

Department of English Memorandum

To: FEPC colleagues

From: John Trimble

Date: Thursday, Jan 25

Our little document on grade inflation is gradually stumbling toward adequacy, thanks to your help. It's also--I can't help noticing--getting a little more inflated each time.

Attached is Draft #3. John Ruszkiewicz & Lynn Henry alertly found some missed stitches in #2; now I give them a chance to find some new ones. You other people, I want some feedback from you, too. Let's get out a document that we can be really proud of.

I hope I didn't get too, ah, rhetorical in the paragraphs I added on p. 2. They were prompted by John's suggestion that "We need a short paragraph emphasizing that:

- a.) the FEPC's concern with grade inflation is not purely statistical,
- b.) the FEPC recognizes that a variety of pressures have caused grade inflation,
- c.) the FEPC's concern is not with lowering grades but with restoring sense to the grading system."

As Othello explained, "One thing led to another."

P.S. Also at John's suggestion, I made some small changes in the paper descriptions (p. 3, top half), incorporating wholesale his suggested descriptions of the D and F paper. Clearer now?

Note: First page is unchanged.

TO: All instructors of Freshman English
 FROM: Freshman English Policy Committee
 RE: Grade inflation

A report recently released by the Faculty Senate Committee on Grade Inflation documents an alarming rise in undergraduate grade-point averages, both nationally and at UT, since the early 1960's.

Here are some highlights of that report:

- A survey of half of the country's 50 leading federally-funded research universities and institutes of technology revealed that between 1963-1974, the percentage of undergraduate A's more than doubled--from 16% to 34%--while the percentage of C's dropped almost as dramatically, from 37% to 21%. Not surprisingly, the average GPA jumped from 2.49 to 2.94--nearly half a letter grade.

- During this same period, grades at UT mirrored the national patterns: the percentage of undergraduate A's here almost doubled, while the percentage of C's dropped by nearly one-third and the percentage of D's dropped by half.

- In 1958, only 14.5% of UT's senior class graduated with honors; in 1967, only 14.0%. In 1977, however, 35.1% of our seniors graduated with honors.

- In UT's College of Humanities last spring, the distribution of undergraduate grades was as follows:

A 31%	D 3%
B 32%	F 3%
C 16%	CR 4%

These percentages were close to the norm of the 11 UT colleges surveyed. The lowest percentages of A's and B's were found in the College of Business Administration, which reported these figures:

A 15%	D 9%
B 29%	F 5%
C 31%	CR 3%

- Of particular interest to us are the figures on grades in Freshman English during the period 1965-1975. Here is how grades were distributed, by percentage, in the first-semester Freshman English course (successively numbered 601a, 301, and 306):

	A	B	C	D	F	Other	Number of students
E601a							
Fall 1965	4	20	44	16	9	6	2111
Fall 1967	8	36	40	8	5	3	2068
E301							
Fall 1969	9	39	40	5	3	3	2851
Fall 1971	8	38	39	5	3	5	2295
Fall 1973	13	45	34	2	2	2	3086
E306							
Fall 1975	23	43	25	3	2	5	3006

Note that during this 10-year period--a period which saw the national average SAT-Verbal score drop by 44 points--the percentage of A's almost sextupled (from 4% to 23%) while the percentage of B's more than doubled (from 20% to 43%). Note, too, that while only 24 % of our students back in 1965 received a course grade of A or B, by 1975 the percentage had jumped to 66%. All of these "Excellent" or "Above average" students, let it be remembered, had had to take the course because they had scored below a modest 550 on the ECT.

This steady erosion of academic standards concerns us deeply. While probably none of us on the Freshman English Policy Committee is wholly satisfied with the traditional grading system, we are not ready to trade it, imperfect as it is, for something bordering on ludicrousness--a state of affairs in which a mere 3% of our 306 students are judged "below average," and in which nearly 25% are proclaimed "excellent" only months after their ECT scores marked them as marginally competent.

