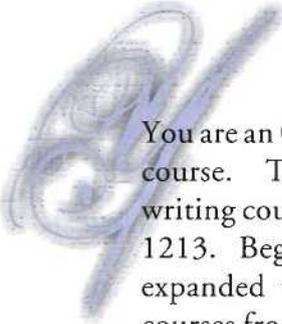


Writing a Recipe for Success

The new Expos Program is dishing up intensive composition courses for OU freshmen that offer challenge, reward and intriguing choices.

BY KATHRYN JENSON WHITE
Photos by Robert Taylor



You are an OU freshman. You have finished your first-semester composition course. Through spring 2004, choosing the required second-semester writing course was, well, a piece of cake: You enrolled in a section of English 1213. Beginning in fall 2004, however, the writing course dessert menu expanded to include the first 11 sections of Expository Writing 1213, courses from a writing program modeled after one that has been evolving at Harvard University since 1872.

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David Long, who taught eight years in Harvard's writing program before creating a similar program at OU, examines various aspects of modern Southern culture in his "Southern Voices" class.

While basic angel and devil's food cakes are tempting, more exotic choices appeal to many. The Edith Kinney Gaylord Expository Writing Program suggests, for instance, the Black Forest cherry cake of "Modern Monsters," a course that looks at works from Homer and the brothers Grimm to Nazi Germany. Here monsters of the modern age are compared with their ancestors and explored for what they say about the cultures in which they loom large. Students may opt for "Gossip, Rumor and Urban Legend," a course in which they grapple with those stories of organ thieves who drug travelers to steal their kidneys and drunken babysitters who put infants in microwaves. This Bananas Foster of a course explores what serious, factual societal fears and problems these bizarre fictions represent.

These are clearly not your mother's cake mix products or inside-the-box freshman composition classes. These creative concoctions are the work of six instructors who teach undergraduate writing based on what research shows is the best recipe

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for success: an intellectually engaging topic to write about, intense interaction with a teacher through written comments and one-on-one coaching sessions, and a step-by-step development of skills from basic to advanced.

In the Expository Writing Program, affectionately called Expos, students read a variety of texts on their subject and write four argumentative essays ranging from five to 10

pages. They tune up before these major written journeys with a variety of shorter assignments and exercises. After the first draft of each essay, they attend at least one required 30-minute coaching session with their instructor. While English 1213 has 24 students per section, Expos courses have 16 to allow for the extensive teacher/student work outside the classroom. In the program's first year, that meant approximately 300 students opted to bite into this challenging course.

David Long, who taught eight years in the Harvard program before creating OU's version, came to Norman in November 2003 to define goals, recruit staff and prepare the physical accommodations for the program.

"Two of my Harvard students were Eli and Alex Ewing, twin brothers from Purcell who had worked in President Boren's office during summers home," Long says. "They shared their experience of writing at Harvard with a task force of OU students, who recommended to the president that OU create a

program similar to Harvard's. I was tapped to introduce a very demanding curriculum for both teacher and student into a large state university environment where the numbers and the academic environment are different and where not all students would be *required* to take the course, as they are at Harvard."

Mary Millben, an intern in Boren's office and former student body president, joined the Ewing brothers in a group that approached Boren with the Expos proposal.

"Four other students and I developed a task force to research, compose and present a proposal regarding enhancements to the

Mergler, Dean of Arts and Sciences Paul Bell and several other faculty leaders to come in. I said 'I just want you to hear this.'"

They came, they heard, and they supported the proposal. So did the Inasmuch Foundation of Oklahoma City, which provided a \$1 million grant to help establish a private endowment to provide continuing support for the program. The late Edith Kinney Gaylord, for whom the program is named, was the founder of the Inasmuch Foundation and a pioneering newspaperwoman to whom good writing, obviously, was important.

