

To: English Department Faculty

From: The Composition Review Committee, G. Murphy, Chairman

Re: *Rationale*

The following statement is offered as background information to the revision of the composition sequence which will be before the department for consideration. The Composition Review Committee, as announced early in the fall, was charged with the responsibility of studying the entire composition program. Early in the deliberations, we decided not just to "revise" existing courses, but to "design" a composition program that we hoped would be suited to the needs of our students, our department, and our university.

In order to accomplish this task, the committee spent a great deal of time this year, not just in looking at course descriptions or hour requirements, but in discussing the general, broad questions that underlie meaningful curriculum revision: what are the needs we must meet? what are the difficulties we face? what reasonable, attainable ends can we strive for, etc.?

The committee began with a recognition of some of the problems all of us as teachers of composition in this department have faced:

1. Our composition program had not undergone close scrutiny for a long time, and important decisions affecting its "structure" had been made on an ad hoc basis.

Basically, not much except adjustment of course hours or numbers had been done to our composition offerings for some twenty years-- from, in fact, the days of "Communication" offerings. During that time, many things had happened: a removal of the "oral composition" component from our courses and a subsequent reduction in number of hours of requirement and length of time we had students; a drastic change in student academic preparation for college; exciting theory and research about the teaching of composition; the addition of mandatory placement testing; the institution of "developmental" sections of 550 and then English 520 later, etc.

During the time these significant changes in student population and the discipline itself were going on, we "adjusted" the sequence, adding courses to an existing framework (which we didn't look at carefully), revising wording, etc. There wasn't an opportunity -- or we didn't avail ourselves of it-- to "start afresh" with a complete review of the sequence.

2. Obvious problems with the courses as they now stand, particularly with the 550D sections, became increasingly apparent.

Originally, the developmental sections were instituted in order to give the lesser prepared student the opportunity to enjoy a smaller class size (and hence more individual attention) and writing center support to bring him up to the same place in ten weeks that "regularly" admitted students could attain to. That hope has simply not materialized: too many students from 550D are simply not ready for 551 (many because they lack the reading skills and ability to write about what they had read

generally emphasized more in 550R), and students dropped 551 at an alarming rate (40%). Perhaps even worse, 551 instructors found themselves between a rock and a hard place: facing either the lowering of their standards for 551 or giving NE's to an inordinate number of students. The mistake was one of theory: students who are "below average" writers need more time to develop and practice their reading and writing skills, not just more concentrated instruction. What seemed to be called for was a sequence in which students could move, entering at the place best suited for them, and arriving at the desired level of competence in writing at the end of 551. We discussed the possibility of reducing or changing the focus of what is currently being done in 551 and even moving research writing to a 600 level course. But our committee agreed that we did want students to have the experience of using writing as an investigative tool, not just for university use, but also as an activity full of value in and of itself and for them.

3. The No Entry grade has not done what it was designed to do (or hoped to be able to do).

The NE grade was instituted to give the motivated student an opportunity to work longer at his writing skills without being "punished" by D's or F's caused by lack of preparation that might not have been his fault entirely. (Remember that the NE was instituted at the same time that the requirement here was lowered from three quarters of 4 a.h. courses to two quarters of 4 q.h.) When it was put in, we had no "special track" courses geared to the special abilities (or lack of abilities) of the students.

What has actually happened with NE's is a perversion of the intent: students "use" the grade to retain grants or scholarships, they "use" it to "shop" for courses they can pass, they disappear and evade the help we as instructors can give them, etc. In addition to the internal problems with the NE we witness so often, there is a very real administrative problem with the NE in the matter of record-keeping at the university. While certainly not the most compelling reason for changing the grading system, the administration's request to look into NE abuses and problems deserves consideration.

4. The composition courses as taught in the department are so varied that expectations of the kind of work, the texts used (which reflect philosophies of teaching), assignments and activities required or encouraged, etc. offer so much variety to instructors that little "common expectation" of student work is reached.

The lack of coordination among sections of composition is rooted in two factors: the large number of people teaching and a vague, undefined course content. Text options are so many and varied that they contribute little, if anything, to coordination; little or no direction is given to type of work required. The result has been an increase of

idiosyncrasy in a (non) sequence where students have to "advance" supposedly, and yet there is no way for teachers to assume that students have had similar experiences or instruction. Certainly, no one desires to stifle the individual creativity and talent of instructors, but some degree of "common" knowledge and commitment to approach is necessary.