(Surely this is Watergate come to Academe.) We cannot pretend to teach responsible critical analysis and evaluation to our freshmen only to practice the opposite ourselves. We cannot grade as if mere effort or good intentions were synonymous with performance. And certainly we cannot honor the truly talented students in our classes by giving equal honor to the less accomplished ones. Some teachers, in an excess of democratic zeal, like to give blanket A's or B's, thinking this somehow promotes greater equity. Actually, all it does is short-change the superior student by equating his work with everyone else's. In fact, it does more: by creating a false sense of achievement in the average student, it tends to make him complacently expect an equal or even higher grade in his next English class--perhaps yours.

No one, then, is served well by grade inflation. The superior student is denied adequate recognition of his excellence, the middling student is given a distorted (and potentially costly) sense of his abilities, the piddling student is encouraged to believe that the adult world gives something for nothing, and the teacher is trapped into becoming a scapegoat or hypocrite.

The FEPC, like the Faculty Senate, wants to restore some sense, some meaning, to our grading system. We do not think the answer lies in bell curves or heavy-handed scare tactics. We do think, however, that progress will be made if each of us makes his standards clearer and firmer to his students--and perhaps to himself as well. If this is done early in the semester, when expectations are easiest to set, we are likely to win student respect for our professionalism, and this will in turn reinforce our commitment to Quality.

Below are five specific recommendations that we would like to add to this general one. Please give them careful consideration:

(1) Caution your students that the grades you award will be literally consistent with the university's published definitions of their meaning:

- A = "Excellent"
- B = "Above average"
- C = "Average"
- D = "Pass"
- F = "Failure"

(2) Distribute to your students a list of the criteria you use in setting grades on themes. We suggest the following:

- C paper: meets the assignment, has few mechanical errors, and is reasonably well organized and developed; still, while generally competent, it is undistinguished in both thought and phrasing.
- B paper: has the first three characteristics but also contains discriminating insights and reveals some stylistic dexterity in its transitions, sentence structures, and word choices; on the whole, it is significantly more than competent, and almost free of mechanical errors.
- A paper: possesses, in addition to these qualities, distinctive polish and vigor; also, its thesis (when a thesis is called for) is sound, truly discerning, and thoroughly developed; its content is impressively rich; overall, it displays intellectual sophistication of a high order.
- D paper: the treatment and development of the subject ~~is~~^{are} rudimentary; organization is present, but neither clear nor effective; sentences are awkward, ambiguous, or marred by serious mechanical errors.
- F paper: the treatment and development of the subject ~~is~~^{are} thoughtless or superficial; the theme lacks discernible organization; the student shows no control over his/her materials; mechanical errors are frequent; the prose is garbled or stylistically primitive.

(3) If your policy is to assign a new grade to each rewritten (or revised) paper, explain to your students that you will average the new grade with the original grade in determining the grade that the student ultimately receives on that writing assignment. (This policy discourages hasty writing of the original paper; it also reminds the student of the editing assistance he got from you prior to drafting the re-write.)

(4) Consider sharing with your students the highlights of the Faculty Senate report cited in this memo. Consider, too, the possibility of designing a writing assignment--e.g., a hypothetical Texan editorial--on the subject of grade inflation. (The more conscious they are of the problem, and the more thoughtfully they ponder the issues involved, the more likely they are to recognize the necessity for quality control.)

(5) Finally, consider including in your final examination an objective section on grammar and mechanics. The committee member who proposed this recommendation explained her own practice as follows:

My sections of 306 receive two objective examinations: a mid-term and a final. In addition to grammar and mechanics, I include problems in syntax and prose style analysis. Both exams count the equivalent of one essay; together, they count about 20% of the final course grade.

Rationale:

(a) It cattle-prods weaker students into learning the fundamentals (in many cases the loan of my dog-eared 3200 is sufficient).

(b) It gives me two almost purely objective grades to average with the 8 or so essay grades. (Essay-grading, in my view, is necessarily a hit-and-miss affair. Too many variables, mostly in me, how well I'm reading, how grumpy or expansive, etc. Thus, the exams are a safeguard

for me and for my students.)

(c) I believe that excellence in writing flourishes only on a ground of general competence. I have yet to meet the student whose writing displays 'intellectual sophistication of a high order' by way of dangling modifiers. The mid-term allows me to show students that there is a correlation between the general effectiveness of their writing and the facility with which they handle basic skills.

Cordially,

The FEPC