"Our [traditional] intro courses in writing are very good; they

teach students how to write a term paper, how to footnote, how to do research," Boren says. "But this is a program where you take a course that interests you: in the literature of the American South, lives of great scientists, the Civil War, whatever. The beauty of it is that it is really writing intensive, like a writing boot camp."

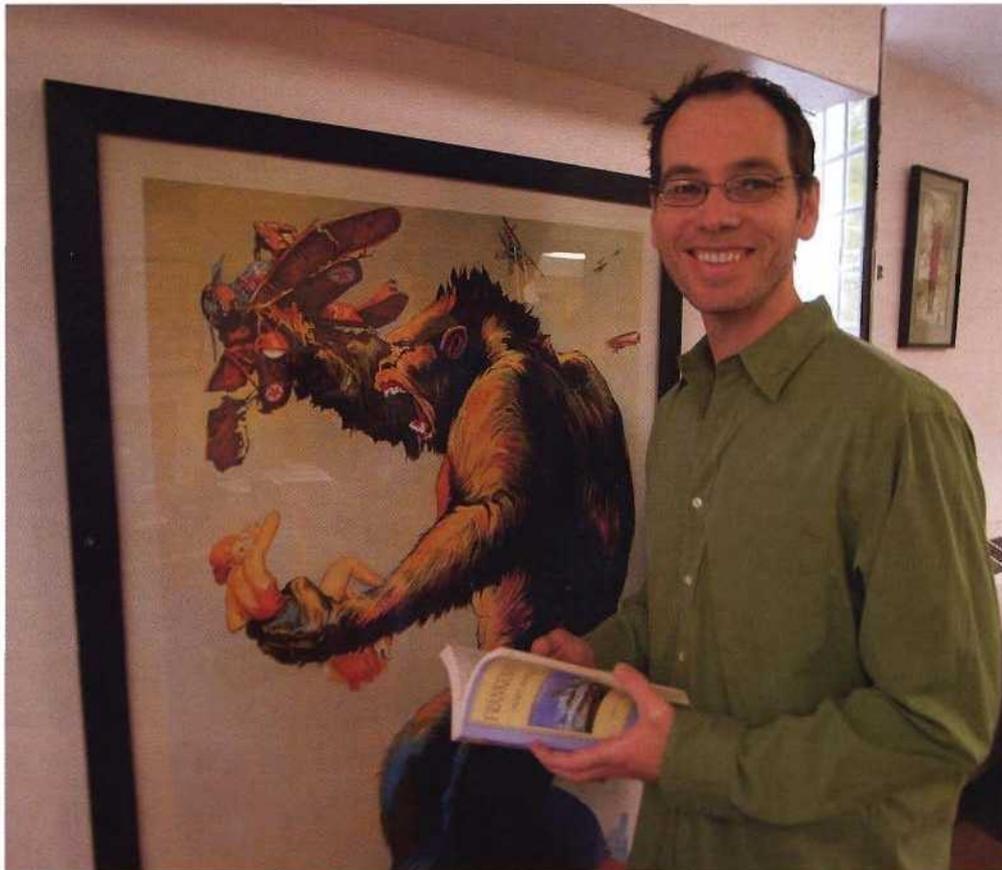
Long, like Boren, often uses metaphors to describe the program. In addition to military training, he likens the Expos writing experience to presenting a legal case when he uses words like "claims" and "evidence" and "motive" and says the writer of a written argument is like a prosecuting attorney. He talks about seeking "teachers willing to get into the trenches with the students," then shifts from combat boots to tap shoes when he explains the kind of faculty members he has hired.

"They had to be able to help students get into their argumentative dance and learn

some new steps," he says. "That takes a lot of patience and perseverance and lots of know how. Because these are topic-based courses, they require a passionate commitment to the material you use to design the courses. That passion is contagious."

Each instructor is, indeed, passionate about his course, teaching two sections each semester. Most will offer four more sections of the same course, two each semester, in the second year, then create a new one to add to what will become a repertoire.

