

IMPROVING THE WRITING SKILLS

OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN—MADISON

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## Introduction

What should the Madison faculty do to bring about an improvement in the ability of undergraduates to communicate effectively through their writing and speaking? This report presents the initial findings of the Task Group on Student Writing and Speaking, a subcommittee of the U.W.-Madison Committee on Undergraduate Education; suggests courses of action, and outlines a number of recommendations. For the present, we direct our attention to writing skills, hoping to say more about speaking skills in a subsequent report. We acknowledge the generous help provided by the many people with whom we met to gather information about the state of student writing and speaking, as well as suggestions about what should be done to improve these essential skills.

Part I of the report presents the Committee's views about the role and importance of writing skills. Part II surveys the available evidence on changes that have occurred in student writing skills. Part III reviews the communication skills requirement and its evolution, as well as current efforts to improve the writing competence of undergraduate students. Part IV offers a preliminary assessment. Part V raises a series of questions that deserve fuller exploration as we seek to bolster our system for improving student writing skills. Part VI reviews possible modifications in the existing mechanisms and discusses the creation of additional mechanisms for assuring the writing competence of our students. Part VII offers our conclusions and recommendations.

### I. Writing Skills and a University Education

The ability to write good expository English is the mark of an educated person. It is also prerequisite to achieving the purposes of a university education. Entering freshman students who do not possess at least minimal skills in written exposition are likely to encounter difficulty in their university coursework and thus be unable to take full advantage of the University's rich offerings. If students already enrolled do not have varied opportunities to augment these skills, their abilities to think clearly and transmit ideas effectively will remain undeveloped, handicapping them not only while they are students but for the rest of their lives.

That these skills are of the greatest importance needs no spirited or lengthy defense. Educators and employers have consistently stressed the need for these skills. And though some might argue that these basic skills are less essential in an electronic age, this Committee remains unpersuaded. The discipline demanded for effective writing forces the clarity of thinking that is essential to clear and precise verbal communication.

By long tradition, the basic writing skills have been taught in the nation's elementary and secondary schools. These skills have been sharpened in the colleges by requiring students to take composition courses during their early college years. They have been further developed and broadened through a variety of writing assignments in students' major fields of concentration during their junior and senior years.

A gradual and substantial improvement in writing and other basic skills of students entering college became evident in the early 1960's, as reflected by test score data and informed opinion. For this and a variety of other reasons, many colleges and universities had by the early 1970's relaxed their composition requirements, by either reducing or, in some cases, eliminating required composition courses.



While these curricular changes were taking place here and elsewhere, however, the basic skills of entering freshmen had already begun to stabilize. And since then, they have declined sharply. Recent and widespread publicity about these declines has strengthened judgments formed earlier by many individual faculty members. As a result, there have been calls for both the colleges and high schools to concentrate greater effort on the teaching of writing.

Three types of suggestion have emerged. One is to make certain that entering college students possess basic skills at least equivalent to those they demonstrated in the 1960's. Another is to offer more and perhaps varied types of instruction in writing to students early in their college careers. A third is to provide more opportunities for college students to augment the basic skills while studying in their major fields, so that students emerge from college with well-developed writing skills at least in their specialities.

All these suggestions involve questions of educational philosophy, technical feasibility, and resource availability. Before considering proposed solutions, we shall review the evidence on the writing competence of undergraduate students.

## II. A Review of the Evidence

The Committee bases its conclusion that a large and growing number of students at Madison have difficulty writing on the following kinds of evidence.

- Recent reports by the Educational Testing Service and the American College Testing Program indicate declines in the verbal skills of prospective college students across the nation. Studies by the National Assessment of Educational Progress reveal that the ability of 17-year-olds to write, as demonstrated by actual writing samples, has deteriorated over the past five years. Though the reasons for the declines may not be fully understood as yet, the fact that a real decline has occurred appears reasonable.
- Clear-cut evidence is available that the verbal skills of entering freshmen at the U.W.-Madison campus has declined sharply since the late 1960's. Scores on a standardized, 75-item test of verbal knowledge and skills (the College Qualification Test) have dropped to their lowest levels since this testing program began in 1957. The magnitude of the recent decline is apparent from a comparison of the scores for 1975 and for 1968, the year of the highest scores. The median score (meaning that 50 percent of the students received higher scores and 50 percent received lower scores) was 57 in 1968; by 1975 it had dropped to 48. Only 22 percent of the students taking the exam in 1975 exceeded the 1968 median score. This indicates a decline in the verbal skills of new freshmen. And since the verbal score on this standardized test is used as one factor in exempting students from a one-semester course requirement in communication skills (English composition or speech), the placement authorities apparently regard it as an effective indicator of ability to write and speak effectively.
- Scores on the previously-used English Recognition Test, employed with the CQT-Verbal score to determine whether students must take a communication skills course, also declined from 1968 through 1974. The median score on this 150-item test fell from 108 to 95.



- Students are experiencing ever greater difficulties in passing an English Usage Test which is prerequisite to enrolling in the Journalism School's courses in news writing. Before 1970 approximately 25 percent of the students failed the test. In 1974 more than one-third of the students failed the test, and in 1975 approximately 60 percent failed the test.
- More and more students seek help or are referred to the Writing Laboratory for assistance with their writing. In fall 1973, the third year of operation, about 400 students visited the Lab; this rose to over 800 students in Fall 1974, and to almost 1000 students, who made 3500 visits, in Fall 1975.
- A 1974 survey by the College of Letters and Science showed that three-fourths of the department chairmen believed that students in the College were not adequately prepared to do the writing necessary for their college work.
- Surveys in 1971 and 1975 reveal that students are aware of the need to develop their competency in writing.
- A recent symposium on student writing, sponsored by the TA-Faculty Committee of the Department of English, concluded that much work is needed to improve the writing skills of undergraduate students even though no agreement could be reached about how this might be best accomplished.
- Finally, as we carried on our investigations, we heard many faculty comment about the poor quality of writing and speaking of students and about the deterioration in student skills they perceive since the 1960's. The recent announcement by the Chancellor that he will appoint a special committee on student writing gives further evidence of concern for the problem.