Our proposal, then, we hope, illustrates a better (not perfect) approach to our composition program. Basically, we have designed

- a. a sequence of four courses, with students required to possess certain skills at the entry point to each course. To the student possessing those skills (assessed to our best knowledge by the placement exam and diagnostic essay), we offer the course designed to help develop those skills. In other words, a poorly prepared student may have to take four quarters of composition (520, 540, 550, 551), but a well-prepared one can enter at 551 and complete the sequence with one course,
- b. a combination in the courses of both reading and writing experience, so that students can learn to see writing from the perspectives of both reader and writer,
- c. a course governed more closely than heretofore, with some content and expectations mandated to provide instructors with a degree of reasonable direction,
- d. a grading system that affords some time to develop skills, but does not put the student on a treadmill of unreasonable promise. The NC demonstrates clearly the need for repetition, although it does not penalize the student's overall average. However, if the student is placed correctly and if he receives a NC twice, he will have a clearer signal given him than the NC has done,
- e. a set of courses which we hope portrays writing the way we know it is done: as a process of learning language as the need occurs and in the most effective way possible. By providing students with the opportunity to devise strategies for using the process well, we will give them a much more practical kind of instruction than we have done before.

The members of the Composition Review Committee are more than happy to discuss any of these points with the members of the department.

Composition Review Committee:

G. Dwyer, chairman
E. McCracken
H. Finney
G. Salvner
J. Mason
T. Coneland
A. Budge

English 520. Basic Writing Workshop. Instruction in the skills necessary for accurate and effective writing. Focus is on the writing of syntactically well-formed and properly punctuated sentences and on the development of a variety of effective sentence patterns coherently arranged within compositions. Students meet three hours a week for lecture and three hours for individualized instruction. Does not count toward the graduation requirement in composition or the humanities area requirement. Open to students on the basis of English Placement Test results. Grading for English 520 will be A, B, C, NC. 4 q.h.

English 540. Introductory College English. Practice in developing the reading and writing skills necessary to begin English 550. Focus is on using active reading strategies including the writing of precis, summary, paraphrase, and short essays to demonstrate comprehension, retention, and application of college-level reading material. Does not count toward the graduation requirement in composition or the humanities area requirement. Open to students on the basis of English Placement Test results or upon successful completion of English 520. Grading for English 540 will be A, B, C, NC. 4 q.h.

English 550. Composition I. Strategies for writing essays, from the earliest planning stages to final revisions and editing, with emphasis on the roles of writer, audience, and purpose as they affect a piece of writing. Most essays are written in response to assigned readings. Open to students on the basis of English Placement Test results or upon successful completion of English 540. Does not count toward the major in English. Grading for English 550 will be A, B, C, NC. 4 q.h.

English 551. Composition II. Continued practice in writing essays. Emphasis is on the process of investigation: exploration of topics, formulation of tentative theses, collection of data from suitable primary and secondary sources, and appropriate presentation of the results of these inquiries. Prerequisite: English 550 or equivalent or permit on the basis of English Placement Test results. Does not count toward the major in English. Grading for English 551 will be A, B, C, NC. 4 q.h.

English 550H. Honors Composition I. Strategies for writing essays, from the earliest planning stages to final revisions and editing, with emphasis on the roles of writer, audience, and purpose as they affect a piece of writing. Writing assignments treat a broad range of ideas, especially in response to the reading of essays by masters of English prose. Stylistic experimentation is encouraged so that each student can develop a distinctive writing style. Prerequisite: eligibility for the Honors Program and permit on the basis of English Placement Test results or upon recommendation of 550 instructor. Does not count toward the major in English. Grading for 550H will be A, B, C, NC. 4 q.h.

English 551H. Honors Composition II. Executing research on a topic of some depth, resulting in a substantial investigative paper. Research is conducted independently and focused on a single project. Prerequisite: Eligibility for the Honors Program and one of the following: English 550H or equivalent, permit on the basis of English Placement Test results, or recommendation of 550 or 551 instructor. Does not count toward the major in English. Grading for English 551H will be A, B, C, NC. 4 q.h.

The following statement is offered as background information to the revisions of the composition courses which are before your committee for consideration. The changes in the courses which satisfy the university requirement in Basic Composition will, we believe, constitute a program best suited to the needs of our students and our university.

I. The review of the composition courses was undertaken because of the following problems:

1. The existing course descriptions fail to reflect current practice in the classroom and/or research about the teaching of composition.
2. Thirty-six to forty percent of students over the last several years test below the standard deemed necessary for entrance into regular English 550 courses. Current departmental practices of offering developmental sections of English 550 and use of the NE grade have not been successful alternatives to bring these students up to the level required for successful completion of the sequence, as witnessed by the forty to sixty percent attrition/failure rate in English 551.
3. The administration has requested a review of the A B C / NE grade.

II. The courses as revised offer the following solutions to these problems:

1. The description of each course has been rewritten to reflect current theory and practice and especially to integrate reading and writing instruction.
2. Entrance requirements have been established for 550 to better insure that students have the skills necessary for successful completion of the course; appropriate courses to provide students with the instruction needed to bring them to those entrance standards are offered.
3. The grading pattern in all courses has been changed to A B C / NC, thus providing a clearer picture of student progress in the sequence while giving them an opportunity to improve their skills without penalty to the GPA.