



The Sacred Art of Writing

WESTERN
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
THE EUGENE PETERSON CENTER
FOR CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION

The Sacred Art of Writing

A Cohort Through the Eugene Peterson Center for Christian Imagination

“Write as if you were dying. At the same time, assume you write for an audience consisting solely of terminal patients. That is, after all, the case. What would you begin writing if you knew you would die soon? What could you say to a dying person that would not enrage by its triviality?”

Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*

PURPOSE

This Doctor of Ministry track will invite both established and emerging writers in multiple genres and contexts (those in traditional ministry and those whose work and writing moves them into broader arenas of service) to think deeply, theologically, and artfully about their work. As people whose very life arrives from the Word, Christians ought to be those with the deepest reverence for language. Yet too often our writing is stilted, banal, clichéd, moralistic and bereft of the beauty and care our craft requires. If we are dealing with holy work simultaneously immersed in gritty humanity and divine transcendence, then our writing ought to carry a haunting lilt while piercing the heart and the mind. *The Sacred Art of Writing* aims to walk with students into this joyful, sacred calling.

The DMin is a *ministry* degree and uniquely seeks to form people in lives of service to God, the church, and the world. As such, the Sacred Art of Writing program is distinct from an MFA. We will tend to matters of craft as one essential thread, but also to theological and spiritual themes inherent in this vocation and essential for the life and soul of the writer.

FACULTY TEAM



Lead Faculty | Winn Collier serves as Director of the Eugene Peterson Center and Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology and Christian Imagination, Winn has been a pastor for 28 years. In addition to writing for *The Washington Post*, *Christianity Today*, *Christian Century* and numerous other outlets, he has published books in multiple genres (spiritual creative non-fiction, fiction, and biography): *Restless Faith: Hanging on to a God Just Out of Reach*; *Let God: Spiritual Conversations with François Fénelon*; *Holy Curiosity: Encountering Jesus' Provocative Questions*; *Love Big, Be Well: Letters to a Small Town Church* and *A Burning in My Bones: The Authorized Biography of Eugene H. Peterson*.



Cohort Mentor | **John Blase**, a former pastor, has worked as an editor in the publishing industry for fifteen years (with David C. Cook and Waterbrook Penguin-Random House). He is a poet and creative non-fiction writer. In addition to ghostwriting for notable figures and publishing essays for numerous outlets, he's the author of *Jubilee: The Poems*; *Know When to Hold 'Em*; *Touching Wonder*, and *All is Grace: A Ragamuffin Memoir* (with Brennan Manning).



Cohort Mentor | **Marilyn McEntyre**, a poet and essayist, was a former professor of humanities at the UC Berkeley-UCSF Joint Medical Program and has spoken for numerous writer workshops, conferences, churches and seminaries. Marilyn is the author of *When Poets Pray*; *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*; *Speaking Peace in a Culture of Conflict*; *Word by Word: A Daily Spiritual Practice*; *A Long Letting Go: Meditations on Losing Someone You Love*; *Drawn to the Light: Poems on Rembrandt’s Religious Paintings*; *Dwelling in the Text: Homes in American Fiction*; *A Healing Art: Regeneration Through Autobiography*; *Occasions: Selected Poems* and numerous other notable titles.



Guest Lecturer | **Leif Enger**, a former producer and reporter with Minnesota Public Radio, Leif is a national bestselling novelist. Leif has written *Peace Like a River* (named one of the Year’s Best Books by both *Time Magazine* and the *LA Times*); *So Brave, Young, and Handsome*, *Virgil Wander*, and *I Cheerfully Refuse*.



Guest Lecturer | **Sophronia Scott**, a novelist and essayist, has written for *Killens Review of Arts and Letters*, *Saranac Review*, *Ruminate*, *NewYorkTimes.com*, *O*, *The Oprah Magazine* and numerous other publications. She is the author of both fiction (*All I Need to Get By* and *Unforgivable Love*) and nonfiction (*This Child of Faith*, with her son Tain, *Love’s Long Line* and *The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday Conversations with Thomas Merton*). Winner of numerous awards, Sophronia is the founding director of the MFA program at Alma College.

PROJECTED SEMINAR DATES AND LOCATIONS

DM	October 7-11, 2024	Holland, MI
DM	April 2025	Holland, MI
DM	September/October 2025	Ireland and/or UK Literary Tour
DM	April 2026	Holland, MI
DM	October 2026	Writing Retreat
DM	April 2027	Holland, MI

RATIONALE

In July of 2006, Eugene Peterson delivered a lecture at the famous Tattered Cover Bookstore in Denver, Colorado, titled “What are Writers Good For?” In it, he warned against “godtalk” — insisting that “[o]ne of the characteristics of language in the land of the living is that it is personal. When we use language that depersonalizes God into an abstraction or an idea or a project, the life leaks out of what we say and write, teach and pray. We are left with nothing but godtalk.” To avoid such a dreaded thing, he encouraged those present that day to concentrate on the language used between Sundays— when and where writers have a high calling “not to tell people what words mean, but to awaken their imaginations so that they see and experience words at work.”

For those of us tasked to hone our skill and craft, we must take the bare elements of words, metaphor and Scripture, the stories we know and the stories we want to birth in the world—we must take all this and, over a lifetime, keep our butt in the chair (Anne Lamott) and do the hard work of putting words to paper.