This abundance of evidence and concern reflects a growing realization by the faculty that something must be done. Unless the downward trend in student abilities to write well and to speak clearly can be reversed, the all-important teaching mission of the U.W.-Madison campus will continue to be undermined.

### III. The Communication Skills Requirements and Its Evolution

The present requirement in communication skills grew out of a report of the Curriculum Review Committee to the College of Letters and Science in Spring 1971. This requirement, shaped by a series of events in the preceding years, is reviewed here.

Throughout the 1950's the Madison campus required all freshmen to complete a year-long English course, English 101 and 102.\* Students who did poorly on an English placement test taken at the time they registered were required to enroll in a non-credit remedial course, after which they began the regular sequence. The first course, English 101, put heavy stress on basic composition skills. Students who received a grade of A in English 101 were exempt from the second course, English 102, which provided instruction in a combination of writing and literature. After completing a year-long sophomore course in English or American Literature, students seeking a Bachelor of Science degree were required to enroll in English 201, Intermediate Composition. Students seeking a Bachelor of Arts degree could elect to take English 201.

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\*All courses are referred to by their present numbers.



About 1960, students obtaining high scores on the placement examination were enrolled in an honors course, English 181, the completion of which fully satisfied the English composition requirement. At the same time, exemption from English 102 based on a grade of A in English 101 was eliminated. By 1963, as part of a broad curriculum review the University eliminated the distinction between the B.A. and B.S. degrees, with the result that English 201 became an elective for virtually all students.

By the late 1960's, when it became apparent that entering freshmen possessed stronger writing skills than their predecessors, the English Department began considering how to adjust its course offerings. Beginning in 1968, English 101 was restructured as a course primarily for students who had been identified by the English Recognition Test as needing additional help in writing. Most students were permitted to go into English 102 immediately, and they fulfilled the writing requirement by passing the course.

In early 1970 the Department of English voted to discontinue at the end of 1969-70 the teaching of English 102 and its honors course counterpart, English 181. A Writing Laboratory was established within the English Department to offer, beginning in 1970-71, tutorial and small-group instruction for those students who needed help with any aspect of college writing. These changes made it necessary for the College of Letters and Science faculty to adjust its requirement. In May 1970 the requirement was modified to call for the completion of a one-semester English composition course, English 101, with the possibility of exemption through a placement test.

In the spring of 1971, as part of a broad curriculum review, the College of Letters and Science established a new English requirement. Students were required to demonstrate their competence in English by passing a placement examination, or by completing a one-semester course in composition or public speaking at the college level. Students were also required to be certified for competence in English, presumably writing, by their major department or adviser. This made it necessary for individual departments to establish their criteria for certifying that their students were competent in writing. These requirements, subsequently accepted by the entire faculty and implemented in various ways by the other colleges, remain in force today.

In fall 1975, the College of Letters and Science voted to inaugurate a two-year experimental program of testing all first-semester juniors. It is hoped that the results of this test will aid departments in determining which student majors possess competence in writing and in revising methods for developing this competence in those who are deficient.

The present requirements operate as follows. Each year all entering freshman students are given the English Placement Test (EPT). Students also take the College Qualification Test (CQT). Students who answer correctly less than 54 of the 100 multiple-choice questions on the EPT and less than 35 of the 75 multiple-choice questions on the verbal portion of the CQT must fulfill the communication skills requirement by enrolling in a one-semester course in composition (English 101) or speech (Communication Arts 102 or 105). Upon passing one of these courses, the student fulfills the first part of the requirement.

Prior to their final semester before graduation, students must be certified as to their writing competence in their major. The methods devised by departments and



colleges for students to demonstrate competence vary considerably. Several of the professional schools require their students to complete specially designed courses on writing in the discipline. In some of the Letters and Science departments student papers are read and evaluated by faculty committees as part of the certification procedure. In a number of major departments the certification process has little meaning because satisfactory completion of coursework in the major is taken as indicative of having achieved writing competence.

At any time, students, both undergraduate and graduate, can seek assistance at the Writing Laboratory which offers help tailored to their writing difficulties. The extent of a student's need for such help in no way determines eligibility to use the lab. No fees are charged for this service, nor is any academic credit offered to students who use it.

#### IV. A Preliminary Assessment

The University turned away from a comprehensive English composition program which operated through the 1950's and well into the last half of the 1960's. The changes since then have been dramatic—perhaps more dramatic than is realized by many faculty members. The impact of these changes is discussed next.

A starting point is provided by comparing several measures of the average achievement of entering freshmen: high school class rank, and two measures of writing skills, the CQT-Verbal score, and the English Placement Test (previously the English Recognition Test) score.

#### Selected Measures of Achievement of Entering Freshmen in Fall Semester

| Academic<br>Year | Median<br>Centile<br>High School<br>Class Rank | Median Raw Score<br>College Qualification<br>Test-Verbal | Median Raw Score<br>English Recognition<br>Test | Median Raw Score<br>English Placement<br>Test |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| 1957-58          | 78                                             | 47                                                       | n.a.                                            | --                                            |
| 1963-64          | 79                                             | 55                                                       | n.a.                                            | --                                            |
| 1968-69          | 83                                             | 58                                                       | 108                                             | --                                            |
| 1972-73          | 81                                             | 51                                                       | 100                                             | --                                            |
| 1975-76          | 81                                             | 48                                                       | 96*                                             | 65                                            |

\*Note: This figure is for 1974 but is shown to provide a means linking the old ERT and the new EPT scores.

Sources: Wisconsin State Testing Program.

All three measures move in much the same fashion, rising from the late 1950's to the late 1960's and then falling sharply in the 1970's. It appears that while average high school rank in 1975 still exceeds that in 1957, the quality of students as measured by the CQT-Verbal score does not differ appreciably from 1957. However, the 1975 CQT-Verbal and ERT are substantially below their 1968 levels. (For a more comprehensive set of data, see Appendix Table 1.)



Against this background, the accelerating erosion of the English composition requirement can be seen. In 1957 virtually all students took at least two courses (English 101 and 102) and a sizeable fraction of them took a third course (English 201). This continued into the 1960's despite the creation of the honors course (English 181). A major change occurred in 1968 when the two-course requirement was effectively abolished by allowing most students to be exempted from English 101. Therefore, most students took one course. With the further relaxation of the requirement in 1971, the proportion of students taking one or more courses plummeted. In 1975-76 less than 10 percent of entering students take even one composition course.

