

Lab formed to fight growing student writing deficiencies

By PHYLIS WEST

Whether you are interested in writing creatively, writing a better research paper thesis or dissertation, learning to teach composition courses or just improving your writing skills, the Writing Lab at Texas A&M can help you.

The lab is not just for students deficient in writing. It is open to undergraduate students, graduate students, professors and teaching assistants interested in individualized writing instruction. The Texas A&M English Department offers the writing lab as a course for the first time this fall. It originated as a pilot program three years ago, said Ray Leighman, director of the writing lab, and is a supplement to beginning composition courses.

Student recommendations have contributed much to the program's success, said Leighman. He added that many students learn of the program through friends who have taken the lab and found it beneficial in some of their courses. At the end of last summer, 1,500 A&M students had used the writing lab.

The trend across the nation indicates a writing deficiency among many college students. Many universities are offering more writing labs and writing courses; and more students are taking them.

While universities such as the University of Wisconsin and the University of Maine are just beginning to require proficiency tests to determine a student's need for writing labs, other universities are stressing the importance of more advanced programs. Cornell University, for example, has created the country's first deanship for the increasing student writing problem. In addition, particular attention among many universities has been to make these labs major-oriented as well as career-oriented.

Texas A&M has only a small percentage of students who take the lab to meet proficiency test requirements, or are referred by their instructors to improve their writing skills. Fewer than five per cent of the entering freshmen are predicted to need remedial help.

The Writing Lab would be better described as a compensatory program, a skills course restricted to complex problems, which are broad in scope and deep in coverage," said Leighman, adding that the course is not emphasized as remedial at A&M.

Many students have specific writing projects to work on during their lab, ranging from creative writing for freshmen to graduate students working on their thesis or dissertations.

The course is also used to train teachers for work in other labs across the country, or to help faculty members with writing problems.

Each student's particular strengths and weaknesses must be evaluated to determine his writing level, said Leighman. Some students must first acquire remedial skills in spelling, organization or mechanics before they can move on to more challenging projects.

Directed studies, or individual teachers working with individual students, are a major source of instruction and make up at least 25 per cent of the course. Video equipment and tapes are used for teaching the basics.

"The advantage is the program's flexibility," said Dr. Forrest D. Burt, director of freshman English. He said the course offers up to three credits and can be taken several times on a pass/fail basis.

Offering the writing lab as a course will provide funds to pay for staff and upkeep of facilities. Currently, the course is conducted on a volunteer basis with Leighman as the only permanent staff member. So far the budget has remained under \$6,000, less than one dollar for each student enrolled.

Leighman said he hopes the English Department can offer an extensive summer writing lab to future students.



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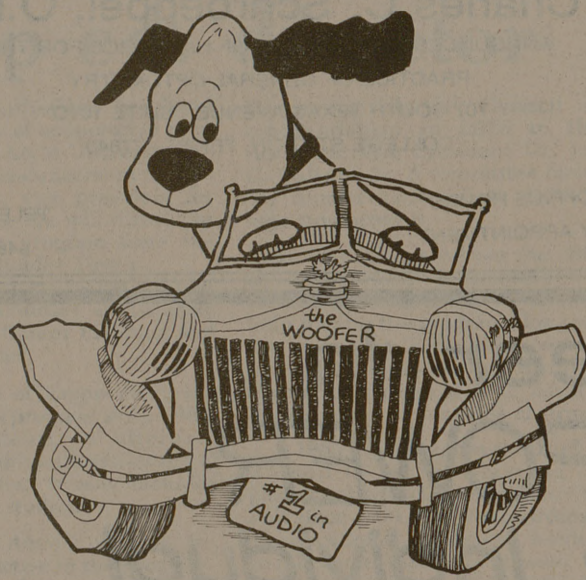
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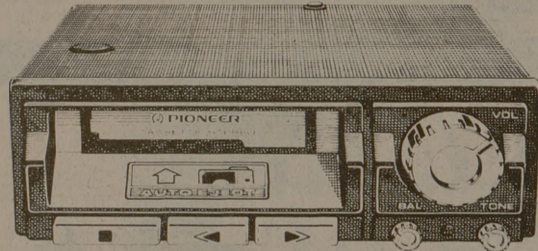
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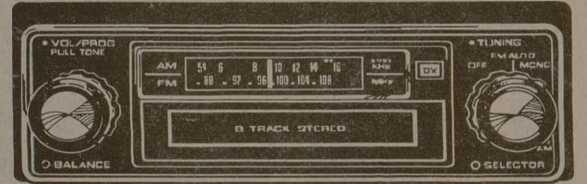
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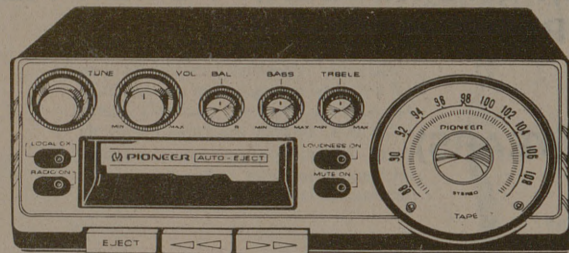
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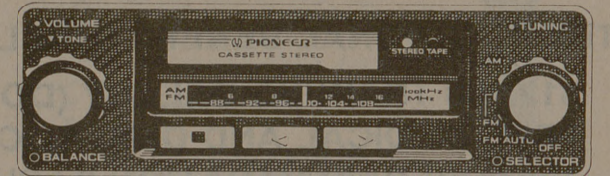
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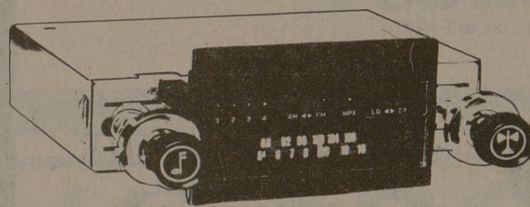
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