical Paper drafted by the end of the second year.

ENGL 506: Residency 3. Students entering their thesis year may choose to take the sequence of Pedagogy Sessions during the residency, in lieu of participating in the mixed-genre workshops. An info session detailing the tasks and goals for the thesis year will also be held for students entering their thesis year. Prior to the residency, each student will have been paired with their thesis-year mentor.

ENGL 513; ENGL 599 (Thesis): Third Year Mentorship. The student is expected to submit 6 mailings to the mentor. The year's main tasks include: completing the Critical Paper (20-40 pages); completing the Creative Thesis (30-60 single-spaced pages of poetry, 60-120 double-spaced pages of prose); submitting a final Program Bibliography; preparing for a class presentation to be delivered at the residency, if the participant opts to do a presentation; planning for a reading at the residency.

There are no critical response papers required in the thesis year. The Critical Paper is considered the culmination of the student's critical reading and writing in the program. In the Critical Paper, the student is not expected to produce new knowledge about the topic, but rather to present a reasoned analysis or a refined argument. The finished product should be articulate and persuasive. The input of the thesis-year mentor will be vital during this process. Additionally, the student should consult the archive of critical papers found on the "Soundings" website.

The Creative Thesis should be a sampling of the student's best work from their time in the program. Keep in mind that the Thesis is intended to be an academic artifact that fulfills the student's degree requirements towards the MFA — it is not the book manuscript that the student is also working on. That said, the thesis manuscript should be of very high quality, and it should cohere. The program does not promise book publication for any student, but ideally the student should be aiming towards an eventual manuscript that will be of publishable caliber. The thesis manuscript should be seen as a substantial and promising iteration of that potential book manuscript. Here again, the mentor will be an important source of counsel as the student works towards completing the thesis manuscript.

If the student is writing a prose thesis (a novel, collection of short stories or essays, a memoir, or other nonfiction work) the thesis should be 60-120 double-spaced pages. For a poetry thesis, a manuscript of 30-60 single-spaced pages is ideal. For those completing a mixed-genre thesis, the individual pieces should feel as if they belong together. All the pieces in the mixed-genre manuscript, regardless of genre, should be of high quality. After the thesis has been submitted to the program, a faculty reader will assess the thesis and write a report.

Some students may finish a thesis-length work in the first two years. If so, the third year can be used to revise and polish the completed project. The student might also choose to branch out into new territory and embark on new work. As always, the guidance of the thesis-year mentor will be vital.

Self-reflection will be a crucial part of the year's process. Each student should leave the program with confidence that they can rely on their own instincts, and with the skills to be able to surmount the inevitable problems that arise in one's life as a writer. Their years in the program will have helped each student complete some projects and set into motion the momentum for new ones. The thesis year is meant to highlight what has already been accomplished, and to set the terms for what's ahead.

ENGL 507: Residency 4. During the residency, a sequence of Grad Sessions will be offered, geared towards graduating students. Graduating students will also participate in thesis-manuscript critique sessions with the peers in their genre. Those who have chosen to do a class presentation will present. All students are required to do a brief reading of their creative work. The graduation ceremony will take place on the second Sunday, on the final day of the residency.