Estimated Percentage of Entering Students Taking Different Numbers  
of Composition Courses, Based on Then-Current Requirements

| Academic<br>Year | Number of Courses |     |     |       |
|------------------|-------------------|-----|-----|-------|
|                  | None              | One | Two | Three |
| 1957-58          | 0                 | 4   | 78  | 18    |
| 1963-64          | 0                 | 10  | 70  | 20    |
| 1968-69          | 0                 | 97  | 3   | 0     |
| 1972-73          | 93                | 5   | 2   | 0     |
| 1975-76          | 91                | 8   | 1   | 0     |

Source: Estimated by this committee from enrollment data for English Composition courses.

Students preparing for elementary and secondary teaching are similarly affected. In the 1950's and early 1960's many of them took three composition courses—English 101, 102, and 201; prospective English teachers also took English 309, an advance composition course designed for those who seek certification to teach English. Now, the only prospective teachers who take any composition courses are those who plan to teach English, and they take only English 309. Whether two required courses in the structure of language are appropriate substitutes for additional composition courses for English-teacher trainees is not clear.

While this was happening, grading standards in English composition courses changed dramatically. Data for fall 1963-64 show that over 50 percent of the grades in English 101 were C's; the grade-point average for the course was 2.11. Grades of A were rare and B's were not plentiful; grades of D and F were awarded with some frequency. A steady rise in grades has occurred since then, so that by fall 1975 the percentage of C's had fallen to 21.0; the percentage of F's did not differ appreciably but the percentage of D's fell by one-half. As a result, the grade-point average for the course rose to 2.55.

Whatever the reasons for these changes, those students with the weakest writing skills who must enroll in a remedial composition course, now receive higher grades than did the average freshman student just a bit over a decade ago. Put another way, students whose CQT-Verbal scores averaged well below 35 in 1975 receive higher grades than did students whose scores averaged 48 in 1957. Thus, the small fraction of present English 101 students who might have been most likely to receive D's and F's in English 101 a dozen or more years ago, now obtain quite respectable grades,



Percentage Distribution of Grades in English 101  
and Average Grade Point for the Course

| <u>Grades</u>    | <u>Fall 1963</u> | <u>Fall 1968</u> | <u>Fall 1972</u> | <u>Fall 1975</u> |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| A                | 3.5              | 5.3              | 14.0             | 4.8              |
| AB               | *                | *                | *                | 13.6             |
| B                | 24.5             | 27.4             | 45.9             | 24.7             |
| BC               | *                | *                | *                | 24.2             |
| C                | 55.6             | 49.5             | 32.6             | 21.0             |
| D                | 12.2             | 7.4              | 0.0              | 5.3              |
| F                | 4.1              | 4.2              | 3.5              | 5.3              |
| Other            | 0.1              | 6.3              | 4.1              | 1.0              |
|                  | 18.1             |                  | 7.6              |                  |
|                  | 17.9             |                  | 11.6             |                  |
| Total            | 100.0            | 100.1            | 100.1            | 99.9             |
| Average (Mean)   |                  |                  |                  |                  |
| Grade Point      | 2.11             | 2.33             | 2.70             | 2.55             |
| Number of Grades | 3603             | 95               | 172              | 396              |

\*These grades were not given at the time.

Source: Registrar's Office; fall 1975 percentages based on data from grade sheets.

with 15-20 percent of them receiving grades of A and AB. The message received by freshman students who pass English 101 is that their writing skills are entirely adequate for their needs as university students.

Whatever may have been the defects of the old one-year sequence of composition courses (English 101 and 102), it provided students with a core of readings, a knowledge of grammar and the elements of effective prose, and experience in writing a dozen papers per semester. It also meant that every student owned (at least during the freshman year) a dictionary and a writer's handbook. This made it possible for other faculty to assume a common set of knowledge, skills and experience among their students. Now no such assumptions can be made and, as a result, important background on which later coursework builds has been lost.

V. Questions About Existing Mechanisms for Promoting Competence in Communication Skills

This review of the evidence, the description of the requirement, and the preliminary assessment raises a series of questions. Because we do not have the answers to these questions, and because the data needed to answer them are unavailable at the moment, intelligent consideration of various proposals for change is difficult. Further information and analysis is necessary. The first seven questions are directly related to our charge. The last two questions, though considerably broader, must be addressed in formulating long-run solutions.



1. How effective are multiple-choice examinations such as the U.W. English Placement Test, the Journalism School's Test of English Usage, the CQT-Verbal score, and the new English Proficiency Examination of the Educational Testing Service, in determining whether students can write clear, well-organized paragraphs and papers? How close is the overall agreement between scores on these exams and expert appraisals of writing samples from the same students? For example, does a closer relationship exist for students with high test scores than low test scores? It is striking that no written reports exist describing the effectiveness of the various English tests used here to measure the quality of students' composition skills. While it is said that the cost of collecting and evaluating samples of the writing of entering students would be high, there are considerable costs in relying so heavily on a testing program whose effectiveness has yet to be demonstrated and verified. In fact, the problems of obtaining agreement among independent readers may not be as great as has often been suggested, according to a report on an experiment carried out by Professor Herbert Wang of the Geology Department and Professor William G. Lenehan of the English Department. (See H. F. Wang and W. T. Lenehan, "Freshman English Revisited," 15 January 1975, U.W.-Madison, Department of Geology, ditto.)

2. If it can be demonstrated in research here at the Madison campus that multiple-choice tests, and specifically the EPT and CQT-Verbal, provide a good measure of the ability of students to write effective prose, the next question is what should be the cutoff levels to apply in deciding what kind of writing help each student needs. What is the justification for employing a score of 35 on the CQT-Verbal, a score of 54 on the EPT, and a combination of these scores to determine which students must take the required communication skills course? Is it defensible to justify the existing cutoffs on the basis of limited resources—i.e., on the basis of the argument that no additional funds can be obtained to take care of the actual "need" for remedial help? Should the cutoff scores instead be perhaps only 20 or 30, or should they be much higher, say, 50 or 60? What skills and knowledge is it reasonable to expect entering students to have mastered in preparation for university coursework? So far, no published reports exist that provide a rationale for the cutoff scores now used with the new English Placement Test. There is a glaring lack of research on these questions, despite the important role of the cutoff scores in determining a student's academic program.

