The sample includes five randomly selected students from the following sections of English/LLD 96S, later named 100A:

Spring 2010: English 96S sections 1 and 3; LLD 96S sections 5 and 6
Summer 2010: English 96S, sections 3 and 4; LLD 96S, sections 9 and 15
Spring 2011: English 96S, sections 2 and 6; LLD 96S, sections 7 and 17

The attached chart indicates each student’s grade in English 1A, English 1B (or community college equivalents), Major, grade in 96S/100A, 100W department and grade, overall Grade Point Average (GPA), and the three most recent Writing Skills Test (WST) scores.

The students are anonymous, labeled by number. An asterisk * next to the number means the student graduated. The symbol % means the student was disqualified from the university and an exclamation point symbol in the last WST column means the student took the WST more than three times. I maintained a paper file of unofficial transcripts and scores for these students.

The students represent many majors including Psychology, Electrical Engineering, Business Administration, Sociology, Chemistry, Art, History, Economics, Civil Engineering, and Sociology/Criminology. I tried to concentrate on students who had completed 100W to see how students have come “full circle” in their writing requirements. Most students are identified as seniors with a few classified as second baccalaureate candidates.

What does the attached chart tell us? Different people might draw different conclusions, but certain patterns emerge for me. Thirty-four students earned an “A” or “B” in English 1B, a total of 55% of the 60 students surveyed. Five students did not have a grade for English 1B on their transcripts, so it’s possible that more than 55% of the students got a “higher than average” grade in the second semester freshman composition course.

Thirty-five students got a higher grade in 100W than in 100A (58% of students surveyed). Ten of those students got an A or A- in 100W and a C or C+ grade in 100A, a difference of roughly two letter grades.

Nine students from this study attempted 96S or 100A more than one time because of a C minus or a course withdrawal. Twenty seven of sixty students (45%) got an A or B in 100A; eight of those earned a B minus or B plus on their second attempt of the course.

Eight students got a seven score on the essay part of the WST in at least one of their three latest attempts; thirty-six students got a six on at least one recent attempt. Please note that one student could be noted twice in these figures; for example, one student might have scored a seven on one test try and a six on another test date.
Many patterns are well-known to us anecdotally; for example, most students who have trouble passing the WST transferred their English 1A and 1B courses from community colleges. The Writing Requirements Committee and others have discussed the problem of grade inflation in 100W (Collins, p. 13, Figure 6). In 100W at SJSU, fifty to seventy percent of students (depending on the major department) get an A or B in 100W.

Let’s first address the problem of grade inflation. David Smith in his article “The Implications of Grade Inflation: Faculty Integrity versus the Pressure to Succeed” cites studies that show adjunct faculty tend to grade higher than tenured faculty because they were new faculty who had to learn how to distinguish grade levels with teaching experience (Smith, p. 334).

James Ballard observes that grade inflation can be attributed to university’s treating students as consumers. Many institutions have registration and grading policies to make education more accessible to students, but regulations permitting later withdrawals and “whole sale teaching-shopping by students wishing to avoid ‘hard’ graders” (Ballard, p. 23) contribute to grade inflation.

Ronna Vanderslice points out that grade inflation does not give students an accurate picture of their abilities (Vanderslice p. 24). She suggests that transcripts include not only the student’s grade in the class but also the average grade for all of the students in the class. The article reports that Indiana University proposed a three-year moratorium on the use of student evaluations in order to address the problem of too many high grades (Vanderslice, p. 24). The author cites an article by J. Felton, who goes so far as to suggest that faculty evaluations be abandoned as a measure of teaching effectiveness.

J.D. Coleman’s article “The Student as Client” objects to universities admitting “students who are woefully unprepared for even the diluted rigors of the modern university.” He observes that most remedial classes cover math and English, but students are deficient in other academic areas. Universities competing for students or FTEs, Full-Time Equivalents, accept students who should not be in the university, causing departments to struggle to help the students admitted for administrative reasons (p. 25).

Dallas Brozik in “Whom do I Blame” echoes many sentiments members of the WRC have voiced over the years. He despairs over his students’ lack of literacy and their inability to concentrate. He asks what happens in the students’ K-12 experience that makes them so unprepared for college work. He suggests that parents be more involved their kids’ education. He also criticizes student evaluations: “we are now to the point where the undereducated are rating the underpaid.” (Brozik p. 26).

Smith and Fleisher (p. 36) cite the following reasons for grade inflation:
--University emphasis on graduation rates.
--Reliance on part-time faculty, many who teach at more than one institution.
--The use of student course evaluations for hiring and retention of faculty.
--The tendency of students to complain about grades and to file appeals.
--The increased use of scantron exams, which encourage memorization and not critical thinking and writing skills
--Competition among departments to maximize enrollments in lower-division general education courses.

I selected the reasons from the article that best apply to San Jose State.

How can we make our writing courses more effective? What can we conclude from the data I collected?

Our expectations of our writing students and our tolerance for errors at the sentence level are not the same as students proceed from course to course. First, transfer students from community colleges are getting A’s and B’s in high numbers. In the past, our colleagues from the community colleges were invited and attended Writing Requirement Committee meetings.

**Recommendation**: SJSU’s WRC Committee should extend invitations to our colleagues at local Community Colleges, such as De Anza and Foothill, West Valley and Mission, Evergreen Valley and San Jose City.

