

# The Battalion

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## Writing instructor enjoys helping students learn

By Lisa Williams  
Reporter

He enters his office in 152 Blocker Building carrying a stack of manila folders, a maroon briefcase and a favorite, old, longneck beer. He calls this beer box his Rodney Dangerfield briefcase. These items are filled with research and instruction materials.

He wears a yoked, snap-down cowboy shirt, Wrangler slacks, cowboy boots and belt.

"Comfortable stuff," he says, referring to his wardrobe. With shoulder-length, gray hair, beard and mustache, he is almost a carbon copy of Willie Nelson.

As the chain-smoker glances over his agenda and tries to get situated for his interview, someone pops in and asks, "How are you today, Mr. Leighman?" In his regular, rustic, normal manner, he replies, "Fairly good."

The lean and rugged Raymond Leighman continues to puff on his cigarette and heads for the coffee pot in a back room of his office.

When somebody else calls his name, Leighman answers, "Yo, what an I do for you?" Casually grasping the student's shoulder, he listens, then replies, "Just follow me and I'll get ya fixed up!"

"Writing is an integral part of understanding anything," Leighman says. "You see, writing is a permanent record."

For years this countryman has loved literature. He sees his position as director of the English Writing Lab at Texas A&M as his way of sharing his love for literature.

In 1971 Leighman helped design and administer the Stride Program, a pioneer education program sponsored by several Texas state agencies. The objective of this program was to "take unemployed unemployables and give them the basic reading and writing skills they lack," Leighman says.

"Unfortunately," he qualifies, "we weren't always able to give them permanent skills."

But, he encouragingly remarks, "We could give 'em Band-Aid skills."

"I met all kinds of people," he says of the program, reflectively leaning back in his chair, hands behind his head and grinning.

"There was this most interesting ol' gal," he begins and goes on to tell a tale of what a prostitute was able to accomplish. He adds that he enjoys keeping track of some of his students and that several keep in contact with him.

In 1974 Leighman instituted the English Writing Lab at Texas A&M. He has continued to serve as center director. He said he started this program working only with graduate students and professors to show them how to set up and develop their own writing labs. He mentions proudly that more than 70 of his former staff members have now set up their own centers at major universities across the nation.

"Our center has a much, much broader scope," he says. Stroking his mustache, he explains how the lab at Texas A&M is different from those he initiated at other places. Most labs he previously set up were remedial writing centers, he comments.

Waving his arms and pointing to the crown of his head, he states, "Most of these kids are a different breed of cat. They're not deficient in writing skills; they just need a higher level of preparedness. Here I can work with kids who want that little bit of extra-edge. I usually don't have to teach them the basics, but I do have those whose gears can be a little rusty."

"Heck, anyone can be involved in the program here. But there was a time when we had a class . . . that became so darn tootin' loaded down with students required by their departments to attend, that some kids that really wanted in, couldn't."

Leighman stresses individual student-teacher contact is the most important for learning. He strongly emphasizes that after more than 20 years of "messing with this stuff" he knows what is important: "The kids

learning to write."

"We don't have a punch card," Leighman announces very simply, "but I'll do just about everything in my power to be available to the kids." Students who choose to perfect their skills can receive about six non-credit hours per week.

