

# UT students writing without tools needed for employment

**P**resumably, all 50,000 of us are here at the University to get the best education possible. But how much are we really learning? If students haven't mastered written communication before graduating, then four or more years of study will have been wasted.

The powers that be at the University realize that writing is a crucial skill. They require all entering freshmen to receive credit for English 306 — rhetoric and composition. Furthermore, they have dutifully set writing requirements for every college and school, from engineering to fine arts.

This is all quite admirable, but also quite inadequate.

To begin with, a large majority of this year's freshman class took the English composition placement test before enrolling. About 45 percent of all those who took the test scored high enough to place out of E 306.

The English composition test is a 90-minute multiple choice exam with no required writing sample. How, then, can it be used to exempt students from a class that strongly emphasizes writing skills? There's no way a single scantron test can take the place of the eight to 10 papers required of E 306 students.

Additionally, as some of us learned the hard way, there's a world of difference between what you could slide by your high school English teacher and what a UT professor demands.

But 45 percent of this year's freshmen have to make the jump between high school and college-level writing without formal instruction. The English composition test can measure your skill at subject-verb agreement, but it can't teach you how to write.

Past the freshman year, every student must take six hours of substantial writing component courses, three at the upper division level. Let's assume that the average degree requires 120 hours to complete. A whopping 5 percent of the total hours needed come from courses that emphasize writing.

Even if the required English 316K class is counted as another substantial writing course, that's still only nine hours, and that's still not enough.

Consider, for example, the College of Business Administration. As of May 1988, everyone receiving a business degree had to have the six hours of writing courses mentioned above. But they also needed an



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equal amount of hours of a natural science.

It's important to have an understanding of scientific processes, but, realistically, administrators and executives in most companies need to know more about stringing sentences together than the laws of thermodynamics. How many times does a typical manager write memos or business proposals? How many times does she dissect mammals or synthesize esters?

Similarly, students in the natural sciences need as many substantial writing component courses as they do music ensemble or art history classes. Again, fine arts are valuable, but when a scientist is ready to present her findings to a leading scientific journal, her cello skills have to take a back seat to her writing ability.

Do all you liberal arts majors remember the counselor who told you to forget electrical engineering or accounting because your degree in folklore or Norse mythology was just as marketable?

Liberal arts degrees carry weight in the marketplace because "liberal artists" traditionally have competent writing abilities. But just six or nine hours of writing courses doesn't ensure this skill.

Some classes not designated as substantial writing component courses do require a respectable amount of written work. If every class, or even a small majority of classes, could increase the number of papers or essays due each semester, the problem of too little writing could be solved.

This wouldn't change the number of hours required for graduation, and it would enable students to gain a valuable (and marketable) skill.

If nothing else, learning how to write would allow everyone an equal opportunity to abuse any *Texan* staff member. That in itself should be a strong incentive to write well.

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