

# COUNCIL - GRAMS

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## Debate Continues: What Focus for Freshman Writing?

The debate within the profession about the proper focus for freshman writing courses is significant at a time when problems in American society are raising concerns about various forms of discrimination, including some violent incidents on college campuses.

In a commentary in the January 23 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Maxine Hairston, professor of English at the University of Texas and 1985 chair of CCCC, explained her pedagogical and ethical objections to making a required freshman English composition course "a forum for debate on social issues."

Required courses, she said, should teach students to use writing as a tool for discovering and organizing knowledge, to become critical thinkers by articulating and refining their ideas through writing and revision, and to use logic and rhetoric to communicate their thoughts clearly.

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—Maxine Hairston

Students, Hairston said, "develop best as writers when they are allowed to write on something they care about." Because "racism and sexism are deep, complex psychological and social problems that cannot be understood or solved quickly or easily," a "must pass" course centered on such problems puts both freshmen and instructors in high-risk situations and "severely limits their freedom of expression."

English faculty, Hairston added, and especially teaching assistants, who can least afford time to acquire depth of background in sociology, cultural anthropol-



Maxine Hairston

ogy, and related subjects, are at risk of failing to teach responsibly about issues on which "being passionate . . . doesn't confer the expertise. . . ."

Immature students, "forced to write" on "controversial and troubling" issues in a required course "will opt for survival over honesty," Hairston predicted, "parrot their instructors' views, . . . be rewarded, . . . [and] learn a chilling lesson: Don't try to think for yourself. Find out what the game is and play it."

### Better Learning with Less Stress?

In a phone interview, Hairston observed that "one of the major things we've learned about teaching writing in the last decade is that if students are going to develop as writers, they need to have risk in the classroom reduced so they'll experiment." If freshmen are to learn to like writing, "they need to write on things that are important to them," she insisted.

She has her students choose their topics, negotiating with her to avoid trivia. "Rather complex" subjects—child abuse, property rights, sexism in advertising, the

economics of basketball—become the focus for papers that explore, explain, and argue.

Hairston said she would not worry about a freshman writing course centered on court cases involving "difference" if enrollment were voluntary, especially since today's freshmen (who may be anywhere from 18 to 30 years old) vary greatly in maturity. Offering elective courses "on important social issues" is "wonderful," she added.

### Kinneavy's Views on "Required Content"

Professor James L. Kinneavy, who had negotiated in favor of carefully planned field testing of the U.T. course, currently teaches a section of freshman writing. In a phone interview, he said that although he normally lets his freshmen choose their own topics, "I have no objection to people teaching freshman composition with a required content. . . . I thought that if they would emphasize the rhetorical aspects [in the course centered on "difference,"] I wouldn't object, but with major reservations: that it wouldn't be taught in a doctrinaire way; that many of the papers would be exploratory; that it wouldn't be limited to racism and sexism; and that there ought to be a major concern for the rhetorical elements normally talked about in freshman composition."

Plans for various stages of the writing process were "very heavily built into the syllabus" of the rejected U.T. course, Kinneavy said, adding that he does not think "the concern that it would become a series of sessions about legal issues" was justified.

In his own teaching, Kinneavy said, "I emphasize different purposes and aims of discourse. The way I handle the modes—description, narration, evaluation, classification/definition—is very traditional."

—D.A.