3. How effective are the required communication skills courses—English 101 and Communication Arts 101 and 105—in helping students improve their writing and speaking skills? How can the improvement in these skills be measured, aside from grades? Has there been any pre- and post-testing of students in an effort to identify how much improvement takes place? Have other similar groups not enrolled in these courses been tested as control groups in an effort to isolate the impact of these courses on the development of student skills? To what degree is observed improvement permanent and lasting, as might be indicated by a retesting a year or two later? The experiment planned in the College of Letters and Science will shed some light on these questions, but much more work remains to be done. In the interim it would be useful to administer the EPT to students at the completion of the three communication skills courses to measure what changes or improvements occurred. Only in this way can it be known whether satisfactory completion of these courses implies achievement of the level of writing competence equal to students who were exempted from the requirement.

4. How well-trained are the teaching assistants who teach English 101, Communication Arts 101 and 105, and English 201? What criteria are employed in the selection of TAs for these courses? How many of these TAs have themselves never completed a college composition course? Have they had systematic training in the



teaching of composition, either prior to or concurrent to their appointment as TAs? Have any of them been tested using the EPT? How wide is their acquaintance with materials for teaching composition? What kinds of training programs are presently available for the TAs? How effective are these programs? Should TAs be required to have at least a week of intensive training in teaching composition before registration week? Should the TAs perhaps be given a course in the pedagogy of composition, as well as regular training sessions? These are important questions in assessing the effectiveness of present TA-taught writing courses.

5. Can the effectiveness of the present requirement for certifying the writing competence of students in their majors be evaluated? Do these requirements have any "teeth", or are they only "paper" requirements? Have certain types of requirements been found to be more effective than others? How many students have been identified as not possessing writing competence in their majors? How do they remedy their deficiencies? Almost no answers exist for these questions. It is known that a survey of department chairmen by the College of Letters and Science indicated substantial faculty dissatisfaction with the methods used in departments to assess the competence of their students in expository writing. Yet the Registrar's Office reports that, last May, perhaps no more than a dozen of the 4,000 or so graduating seniors were denied degrees because of a failure to be certified for writing competence; that so few were not certified is surprising in light of the quality of the writing produced by seniors. The evidence has been clear for some time that this requirement needs to be shored up or supplanted with something that has meaning and value.

6. How best can the effectiveness of the individualized teaching of the Writing Laboratory be evaluated? Certainly management of ideas, increased confidence in approaching writing, and so on, cannot be measured easily by objective tests; but can questionnaires or interviews, follow-up on grades, or some other such method be used to ascertain how students and faculty who use the Laboratory evaluate the instruction? The Writing Laboratory's growth indicates that students seek such help, but further evaluation should help determine how much and what type of expansion of resources must be made if the Laboratory is to play a major role in meeting current needs.

7. What is known about how lower and upper division coursework promotes the development either of minimal competence or of advanced levels of proficiency in writing? How much writing does the average lower division student do in freshman and sophomore courses? How much of this writing is examinations? Laboratory reports? Expository papers? Irrespective of the amount and kind of writing, how much of it is read and evaluated both for its content and its mode of presentation? How frequently do students receive comments on their papers about the quality of their writing? A limited survey in a large lower-division course early this semester revealed several interesting results: large proportions of students are typically examined with objective-type questions; aside from English courses, students were required to write papers in less than a third of their courses; and a majority of the courses that did require papers made only minimal writing demands on the students. Would not a systematic survey of the amount of writing students do be useful? Even if more were known about student writing, we would still know little about faculty attitudes. What is the judgment of faculty about student writing in general and about different kinds of student writing? What deficiencies crop up most frequently in student papers? Why do faculty require the kinds and amounts of student writing they do? Do faculty members believe that some kind of assistance would facilitate their task of evaluating student papers?

8. How effective is the training in writing and speaking of students who graduate and become elementary, secondary, and college teachers? A decline in the



amount of instruction in composition for prospective elementary and secondary teachers in general and English teachers in particular has already been noted. Should the writing requirements for teachers be increased? What is the relationship between additional courses in writing (and speaking) and the ability of teachers to stimulate the development of these skills among their students? Should additional courses be offered to already-qualified teachers who wish to improve their writing and their ability to teach writing? Should there not be equal concern about the writing skills of students who are prospective college teachers? How many graduate students are deficient in their writing and speaking skills when admitted to graduate school? How many of them require help to bring their skills to the high levels needed for effective college teaching? What are effective ways for ensuring that teachers at whatever level will give needed emphasis in their teaching to the development of student writing skills?

9. What forces in the home, society, and elementary and secondary schools account for the decline in the verbal test scores that are taken as indicative of student skills in writing and speaking? What are the most effective ways of reversing the downward trends in these scores? To what extent do changes in university requirements help account for these declines? What accounts for the apparently pervasive decline in test scores for not only grades 9-12 but also for grades 3-8, as revealed by several recent reports. What accounts for the substantive grade inflation in the high schools from the early 1960's to the mid-1970's? What is likely to be the effect of these two forces on student performance and behavior in college?

#### VI. Alternatives to Existing Programs

Alternatives which expand or augment existing programs may take two directions:

- (1) changes in requirements (admission, passing level of the present EPT, advancement to junior standing, graduation) to assure certain minimum standards of competence,
- (2) allotment of resources and development of methods that will improve the necessary skills, as these are defined for entering students and for university graduates.

In the following pages we shall first outline a variety of alternatives or modifications of the present system, and then discuss briefly some advantages and disadvantages of each alternative. While it is difficult to determine even approximately the resource costs of these alternatives, it is important to realize that the existing system is not without costs. Although resources going into formal instruction in writing are currently much smaller than they were a decade ago, the real costs of the present requirements can be identified, if not precisely measured. One is the reduced effectiveness of all instruction, caused by the declining levels of communication skills presented by entering students. Another is the failure of students to acquire the skills and discipline they need in the 40 to 50 years of active life ahead of them. Though these costs cannot easily be quantified, they are nonetheless real.

