

# Newsletter

## Welcome

*Greetings, and welcome to the Viterbo English department's annual newsletter. Our faculty members and students have been busy, and we are excited to share our news and updates with you. Join us in celebrating the 2024–25 academic year.*

## Department News

### English and Honors Students Meet National Book Award Finalist, Sarah Smarsh



Jackie Herbers and Sarah Smarsh

The English department collaborated with Viterbo's Honors program to host a dinner with journalist and author, Sarah Smarsh, in September. English and Honors students alike used the time to ask Smarsh about the writing process for her award-winning book, *Heartland*, which was selected as the common read for Viterbo's first-year experience. After the dinner, Jackie Herbers had the privilege of introducing Smarsh's presentation to a full crowd of students and La Crosse community members in the Fine Arts Center Main Theatre. Smarsh's talk on her book was both a poignant and down-to-earth reflection on not only her experiences as a first-generation college student, but also on the complex ways socioeconomic class shaped her identity. It is a story that resonated with students, and they were grateful for the opportunity to meet her in person.

### English Alumni Panelists Share Career and Life Updates



Left to right: Vincent James, Alexander Ashland, Brandi Shramek, Ivy King, Jackie Herbers, Janelle Miller, and Grace Monk

In November, we were pleased to welcome back to campus English alumni Grace Monk '23, Brandi Shramek '18, Ivy King '18, and Janelle Miller '13. Panelists shared their reflections on their time at Viterbo along with their advice for being successful in the English program. They also explained the way the major helped prepare them for their careers. Monk is now a journalist; Shramek is a member relations supervisor; Miller is a public librarian; and King is the office coordinator for the School of Education right here at Viterbo. She is also an instructor for our first-year seminar, Franciscan Values and Traditions.

In her *Lumen* article on the event, English major Ava Stoeckly described it best by stating: "Current BA English or English education students took full advantage of this opportunity, engaging with the alumni by posing questions that ranged from inquiries about their senior thesis projects to discussions about their favorite courses. This interaction not only

*Continued on next page*



## Department News *continued*

provided valuable insights but also fostered a sense of companionship between past and present students. The event exemplified the strong sense of community at Viterbo University, reinforcing the idea that the bonds formed during one's academic journey can continue to thrive long after graduation."

### Poet Dana Maya Hosts Writing Workshop



Left to right: Jackie Herbers, Dana Maya, Sailor Zarecki, and Ayawyn Conner

In March, Viterbo students were treated to an inspiring visit and series of creative lectures led by Madison-based poet, Dana Maya. Maya, who works with the literary technique of ekphrasis, shared her interdisciplinary, poetic responses to visual artwork, as well as guided students in the composition of their own works of poetry and fiction.

### American Literature Students Enjoy Movie Night



Professor Ashland's "Topics in American Literature" students watched Sam Mendes's WWI film *1917*. In addition to enjoying the movie with popcorn, students had a chance to reflect on the course theme: "War, Literature, and Health."

### Department Offers First Spring Literary Reading



Left to right: Michael Wodzack, Vickie Holtz-Wodzack, Lindsay Koza, and Vincent James.

English and world languages sponsored its first ever Spring Literary Reading event in the Nola Starling Recital Hall. Students, faculty, and members of the Viterbo community gathered to celebrate the publication of Vincent James's novel, *Acacia, a Book of Wonders*. Vickie Holtz-Wodzack also read from Dan Cullimore's poetry collection, *Out of Lethe*, Michael Wodzack read a chapter from a novel that he is currently writing, and English education major Lindsay Koza shared her poetry.

### Viterbo Community Gathers for *Touchstone* Reception

This year marked the release of the 89th issue of *Touchstone*, Viterbo's magazine for literary and visual arts. To celebrate the occasion, students, faculty, and community members gathered in the Viterbo University Gallery for a poetry reading and art show, followed by a reception. The creativity of our students and community continues to inspire with amazing literary and visual work.



*Continued on next page*



# Student Awards, Projects, Presentations

## December Graduate Successfully Defends Senior Thesis



Maddie Feldhake '24 with Jackie Herbers

English major Maddie Feldhake completed her senior capstone. The essay that she presented, entitled “Disability Studies and Caliban’s Monstrous Departure from the Ideal,” analyzed William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* using a Disability Studies framework.

