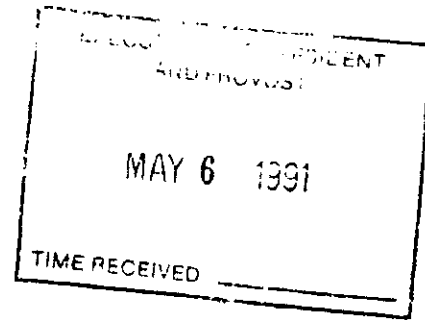


April 17, 1991

Dr. Gerhard Fonken
Vice-President for Academic Affairs
The University of Texas at Austin
Austin, Texas, 78712



Dear Dr. Fonken,

As the high school English teachers who send students to the University to continue their educations, we view, and have viewed, with alarm the attempt at the University of Texas to replay the push for "Relevance in the Teaching of English" which is now called the "Move toward Multiculturalism through English." Our concern is focussed on the needs of the students we send you and the means proposed by University faculty members to meet those needs.

We have concluded from our observations of the proposals and actions of the University English faculty over the past year or so that those entrusted with teaching English to entering students at the University of Texas do not understand who these freshmen are. Students taking English 306 are **not** the top students from our English classes. The University requires that entering freshmen take the English Achievement Test of the College Board in order to be admitted to the University; students who score well enough to place in the top half of college-bound high school seniors nationwide (550 = 58th percentile) **place out** of English 306 and into more advanced courses. Students who score well enough on the Advanced Placement Examination in English Language and Composition (roughly the top fifteen percent of college bound high school juniors) **also place out** of English 306 and into more advanced courses. According to English department figures as reported in the Austin American-Statesman May 31, 1990, 40 percent of incoming students test out of English 306 and another ten percent earn credit for it at another institution before coming to the University. Therefore, the students who are in English 306 are there because they need to learn **writing**, not politics. The educational program of the department of English should be made to meet the needs of the students, rather than to fit the teaching assistants' political agenda.

As has been evident during this entire conflict, it is difficult to bring quiet reason to inflammatory topics. The students in English 306 need, first of all, to master the ability to reason in their writing. The proposal to focus English 306 on the injustices of our society - racism, sexism, abuse, - requires that the models presented be as inflammatory as the issues which they address. Generally, such models are not models of good writing, nor of sound reasoning. Granted, the readings studied in English 306 can be chosen from contemporary sources; newspaper

essayists such as George Will, William Raspberry, are good reading, but not necessarily the only models whom we would want students to emulate as examples of the best writing our society has produced.

As to the proposal to make Supreme Court decisions, or other legal documents, the material from which English 306 is taught, it ignores the fact that, for many people, legal briefs are a private language, a specialized language for a specialized audience, not a model of clarity and conciseness to be emulated by educated engineers, or scientists, or psychologists, or general citizens writing for their peers.

What do we, English teachers of Texas high schools want of the English department of The University? We want them to teach writing to the students who need to learn to write. "Cultural diversity," "political correctness," "pluralism of society," "multiculturalism" are issues that may be of interest to graduate students and young faculty members of the English department. They are issues which we and our students face in the world. However, the more pressing issue for the students in English 306 is to learn to write and think well enough to be able to address such issues. The focus of English 306 must be the writing and the thinking. Polemics will come soon enough.

The statement attributed to a member of the English department in a recent Austin American-Statesman article that racism, sexism and other -isms "ought to be used to teach freshman writing because that is what the students want to talk about" struck a harshly discordant note with high school teachers, particularly teachers of high school seniors (who are, after all, only three months or so younger than college freshmen). It has often been observed that students "want to talk about" anything that will distract the instructor from the intended lesson for the day. It is a favorite game for students, particularly those who face learning a skill or concept they feel will be difficult for them. A teacher's role is not to talk about what interests students, but to interest students in the "lesson."

Another concern that causes many people to question the proposal to change the focus of English 306 from a study of writing to a study of "differences and discrimination in America" is the history of proposals for change in this course. In August 1985, the English department proposed that students be required to obtain credit for English 306 by "passing a test, transferring credit from another institution, taking it during the summer at UT, or taking it by extension through the UT division of continuing education." Joe Kruppa, then the associate chairman of the English department, said that the proposal "is intended to say to students that if you're going to come to the University, you need to have these skills....if this proposal passes, and the word goes out to the high schools that the stakes have been

raised, then the schools will have to do a better job of teaching writing, and we'll see more students placing out of the course....About 40 per cent of UT students score high enough on placement test to be exempt from the course."

The department proposed in 1985 that the English department not teach English 306 so that the high schools would do a better job and send students to the University who did not need further instruction in writing. In 1990, the English department proposed that English 306 be a study of "difference and discrimination in American society." In 1985 and in 1990 the best forty percent of University freshmen placed out of English 306. In 1985 and in 1990 sixty per cent of University freshmen needed instruction in college writing skills. Who has the responsibility to teach college writing to college freshmen? Is it not the English department? We at the high school level know that teaching writing is hard work; we send almost half (40%) of our students to college with college level writing skills so that they place out of college writing classes. In 1985, the English department thought that level was not good enough - "high schools will have to do a better job of teaching writing." In 1990, that level was good enough that the sixty per cent of freshmen still required to take English 306 could study something other than writing skills in English 306. In 1985, the English department wanted students to take their writing instruction from the extension division - the correspondence school of UT; in 1990, the English department wants to teach sociology rather than writing. A "senior lecturer in the English department" is quoted in the Austin American-Statesman of February 14, 1991, as saying, "The revision came out of a concern that graduate students teaching the old syllabus could not teach it. There was no sound pedagogical reason for teaching as they were." Perhaps that is part of the problem; the students who need the best teachers and the most help are faced with graduate students who cannot teach the syllabus and who do not want to teach writing because it is time-consuming hard work which interferes with their own pursuit of learning and a graduate degree. Ironically, these graduate students may never have taken English 306 themselves because their test scores were high enough that they, too, **placed out** of the course.

What do high school English teachers want the English department to do? We want them to teach writing to those students who need to learn to write better. We have done a good job with them at the high school level; now it is the responsibility of the University to teach them to write at college level.

As we pass our students on to the University, we would hope that the English department would focus the attention of beginning students on those forces in our society which unite us, not those which divide us, on those works which are the best examples of writing - sound rhetoric - not polemic.

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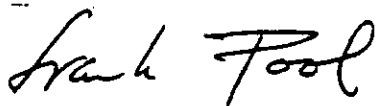
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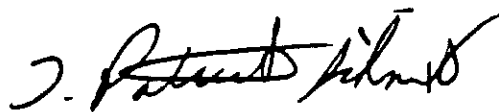
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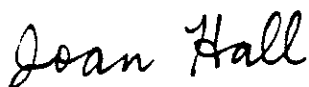
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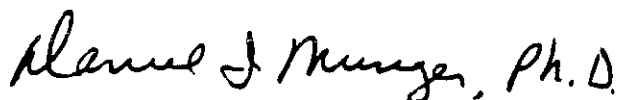
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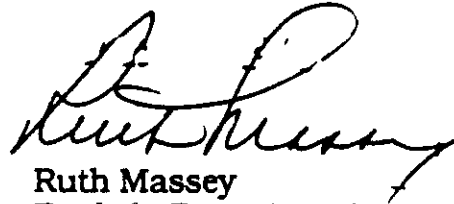
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