We have identified three sets of alternatives. They are first listed below, and then discussed in detail.

#### A. Alternatives that replace the present system

1. Establish an English competence requirement for admission to the University.
2. Establish an English competence requirement for graduation.
3. Reinstitute a required course similar to English 101.
4. Develop a set of basic courses, one of which is required.



B. Alternatives that supplement the present system

1. Expand the Writing Laboratory.
2. Expand the number of elective writing courses.
3. Expand programs providing required remedial help.
4. Encourage faculty to place more emphasis on expository writing and speaking skills.
5. Encourage departments to strengthen their competence requirements.

C. Alternatives that substantially modify the present system

1. Institute an English competence test at the junior level combined with mandatory referral to courses and the Writing Laboratory.
2. Reduce the number of students exempted from required communication skills courses and
  - (a) Expand present mandatory program (English 101 or a set of courses);
  - or (b) Institute a dual-level mandatory program for those not exempted, with the weakest required to take English 101, and the others required to obtain consultation from the Writing Laboratory;
  - or (c) Replace the present mandatory program with another program outside the Madison campus (e.g., Extension).

A.1. Establish an English Competence Requirement for Entrance to the University. This involves using some test instrument, perhaps in conjunction with high school grades, courses in English, etc., to assess the ability of students to write, and to help determine their admissibility to the Madison campus.

Advantages. A change in high school English curricula might result immediately, leading to more emphasis on the acquisition of communication skills at the educational level where most agree it belongs--pre-college. New reporting techniques ("New Freshmen Profile") are being developed that provide information to high schools about how well their students fare at Madison. Second, this proposal involves no added costs to University programs and, in fact, it might result in some savings through a reduced need for communication skills courses and the Writing Laboratory. Why should the University bear the financial burden for what are essentially remedial programs? Third, by raising admission standards, the University might be relieved of some of the responsibility it now has for the low competence of its graduates. If individuals were responsible for financing their own remedial work, there would seem to be many advantages and few disadvantages to the institution of an English Competency Admission Requirement.

Disadvantages. First, there are obvious difficulties in the administration of such a requirement. What test or combination of tests could be used with complete confidence that the right things were tested? Second, would this system be fair? What of the excellent high school student who does poorly (because of a "bad" day)? Should that student be denied admission to the University on this test alone? Should a single test carry that much weight? Third, how would the standards be set? Would some absolute minimum score be used as the cutoff, or would a percentile cutoff be used? Fourth, students are now allowed to enter the University with certain deficiencies to be made up after admission. Why should English be treated differently? What about the discrepancy that would be created between the treatment of residents and foreign students applying for admission? Fifth, would such a requirement obligate the University to provide a plan, if not an actual program, for remedial work to enable



applicants to pass the exam at some later time? If so, why not admit the student with deficiencies, and institute a mandatory remedial program?

- A.2. Establish an English Competence Requirement for Graduation. This proposal calls for testing all seniors in their final semester before graduation and then recording the result on their transcript. If the ability to write is viewed as important, all students would be convened on a Saturday in their senior year to produce a short paper which would become a part of their transcript. Some specified level of competence would be a requirement for graduation, or alternatively, whatever level of competence was achieved could be entered on the transcript.

Advantages. Responsibility for achieving competence is placed on the student. By not requiring any given level of competence for graduation, the burden of determining whether students have the ability to write well is left to employers and others who can judge the evidence as they see fit. Whether or not a standard of competence were required for graduation, students would probably need to take additional courses to enhance their competence in writing.

Disadvantages. This approach does not assure that students write well while in college. The demand for writing courses, use of the Writing Laboratory, and pressure for writing in other courses would be difficult to estimate, at least initially. It seems clear, however, that the education of college students would continue to suffer for want of clear writing.

- A.3. Reinstitute a Basic Required Course Similar to the Old English 102. This proposal is essentially a return to the old one-semester English composition requirement, with English 101 still open to those students who are grossly deficient.

Advantages. The University retains control over the standards of competence it desires and the methods utilized for improvement of communication skills.

Disadvantages. First, the costs (estimated at \$750,000) are almost prohibitive without either (a) the generation of new funds, or (b) the redirection of existing resources (personnel and hence funding) to this program. Since (a) is unlikely, the proposal requires a sacrifice in existing programs. Whether departments and colleges are ready to make this sacrifice is not clear. Second, we should not lose sight of the reasons why required courses so often fail: (a) not everyone needs the course; (b) the artificiality of the course and its assignments, combined with its required nature, does not make for the most effective learning environment; and (c) the sheer size of the course makes for difficulty in providing effective and uniform instruction. There is little assurance that the required course as it was offered here or as these courses are structured in other schools actually prepare students for writing throughout their college years and in life. Third, these courses tend to emphasize written communication over more general communication skills; at best such large courses are unevenly taught; without continuing practice and without specific application to writing in other disciplines, students often fail to sustain skills learned as a freshman requirement. And finally, from a pragmatic viewpoint, there is considerable doubt whether the faculty as a whole would be in favor of the sacrifices necessary to return to the old system.

- A.4. Develop a Set of Basic Courses, One of Which is Required. This calls for identifying existing courses that in fact require (or with slight modification



could require) the development of minimal competence in communication skills for a passing grade in the course. These would have to be freshman-sophomore courses.

Advantages. First, relatively little additional funding might be required to allow such courses to develop the requisite skills and serve to certify minimum competence. The basic science, social science, and humanities courses could serve this purpose. Second, this change would allow each college to determine whether it has existing courses that serve or could easily be made to serve this function. Third, a number of the disadvantages establishing a graduation requirement (A.2) are avoided. Fourth, a selection of courses would allow for emphasis on a variety of skills (written expression, oral expression, reading comprehension, and research and reporting techniques) with the emphasis determined by the colleges themselves.