Lou Berney, a screenwriter, teaches "Modern Monsters."



Screenwriter Lou Berney gives his students a close look at the monstrous in the modern age from Frankenstein to Nazi Germany to smallpox in his "Modern Monsters" class.

academic arena at the University," she says. "Our research consisted of traveling to Ivy League and public institutions around the country. We visited Stanford and Harvard to evaluate their commitment to a rigorous writing program in the freshman year."

Boren says the students' initiative and dedication to enhancing the curriculum led him to give the group a research grant of \$6,000 to visit the universities on a scouting mission.

"They came back and had incredible ideas, and at the head of the list was adopting this freshman writing program," he says. "I was so impressed listening to them that I invited Provost Nancy

David Samper, whose doctorate is in folklore and folk life, presents “Gossip, Rumor and Urban Legend.” Long offers “Southern Voices,” which looks at the cultural character of the modern American South through Civil Rights documents, poetry, fiction and autobiographies. Gary Hawkins, whose doctorate is in literature and creative writing, teaches “Varieties of Radical Dissent,” which focuses on radicalism from the colonists through modern art. Jim Zeigler, whose Ph.D. is in English, offers “Their America,” which looks at the importance of immigrants in the American cultural story. His students view Charlie Chaplin’s *The Immigrant* and read the U.S. Constitution, immigration acts, and fiction and nonfiction on the topic. Tad Tuleja, whose doctorate is in anthropology, teaches “Savages and Civilization,” during which students read Columbus’ 1492 voyage log, study the “Vanishing Americans” photographs of Edward S. Curtis and evaluate American Indian self-portrayals in recent films.

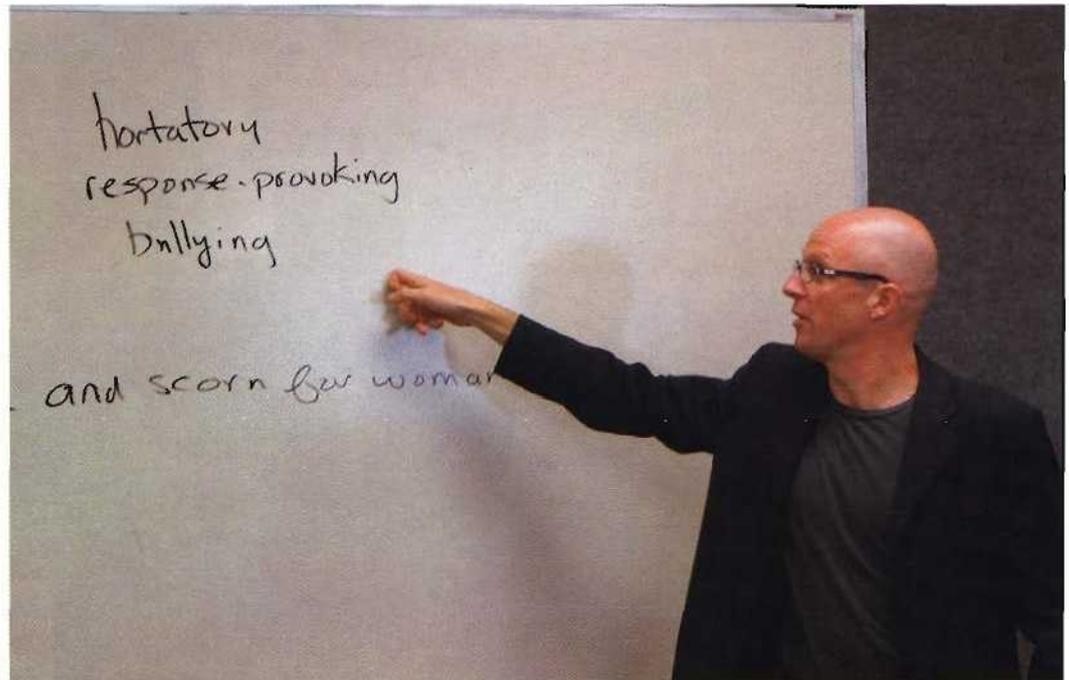
Bell says that the Expos instructors clearly add to campus energy by bringing their areas of expertise and interest to bear on the teaching of writing, but that they also spark the students’ own intellectual fires.

