

# Concerns About Content in a Student's Writing

You are often the first to have access to students' ways of thinking and acting. If a student's writing seems disturbing, it's natural for you to want to respond. The following information is designed to assist you to identify and respond appropriately to disturbing writing from a student. This information is meant to serve only as a general guideline and should be used in accordance with policies and procedures from the department involved and ECU as a whole.

## Identifying Disturbing Writing

If you become initially alarmed by student work, considering the following questions to assess risk factors. If you answer 'yes' to many of these questions, see the section "What To Do." If you answer 'no' to many of these questions, then keep in touch with the student per usual.

- Does the violence occur appropriately within the context of the subject matter or the purpose of the assignment? Or does it seem to come out of left field?
- Does the violence fit in with expected questions and issues? Or is it in some way gratuitous, purposeless or nihilistic?
- Is the violence in a piece of writing attributable to the thoughts and actions of one or more characters (or the narrator of the piece), or does the violence seem to come from the author?
- Does the violence seem to be intentional (i.e., the writer is intentionally trying to create violent characters), or does the disturbing nature of the material seem to be leaking out around the edges in a way that seems to have escaped the author's control?
- Are there indications of impulse control in how the character approaches situations and interactions, or does the character demonstrate a lack of self-awareness and moral consciousness? Is the violence glorified or admired? Or does some moral redemption take precedence over the violence?
- Is the writing excessively violent? Do characters respond in violent ways that are above and beyond what would be expected from that particular character's role?
- Is the violence the core of the written work or just one component of a larger piece?
- Is the violence general (for example, rampaging aliens are tearing to bits everyone in New York) or is the violence directed at a particular person (who is named in the writing) and/or at a particular group? Is the violence situated on campus or in the local community, or is the violence directed at a generic, mythic, or far-away locale?
- Is the student discussing thoughts of suicide? If so, does the student include specifics about how he or she might commit suicide?
- Is this the first time the student has turned in writing that you are concerned about? Are there other warning signs or indications (see below) that are cause for concern?

## Associated Behaviors

In addition to assessing student writing, it can be helpful to consider whether there are warning signs that seem out of sync with the wide range of normal student behaviors. Answers to the questions below may help you to further clarify and guide your decisions about the next steps. Have any other behaviors also raised red flags? Possible signs include:

- Suddenly deteriorating academic performance: A student who has been particularly conscientious about his or her academic work and is now missing classes, neglecting assignments, etc.
- A fixation on death and violence, such as a morbid fascination with and exposure to violent movies, games, music or other artwork.
- Dramatic changes in the way a student relates to others: Is an outgoing student suddenly more withdrawn and quiet in the classroom? Is he/she/they no longer friendly with students with whom he/she/they once seemed quite comfortable? Or is the student suddenly much more outgoing, talkative, or even intrusive or aggressive with classmates? Is the student dropping hints about disturbing, destructive or abusive relationships?
- Sudden or dramatic changes in a student's level of activity in class: Are they suddenly more hyperactive, unable to sit in one place, having difficulty keeping appropriate boundaries with others? Are they writing or drawing obsessively or with great volume?
- Volatile mood swings, a sudden change in personality or sudden lack of awareness of social norms.
- Risk-taking behaviors such as being under the influence, vandalism, etc.
- Depression: Does a student seem much more negative, irritable, or sad than usual? Are they crying in the classroom or needing to leave the room suddenly because of difficulty controlling emotions? Does a student seem excessively slowed down, or much more agitated and restless? Does a student express loss of hope or loss of future-oriented direction?
- Actual threats made to other members of the class, the professor or GA, etc.

### **A Note of Caution**

In the current environment in which violent acts toward others have received a lot of media attention, the impulse to react immediately without reflecting on the consequences is natural but in the long run often undesirable. The following points can be helpful in determining the most appropriate response:

- Not all disturbing writing leads to violence. Not all writers or creators of disturbing work tend to act violently (e.g., Goethe, Edgar Allen Poe, Anne Rice).
- Students often use their journals and writing assignments to work through their problems and explore their imaginations. This is similar, in many ways, to children who act out their violent fantasies through play.
- The meaning of what constitutes "violent or disturbing writing" is different for different people, contexts and cultures. Some ideas originally conceived in another language may seem more violent when written in English. Some cultures think about and express ideas about anger and violence in more nuanced ways than is typical in the United States. This does not necessarily lead to higher acts of violence.
- Horror movies and fiction are an accepted part of American culture. Many students who write about violence may simply be mimicking what they are exposed to in society.
- Finally, it is important to remember that disturbing writing can be indication of the need for help. One key role you can play is helping students find the help they need.

### **What to Do**

It is normal if you initially feel overwhelmed when dealing with disturbing situations. Know that there are many formal and informal ways of doing something to reach out to help students you are concerned about.

You may consult with a colleague, department chair, or appropriate administrative person to evaluate the above issues and attempt to answer them with a 'yes' or 'no'. If you answered 'yes' to many of the questions/issues noted above, then consider the following action steps:

1. You are welcome to call CCSD to consult. You may also contact the [Dean of Students](#), Vidant Emergency Department 252-847-4100 (2100 Stantonsburg Rd, Greenville, NC 27834), or [NC DPS](#).
2. If you decide to talk with the student, you may approach the student informally outside of class or request to meet with them to ask questions in a compassionate, nonjudgmental manner. For example, "I was struck by this piece you wrote. I would like to hear more about what you were trying to do in this piece." Or, "This piece feels very sad. Is that what you were trying to convey? For what reason were you trying to convey this to the reader?" Generally, open-ended questions asked in a gentle but assertive manner can elicit richer responses. Focusing on the content of a piece of writing rather than its writer is especially helpful.
3. Be prepared with resources to help the student immediately, as part of a conversation about the situation. You may need to call CCSD or walk the student over to us.

### **What to do "Right Now"**

If there seems to be imminent danger, to the student or to others, call ECU Police immediately. In this situation, you are also encouraged to contact your program or department heads.

- Main Campus (252) 328-0062
- Health Sciences Campus (252) 744-5080