



Drawing by Guy Michel

oregon daily emerald

Vol. 76, No. 97 Eugene, Oregon Tues., Jan. 28, 1975

Survey shows students and adults are getting dumber and dummer

(CPS) — What's it like in a world papered with books, newspapers, magazines, forms and notices not to be able to read? What do you do if you can't understand your college textbook, figure out your income taxes or follow the qualification requirements in a help-wanted ad?

According to a number of recent surveys more and more Americans, much to their disadvantage, are finding out.

"Functional illiteracy," or the inability to communicate and accomplish tasks within a basic level or competency and clarity, has won a prominent place in the lexicon of contemporary American education.

And unfortunately its applications have been widespread, stretching across all levels of education and not confined to one race or family income:

—One study, due for release in a few months, found that 36 per cent of its sample, given an income tax form and information about dependents were unable to read, write or compute well enough to enter the correct number of exemptions in the appropriate block.

—Another study of adults with 10.5 years average schooling found that their average reading and computation level equaled a fifth grade education.

—A third survey of college department chairers found widespread, though not universal concern that "students are coming from high school with a far less firm grasp on fundamentals than before—middle class as well as disadvantaged students."

Results from this last study coincided with remarks from the executive secrets of the Modern Language Association, who stated, "My impression is that on a national level we have failed—have continued to fail—to meet the challenge of illiteracy among college-level students."

At Maine's Bowdoin College, increasing concern that students were "incapable of expressing a coherent train of thought in written form" led the school to request a written essay as part of its student application process.

The college's faculty and administration singled out athletes, middle class students from progressive schools and the poor from deficient high schools as those who most frequently comprising the group of inept writers.

"One third of the papers and exams I receive," said one history professor, "are written by students whom I consider functionally illiterate. I simply cannot correct for both the historical content of the work and for grammar."

In a similar move the College Entrance Examination

Board recently included a "Test of Standard Written English" as a regular part of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT).

The bid to more specifically and accurately analyze writing skills came after a general ten year decline in SAT mathematics and English scores.

Concern over poor writers and readers has extended

'Functional illiterates' on the rise

by CHRIS JUPP
Of the Emerald

A discouraging phenomenon is causing dismay at colleges across the nation—entering freshmen just don't seem to understand their native language.

Numerous English departments have come to the startling conclusion that they are handling "functional illiterates," the professional term for students who can't write and have no idea how to express themselves on paper.

College textbook publishers, in fact, have found the problem so wide-spread and apparently permanent that they have simplified textbook language and content. The Association of American Publishers guide to textbook usage was recently downgraded from a 12th to a 9th-grade reading level.

Blame for the trend is uncertainly pinned to everything from mindless television addiction to the 1960s quest for relevancy in education; but the solution is universally voiced—more grammar, more drills, more grinding book study.

At the University things got so bad that Nat Teich, director of composi-

tion, sent out a form letter early this year to Oregon high school teachers to inform them of the problems and elicit their support and suggestions.

"The problem does not seem to involve the intelligence, awareness or motivation of today's college freshmen," the letter stated.

"Rather, it reflects their prior training which does not seem to have provided them with the basic skills to write a correct standard English sentence, not to mention a well-organized expository essay."

Teich cites statistics along with the general decline in literary aptitude:

- Courses in remedial writing have risen from seven in 1970-71 to 18 in 1974.

- Freshmen required to take "Remedial Writing 120" (those with SAT verbal scores below 370) have increased from 208 (11 per cent) in 1969 to 327 (15 per cent) in 1974.

- Freshmen exempt from any composition requirements (those with scores above 650) have decreased from 141 (eight per cent) in 1970 to 81 (four per cent) in 1974.

The English department is not the only sector of the University affected by students' degree of literary competency. Journalism, a field solidly grounded in language, is even more

directly influenced by inadequate English mastery.

To ensure proficient English usage, the journalism school requires a basic course in grammar, spelling and writing of all majors.

Instructor Dean Rea notes continuing inadequacy in the college preparation given to entering journalism students in his 10 years at the University. "Our problems are the same as the English department's, but we've got to quit complaining and give the students what they need," he says.

The English department has had to compromise students' educational needs with a tight budget.

Class enrollments in WR 323 have climbed from an average of 23 last year to 27 this year, while elective writing courses have been cut back to make room for increased sections of remedial composition.

Teich sees no immediate alternative in the battle for student literacy. "We have to deal here with students who have not been trained in the fundamentals of English since high school or even junior high," he said.

"Hopefully we will be able to work something out with secondary schools, but that will take some time."

beyond academia. Textbook manufacturers, for example, are encouraging college textbooks to be written at lower than previous reading levels.

McGraw-Hill now asks authors to write college textbooks at the eighth and ninth grade levels of reading.

A spokesperson for the book publishers defended the move, saying, "We're not talking so much about just lowering the (reading) level of the books as we are (about) making the points a little clearer."

For many Americans outside of college, though, "clarity" isn't so much the issue as is the lack of basic reading, writing, speaking and listening skills.

According to U.S. Commissioner of Education Terrel Bell only 56 per cent of American adults are able to match personal qualifications to job requirements when shown a series of newspaper help-wanted ads, and one fifth cannot read an "equal opportunity" notice well enough to understand it.

In addition Bell said that about 38 million Americans could not locate the deduction for social security on a monthly earnings statement.

The study cited by Bell is the first national assessment of the performance of adults on a number of objective skills judged necessary to "survival in American society."

Bell expressed particular concern for those on the bottom of the "survival skills" ratings. "If they cannot cope now," Bell said, "the next decade will find them lower on the survival scale, and with them their families."

Think "how it must feel," the education commissioner said, "to be 25 years old and unable to fill out a work application, open a savings account or read instructions for using an electrical appliance."