

# What the F?

Learn the difference between an MA and an MFA.

If you're planning to further your writing education with a graduate degree, you have options. A popular trend is to get a Master of Fine Arts degree through a full-time or part-time program. But whatever happened to the traditional Master of Arts degree? Is there a difference between the two?

The simple answer is yes, there is. An MA is often focused on English literature and academics with the possibility, depending on the program, of a concentration in creative writing. The MFA, on the other hand, may require heavy reading, but it is dedicated to writing, workshops and achieving a manuscript-length project at the end of the program.

Consider the following when deciding which path to higher education suits your needs.

## Your future

Deciding which degree is right for you depends on your goals. Both an MA and an MFA can open the doors to teaching in high schools and smaller colleges. (Think of your senior year English class.) The MFA targets teaching the craft of writing or teaching at the university level – often as a means to pay the bills while working on personal writing endeavors.

Also, the MFA is a terminal degree, with no possibility for a PhD in fine art. As such, receiving an MFA means that you are an expert

in the field and can apply for grants, as well as certain scholarships, including the Fulbright.

## The course structure

In general, MFA programs require less time than MA program. The flexible residences of many MFA programs make earning a degree convenient, most of the time from the comfort of your own home.

When it comes to in-person classes, most MFA programs offer small student-faculty ratios in workshops, which means more time critiquing your work with your peers. Smaller class sizes also make for a more intimate relationship with classmates and mentors, providing a built-in network of colleagues and confidantes for moving forward in your career.

While there is some creative writing in an MA program, the syllabus weighs heavier in the direction of reading and analyzing the work of other writers. Think more academic and research-oriented rather than a creative writing studio atmosphere.

## Getting in

For starters, most MFA programs do not require you to take the GRE exam, so that's one burden off your shoulders. On the other hand, the majority of these programs do require that you choose a genre to study. Most schools will let in a certain number of students to study fiction, nonfiction or poetry, so you have to declare your intentions right away. Going for an MA will buy a little more time before you have to declare a path.

Although there are hundreds of MFA programs, the competition to get in has also been slowly rising. Landing your top choice might prove difficult. Earning an MA or starting an MA and transferring into an MFA program could give you an edge when the admissions officers are weighing your application.

## The long and short story

Keep two factors in mind when considering MA and MFA programs: The former is mainly about academia and other writers; the latter is about your writing and your creative growth. The choice is yours. **W**

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