

Responding to Disturbing Creative Writing: A Guide for Faculty and GTAs

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Principles and Purposes

The creative writing program develops the creativity of student writers, which necessarily involves allowing them freedom of expression. Students should not feel that the program monitors and threatens them with disciplinary action for the themes and language they choose. Instructors should not feel that they must take on the roles of therapists or police officers – roles for which they have no professional training. Occasionally, however, student writing can create an unwelcoming environment for peers or raise questions about the author’s mental state, and the instructor may feel the need to address these issues. This guide offers a series of questions to help instructors think through the disturbing elements in student writing, and it outlines strategies, resources, and procedures for taking appropriate actions.

Please note that this document deals with disturbing **writing** only. For problems with behavior, please refer to “Responding to Disruptive or Threatening Student Behavior: A Guide for Faculty,” available on the English Department’s faculty web pages (www.faculty.english.vt.edu). Disturbing writing in combination with disturbing behavior will heighten concern.

Identifying Disturbing Writing

Everyone’s sense of what is disturbing will differ. We recommend that instructors follow their own instincts and common sense when determining what constitutes disturbing writing. Probably at the core, we’re concerned about writing that seems to warn of potential harm to self or others, or writing that reflects a deep desperation. Themes of violence and gruesome details might be markers, but they do not in themselves establish a problem. Outright threats are more problematic. The following questions may help you assess the student’s situation and whether what’s disturbing reflects creative exploration or something more idiosyncratic.

Is the creative work excessively violent? Do characters respond to everyday events with a level or kind of violence one does not expect, or may even find frightening? If so, does the violence seem more expressive of rage and anger than it does of a literary aesthetic or a thematic purpose?

Are the characters’ thoughts as well as actions violent or threatening? Do characters think about or question their violent actions? If one set of characters demonstrate no self-awareness or moral consciousness, are other characters aware of or disturbed by what has taken place? In other words, does the text reveal the presence of a literary sensibility mediating and making judgments

about the characters' thoughts and actions, or does it suggest unmediated venting of rage and anger? If the literary sensibility is missing, is the student receptive to adding that layer and to learning how to do so?

Is this the student's first piece of violent writing? If yes, what is the nature of his or her other work? Is violence at the center of everything the student has written, or does other writing suggest that violence is something the student is experimenting with for literary effect?

Are the violent actions in the work so disturbing or so extreme as to suggest they go beyond any possible sense of purpose in relation to the larger narrative? Do they seem to be the point of the piece, or a component? Does the nature of the violence – or the nature of the writing overall – suggest extreme depression or suicidal inclinations?

Is the writing full of expressions of hostility toward other racial or ethnic groups? Is the writing threateningly misogynistic, homophobic, racist, or in any way expressive of a mindset that may pose a threat to other students?

Responding to disturbing writing

Once you've decided you are concerned about a piece of writing, we suggest you move through the following steps. If you feel even a hint of threat to yourself or other students, however, please do not try to meet with the student alone nor try to solve the problem alone. You should immediately contact the Director of Creative Writing and the department's chair and associate chair, who can consider and advise on possible next steps.

Step 1: Instructor talks informally with the student

If you suspect that the disturbing features of the writing are literary in nature, talk to the student about the writing. Try to make this discussion as informal as possible. You're after honest and direct give-and-take. It may be best to do this before or after class, or in a common area, rather than having the student come by your office. If the student seems at all threatening, do not meet the student alone.

It may be a good idea to let the student talk as much as he or she wants. You're after a fuller sense of the person behind the writing. Try to keep an open mind. Listen carefully to the student.

Try to open up the conversation in a way that makes the writer comfortable. One way to increase comfort is to focus on the text itself, not on the student writer. You might consider asking about the inspiration for the piece. Was it inspired by an image or idea, some event in the news or some bit of history, or was it inspired by another piece of writing? Allow the student to contextualize what he or she has written. Most writers will be able to give you some sense of how their writing began

and evolved. Ask the student to discuss the motivation of the characters, and their sense of how different imagery or actions will function in relation to the overall effect of the work. Try to touch on any published works the student feels are relevant. If students have read authors such as Stephen King or Anne Rice or Chuck Palahniuk, these influences may give insight into the disturbing material in the writing.

At this point, it may be appropriate to offer your best counsel to the student and to provide as much support as possible in helping the student deal with any issues you perceive as a result of your meeting. If the student offers personal information suggesting a need or wish for help, or if the student seems unable or unwilling to discuss the piece in literary terms, encourage the student to visit the Cook Counseling Center (231-2104, 240 McComas Hall, www.ucc.vt.edu). You can volunteer to call for the appointment and follow through at a later class to see if the student has gone.

Please document your meetings and advice by writing down the date, specific advice given, and outcomes you know.

If after this meeting you continue to be concerned about the student and his or her writing, if you think you are dealing with a student whose writing suggests that he may present a threat to self or other students, move on to Step Two.

Step 2: Instructor consults with the Director of Creative Writing

If your conversation with the student does not convince you that the disturbing features of the writing are literary in intent, consult with the creative writing program director. Share the writing in question, explain the situation in detail, review notes from your meeting with the student, and seek advice about interacting with the student. Try to present a thorough picture of the student and his or her writing.

If the conversation between the instructor and program director leaves either feeling uncomfortable, they should confer with the associate chair of the department. The associate chair handles student issues in the Department of English and may have some history to share from other English classes as well as knowledge of resources beyond the department. You may determine together that it is advisable to confer with other instructors who have taught this student, both in creative writing and in other English classes, in order to determine if there have been other concerns raised about this student's work. Also inform and engage the department chair.

All discussions and decisions should be made with great concern for the student's privacy. All correspondence and conversations should be confidential. At this point, if it is the considered opinion of the instructor, the program director, the department

associate chair or chair, or one of the other parties contacted in investigating the writing – if anyone feels strongly that the student may pose a threat to himself or herself or other students – the department should move to Step 3. Our concerns, however, as individuals and as a department should be considered and serious before moving on to the next step.

Step 3: Department involves the university

The department understands its strengths in teaching English and its limits in mental health diagnosis and treatment and in law enforcement, and for such issues, it seeks the support of specialists beyond the department. The department will seek advice first from the Dean of Students, who may advise or initiate contact with the Counseling Center, Dean of the College, justice system, or some combination of these. This discussion of the student's writing should be undertaken with deep concern for the privacy of the student and his or her right to free expression. The sole concern of this group should be the possibility that the student's writing is so disturbing that further action or intervention may be the wisest course of action.

Concluding Thoughts

Judging writing and student intentions is an interpretive act. It is impossible to predict behavior on the basis of writing alone. When writing teachers are concerned about a student, their best service is to encourage that student to engage with specialists. We offer these guidelines caring about our students both as developing writers and as human beings. Guidelines help us think through situations, but they cannot tell us what to do in any absolute sense.

One role of creative writing is to disturb and disrupt comfortable, uncritiqued assumptions. Disruption that leads to new understanding is one of its contributions to culture.

Some of the greatest writing in the history of our literature, from Catullus to Kafka to Toni Morrison, is deeply disturbing. Intervention with students as a result of writing that pushes limits or is violent should be recommended only when there is genuine and deep concern upon the part of all involved that the writing in question is more of a call for help or a screamed threat than it is in any sense a literary creation.

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