“The Expos instructors add to the intellectual life at OU by helping students be more analytical and to engage fully in the intellectual discourse that characterizes and enlivens the campus, not just as passive consumers but as active participants,” he says.

Despite the courses’ compelling and challenging subjects, no one ever forgets the primary directive: to help students develop an effective style of argumentative writing. That means in this course, *how* to write is always more the focus than *what* to write about. While dangling participles and pronoun/antecedent agreement errors do not lead to striking out in the class, instructors point out writing problems from argument structure to paragraph cohesion to grammar in extensive marginal comments on all drafts and in conferences. Zeigler estimates that while his focus on course content and composition craft are about equal in the first few weeks, as the semester progresses the split quickly heads to about 30 percent content and 70 percent craft.

“We all seek a balance between addressing the issues in the reading and the technical aspects of writing,” Long says. “If priority is given, though, it must be to writing skill.”

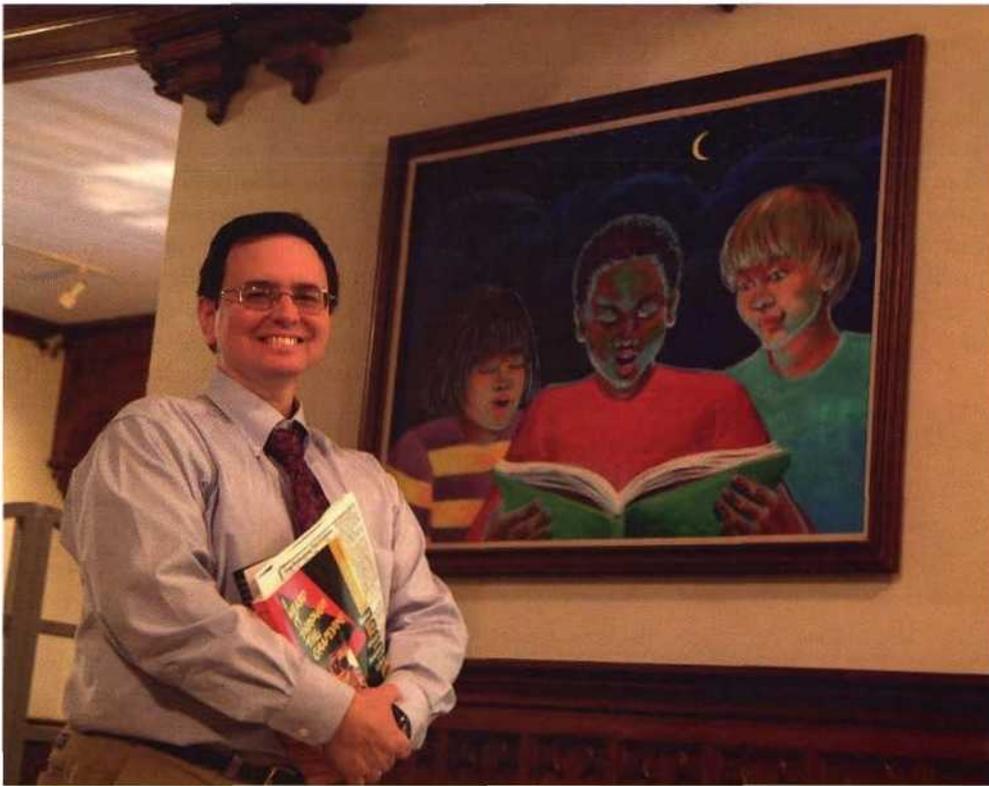
Nancy Sommers, who headed the OU English Department freshman composition program in the late ’70s, is now Sosland Director of Expository Writing at Harvard. In a four-year study of Harvard students’ writing, she found that to write thoughtfully and coherently about a subject, writers need to immerse themselves in an intellectual world, one in which there are arguments and counter arguments, evidence and counter evidence. She applauds OU’s giving students this option.



