

# At Berkeley, half the frosh must take "Bonehead English." A third of would-be journalists at Wisconsin "flunk" English usage. "We have failed to meet the challenge of illiteracy among college students," says a national education publication.

Joe College can't write. But at Mizzou, there's no "Bonehead English" . . . yet. There is concern, though, about the "striking change" in the percentage of students having to enroll in English 1.

Since 1967, all Mizzou students have taken a test for placement in three basic composition courses. Top students can take 65GH, a General Honors English composition course. Students with scores in the middle range are put into English 60. Either course completes a student's composition requirement. The low scoring students have to take English 1, pass it, and then take English 60.

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## Now, 38 percent of Mizzou students have to take English 1, the most basic composition course.

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Since 1967, the number of students in English 1 has more than doubled. Now 38 percent of Mizzou students must take the course.

Why can't Joe (and Joan) College write? The scapegoats seem to be the high schools, the "oral culture" and TV, and the "counter-culture" that values intuition and spontaneity more than logic and discipline.

High schools are dropping required English and allowing students to choose from a wide variety of English-related courses, which may or may not emphasize writing.

Dr. John Roberts, English department chairman, believes, "As Missouri high schools drop English requirements, worse writing will catch up with us. We have until now been getting a more conservatively trained student."

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## People blame the high schools, the 'oral culture' and the anti-establishment Sixties.

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Mrs. Win Horner, acting director of freshman-sophomore English, blames the "oral culture" and TV, its medium. "I think we're in a language revolution. People are not reading—not even comic books."

The role of college English departments is changing, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* says, "from introducing students to great literature to introducing a growing number of young adults to literacy—reading, writing, and even to speaking."

Others who bemoan the students' lack of proficiency in writing say perhaps the telephone, the tape recorder and even audio-visual aids in the elementary and secondary school classrooms should share the blame.

Several years ago, a Mizzou professor told a Columbia high school composition teacher that she was wasting her time teaching people to write. "I just pick up the phone and call somebody," he said. "And, if I have to write a letter, I use my dictaphone or a tape recorder, and my secretary types it, if that is necessary. I haven't written anything for years, and I don't expect to. Writing's old-fashioned," he maintained. That's the "oral culture."

Dr. Ben Nelms, associate professor with a dual appointment in education and English, thinks perhaps the "counter-culture" of recent years is to blame. "You must remember that the students who are now coming into college were influenced in junior high and high school by the anti-academic counter-culture," he says. The flower children and hippies have sometimes been satirized as people who believe that mumbling, "Ya know, man," is the epitome of "real communication."

Scapegoats abound. Whoever or whatever is to blame for Joe College's lack of ability with the pen is perhaps less important than what the colleges are going to do about it . . . if anything.

An unpunctuated ad in a recent Campus newspaper said, "Who knows you have been to college No one unless you wear a class ring." And that may be the truth.

It used to be that one mark of an educated person was the ability to speak and write "proper" English.

Professor Higgins may have made royalty out of flower girl Eliza Dolittle by teaching her how to speak properly, but modern profs are squeamish about "correcting" students' speech. Last April, the Conference on College Composition and Communications, which represents 3,000 college English instructors, adopted the following resolution:

"We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language."

This sort of attitude cannot help but have an impact on what goes on in basic composition courses in college. Some college professors were outraged at the resolution. One called it "misplaced humanism, not education." But many Mizzou instructors seem to support it.

Edited English is a euphemism they use for standard or proper writing. It is necessary to use the phrase "edited English" because it does not have social overtones that the words "standard or proper" have, they believe.

Ideally, the profs believe, students should have a wide repertoire of language responses from which they could choose the idiom most appropriate to the situation. In a letter requesting a job interview, they could use "edited English"; in a love letter, they could use their own language.

The goal seems to be to teach students to write "proper" English without criticizing "the dialects of their own nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style."

Students probably don't know about their

"right to their own language," but many are increasingly aware of their lack of writing skill. They are concerned that they can't write. Some are embarrassed to hand in papers. Last fall, 71 students were turned away from a technical writing course. It already was full.

"Typically, students are resentful during the time they are taking composition, but grateful afterwards," Karlene Mitze, who has taught all levels, believes.

"Some students say it's their favorite class, however, because the classes are small and the instructor really knows them," Ms. Mitze says.

Instructors get to know students by encouraging them to write about what interests them. Instructors have received themes on hogs, pari-mutuel betting, licensing of nurses, and (from a male) "A Woman's Place Is in the Home" and (from a female) an account of her recent rape.

English 60 is a strong program. Students are more homogeneous than in the other two levels. And students know they need the class. In contrast to many colleges where comp is for freshmen, Mizzou offers English 60 only to students with sophomore or higher standing.

English 65GH is generally thought to be an excellent program, though in rare cases students are admitted who are really not qualified for the honors course, but have simply done well on the placement test.

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## English profs, preparing for the onslaught of illiteracy, say writing will get worse before it gets better.

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The English department, and especially its new Lower Division Studies Committee, is committed to continuing to improve the basic composition program because the faculty expects that writers are going to get worse before they get better.

English 1 classes are top priority. Paradoxically, they are the biggest, with 25 students in each section (English 60 and 65GH have about 15).

A consultant from the University of Wisconsin recommends improving English 1 by reducing class size, using the most experienced teachers where the writing problems are the most severe, and establishing a writing lab, in which teaching machines could be used to drill deficient students on such basics as punctuation and grammar.

The committee will study English 1 this semester to try to find out why enrollment is rising and what can be done about it.

On a practical level, the English instructors will have to somehow integrate the philosophy (Students have a right to their own language) and the stated goal (Colleges should produce students who are competent writers) with the reality . . . . .

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## (JOE COLLEGE CAN'T WRITE).

By Anne Baber