



# 346K — the write stuff

The University of Texas fired 50 writing teachers just the other day. They'd been doing a lousy job, right? Those 50 writing teachers didn't know English composition from extrasensory perception? . . . *Wrong*. The 50 were, in fact, doing a middlin' to pretty fair job, considering their charge — a course called 346K.

The firing of the 50 and the background of 346K aren't all that easy to untangle. But you'd be in the right ball park if you called the fired 50 *indentured servants*. They weren't hired as, and they could never become, *actual* University of Texas faculty. They were soldiers of fortune, hired for one purpose: to teach youngsters, maybe some of yours, *writing*. Or, as their former supervisors, the folks who hired them and then fired them, would put it, to teach "*rhetorical skills*."

I ask you to put the high school "no-pass, no-play" controversy on hold for a minute and to look up the road, to universities in our state that agonize over whether writing even *can* be taught. At UT, which happens to have the largest English Department in the land, they thought they had the answer: 346K.

Think of 346K as basic writing skills linked to the student's discipline. The theory of 346K was that if a youngster majors in, say, *geology*, that youngster takes a section of 346K aimed at teaching geology majors how to write to *other* geology majors . . . and professors of geology. People like that.

Uh-huh.

UT also required that every student take two courses with "*sufficient writing components*." What that translates to is: the teachers of those 6 hours couldn't grade by computer. They had to assign and grade *written* work. Figure that the typical student takes 120 hours, not counting English, and 6 of those *require writing*.

Uh-huh.

So, what went wrong with 346K? The *main* thing was that UT hired just about as many people to teach 346K as they had *actual* faculty.

Uh-oh.

Something like 70 "temporaries" and 80 real faculty. And, since the 70 taught full loads, they got a vote in departmental meetings. And, since the 70 were more likely to attend boring departmental meetings than the 80 . . . pretty soon . . .

Anyway, the University fired 50 of 'em. The English Department's "governance structure" has been placed in what U.S. calls a "limited form of receivership" and youngsters attending the state's largest university may learn to write. Or they may not.

And caught in the middle, as 346K gasps its last? . . . Your youngsters and mine.

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