

# A modest proposal: Stick to writing in E306 at UT

By James Duban  
Special to the American-Statesman

The controversy over Freshman English at UT prompts me to share my thoughts about this issue. I am unable to agree with the proposed changes in E306 because I deem the perfecting of

## PUBLIC FORUM

basic writing skills to be the principal goal of UT's one required freshman composition class. The teaching of these skills gives students a good foundation for success in other courses and in life. Were I a professor of mathematics, I would similarly insist that students demonstrate mastery of basic skills in algebra, geometry and trigonometry as a foundation for studying calculus, engineering or physics. In either case, if a student's educational foundation is weak, that student's potential for success in later college courses is, at the very least, jeopardized.

Having taught a variety of freshman English classes here and elsewhere, I believe that the various topics (including social ones) that motivate students to write should receive only passing attention from the instructor, whose primary obligation is to offer freshmen intensive feedback about grammar, style, tone, form, triteness, agreement, conciseness, organization, cogency, logic, etc. — all of which make possible and support effective argumentation. Even the brightest of our incoming freshmen need basic instruction in such matters. Similarly, classroom discussion about assigned readings should focus mainly on matters of writing. In the limited time we have to help remedy the often numerous, serious deficiencies in the writing of our freshmen, excessive focus on expressly social, political and legal topics can interfere with the teaching of basic writing skills.

The newly released packet of readings and the "Tentative Syllabus" for the postponed version of E306 suggest to me that the discussion and researching of social, political and legal topics (the general importance of which I have never contested) would have become the de facto "subject matter" of our only required freshman composition course. Freshmen in that course would have been unable to focus mainly on their writing assignments because of the size, complexity and social orientation of the reading packet. And where in the syllabus is any formal attention to grammar and the mechanics of writing? The new E306 syllabus would have required students to purchase the 822-page *Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers* (1988), written by Maxine Hairston and John Ruskiewicz. Yet, the syllabus instructs students to encounter only 81 pages of that book. Of those 81 pages, 47 deal with bibliographies and documentation.

And with the exception of worthwhile instruction concerning the avoidance of sexist language (eight pages), the other 26 pages of assigned *Handbook* readings do not directly confront the complexities of editing. Students are not asked to read or learn from those remaining 741 pages of the *Handbook* that effectively cover such basic skills as revising and editing, paragraphing, fragments, transitions, punctuation, etc.

The proponents of the new E306, wishing to teach argumentation in complex legal writings and social commentary, fail to recognize how intensive instruction in basic editorial categories facilitates rather than impedes participation in legal forms of dialogue and discussion. Here I have in mind a checklist of 56 editorial categories that I regularly emphasize when teaching freshmen. Several of these freshmen have gone on to distinguish themselves in law school and have attributed much of their success to this foundation of editing skills. Had these students and I spent most of our time talking about difficult legal concerns, I fear that I might have restricted — rather than increased — their chances of participating so fully in legal discourse.

At stake is academic freedom for students and teachers. AI's scheduled to teach the new E306 would have been offered no choice of reader (i.e., a textbook of readings) from which to choose prose models to discuss with students. The purported emphasis in E306 on difference was compromised by a failure to recognize that different teachers often teach best with different materials. Faculty members should not have to petition academic freedom into existence. Here I advocate the principle of free inquiry upon which the possibility for multicultural education presumably rests.

In a related vein, I and other professors across campus are concerned about an apparent academic inconsistency: professors should indeed imbue students with a hope for economic and political equality of opportunities, but we should not at the same time deny these young persons the writing skills they will need for success in their endeavors. As a writing teacher, I want students to acquire an articulate and eloquent voice so that their words will be all the more understood and heeded. Faculty and administrators should have the willpower and decency to send a message of encouragement to our freshmen — the message that these students will receive an education worthy of their time, effort and aspirations.

Duban is a professor of English at UT-Austin and past recipient of the UT President's Associates Teaching Excellence Award for the Teaching of Composition.