

# New E306 keeps commitment to writing

Editor's note: This is the first in a two-part column detailing the proposed changes in the E306 syllabus by two of the changes' primary advocates.

The prospect of changing E306, the University's required first semester writing course, has been controversial, to put it mildly. *The Texan* has run almost daily stories all summer long, and there has been coverage in newspapers across the state, including the daily press in Austin, Houston, Dallas and, now, the *Austin Chronicle* as well. There have been television appearances and interviews on National Public Radio; even a story in *The New York Times*.

The opponents of change have put forward a number of charges. The most serious of these are, first, that E306 will no longer be a writing course if the new syllabus is adopted, and, second, that the new syllabus represents unprecedented and unjustifiable "politicization" of a course its opponents, (especially Professors John Ruszkiewicz, James Duban and Alan Gribben,) evidently suppose to have been politically neutral in the past — which simply means that previous syllabi embodied their political views and thus rendered those views invisible, at least to them.

One of the remarkable things about the litany of condemnation is that most of it came from people who complained that they had never seen the syllabus and then went on to attack it anyway; only Duban, who has openly opposed the course since April, had actually seen the draft syllabus when he offered up his "Modest Proposal" in *The Texan* on Aug. 9. As members of the Lower Division English Policy Committee who volunteered to serve on the ad hoc group of faculty and students who worked on the syllabus during May, June and July, we hope to clarify at least some of the issues and answer some of the questions that have been raised since the new focus of the E306 syllabus was announced.

What we'd like to do in this space is to take a look at the syllabus for "Rhetoric and Composition: Writing About Difference," which has been publicly available for some weeks now.

It will become clear in the course of these remarks that E306 is *not* a course in racism and sexism, as the Texas Association of Scholars alleged in a paid political advertisement in *The Daily Texan* on July 18; nor is it a course in multicultural literature. It is what it always has been — a writing course designed for UT students.

The rhetoric and composition program at the University has a long and distinguished history, and the new syllabus is fully consistent with that tradition of excellence. It deals with a coherent body of material rather than the grab bag of essays provided by most composition readers; and it puts at the instructor's disposal a detailed, day-by-day breakdown of assignments and class activities — including the writing assignments themselves.

The 50-plus sections of E306 are taught almost entirely by assistant instructors (AIs). In relieving them of the burden of having to con-

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GUEST COLUMNISTS

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struct a workable syllabus around an incoherent collection of materials, the new syllabus frees instructors to concentrate on what we all agree they should be doing — teaching students to write.

As of July 23, when College of Liberal Arts Dean Standish Meacham announced that implementation would be postponed for one year, the new syllabus mandated no fewer than 18 writing assignments:

- Six formal essays, including at least one documented paper (2,800-3,400 words total)
- Ten brief, informal writing assignments, or "scripts," totaling approximately 600 words; and
- Two in-class essays.

And there's more. In keeping with a practice that is now widespread in writing courses throughout the United States, students will also turn in complete preliminary drafts of three of the formal essays. They will receive detailed written critiques from fellow students and from the instructor, then revise their own drafts in response to the suggestions made and problems pointed out by their readers.

Drafts and written critiques will add another 1,500-2,000 words to the volume of student writing. The total word-count, then will be between 4,000 and 6,000 words per student — about where it has been for the past decade. Students enrolled in computer-assisted sections of E306 will do even more writing, as they make use of the Daedalus Group, Inc.'s award-winning software to conduct intensive, text-based discussion over networked computers.

Still, numbers of assignments and word-counts don't make a course, so let's look at what the assignments require students to do.

The readings for the course we had proposed to begin teaching on Aug. 29 consisted of six cases from the U.S. Supreme Court and other federal courts, plus a packet of academic essays on topics directly related to the issues addressed in the court cases, and the *Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers*, by Maxine Hairston and John Ruszkiewicz, both of whom have expressed strong opposition to the course.

Far from wanting to turn the classroom into an emotional battleground, we have aimed at offering students ways to conduct closely reasoned, civil (and civic) discourse about issues that generate passionate response.

In other words, we would like all students to know how to construct properly grounded arguments for the positions they have arrived at after considering pertinent issues.

The six major writing assignments are directed at identifying and assessing the strength of

arguments offered by the several parties to the court cases we will be studying, or by the authors of the essays which provide contextual material.

Here, for instance, is a draft of the fourth writing assignment, which would have been assigned on Wednesday, Oct. 3; first drafts would be due on Monday, Oct. 15, with written critiques due the 19th. (The due date for final drafts had not been determined as of July 23. References to "your group" have to do with student writing groups established at the beginning of the semester; each group would have had primary responsibility for one of the court cases and the accompanying contextual essay.)

## WRITING ASSIGNMENT 4

Reviews of academic books and essays are a specialized genre. For this assignment, each of you will write a 500-700 word review essay of the article assigned to your group. Because scholarly writing concentrates on convincing readers that the evidence used to ground claims is warranted, the purpose of a review is to evaluate how well a particular book or essay has accomplished this goal.

This assignment requires you to:

- (1) re-read the article
- (2) select what you think are the principal claims
- (3) identify the grounds used to support the principal claims
- (4) assess how well the grounds warrant the claims made.

Write a title for your review and begin your essay with a full citation of the article. See HB (647-668); citing articles and chapters from books. In the review itself, construct an argument evaluating the effectiveness of the entire article. Support your position by assessing how well the grounds supporting the principal claims are warranted.

This assignment does not invite students to offer their personal opinions on the issues discussed in the article they are assigned to review, or on other matters that raise the emotional temperature of the classroom or the campus.

The assignment asks students to write an essay examining the arguments in the article itself, and to assess the strength of the grounds, or evidence, offered in support of those arguments. That assessment has less to do with their own preferences than with the way the argument is constructed.

In other words, the assignment requires students to separate their own beliefs from those articulated in the article they are examining. The instructor, of course, will do the same when evaluating student performance. There is nothing in the syllabus to require that either instructor or student adopt a particular point of view or a specific stance toward the course material.

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## FIRING LINE

### KLRU panel on campus issues unbalanced

On Aug. 30, KLRU-TV presented a one-hour panel discussion on student issues. The program was aired live at 8 p.m. The seven panelists were student leaders from the UT campus.

Unfortunately, although there are several issues of interest to students, the discussion was monopolized by multiculturalism and, consequently, by the E306 controversy. Additionally, there was no effort by the station and the moderator to present a balanced discussion of the issues. Against all sense of professionalism and journalistic integrity five of the participating students were strongly in favor of politicizing the curriculum and indoctrinating incoming freshmen with their leftist, extremist ideology.

We strongly protest this blatant act of deception on the part of the station. We challenge *The Texan* and Kevin McHargue (who was on the panel) to provide us with a guest column in *The Texan* so we can fully express our views. Let *The Texan* show a greater sense of professionalism and fairness toward this issue than KLRU did.

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Physics*

Editor's note: This letter was signed by eight others, any of whom are encouraged to submit a guest column to us. All you had to do was ask.