Disadvantages. First, much further study and planning is required to identify such courses or potential courses. Second, the problem of applying equitable standards through the University arises. Third, insofar as this requirement is instituted merely to correct deficiencies rather than to develop college-level skills, we would be employing our faculty inappropriately. Fourth, some duplication of effort would occur if students took several of these courses. Fifth, additional training of faculty and TAs would be required to make this alternative an effective one.

- B.1. Expand the Writing Laboratory. This involves additional funding for the Writing Laboratory, perhaps allowing the offering of more short specialized training programs such as they now provide for journalism students. Greater use would be made of referral systems to the Writing Lab. More extensive follow-up could be instituted for those students who have minimal but passing scores on entrance tests.

Advantages. The advantages of expanding existing voluntary facilities are obvious, especially in view of the increasing use made of the Writing Lab. Certainly motivation is essential if a student is to persist in efforts to improve writing skills. Also, improvement occurs at various levels, and the Writing Laboratory now works with students who are good writers and wish to become better ones, as well as with those that are poor writers.

Disadvantages. One can question the extent to which the University should divert its financial and personnel commitments to the support of programs that, although useful, are largely remedial. Moreover, there are doubts as to whether the voluntary programs can alleviate enough of the problems that are identified, unless faculty members generally become more active in counseling students to take advantage of the opportunities these programs offer.

- B.2. Expand Elective Courses in Writing. English 102, discussed above, would be made an elective course. In addition, a writing course in each of the four divisional areas--physical, biological, and social sciences; and the humanities--would be established for upper division students. Whether these courses should be within the English Department, attached as short courses to the Writing Laboratory, or scattered through various departments, is not yet clear.

Advantages. These courses, staffed by instructors knowledgeable to at least some degree about writing problems in the four areas, would provide opportunities not now available to most students. English 201, the only general intermediate composition course, now requires a year of literature which effectively deters some students from enrolling.



Disadvantages. The only disadvantage is that of finding qualified instructors. It should, however, be possible to locate enough people to offer at least a few sections of each of these courses.

- B.3. Expand Programs Providing Required Remedial Help. There are a number of possibilities. For example, instructors of first semester freshmen would report on students' English competence prior to the 14th week of classes. As a result, second semester freshmen would be required to take English 101 or consult with the Writing Laboratory. A second possibility would be for each college to designate certain courses (at least one in every department) in which such reports would be made.

Advantages. First, existing facilities and programs are used, but an additional means of identifying those who need improvement is instituted. Thus, the actual employment of communication skills in an academic context becomes an additional basis for referral, rather than simply a score on a multiple-choice test. Second, a dual referral system could be instituted: those who need intensive, long-term help could be required to take a remedial course, while those who need more limited help can be referred to the Writing Laboratory.

Disadvantages. First, there is a real question concerning how much writing first-semester freshmen are doing; many of their courses may have little writing on which to base a report. Second, there is the question of how much writing can be attempted and evaluated in many of the large lecture courses. Third, there is no way of knowing in advance the extent to which existing programs will need to be expanded. Thus, problems of planning and funding may arise. Fourth, there is the recurring question of the extent to which remedial programs for non-disadvantaged students should be subsidized, thereby diverting needed funds away from regular academic programs.

- B.4. Encourage All Faculty to Put More Emphasis on Writing Skills. Some limited resources could be used effectively to show faculty how to emphasize the development of these skills among their students. This might include suggestions for time-saving methods of evaluating papers, for more specific and directed assignments, for the use of shorter rather than longer papers, for useful speaking exercises, and so on.

Advantages. Ideally, the continuing development of these skills is a part of the instructional process. Encouraging their use in the context of courses in a discipline should help show students the importance of clear writing and speaking.

Disadvantages. Faculty may be less than enthusiastic, believing that outsiders are trying to subject them to unnecessary scrutiny. Also, additional time and effort will be needed to facilitate the development of these skills.

- B.5. Encouraging Departments to Strengthen Their Competence Requirements. Here again, a small expenditure of resources could demonstrate to departments various ways of making this requirement a useful and manageable one. Unfortunately, departments were given little assistance when they had to develop their own competence requirements, with the result that the requirements were written to comply with the need to have them rather than to help students improve their writing.

Advantages. The integrity of departments can be enhanced by showing them legitimate, effective, and low-cost ways of establishing competence requirements.



Disadvantages. The task of monitoring this requirement must be shared by some subgroup of the department, since there is no convenient way to share it equally.

- C.1. Institute an English Competence Test at the Junior Level, Combined with Mandatory Referral. This proposal follows the experimental program recently approved by the College of Letters and Science, but it makes use of the results of the test for mandatory referral. The present English Placement Test for entering freshmen with its mandatory referral to a communication skills course would be retained.

Advantages. First, if the level of competence should improve during the first and second years of college, this proposal can impose higher standards of competence than those required for early undergraduate work, thereby better ensuring the English competence of our graduates. Second, in this way remedial programs can be directed toward communication skills required for successful completion of advanced coursework, not just to basic grammar and composition.

Disadvantages. First, in all but a few cases existing remedial programs would be inappropriate for juniors, who would probably not require the kind of help provided in English 101. Second, there are doubts concerning the validity of the tests for identifying anything other than general literacy (vocabulary, recognition of grammatical structure). Third, there is no apparent agreement about what should be tested at the junior level.

- C.2. Raise the Test Score Cutoff Levels so as to Reduce the Number of Students Exempted from English 101, and

- (a) Expand present mandatory program (English 101 or a set of courses)
- or (b) Institute a dual level mandatory program (requiring English 101 for the lowest-scoring students, and requiring Writing Lab consultation for low-scoring students)
- or (c) Replace the present mandatory remedial system with a self-supporting (financing) system.

These proposals are all based on the assumption that raising the minimum centile for passing the multiple-choice tests will identify a greater number of those entering students needing improvement in the communication skills requisite for academic success. Subproposals (a) and (b) involve an increase in the present remedial program, while subproposal (c) suggests a basic change in the present remedial program. Here is one possibility: require those below the new minimum centile to pass a new, non-credit course (graded P/F) in communication skills administered by University Extension on a self-supporting fee basis. This course would utilize a wide range of available teaching resources: graduate students in a variety of fields, regular part-time faculty, and qualified members of the larger academic community.

