



Responding to Disturbing Writing: A Guide for Faculty¹

Certain writing assignments encourage freedom of expression, and these writings may create concern in the thoughts of the reader. The definition of “disturbing” will differ from person to person, and people must follow their instincts and use common sense when determining whether intervention is required. Concerns may include writing that seems to warn of potential harm to the student or to others, writing that reflects deep desperation, themes of violence, and outright threats. The following questions may help you assess the student’s situation:

- Is the writing excessively violent?
- Does the writing indicate a violent response to everyday events that seems unexpected or frightening?
- Does the violence seem to be based on anger or rage rather than thematically appropriate?
- Are the thoughts or actions expressed violent or threatening?
- Is there indication that the violent actions are thought about or questioned?
- Is there a literary sensibility that mediates and makes judgments about the characters’ thoughts and actions? If this is missing, might the student be willing to add that layer or learn how to?
- Is this the first piece of violent writing? If yes, what is the nature of the student’s other work? Is violence at the center of all the student’s writing?
- Does it appear that the violence is an experiment in literary effect?
- Is the violence in the writing so disturbing or so extreme as to suggest the student goes beyond any sense of purpose?
- Is the violence the point of the piece or simply a component?
- Does the nature of the violence suggest extreme depression or suicidal inclinations?
- Does the writing express a great deal of hostility toward racial or ethnic groups? Is it threateningly misogynistic, homophobic, and/or racist, or does it express a mindset that may pose a threat to others?

If you decide you are concerned about a piece of writing, the following steps may be appropriate:

1. Talk informally with the student (document meeting).
2. If you are still concerned, consult with your department chair and/or academic dean.
3. Discuss the writing and situation with Counseling Services, the Dean of Student’s Office, and/or SOBI.

¹Adapted from “Responding to Disturbing Creative Writing: A Guide for Faculty and GTAs.” Virginia Tech. August 2007.