## First-Year Writing Students Receive Gengler Awards

Named after FSPA and longtime member of Viterbo’s English department, the Sister Maureen Gengler awards honor outstanding student essays written in Viterbo’s first-year composition courses. Winners receive a certificate of recognition, and their essays are published in the next volume of *Backspace*. The department wishes to congratulate the following students who have been awarded the Gengler for the 2024 calendar year:

- Owen Mylchreest, for his literary analysis, “The Dangers of Doubt: Examining the Emotional Unrest in David Auburn’s *Proof*”
- Vivian Stephenson, for her researched argument, “Raising the Age of Majority Back to 21”
- Emma Larson, for her researched argument, “The Benefits of Growing Your Own Garden”

## English Department Mission

In the English department, we prepare students to succeed in careers that value critical thinking, writing, artistry, researching, teaching, and a variety of other skills. Additionally, we offer students valuable research and creative opportunities, and invite them to participate in student-led university publications. As faculty and mentors, we value building dedicated relationships with students in the hopes of not only enriching their academic experiences, but providing crucial aspects of a liberal arts education that prepare students for life beyond the university.

## Department News *continued*

### *Lumen* Celebrates 70 Years of Student Journalism

The 2024–25 academic year marked the 70th anniversary of the student newspaper, *Lumen*, which was founded by Sr. Celestine Cephress in 1954. To celebrate the milestone, current advisor, Jackie Herbers, and staff members Heidi Klooststra, Megan Carey, Lindsay Koza, Ava Stoeckly, Olivia Gochenaur, and Helen Riddle recreated a photo of the original group from that first year. Through the decades, English has provided the advisor for the organization and has offered journalism courses for hundreds of *Lumen* reporters. The paper is open to anyone who enjoys writing and is committed to facts, ethics, and professionalism.



## Faculty Updates



### Alexander J. Ashland, PhD

This year, Alexander Ashland has been involved in a number of activities that aim to better serve Viterbo students. First, he helped organize the annual English alumni panel in which former students shared their insights and experiences about being an English major. Additionally, he received a Francis Funds grant that was used to purchase

books for a faculty reading group. This grant was especially impactful in that it enabled faculty from across disciplines to discuss transformational teaching practices in higher ed. Ashland also began serving on the Undergraduate Academic Program Review committee. Regarding research and teaching accomplishments, Ashland published his article “Navigating the Textual Currents of Reconstruction in Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi*” in *The Mark Twain Annual*. He also organized a panel for the annual American Literature Association conference. His proposed theme was “The Document in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature,” and he presented his paper “‘fraught with so much seed’: Documentary Ecologies of Race and Gender in Antebellum U.S. Fiction.” Additionally, Ashland was awarded a 2024–25 D.B. Reinhart Institute for Ethics in Leadership fellowship, and he presented his research and teaching plans to the Advisory Council. Finally, a summary of Ashland’s 2024 William Gilmore Simms Visiting Research Professorship will be published in a forthcoming *Carolyniana Columns* newsletter.



### Jackie Herbers, PhD

In the fall, Jackie Herbers transitioned into two new roles as department chair of English and world languages and Faculty Council chair. These positions have brought with them both challenges and opportunities for her to serve her colleagues and the Viterbo community. She also still serves as the advisor for the student newspaper, *Lumen*, and teaches first-year seminar, first-year writing, rhetorical studies, and journalism. Beyond those responsibilities, Herbers recently published the article, “Feedback First Classrooms: Rethinking Grades in College English” in the *Minnesota Writing and English Journal*. In the fall, she was also awarded a sabbatical, which she will take in spring 2026 to work on creating a course on generative AI and writing. The aim of her research is to develop expertise in the following three areas: 1) digitally mediated writing, 2) AI ethics as they relate to writing, and 3) practical applications for using generative AI in the writing process. In the meantime, she is preparing for her sabbatical project by writing shorter pieces on AI, and her current article in development focuses on the metaphors we use to describe AI and our relationship with it.

