

November 14, 1985

TO: Joann Coniglio, Sheldon Good, Jane Perleman, David Jin-Nun Quan,
Angela Cotera, and Scott Scarborough

FROM: Valerie Balester

SUBJECT: E306

As a graduate student in English, I have taught English 306 at the University for one year and worked in the Writing Lab for two years. I also taught composition and business/technical writing at The Pennsylvania State University for four years. It is my opinion, as an experienced teacher of writing, that the undergraduate students at this University would be ill-served by the new English proposal, particularly by the decision to require it without offering it during the long sessions and the decision to eliminate all forms of technical, business, and scientific writing from the English program.

First and foremost, I do not accept the characterization of E306 as a remedial course; nor do I believe that the high schools will reasonably be able to teach college writing for all college-bound students. E306 is expressly designed to teach the writing of college-level prose. That it also assists students whose high school preparation is deficient is an additional benefit of a course that is in every other respect as important as introductory courses in chemistry, physics, or literature.

It is my opinion that undergraduate students will suffer educationally if they are deprived of the only lower division writing course designed to serve students of all majors and all colleges at this University. A University should encourage students of all majors to hone their writing skills; E306 does just that for many students, of all disciplines. Without E306, the only lower-division writing courses that students will be able to take will emphasize writing about literature or the history of ideas. It is my belief that the Department of English is responsible for the teaching of writing on this campus, in the professions as well as in the arts and sciences. There is no reason to assume that the only business of an English Department is literary studies; in fact, the graduate program in the Department of English offers specializations on the PhD level in rhetoric, folklore, and linguistics in addition to literary studies. Moreover, English Departments themselves are part of a rhetorical tradition which has its roots in the study of all kinds of writing--not just literary texts.

In addition to limiting the general courses in composition available from the University of Texas Department of English, this proposal will relinquish any responsibility for the quality of the composition courses accepted as equivalent to E306. Some students will take E306 at local community colleges; others will take it at other colleges or universities. There are bound to be major differences in the quality of these courses

and in the level of expertise required to do well in them. There is no guarantee of the quality of the syllabus, the nature of the assignments, the uniformity of grading. There can be no program comparable to the carefully designed library research unit in the current E306--set up expressly to teach students to use the intimidating UT libraries and to do basic college-level presentation of research. There will be no place for students to articulate complaints about writing instruction, no way for students to affect the program through teaching evaluation. There will be no formal teacher training, no Writing Lab available to tutor students in equivalent E306 courses taken outside the English Department's summer courses.

Furthermore, the students who pass out of E306 by examination are being cheated of a writing course that addresses whole-essay skills and the finer points of writing. The ECT test used for placement does not include a writing sample.

Those undergraduate students who must take E306 on another campus will have to spend valuable time commuting. But worse than the inconvenience and extra time is the extra expense. In some cases students may have to pay activities fees as well as tuition costs. This will not be a problem, perhaps, for students whose families are willing or able to bear the extra cost of summer school or of added tuition and other fees. But does the average University of Texas student spend summers at the beach instead of working at a scarce part-time job?

Perhaps most serious is the faulty design of the proposed "Level Two" writing courses--which explicitly preclude writing courses that address the needs of the majority of students at UT. The dominant course is likely to be "Topics in Composition"--a blanket title which allows instructors to teach anything they like in the history of ideas or in literature as a composition course. It is unlikely that students signing up for the "Topics" course will have any idea what the course is about until the first day of class. The other two proposed courses, "The Writing Process" and "Thinking and Writing," currently exist only as titles. Along with "Topics," they form a writing program without a rationale, theory, or sequence supporting them. They replace a writing program with national recognition and national ranking.