Our world needs brave, faithful, and imaginative writers who recognize the holiness of words, who resist ugly, manipulative, commodified language, and who string together sentences that carry weight and beauty. We need tenacious writers who avoid “godtalk”—who will honor their sacred task, in service to the God who is wholly other and yet shockingly human and write words that ignite fire and hope rather than enraging with their triviality.

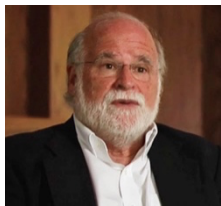
FRAMEWORK

Each year will revolve around two annual residencies, one in the fall and one in the spring. Each residency will emphasize the spirituality and theology of writing, various angles on our craft, and workshopping our ongoing work. Occasionally, a guest lecturer will join us.

The reading load per residency will be 5-7 books, with possible additional essays or poetry. The following flow and reading list offered here is *representative only*. **Readings and topics will adjust as we navigate each residency.**

Year One | In addition to mapping student projects, the first year will focus on the theological grounding for the sacred work of writing and begin our broad reading. Our guest lecturer will be Leif Enger, emphasizing the novel. Possible teaching topics are Writing Virtues, Lists, The Holiness of Words, The Burden of Nouns, and Writing Into the Unknown. Samples of possible reading: Annie Dillard’s *The Writing Life*, Stephen King’s *On Writing*, Frederick Buechner’s *Telling Secrets*, Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird*, Marilyn McEntyre’s *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, Leif Enger’s *Virgil Wander*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Emily St. J Mandel’s *Station Eleven*, Jasper and Allen’s *Between Truth and Fiction: A Narrative Reader in Literature and Theology*, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, Winn Collier’s *A Burning in My Bones*, John Blase’s *Jubilee*, Kent Haruf’s *Plainsong*.

Year Two | Our second year will deepen themes from year one, continuing to ponder the spiritual dimensions of the writer’s work and life, and continue our exploration of the novel, memoir, poetry, and essay. Our guest lecturer will be Sophronia Scott. Possible teaching topics: The Joy of Self-Editing, Exodus and the Writers’ Questions, The Trouble with Fiction, Potential reading might include a packet of theologically-oriented articles, Kathlee Norris’ *Amazing Grace*, Mary Karr’s *Lit*, Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Shulem Deen’s *All Who Go Do Not Return*, Dani Shapiro’s *Inheritance*, Deborah Feldman’s *Unorthodox*, St Therese of Lisieux’s *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of the Little Flower*, Sarah Broom’s *The Yellow House*, Pat Conroy’s *The Water is Wide*, Fleming Rutledge’s *Help My Unbelief*, Tom Kooser and Jim Harrison’s *Braided Creek*, James McBride’s *Deacon King Kong*, and Gabriela Mistral’s *Madwomen: The Locas mujeres Poems of Gabriela Mistral*



+October of year two will include our 8-10-day literary tour, led by Daniel Taylor, a longtime English professor, essayist, award winning novelist, and world traveler. Daniel is the author of *In Search of Sacred Places*, *Death Comes for the Deconstructionist*, *Tell Me a Story*, *The Myth of Certainty*, *The Skeptical Believer* and numerous other titles and essays. The tour itinerary is still in the works but will likely be Ireland and/or England (estimated cost is \$2950 double occupancy + airfare and some meals)

Year Three | Our third year will continue weaving the threads from our first two years, while providing extended space for workshopping our writing projects. Potential reading might include Zadie Smith's *Intimations*, Andre Dubus' *Selected Stories*, James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, George Saunders' *Tenth of December*, Brian Doyle's *One Long River of Song*, with additional space given for curating one's own reading list.

+year three will include our writers' workshop retreat, location to be determined (estimated cost \$900 double occupancy + travel and some meals)

Ongoing | Students will submit their assigned writing 3-4 weeks prior to the next residency, and mentors will at times host Zoom gatherings with their writing group between residencies.

ADDITIONAL DETAILS

Candidates | This cohort welcomes candidates with a master's degree able to articulate (1) a theological undergirding for their calling to the writing craft and (2) how their writing works in service to the church and God's world. Candidates will offer writing samples to demonstrate appropriate experience and competency.

Writing Project | As culminating thesis toward which they will work over the three years, students will create a writing portfolio including [1] a substantial, original literary work in their genre of choice (roughly 15,000 words) along with [2] two collected essays reflecting on theological themes connected to writing as a sacred art and on the writers' own formation as a writer in service to God's church and world (roughly 5,000 words each), for a total portfolio project of roughly 25,000 – 30,000 words. A final presentation from the portfolio will be presented to the project committee and cohort.

Where | The Cohort will meet twice a year for a week (Fall/Spring). Four residencies will be on campus at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. Two of our residencies will be off campus: a literary pilgrimage and a writing retreat. All travel and lodging expenses are the student's responsibility.

Cost | Tuition will be \$17,964 total for the full three years. For our international literary tour, we estimate \$2950 double occupancy + airfare and some meals. For our writing retreat, we estimate \$900 double occupancy + travel and some meals. Further information on any applicable fees or more details on tuition are available from WTS.

For more information and to apply, please visit:

<https://www.westernsem.edu/academics/degrees/doctor-ministry-degree/>