## Vickie Holtz-Wodzack, PhD



Vickie Holtz-Wodzack was awarded a fall semester Viterbo Faculty Scholars’ release to complete research on Tolkien’s use of Stoker’s *Dracula* as a significant source of his construction of evil in his *Lord of the Rings*. This work will be completed during the summer of 2025 and the final article will be submitted for publication during

the 2025–26 academic year. She offered a course on Tolkien’s work during the fall 2024 semester and will offer a course entitled Vampire Lit in fall 2025.

## Vincent James, PhD



Vincent James recently published an essay titled “Portraits of a Friend with Self” in *Gulf Stream’s* 50th anniversary issue and continued work on a manuscript of poetry, *Or, Obligatory*, and a novella, *Vacancies*. James offered a number of readings from his recent novel, *Acacia, a Book of Wonders* at the 2024 AWP confer-

ence in Kansas City and in several nearby states and was a panel guest on the topic of “what to do after you graduate” at Virginia Tech University. He also developed new Viterbo courses themed around global speculative fiction and the concept of “The Other.”

## Adjunct Faculty Updates



### Jeremiah Jenkins, MFA

Jeremiah Jenkins published several poems, photographs, and essays in 2024 and has more work forthcoming in *The Paris Review* and *The Indianapolis Review*. He will be spending the summer at a writer’s residency in Costa Rica, where he hopes to finish the manuscript of his first book.



### Sarah Clements, MA

Sarah Clements signed with a publisher, Folio Unbound, in 2023 and will be publishing her first fantasy series under them in 2024–2025. The first book, *Wild Order*, is with the editor while the second book (still unnamed) is outlined and ready to be written during the summer.



## Recent Course Offerings

### War, Literature, and Health

This Topics in American Literature course explores the intersections of literature and health from the Civil War to WWI. Students examine how writers attempted to represent bodies affected by war, illness, and trauma. Some of the questions that animate in-class discussions are: How did the body become a metaphor for the nation? How was bodily disfigurement used to critique social values, politics, and beliefs? How is the work of caretakers and medical professionals gendered and racialized? How do representations of bodily and psychological trauma change based on genres, including fiction, poetry, private correspondence, and memoir? In this class, students are also introduced to a field of study known as Disability Studies.

**Professor: Alexander J. Ashland**

### Introduction to Rhetorical Studies

This course introduces students to rhetoric, both as a philosophical tradition and as an essential tool for understanding the cultural messages of today—the political, commercial, and artistic “texts” that surround us. Students learn the historical origins of rhetoric and the main principles of rhetorical criticism. Students then apply that knowledge by analyzing and creating a variety of rhetorical texts, including written, oral, and visual arguments. For their final projects, students have the opportunity to explore debates regarding generative AI and rhetoric to create their own argumentative essay. Questions they can ask include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Should any steps be taken to preserve and promote human authorship?
2. What role, if any, should AI play in generating texts for professionals such as teachers, scientists, lawyers, and health care providers?
3. Should political campaigns be allowed to use generative AI? If not, why? If so, in what ways?
4. How does using generative AI affect a writer’s cognitive processes? Can writing produced in this way be considered human?
5. Should the U.S. allow AI technology to be integrated into all aspects of our interactions with computers, phones, tablets, etc.? Why or why not?
6. What happens when a small handful of powerful tech companies have direct influence on the language produced by every U.S. citizen?

**Professor: Jackie Herbers**

### Speculative Literature

In English 252/352, students study texts from diverse cultures, periods, and imaginative landscapes, all of which can be classified under the supergenre of “Speculative Literature.” From futuristic realms of science fiction to enchanted realms of fantasy to haunting landscapes of horror, our course delves into narratives that uniquely reimagine boundaries of time, space, the environment, history, otherness, ethics, and human nature. Additionally, our readings will offer a variety of cultural perspectives as represented by authors from Argentina, Italy, Nigeria, Russia, the U.S., and Japan. Through our readings and online discussions, we will analyze how global works speculative literature reflects the anxieties, aspirations, and cultural perspectives of different societies and explores universal truths within the diversity of human imagination.

**Professor: Vincent James**

### British Literature: Tolkien

In English 343, we read JRR Tolkien’s *The Hobbit and The Lord of Rings*. These works are, in many ways, foundational works underlying contemporary fantasy in literature, film, and games. We read and discuss the works and the many complex historical, literary, religious, and personal elements that go into understanding how Tolkien built these works.

**Professor: Vicki Holtz Wodzak**