Gary Hawkins discusses America’s penchant for radicalism from the Revolutionary Era to modernist art in his freshman Expos class, “Varieties of Radical Dissent.”

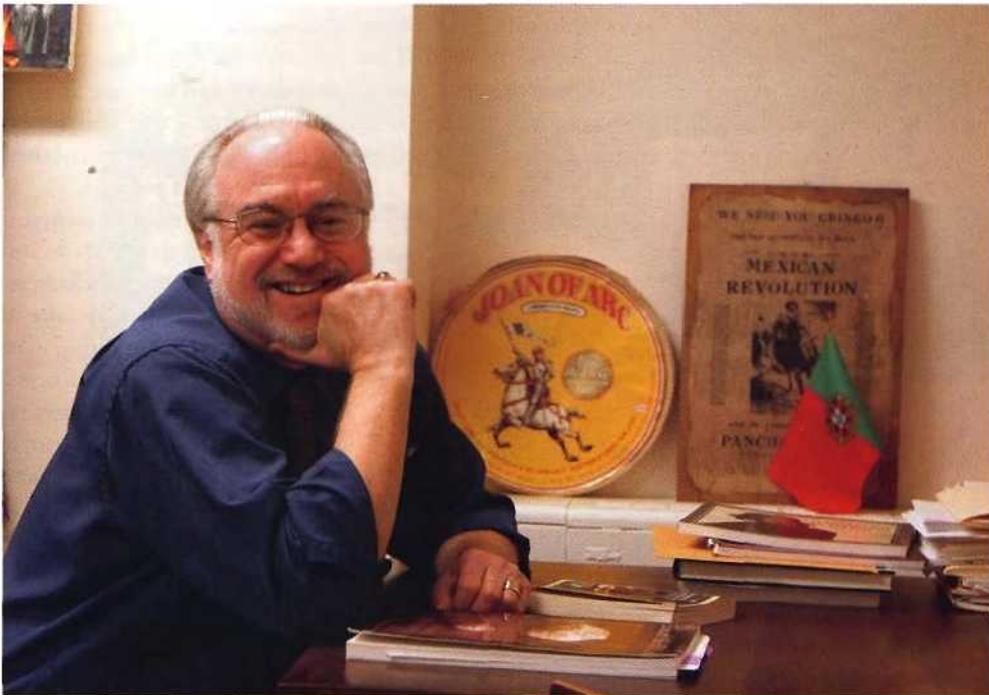
“It is great for students to have a choice when taking their required writing course,” she says. “The Expos choice offers an opportunity to take on a topic that might interest students, an opportunity to explore questions and issues that matter to them, both personally and intellectually.”

“Too often in writing classes, students are given an assignment and asked to write about a subject they don’t know anything about. In the Expos model, we try to give students enough information to feel as if they have some expertise with the topic. We want them to find a question they want to explore and to find evidence they can read closely and carefully. We want them to learn not to impose meaning on evidence, but rather to analyze evidence and discover its meaning. It is impossible to ask questions and wrestle with evidence if you don’t know enough about the topic.”



LEFT: Students explore the sociological reasons behind such urban legends as the killer in the back seat and the stealing of body parts in “Gossip, Rumor and Urban Legend,” taught by David Samper.

BELOW: Starting with the journals of Christopher Columbus and moving forward into the 20th century, Tad Tuleja guides his students through a historical maze of conflicting attitudes toward Native Americans in his “Savages and Civilization” class.



program director talked with students in Jessica Eastland’s section of Hawkins’ course, the international and area studies sophomore from Yukon wrote an unsolicited letter to counter some student grumbling about the demands of the course and the difficulty of earning a high grade. She started her letter by telling Long that her original idea of OU was that it was the “vision of mediocrity” and that she had fought with “every inch of her being to get out of Oklahoma for college.

