

Alan Gibben

From: Freshman English Office

Re: Freshman Composition Subcommittees to assist them in their deliberations.

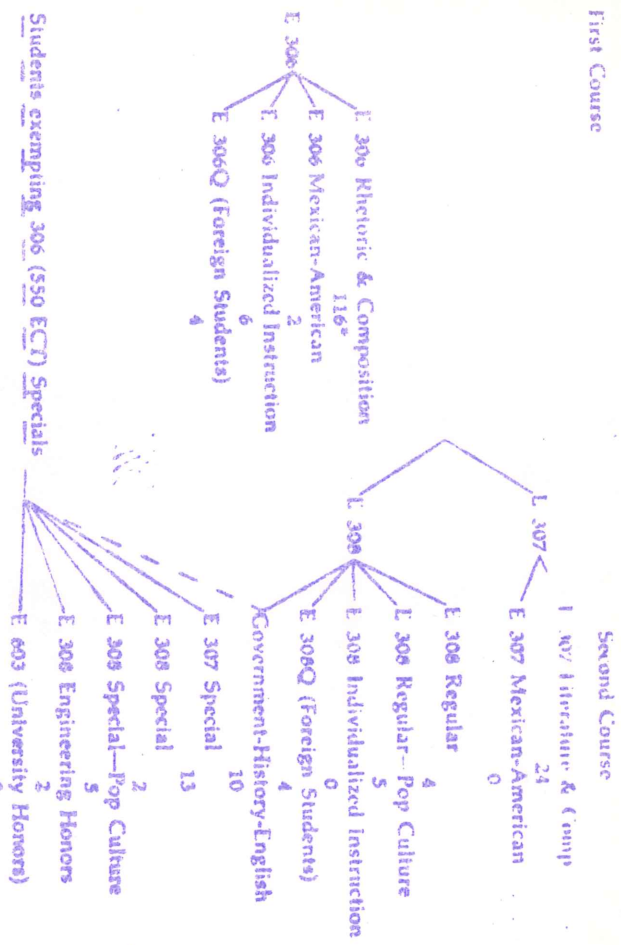
Several members of freshman composition subcommittees have asked for information about the current program. The attached article, published in Options for the Teaching of English: Freshman Composition contains an overview of freshman English, and information on placement, course philosophy, ~~and~~ T.A. training. We believe it will be helpful.

The Freshman Composition Program at the University of Texas at Austin

James L. Kinneavy, Director of Freshman Composition

Department responsible for the composition program	English
Full-time faculty in the department	00
Enrollment policies	
Maximum Enrollment	25
Minimum Enrollment	10
Average Enrollment	24
Staffing	
Percentage of freshman composition courses taught by graduate students	69+
Percentage taught by part-time faculty (excluding graduate students)	4+
Percentage taught by full-time instructors or lecturers	12+
Percentage taught by assistant, associate, and full professors	12+
Program size	
Number of students enrolled in the freshman composition program in the fall term of 1976	5,158
Number of sections of freshman composition offered in the fall term of 1976	205
Number of sections at all levels—literature, composition, film, graduate, undergraduate, etc.—offered by the department in the fall term of 1976	446

Figure 1: The Structure of Freshman English Courses at UT Austin



* Indicates numbers of sections for that course for the fall semester, 1977.

alized in laboratory meetings with undergraduate tutors and teachers; the course emphasizes initial grammar and sentence-combining work more than the regular course; although the students do whole themes at the end of the class. The E 306 II has not yet been used as a remedial course, but it may soon be given that orientation. The E 306Q courses do not emphasize writing and rhetorical skills as much as the regular course; speaking and grammar are also important elements of the course.

After E 306 the student takes one of the courses listed under *Second Course*. Only students exempting E 306 can take *special* courses listed in the lower half of the chart.

The four major courses offered under *Second Course* are E 307, E 308, GS 913, and E 603. All of these are basically composition courses with specified required writing assignments. (E 307 and E 308 require seven themes.) For mechanics, all of these courses use the handbook used in E 306. All but E 603 have a strong rhetorical syllabus, and all have anthologized readers or specified reading assignments. Indeed, it is the reading assignments that differentiate the courses. In all of the variants of E 307 the students read fictional materials (short stories and short novels) and write themes related to the readings. The kinds of themes required in the following units are, in order: an expressive autobiography or biography, a paper on fiction versus nonfiction unity (usually the rewrite of a myth to achieve a different aim), creating or analyzing a plot, creating or analyzing a character, an analytical paper emphasizing close reading of a text, a paper emphasizing library research, an

evaluative paper. The E 308 courses generally emphasize nonbelletristic readings. The E 308 popular culture variant, for example, stresses current mass media scripts from contemporary speeches, radio and television broadcasts (documentaries, soap operas, etc.), *Conzo* journalism, and so on. The themes focus on the following types of assignments: persuading (creative or analytical), advertising (creative or analytical), comparing or contrasting two reports of the same incident, describing or narrating in the style of the new journalism, presenting the same material in a traditional journalistic manner, defining a culture hero or describing a cultural pattern of behavior from an outsider's point of view, or persuading by means of an oral presentation to the class.

The readings in GS 913 are literary, historical, and theoretical. The English classes meet conjointly with required government and history classes, and the themes are closely correlated to the content demands of these two classes.

The readings in the engineering honors classes, E 308 EH, are both literary and scientific. Initially, the readings were preponderantly scientific, including classical and contemporary essays; but the students insisted on the inclusion of more literary materials.

The readings in E 603, the university honors course for both freshman composition and sophomore literature, are drawn from masterpieces in world literature. Often, though not necessarily, they follow a chronological sequence. The writing assignments differ more from instructor to instructor than in the other English classes.