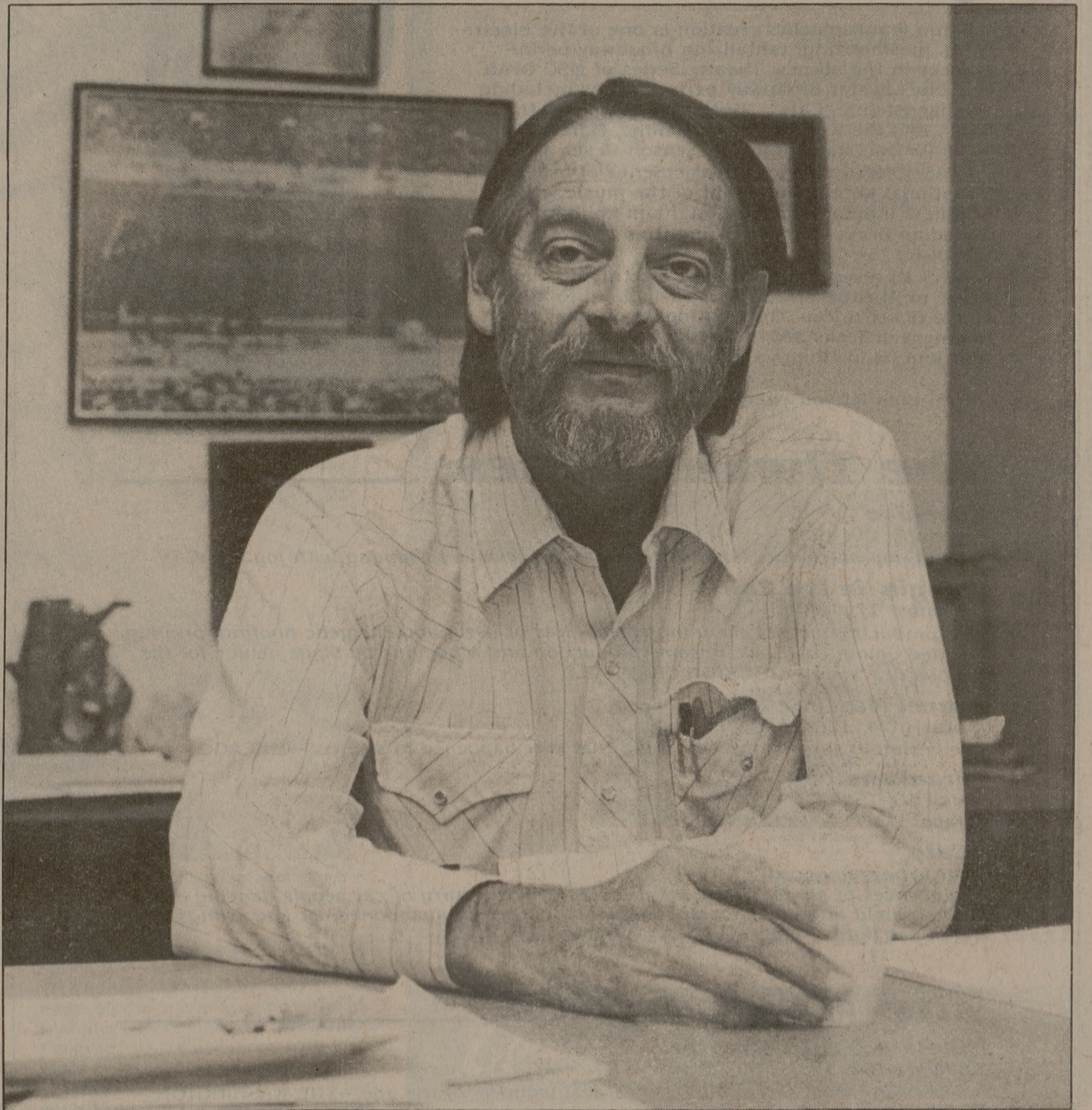
Leighman says the writing lab services about 150 students per semester, excluding referrals. During the first summer session he instructed 150 provisional freshmen.

"I call them Aggies the minute they get here," he says. "Just like anyone else, I never know what a kid's got in his shirt — I give 'em all the opportunity. They just have to want to get in there and get after it."

Scanning the vast array of awards on the walls of his office, Leighman's involvement with people is apparent. Such symbols of recognition include a couple of Aggie Band adviser achievements, several honors from the Athletic Department, Kiwanis Club, Honor Society of Agriculture, Outstanding Educators of America and Boy Scouts. And there are more.

Leighman has taught a broad spectrum of classes, including philosophy, history and literature. He has worked for several junior colleges in Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma and New Mexico. He has participated in several professional organizations, including the College Conference Teachers of English, where he served on the board of directors, the National Council of Teachers of English and the Texas Junior College Teachers Association. He pulls a slip off a stick 'em note pad from his desk and is reminded of consulting he will do for Harper & Row Publishing Co.