“I tried moving to a non-traditional school in Missouri,” she wrote. “I tried to [pursue] an intense career in the Air Force, and I tried to attend an Ivy League institution. In each case, they failed to prove to be wise choices considering my intellectual as well as fiscal needs.

She says Long’s extensive experience at Harvard will help him create a firm foundation for OU’s program.

“David received many teaching awards at Harvard, and his students received many writing prizes,” she says. “He knows the structure of our program from teaching within it for so many years. I’m sure he has modified the program to fit the needs of OU.”

The students seem to think Long has done just that. After the

So I decided to attend here, bitterly, and concluded that I would just need to make the best with what I was given.

“In my entire life, I don’t think I’ve ever been so happy to be proved completely wrong about one of my viewpoints. This first semester at OU has been hard. Within the first couple of weeks of class, I realized that this Expos class was actually really hard. I can tell Dr. Hawkins demands a level of excellence from himself

“When students start to see themselves as writers, that’s when the miracles happen.”

and his teaching, and he reasonably expects [us to] complement his excellence with our own. OU is so much more than I expected it to be.”

The instructors take their students seriously as thinkers, writers and rewriters rather than just handing each a laundry list of problems they should erase from their writing. All say this is an investment of their time and spirit that pays dividends.

“Our succession of intense conferences builds a great deal of rapport,” Zeigler says. “Thank goodness for that because some of them are very attached to their writing and deeply invested. When they’ve revised twice and grading doesn’t go so well, they can have an emotional response. That I know how to talk to that student in ways that are idiosyncratic to him or her goes a long way toward healing hurt feelings and repurposing emotions toward the next revision and success down the road.”

Berney sees the mentor/coaching relationship as the key to the program’s success.

“When students start to see themselves as writers, that’s when the miracles happen,” the screenwriter says. “We get students at the beginning of the semester who aren’t very good writers or even very good students sometimes. But when they start getting treated like writers, they start thinking of themselves as writers, and they blossom.”



Jim Zeigler, right, goes over a writing assignment with Anayeli Herrera, a student from his “Their America” class, which explores the importance of immigrants in American history. In-depth, one-on-one conferences like this one are a key ingredient in the success of the Expos program.

Long notes that one of his goals was to prevent the program from being perceived as elitist or only for students in the Honors College or OU Scholars Program. While advisers for those students tend to steer them toward Expos, Long managed enrollment so that two-thirds of the fall enrollees were University College students. His five-year goal of 12 instructors serving 900 students would lead to an even wider impact on writing across the curriculum. Long says that the students are not limited to the obvious majors of English or journalism or communications. Future engineers, architects and scientists of all sorts have exposed themselves to the demanding immersion in strategic writing.

Bell, in on the writing program’s plan from the beginning, says that the College of Arts and Sciences is responsible for providing all students with a strong foundation in the liberal arts, for helping them to think critically and clearly, and for guiding them to express their thoughts in the same way.

“Of course, the only way to learn to write is by writing, and by writing a lot,” he says. “The Expos classes are one part of an overall strategy at OU to get students to write more and to receive critical feedback not just on *what* they write but how well they express it. In so doing they learn to write analytically, critically and persuasively, a process that can be extended to the rest of their studies at OU and to the rest of their lives as educated persons.”

Bell says that other elements in the University’s efforts to improve student writing include requiring all freshmen to take at least one course in writing, even if they test out of the traditional English composition courses; requiring a writing component in all general education classes; and requiring a significant amount of writing in the two upper division general education courses required for graduation.

By cooking up a customized version of Harvard’s expository writing program, OU aims to sweeten the educational experience and better serve its students. 

Freelance writer Kathryn Jensen White is an assistant professor of journalism in the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication.