

March 3, 1980

To: Members of the Format I Committee

From: Gerald Langford

During my thirty-odd years at UT, our freshman and sophomore English courses have been regularly tinkered with and rethought and revamped, without ever satisfying the Department as a whole or producing noticeable improvement in our students' performance. This fact seems to suggest that the problem is not to be solved by external devices such as changing the proportions of reading and writing, or rearranging the sequence of freshman and sophomore courses, or giving students more "relevant" materials to write about.

In my experience people learn to write by (1) reading (read anything eight hours a day, said Dr. Johnson, and you will become learned -- or literate, one might prefer to say), and (2) writing and having their work criticized by competent instructors. But with our teaching loads legislated as they are, no instructor can deal adequately with more than half a dozen sets of themes per class per semester, and this is simply not enough writing for students to accomplish what we would like.

I have no objection to calling 306 a remedial course, which a student ~~is~~ could not pass until he had learned to write English on a level reasonably to be required for college entrance. Such an arrangement, though, would require of us the same type and amount of work as at present, and would pose the same problems we face now.

I'm all for panel-graded finals in sections taught by T.A.'s and A.I.'s (and maybe also in those taught by new assistant professors during their first year). From what students tell me, I gather that many of them are not taught the fundamentals, and as J. Frank Dobie used to say, what is the use of trying to write an essay if you can't write a sentence?

I would not favor abolishing or abbreviating composition on the freshman level in order to substitute an upper-level requirement in composition (though I would not mind adding such a course), because surely freshmen need to develop writing and thinking skills as soon as possible.

In the main, it seems to me that somehow we need to lighten the composition teacher's load enough for him to require more writing. Could not the size of freshman classes be cut?