Advantages. Subproposals (a) and (b): First, no new testing or referral mechanisms need be established. Second, these subproposals utilize existing programs, and would require only increased support for those programs. Third, one can reasonably evaluate the success of these subproposals in terms of the success of present remedial programs. Fourth, if the present testing mechanism is reasonably accurate, the simplest thing to do is to raise the passing level and thereby direct a greater percentage of entering students into existing remedial programs. Of course, this presupposes that English 101 is effective in accomplishing its goals.



Disadvantages. Subproposals (a) and (b): An increase in present remedial programs will divert University resources from existing academic programs. This could be offset by charging special fees for existing remedial programs or by creating a new self-supporting program outside the University's credit offerings. Sub-proposal (c) pursues this latter alternative.

Advantages. Subproposal (c): First, this proposal would formalize what we believe the faculty as a whole supports: that remedial programs should not be subsidized from the regular instructional budget to the extent that a reduction in regular credit offerings in academic curricula is required. Second, this proposal assumes that the training of graduate students in English is not unique in preparing graduate students to serve as resource personnel for remedial courses in communication skills. In fact, under this proposal a variety of instructors could be utilized in ways more appropriate to students planning to study in areas outside of the humanities. For example, different sections of the remedial course could have different emphases--social sciences, biological sciences, physical science, engineering, agriculture, medicine--whereby part of the course would be diverted to the style of exposition, argumentation, organization and research tools relevant to communication in that area. There is every reason to think that graduate students and others in these fields have the requisite skills which, through minimal training sessions, could be put to good use, especially in these days of declining graduate support through regular teaching assistant positions. Third, by making remedial courses in communication skills self-supporting, pressure is placed more directly on the secondary school systems to improve the communication skills of the students at the pre-college level.

Disadvantages. Subproposal (c): This obviously requires a great deal of further study and planning, involving several parts of the UW system. It also would involve a new administrative structure for the remedial program.

## VII. Conclusions and Recommendations

The conclusions emerging from our investigations are as follows:

-- Possession and development of effective writing skills is central to the University's instructional program and to the learning of students.

-- The apparent deterioration in writing skills of students is alarming; it is also discouraging because of the substantial long-run effort required to offset this decline.

-- Numerous proposals exist for improving the writing skills of students but all of them are costly.

-- Raising the writing competence of undergraduate students requires the availability of additional resources or, barring that, the reallocation of resources from other programs and activities.

-- The University must take decisive action to enhance the ability of students to write effective prose.

\* \* \*



These conclusions lead to the recommendations listed below. These recommendations are based on the assumption that the development of writing skills is a continuous process requiring constant reinforcement. They also recognize that the herculean task of improving these skills must be shared--by university faculty and administrators, by the elementary and secondary teachers and school officials, and above all by students at every level.

A. STUDIES NEEDED IMMEDIATELY

1. Make available the resources to answer the questions posed in Part V of this report. These questions concern the appropriateness of multiple-choice tests of writing competence, cutoff scores employed to determine whether students need remedial help, effectiveness of the required communication skills courses, training and effectiveness of teaching assistants in these courses, strengths and weaknesses of the requirement for certifying writing competence in the major, effectiveness of the Writing Laboratory, and the extent to which regular coursework reinforces writing skills. Two other questions concern the emphasis on writing provided in the training of teachers and the larger forces which underlie the decline in writing skills. Work must start immediately so that before the fall semester begins much of the needed information will be available. Completion of additional work during the fall semester will provide a firmer basis on which to make additional recommendations next year.
2. Start work immediately to examine in detail the merits, costs, and methods of implementing each of the various alternatives outlined in Part VI of the report as well as the recommendations presented here. Much of this work could also be completed by the end of the coming summer and thereby provide a basis for additional recommendations next year. The goal is to develop a comprehensive five-year study for implementing and evaluating the results of the necessary steps aimed at improving writing skills of undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

B. ESTABLISHING LEVELS OF COMPETENCE IN WRITING

3. In setting admission standards, give more weight to writing skills through establishment of a minimum admissible level of writing competence. The exact method for determining this minimally admissible level of competence will have to be worked out. However this is done, it should include the evaluation of an applicant's actual writing unless research shows that other indirect assessment procedures can do this more accurately. Any change in admissions requirements should be phased in over a four-year period to give secondary schools, students, and their parents ample opportunity to bring the skills of potential applicants up to admissible levels.
4. As an interim measure, raise the cutoff scores used on the College Qualification Test-Verbal and the English Placement Test so as to require a larger number of students to take a required communication skills course. The judgment of this Committee is that the cutoff scores must be raised. Action is needed immediately so that additional sections of the needed courses can be scheduled in fall 1976. This will give prospective applicants for fall 1977 an opportunity to develop their writing skills during their final year of high school.



5. Establish an intermediate level of competence in writing, to be achieved by the end of the sophomore year. A uniform standard of quality should be applied to all students, but various means of satisfying this requirement can be developed. These might include (a) a high level of demonstrated competence at the time of admission to the University; (b) completion of a lower division course beyond a required communication skills course which emphasizes writing skills; (c) certification from a faculty member for whom a student has demonstrated intermediate competence through written work.
6. Establish an advanced level of competence in writing, to be achieved by the time of graduation. The student's transcript will indicate the achievement of this level of competence. If this level is not achieved, the student's transcript will carry an entry to that effect. The exact mechanism for demonstrating this level of competence must be worked out in conjunction with a thorough review of the existing requirement of competence to write in the student's major field of study.
7. Inform students each semester of their level of writing competence. This will increase students' awareness of the importance attached to writing competence. Students should be made as conscious of their level of writing competence as they are of their grade-point average. This can be accomplished by indicating on the student's current grade report or registration form the level of competence achieved, date of achievement, and any higher levels of achievement yet to be completed.