Rhetorical Basis and Pedagogical Assumptions Underlying Freshman Composition at UT Austin¹

The freshman composition program at UT Austin has had a rhetorical foundation for a good number of years. At the present time, there is a systematic and articulated rhetorical basis for each of the three basic courses in the freshman program. Some of the more important principles underlying all three syllabuses are:

(1) There are specific rhetorical and mechanical skills which can be taught, at least at the level of ordinary workaday prose.

(2) The major teachable rhetorical skills relate to the different purposes for which we use language and the different general perspectives taken of subject matters. The major purposes for which we use language, the aims of discourse, are exposition (informing, proving and explaining, exploring), persuasion, literature, and self-expression. The major perspectives from which subject matters are viewed are classification and definition, narration, description, and evaluation.

These skills have to be differentiated in teaching, because they are fundamentally quite distinct. The criteria for effective propaganda (persuasion) are not at all the same criteria for effective literature or effective expository writing. Similarly, the criteria for a good narrative are quite dissimilar to those of classifying and defining.

It is quite true that these different aims often overlap in practice—as do different modes. But, just as tennis players spend hours practicing the

serve and other hours practicing backward and forward volleys, so different skills are necessary to achieve overall competence in writing. And a person quite expert in one skill can be extremely deficient in another.

(2) These different skills cannot be taught all at once. Experience has demonstrated that we can learn them best by focusing on one major rhetorical skill analytically in a given theme and by relying on our already learned competencies instinctively with regard to other major skills. We have used all of these skills with some degree of confidence intuitively since childhood. Thus we have all told stories without an analytical awareness of the nature of narrative. In college, for the first time systematically, it is possible to improve these skills by a conscious analytic awareness of their processes.

(3) These skills are most successfully achieved when the writer says something he really believes in, for a specific purpose, to a well-defined audience. Therefore, individual choices of subject matter, especially in E 306 and E 308, and to some extent in E 307, are encouraged. This is an application of situational rhetoric to freshman composition.

In addition to a rhetorical basis, the program at UT Austin has also consciously followed some fairly well-established educational principles, a few of which are articulated below.

(1) A student learns to write by *writing*. Many students write as many as twelve themes a semester (counting revisions). Although anthologized readings, rhetorical principles, and handbook exercises may assist, they are not substitutes for the act of writing.

(2) A student learns to write by writing *whole* themes. There is a frankly holistic approach to writing. The whole themes may be quite short, even one-paragraph themes, but they should have something to say, a specific purpose, and a clearly defined audience.

(3) The teaching of mechanical skills (grammar, spelling, punctuation, kinds and registers of dialect, etc.) isolated from the actual writing of themes is not useful. The isolated teaching of rhetorical skills (such as literary research, logic, and rhetoric) is almost equally useless.

Training Program for Teaching Assistants

In the fall of 1977, about seventy percent of the courses in the freshman program were taught by teaching assistants. About two thirds of these were graduate students in English; one third were graduate students in other areas such as linguistics, comparative literature, philosophy, English education, and so forth, but with B.A.'s or M.A.'s in English. Because of the preponderantly literary emphasis in their earlier degrees, most of these teaching assistants did not have the background necessary to teach some of these courses. Consequently, a training program was instituted to train new teaching assistants. The program contains an orientation program of one week prior to their first semester of teaching, an observing period of apprenticeship in which the inexperienced teaching assistant learns the syllabuses by working with a full-time faculty member but does not teach his own class, and two three-hour, semester-long courses, specifically related to the course that the beginning teacher is teaching his first two semesters. These graduate courses closely

follow the syllabuses of the course the beginning teacher is teaching, supplying the rhetorical basis for the lessons and suggesting practical techniques for handling the rhetoric, the readings, and the handbook exercises. The course tries to slay about a week ahead of the freshman courses to enable the beginning teacher to prepare ahead of time. This requires a close synchronization of all teaching assistants in the syllabus sequence when they take the teacher-training course. Afterward they may depart from the syllabus.

Teaching assistants' reaction to the training program has progressed from resentful compliance to enthusiastic reception. Some older teaching assistants who were not required to follow the training program now follow all or part of the teacher-training courses. And some full-time faculty participate in the orientation program and parts of the courses in teacher training. To date, eight different faculty members have taught the training course.

Besides the faculty contribution to the training program, older experienced teaching assistants act as counselors to the incoming teaching assistants. Six or seven new teaching assistants are assigned to each counselor. He or she meets with these new teachers in a group once or twice a week, observes them once or twice during the semester, and helps them in grading, lesson preparation, and personal problems. The counselor component of the training program is possibly the single most valuable component of the training sequence.

Weaknesses in the Program

Although the program at UT Austin has experienced continual growth and improvement over the past fifteen years, there are still some obvious deficiencies. For this reason, the Freshman English Policy Committee, a group of four faculty members and four teaching assistants, is continually experimenting with innovative suggestions that question either the procedural matters of the syllabuses or the very basis of the courses. Experimental suggestions are requested every semester and tested with whatever research facilities are available to the program. Experiments usually involve pre- and post-tests and a minimum regard for research design. This semester six different programs are being tested by these criteria.

We are now attempting to eliminate grade inflation (partly arising from required student evaluations), to provide an intelligent rationale for the sequence from first-semester to second-semester freshman courses to sophomore literature courses, and to make provisions for minority students whose performance is weak.

Notes

¹ The rhetorical principles outlined in this section can be found articulated in detail with evidence and documentation, in James L. Kinneavy, *A Theory of Discourse: The Aims of Discourse* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971). A less scholarly presentation of the aims of discourse, intended for upper-division undergraduate students, can be seen in James L. Kinneavy, John W. Cope, and J. W. Campbell, *Aims and Audiences in Writing* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt, 1976).