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Do You Need a Writing Degree to Be a Professional Writer?

Posted By [teresa-ponikvar](#) On June 13, 2009 @ 10:24 pm In [Uncategorized](#) | [7 Comments](#)



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It's a big decision: to spend a year or more and a big chunk of money on a degree in a notoriously unprofitable field.

With the proliferation of MFA and other writing programs since the 1970s, it seems that more and more would-be writers of all kinds are heading back to school. Should you? Some things to consider before you decide:

Does it have to be specifically a writing program?

Pretty much ANY graduate-level course of study will require you to write a lot. Would you benefit more from a degree in anthropology, geography, or ecology with a strong writing component?

Does workshopping work for you?

In a recent *New Yorker* article, Louis Menand described this cornerstone of writing programs as "a combination of ritual scarring and twelve-on-one group therapy where aspiring writers offer their views of the efforts of other aspiring writers."

For some writers, the workshop is a useful, even essential, experience. As one writer told me,

I do think my writing and my ability to logically analyze writing – and therefore my ability to coherently explain what worked, what didn't work, and why, and incorporate that into my writing and suggestions to others – improved in the workshop classes that were a part of the writing track.

However, workshops don't work for everyone, and they don't work every time. Not every group is compatible, and not every writer, no matter how brilliant, is a good discussion leader. For some writers even a "good" workshop can be stifling—and a not-so-good workshop, utterly dispiriting.

What's more your style? Will too many suggestions and criticisms weigh you down, or will you appreciate having lots of opinions on your work in its tender early stages?

What are your goals?

As one writer and teacher told me,

This kind of [writing] degree can help you land a job TEACHING writing; it's not as clear that it (or participating in the program itself) will help you BE a professional writer.

If you want to teach writing, a degree is probably indispensable. But if you're looking for a career as a freelance travel writer, that piece of paper won't necessarily impress editors.

However, in the process of getting a degree, you'll probably make important contacts in the writing world, learn mechanics and grammar, how to work with deadlines, and possibly (depending on the program) how to sell yourself and your writing better—all worthwhile things. Do you need to spend two years in school to learn these things? That's a call you'll have to make.



[Nerovivo](#)

If you've decided that a writing degree is definitely for you, consider these things as you select a program:

How much debt will you accrue? Will paying it back prevent you from writing once you've finished your degree?

Let's be realistic: if you're going to be so far in the hole after you graduate that you'll be obligated to accept the first paying job that comes along (whether or not it has anything to do with writing), having that degree in your hand won't do you a whole lot of good.

If you're not necessarily looking to be a full-time writer anyway, it might not matter so much that you'll need a day job once you graduate. And many writing programs offer excellent financial aid options

Will the program try to "mold" you into a certain kind of writer?

This is one of the strongest arguments against writing programs: that some programs, and some teachers within some programs, will try to make your writing over in a certain image, rather than encouraging your own original voice and style.

On the other end of the spectrum, some programs or teachers are so concerned with letting you express yourself that they're hands-off to the point of making you wonder what you're paying for.

Before you select a program, ask as many current and past students about this, and talk to the instructors you'd be working with.



[That Guy Who's Going Places](#)

What extracurricular options will you have? Does the program have a magazine or journal? Can you edit?

Participating in the process of selecting and editing writing for a journal or magazine can be an incredibly valuable experience: you learn to think like an editor, and thus to pitch your work more effectively.

Can you take classes in other disciplines for credit?

Obviously as writers we need *material*—and learning something surprising about astronomy, or Native American history, or microbiology—whatever floats your boat—can be excellent material. Especially if your travels are somewhat restricted by being on a grad student's schedule and budget.

Bottom line: No, you don't NEED a writing degree to be a professional writer, but if you choose the right program, it can help you be a *better* writer, and improve your chances for making it as a professional.

Most of the benefits of a writing degree can be found elsewhere (you can put together a workshop with friends, learn mechanics from a book, make contacts at conferences...) but probably not so neatly wrapped up in a single package.

That said, the WRONG writing program will probably do more harm than good, so make your decision with care, considering the writer you already are, the writer you want to be, and how you can best get from here to there.

Community Connection

Did you have a fantastic experience in a writing program? Tell us where!

Are you doing just fine without that piece of paper? Share your story!

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