C. EXPANDING INSTRUCTION AND ASSISTANCE IN DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS

8. Establish additional opportunities for students to enhance their communication skills through a variety of elective courses. An elective lower division course in expository writing at the level of the now-discontinued English 102 is needed. In addition, certain introductory courses, or sections of them, in the various departments should give added emphasis to writing skills. A number of upper division courses emphasizing advanced expository writing are needed and should be oriented around the writing needs of students in their disciplines--humanities, social sciences, and the physical and biological sciences.
9. Expand the Writing Laboratory to provide a wider variety of assistance to students who have writing difficulties or who wish to improve their writing skills. This expansion could include a number of short, non-credit courses that provide help with general communication skills (organization, paragraph development, use of supporting evidence, and so on). It could also include sessions on specific writing problems encountered by students in the various divisions, schools, and colleges within the University. The expansion of the services of the Writing Laboratory will require additional space, instructional materials, and professional personnel.
10. Encourage faculty members to give more emphasis to the development and improvement of student communication skills in their courses. To that end, utilize University resources to aid them in doing this effectively. Suggestions on how to do this should be solicited from the teaching faculty, coordinated, and given wide distribution during the next academic year.



11. The English Department, the Communication Arts Department, and other departments, schools, and colleges, may wish to institute required training programs for instructors of courses which give primary attention to developing writing competence. Given the importance of the skills taught in these courses, the entire University has a concern with the effectiveness of these courses.
12. The faculty may wish to consider the advisability of allowing prerequisites in certain courses to include the level of writing competence. No suggestions are offered about how such a plan might be designed or implemented, but it would go far to indicate faculty concern with writing competence.
13. The Graduate School and the various schools and departments may wish to consider the advisability of requiring that all graduate students demonstrate an advanced level of competence in writing.

D. REPORTING THE UNIVERSITY'S PROGRESS

14. As action is taken on each of these recommendations, information about the resulting changes must be circulated widely, to the University community, to the school systems throughout the State, to parents, and to the citizenry.
15. Each spring for the next five years a report shall be presented to the Faculty Senate reporting on progress achieved in improving writing skills, shortcomings in the program to improve writing skills, and additional actions that are needed.



Appendix Table 1

Comparative Data on U. W. - Madison Freshmen

|                                                        | 1957-58 | 1963-64 | 1968-69 | 1972-73 | 1975-76 |
|--------------------------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. Median High School Rank Centile                     | 78      | 79      | 83      | 81      | 81      |
| 2. College Qualification Test                          |         |         |         |         |         |
| Verbal                                                 | 46      | 55      | 58      | 51      | 48      |
| Numerical                                              | 34      | 36      | 41      | 37      | 36      |
| Total*                                                 | 126     | 145     | 151     | 138     | 129     |
| 3. English Placement Test (first used in fall 1975-76) |         |         |         |         | 65      |
| 4. English Recognition Test                            | N.A.    | N.A.    | 108     | 100     | 96**    |
| 5. Scholastic Aptitude Test                            |         |         |         |         |         |
| Mean Verbal                                            | N.A.    | 530-539 | 569     | 544     | N.A.    |
| Mean Mathematical                                      | N.A.    | 550-559 | 597     | 583     | N.A.    |
| 6. American College Test                               |         |         |         |         |         |
| Mean Composite                                         | N.A.    | 24.2    | 24.8    | 21.5    | N.A.    |
| 7. Mean Freshman Grade Point Average                   | 2.23    | 2.24    | 2.59    | 2.62    | 2.70    |

Notes: Data in lines 1, 2, 3, and 4 are medians; data in lines 5, 6, and 7 are means.

\*The scores on the "Information" section of the exam are not shown separately although they are a part of the "Total" score.

\*\*This figure is for 1974 but is shown to provide a means of linking the old ERT and the new EPT scores.

Sources: Lines 1, 2, 3, 4: Wisconsin State Testing  
 Lines 5, 6: Registrar's Office except for 1963 data which is from Wisconsin State Testing Office  
 Line 7: Registrar's Office



# Express Yourself

## UW Panel Suggests Ways to Help Students Do So in Correct English

By JOHN WELTER

Of The Capital Times Staff

An "alarming deterioration" of student writing skills means the University of Wisconsin must take decisive action, even if it means taking money for costly remedial programs away from other areas, a University committee concluded Wednesday.

The UW Committee on Undergraduate Education studied the problems which UW students have with writing and suggested a number of ways to ensure that better writers are admitted to the UW and to improve the skills of those already here.

"Clear-cut evidence," both on local and national levels, indicates that the verbal skills of entering freshmen have dropped "sharply" since the late 1960s, the committee reported. Scores both on tests taken by high school students for admission to the UW and on tests they have taken at the University have dropped significantly.

Required English composition courses were dropped from UW curriculum in 1971 after several years of increasingly higher test scores. Since then students have had to be certified as competent in English usage by their departments as a requirement for graduation.

The committee identified a number of alternative approaches to the problem, ranging from re-establishing required English composition courses or passing some English competence requirement to expanding remedial programs like the English Department's writing laboratory.

**"My own view is that whatever it costs we ought to deal with this problem,"** said committee chairman Professor Bassam Shakhashiri, a chemistry professor.

What weight the committee's recommendations carry is uncertain, but the report will be distributed to faculty members and discussed.

Chancellor Edwin Young said earlier this year he would be appointing a committee to make official recommendations to him about improving writing skills, and that committee may use the Undergraduate Education Committee report as a starting point.

**"Work must start immediately so that before the fall semester begins much of the needed information will be**

**available,"** the committee report urged.

Among the recommendations included in the Undergraduate Education Committee were:

- When admissions standards are set, more weight should be given to writing skills, by establishing a minimum standard of English competence. Such standards should be phased in over a four-year period, the committee urged.

- As an interim measure, cutoff scores in English placement tests should be raised next fall so that more students are required to take some sort of "communications skills course."

- An advanced level of writing competence should be required by the time a student nears graduation, and students should be informed regularly of their level of writing competence.

The committee also recommended increasing both instruction in composi-

tion and assistance programs. The English Department's Writing Lab should be expanded, the report said, and a greater number of elective courses in writing skills should be offered.

One problem which concerned English faculty members during a symposium earlier this year was how to involve faculty throughout the University in programs to improve writing skills.

The committee suggested that departments other than English might want to institute required training courses for instructors in composition,

so that they could pass that training on to their students.

In some courses, also, the faculty should consider requiring an English composition course or some other form of writing skill development as a prerequisite for taking the courses, the committee suggested.