

My name is Jennifer Sheets. I am an MFA candidate for creative non-fiction writing. I started writing when I was a little kid, starting with my first book, which was about the Pickle family. Writing was a way to express myself, I had a very active imagination and not always an audience, so writing was a great way to get it down on paper and get all my ideas out.

When I first applied, I had a professor who said, 'Give yourself the gift of two years of just writing.' Writing is a really lonely profession, you're by yourself quite often. So to get to come to a place where there's 50 of us— all in one building, all going to the same community events, all in the same classes— is not like anything you're going to find in the real world. This is such an amazing opportunity. We kind of call it, you know, Writers Camp, because unless you really take the initiative to join a writers group or, you know, form something on your own, then writing is you by yourself. So this is pretty awesome.

We do dinners together, we go out for coffee and cowork. Getting to share that with other people is an amazing bond. We have to do an 80-page thesis; I am working on a collection of essays. It is a collection of essays from Minnesota, North Dakota and Montana. So kind of growing up along this stretch of Interstate and all the spurs off of it. It's about the landscape and the people and life in rural America. The Creative Writing Program here at the university has been nationally renowned for a long time. Just recently, we've had two MFA alums have Pulitzer Prize-winning books. And to be able to see that is validating and exciting. And to know that some of our professors that are still here taught them. Just recently, another writer last week was reviewed in the New York Times for his new book. So he's an MFA alum.

The really cool thing about the University of Montana is that Missoula is kind of a hub for writers. Montana is as well, and I think it's a lot of people seek the solitude and the nature and they move here to write.

I had an idea for an app when I was out of school and had no idea how to proceed. And someone led me to a group called the Blackstone Launchpad. And they have them at universities across the nation, but not every. It's free entrepreneurial help for students or alumni. So I started talking to Blackstone Launchpad here at the University of Montana, and expanding my idea, they hooked me up with student developers, networking in the community, mentors, coaches. And because of the launchpad, I entered two competitions, and won some startup money to keep it going. So in addition to teaching and working on my thesis, I'm building this app on the side and it's fully supported by the University. The amount of outreach has been extraordinary. So it's a fun little side project.

I think you can start writing at any age. But the beautiful thing is, the older you get, the more experience you have. And so if you're in your 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, and older and you think 'I've never written, I don't know how to start'— that's the best time to start because you have so much experience. So for anybody who's thinking about maybe applying to an MFA program or coming back to school for writing, you have a wealth of experiences, you can write about anything. Just this morning I was telling my student she could write an entire essay on a filing cabinet. You can make it interesting, with good training. You just have to try. Try to write a little bit every day and

not judge yourself and be kind to yourself because it is hard. It's an art, but everybody has the ability to tell a story.