

To: The General Faculty
 From: The Ad Hoc Committee to Review the Change in the Plan I,
 B.A., Lower-Division English Requirement.

On February 6, 1973, the General Faculty approved a change in the English requirement for the Plan I, B.A. degree from two courses in freshman composition and two courses at the sophomore level, to two courses in freshman composition and one course at the sophomore level. It also approved two options for the second-semester composition courses, one to be a course in composition and literature, and one in composition, logic, and rhetoric. The legislation providing for this change called for a review of the change in requirements by a committee of the General Faculty at the end of three years after that change went into effect, and for a report of that review to a regularly scheduled meeting of the General Faculty. Accordingly, on December 1, 1976, President Rogers asked the persons whose names appear at the end of this report to serve on an ad hoc review committee to make such a review.

The committee interpreted its charge to include the following responsibilities:

1. To determine whether changing the 12-hour English requirement to a 9-hour English requirement by dropping 3 hours of sophomore literature and retaining 6 hours of composition had proved detrimental to the students in Plan I, B.A. degree plan.

2. To determine whether offering students two options in the second semester of freshman composition is useful and should be continued.

The committee did not think that its charge included prescribing the specific content of the required English courses, nor did it include specifying how or by whom they should be taught.

Conscious of widespread concern by faculty, parents, and the general public about dropping scores on college entrance examinations and an apparent decline in students' ability to read and write English adequately, the committee took seriously the task of trying to determine whether reducing the English requirement had adversely affected student skills. As preparation for that task its members studied several documents, among them the professional summary of a poll of University of Texas professors' and students' attitudes toward writing, designed by Professor James Sledd and administered in the spring of 1975 by Measurement and Evaluation, an article on the 1974 National Assessment of Education Progress report, a summary of course-instructor surveys in all freshman English classes in 1974-75, and the syllabi for the three freshman composition courses. It also read pertinent articles from the Chronicle of Higher Education, Change, and the Association of Departments of English Bulletin, reviewed national surveys on the so-called "writing crisis" conducted and reported by the Los Angeles Times and the New York Times, reviewed data about requirements at other universities, and talked with Professor James Kinneavy, current

Director of Freshman English, and with English Professor James Sledd. Finally, working through the Measurement and Evaluation Center, the committee polled all regular faculty of the University about their views on the change in the lower-division English requirements; 807 faculty members, or slightly over half of those polled, responded; more than 200 respondents added comments.

Both Professor Sledd's survey and the comments on the poll taken this spring reveal widespread faculty dissatisfaction with their students' writing ability. Clearly, most professors think it important that students learn to write better, and support strengthening the writing program in the university. In the 1977 poll, 50.8 percent of the respondents favored a return to the 12-hour English requirement, and 89.2 percent opposed reducing the freshman composition requirement to 3 hours.

After reviewing available data, however, the review committee concludes that the writing problems of students at this university are far too complex to be solved by tinkering with either the structure or content of the required English courses for the Plan I degree plan. For one thing, the decline in traditional writing skills is a well-documented national phenomenon. For example, in 1974 the National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that both 13- and 17-year-old students were writing less coherently and using a simpler vocabulary and style than comparable groups four years earlier. Dozens of institutions ranging from large state universities similar to ours to prestigious private universities such as Stanford and

Harvard report a marked decline in the writing ability of upper-division and graduate students as well as freshmen, and many schools that had dropped the composition requirement are reinstating it and adding writing laboratories and skills centers. And across the nation, in the last 12 years the average scores on the verbal section of the Scholastic Aptitude Test have dropped 44 points to a low of 434 on a scale of from 200 to 800. So the deficiencies our faculty sees in students at the University of Texas seem more to reflect the deficiencies of college and pre-college students throughout the country than to be the direct result of anything they are or are not learning in lower-division English courses.

For several years both educators and laymen have been trying to determine the causes of this national decline in writing skills and general verbal abilities; so far they seem to agree only that the reasons are extremely complex and result from cultural influences as much as they do from our educational system. Some of the cultural factors involved are heavy television viewing that has decreased students' exposure to and experience with the printed and written word, reliance on the telephone for both business and personal communication, little or no writing being done in the home, and more relaxed attitudes in society about standard English usage. Among the educational factors involved are a marked decrease in the amount of writing most students are doing in high school, the widespread use of an elective system in high schools that allows students to

choose courses that don't require writing (when one California school system made English composition an elective rather than a required course, enrollment in it dropped 77% in 3 years), increased reliance on machine scored tests and less assignment of essays or essay-type exams, a shortage of teachers properly trained to teach composition, and very little research in or reward for the teaching of writing. Finally, schools do not teach enough writing on any level partly because to do so is expensive; so far no one has found a way to teach composition in large sections or by lecturing.

Thus, while recognizing and sympathizing with the faculty's desire for improved writing instruction at the University of Texas, the committee believes that the writing problems of our students are too complex and deep-rooted to be ameliorated by legislating an increase in the Plan I lower-division English requirement. The Department of English has already attempted to meet some of the problems identified by Professor Sledd's 1975 survey by incorporating more instruction in grammar, mechanics, and logic in its freshman courses; it has also substantially expanded its writing program at all levels, and more than half of the regular faculty are now involved in teaching writing courses each year.

Moreover, the review committee feels strongly that the responsibility for improving the writing of University students cannot be delegated solely to the English Department. If the faculty expects the student who graduates from the University

of Texas to write decently, all faculty members must concern themselves about student writing. They should assign essays and give essay exams, correct them for form as well as content, and consistently reward and reinforce good writing by their students. Writing competently is a skill, and students who do not have to practice it will quickly lose it.

The review committee therefore makes these recommendations:

1. The present Plan I, B.A. lower-division English requirement of 6 hours of freshman composition and 3 hours of sophomore literature or writing should be retained.

Explanation: Although 50.85% of the respondents to the faculty poll favored a return to the 12-hour requirement, the committee has seen no evidence that adding a 3-hour literature course to the requirement would appreciably improve students' writing; therefore we would be reluctant to recommend reinstating this requirement.

2. The two options for the second semester freshman composition course should be retained, allowing students to choose (or their colleges to recommend) a choice between Composition and Literature or Composition, Logic and Rhetoric.

Explanation: Students should be allowed to choose the kind of writing course that they find most interesting, in the hope that having such a choice will increase their motivation to write.

Finally, the committee goes beyond the charge given to it by President Rogers to recommend that the President appoint a University committee to study ways in which the writing of undergraduate students can be improved not only by improving curriculum and instruction within the English department, but also by generating wider University involvement in and responsibility for writing proficiency at all levels. As studies at both the University of Iowa and Harvard have shown, the skills a student acquires in freshman composition deteriorate quickly if they are not regularly reinforced in other courses at other levels. Thus the committee believes that promoting proficiency in writing should be a primary and continuing concern of the whole faculty.

Respectfully submitted.

The Ad Hoc Committee to Review the
Lower-Division English Requirement
for the Plan I, B.A. Degree

Chairman: Maxine Hairston, Department
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Members: Robert Little, Department
of Physics

Howard Miller, Department
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Edmund Pincoffs, Department
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