Students progressing from LLD 1 and 2 to English 1A: what are the exit goals of those courses? English 1A and 1B have clear learning objectives and goals, but does LLD have this information? Does LLD consider the goals of English 1A and 1B in their courses? Does the English Dept. keep LLD up-to-date on those courses? What is the progression from 100A to 100W? How is it that students get such high grades in 100W? It seems clear that some instructors consider 100W to be a content course more than a writing course. Many 100W instructors are trained in their field but not in writing instruction, and some instructors emphasize the concerns of the major over grammatical correctness.

**Recommendation**: The various departments need to have frequent meetings to help coordinate the writing courses.

What about the Writing Skills Test? So far I haven’t heard reports from 100A instructors that competent writers landed in 100A. In fact, in unofficial interviews with some 100A instructors, I’ve discovered, much to my surprise, that many students in 100A do not just suffer from writing problems. Some of the students have attitude problems, behavior problems, emotional problems, and other difficulties functioning in an academic environment. This makes 100A an extremely challenging course to teach.

The WRC should examine the WST scoring guide and sample papers to better understand the test. The exam question could be altered so that students can analyze a text instead of answer an experience-based question. The objective part of the test is expensive and ACT has not served SJSU well, in my opinion. In all my years coordinating the exam, I have never heard the WRC or anyone else suggest that we raise the standard for passing. In fact, I’ve heard phrases like “backlog of students” and “move them out,” suggesting that the university is more concerned with graduation rates than writing standards.
**Recommendation:** Discuss the issue of SJSU graduating students (including Master’s degrees) despite students’ weak writing skills. What are our standards and expectations?

Because 100A had the scrutiny of a sub-committee which addressed matters of writing assignments, rubrics, and grading, we can see the students had to meet a higher standard than in 100W, generally speaking. Fifty-eight per cent of students tracked got a higher grade in 100W than in 100A, although the grades in 100A were not low (45% got an A or B in 100A). These results tell me we are not supervising the day-to-day operations of 100W, a large course spread out over many disciplines, departments, and colleges. Most 100W instructors are hard-working lecturers eager to take on the heavy work load of the course, but vulnerable to low student evaluations.

Over the years on the WRC, I have found the committee’s scrutiny of 100W syllabi to be an excellent way to make sure the course stays on track. The course in many departments changed from not being 100W in any recognizable form, to a course that follows the major objectives of 100W.

**Recommendation:** The WRC should make sure 100W courses follow course guidelines.

**Recommendation:** The WRC should host in-service workshops so instructors can discuss how they grade papers in 100W. Other topics can include how to address the problems of English Language Learners, what readings are models of excellent writing, etc.

And what about the practice of revision in a course? 100A and many composition courses demand that students revise their essays and assignments, something every accomplished writer does. But how do we account for revisions in a grade? Should every draft get a grade that is averaged for the final draft? If a student gets feedback from the instructor, other students, and tutors, how much of the piece is the student’s actual work? The 100A sub-committee instituted more in class writing as the course evolved to be sure instructors could evaluate students’ fluency, the ability to produce sentences and thoughts without outside help. In other words, how do we evaluate students as independent writers?

To graduate or not graduate? I imagine the WRC would be the place to offer recommendations to Undergraduate Studies, Graduate Studies, the Board of General Studies (BOGS) and the like concerning writing at SJSU. I believe we have been graduating students who do not read and write at the college level. Graduate students hire editors to clean up the sentences of their thesis papers and major advisors look the other way with great relief. CSU East Bay has had the practice of issuing the “tainted degree,” by stamping “not proficient in writing” on diplomas. Should SJSU adopt this practice?

We can ask, what is an educated person? Is it acceptable to the university community to have graduates who are competent in electrical engineering, nursing science, computer programming, dance, design, or accounting, but not competent in writing complex thoughts in understandable prose? Do we really treat 100W as a writing course? How much do we forgive a native speaker’s writing errors? A Chinese speaker or Vietnamese speaker’s? (non-Indo-European language), a Farsi or Spanish speaker’s?
Perhaps I can end by starting at the beginning—how are students admitted to SJSU in the first place? Anyone who teaches LLD 1 and 2, English 1A and 1B, know that many students arrive at SJSU without enough academic skills. We help these students through special tutorial programs, mentoring programs, and counseling; we track them and worry about assessment at every turn, “assessment” and “retention” our latest mantra as each college and division competes for scare funds. We cannot do much about junior transfers from other colleges; we must take them if they meet our articulation agreements. But can we reject students who are not ready for college work? How do we determine that in that first place? Can we follow standards based on academic qualifications and not budgets?

We face budget cuts and deficits at the California State University system, and our administration is now working on ways to deliver instruction to our lovable students. But I also worry that in the name of budget cuts and expediency, we will degrade the quality of education. Should writing classes have 35 students in them? Should freshman students, immature and new to college, fulfill G.E. requirements via online courses? How can we make sure writing is practiced in G.E. courses? Should we pay corporations and publishers thousands of dollars for various “teaching instruments” while in class instructors are laid off? We cannot divorce politics and procedures from what we do at SJSU. I hope the WRC will face these challenges by always putting the students first, by preserving and raising standards, by making a college degree more like a poem than a text message.