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Courses focus on writing

Writing skills key to clear thinking

By Marna Broekhoff
Of the Emerald

"No person can be called educated who cannot write," says Robert Berdahl, dean of the University College of Arts and Sciences. "In fact, the ability to write coherently, along with its prerequisite abilities, to read critically and to think clearly, should be the primary focus of a liberal arts education."

Albert Kitzhaber, University professor Emeritus of English and past president of the National Council of Teachers of English, agrees. "Writing is the most complex skill human beings have," he says, "and the process makes one's whole personality come to a focus at the fingertips."

"Writing is also perhaps the most necessary survival skill in all areas of the professional world," Berdahl says, including education, business, the technology, law and medicine. Few would deny that writing ability is the key to academic success.

"We get calls all the time from companies who want to improve their employees' writing," according to Kathleen Dubs, director of composition in the English department. She quotes figures to show that for training in writing, business normally outspends higher education by a margin of five to one.

Nevertheless the media tell us we are in the midst of a national "literacy crisis," in which the majority of Americans simply cannot write clear, usable, everyday prose. This crisis extends to all ages and all levels. It is now common knowledge that the vast majority of high school seniors score below the midpoint on the verbal Scholastic Aptitude Test. Last year one major corporation estimated that it lost a million dollars simply because of inefficient, incoherent, and useless writing.

"All employees complain about the lack of literacy," Berdahl says. "It's a tremendous problem." Dubs predicts that the crisis will continue as long as we allow it to continue. "We would never tolerate having a student tell us that two plus two equals five. Why do we tolerate unreadable prose?"

Writing skills have always been emphasized at the University, and over the past several

years the University has been responding to the literary crisis in an aggressive and systematic way.

"There is continuing concern all over the University with writing ability," says Glen Love, former director of composition and chief author of the writing curriculum for the federally-funded Project English. Stoddard Malarkey, also a former composition director and author and editor of books on prose style, maintains that "teaching precise use of the written word is the most important function of the English department and really what the humanities are all about." The battle for literacy at the University is being waged on three fronts: course variety, teacher training, and writing re-

graduation credit. Additionally, students at any level who are concerned about their writing can receive tutorial help from specially trained teachers in the writing lab at the Learning Resources Center. According to Susan Lesyk, assistant director at the Center, about 300 students use the lab regularly, but many more come in for help with special projects, such as with job applications or graduate theses.

About a quarter of the lab's visitors are from the University's foreign student population, which now numbers over 1000 from 72 different countries. Foreign students may also enroll in the English department's year-long writing sequence, English as a Second Language. This

prepares them for the regular freshman-level courses. Several sections of these regular level courses are reserved for foreign students and other minorities. The linguistics department is also developing ESL courses with the help of the American English Institute.

To train professionals who must write frequently, the English department offers scientific and technical writing, and business communications, on both the undergraduate and graduate levels. To train professional writers, the department offers more than 20 advanced courses in nonfiction, short story, novel, drama, and poetry. It also offers the M.F.A. degree in imaginative writing.

Writing instruction at the University is outstanding not only because of such quantity, but also because of its quality. All teachers in the writing programs have master's degrees; many also have doctorates. Graduate students in English teach writing sections only after they complete a term-long workshop in college composition and then serve a one-term teaching apprenticeship. The department also provides weekly colloquia on composition teaching for all interested staff members. Each teacher's performance is reviewed annually by members of the Composition Committee. Such strong commitment and professionalism are reflected in the extremely high evaluation writing teachers regularly receive from their students — among the highest in the University.

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'If you go back 50 or 100 years,' Kitzhaber says, 'you'll find people always thought writing was in a state of decay.'

search.

The University offers a variety of courses for a variety of clientele that few other institutions can match. Each term the English department teaches hundreds of classes in composition, two of which are required for graduation. Other than a course in health education, writing is the only University subject required of all students. Many departments would double the writing requirement if staff funding were available, Dubs says.

In the regular program, students learn basic techniques of formulating a thesis, developing ideas and doing research. For the 150 academically talented students in the University Honors College, writing instruction is integrated with the rest of their curriculum. In the Honors College's "writing-across-the-curriculum" project, which received federal funding last fall, professors in other disciplines are trained to teach writing.

At the other end of the spectrum, students needing to work intensively on their writing skills can enroll in several different developmental courses. These courses are entirely self-supporting and do not provide

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