"I love my work," he says. "And best of all, I can stand on my results with these kids. It's like sitting on my diesel tractor with the two-ton disks hooked to it — I don't have any trouble telling where I've been. I'm darn proud of my results as an instructor. I don't mind going where people haven't been. I hope I'll be able to plow a little deeper."



Raymond Leighman, English Writing Lab director

Photo by John Adkins

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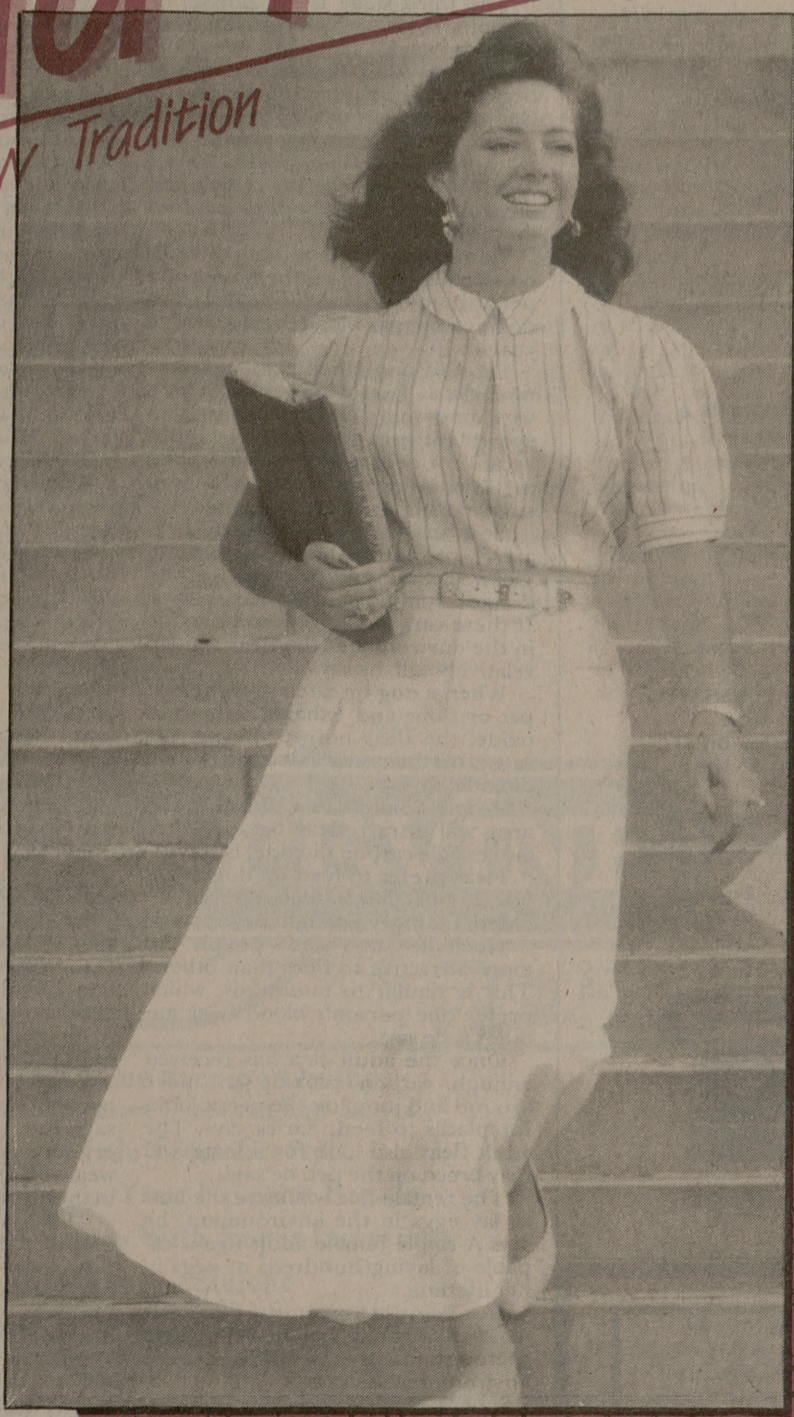
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