

Chapter IX: SOPHOMORE WRITING EXPERIENCE

Who takes it?

The SWE is designed for sophomores and for transfer students during their first semester. All students must take the writing assessment before enrolling in the required Junior Interdisciplinary Seminar course or, if they have transferred credit from another institution, before graduating.

When is it administered?

The SWE is offered a number of times during the fall and spring semesters and during the summer. Students schedule to take either a word-processing or handwritten SWE session.

How long does it take for a student to complete the SWE?

Students take three to four hours on average to complete the SWE, including prewriting, writing, revising, and editing a problem-solving essay, completing a self-assessment questionnaire, and conferring with a faculty member after the writing sample is evaluated.

What office administers it?

The Writing Assessment Director in the Writing Center, McClain Hall 303, administers the SWE.

Who originates the assessment?

The SWE, originally designed by the English faculty, continues to be administered by the Director of Writing Assessment with the assistance of the Composition Committee and faculty from across the curriculum who read SWE writing samples and confer with students taking the SWE.

When are results typically available?

Typically, students receive results during the semester in which they take the SWE. A general report is available to faculty, students, and administration at the end of each summer.

What type of information is sought?

The SWE is used primarily to advise student writers. Students compose an essay on a current issue that is read and scored by faculty from across the curriculum. After the sample is evaluated, the student and a faculty member confer one-to-one, using the writing sample as a springboard for discussion of the student's writing. Faculty encourage students to assess their writing strengths and weaknesses and to set goals for writing growth. Students who score a 2 or below on a 1 (weakest) to 6 (strongest) holistic scale are required to revise their SWE paper with the help of a Writing Consultant in the Writing Center before they are allowed to register for a JINS course and/or graduate.

From whom are the results available?

Students receive results from faculty from across the curriculum who confer with them in a one-on-one conference. A general report and any other information faculty or staff might seek regarding the SWE is available in the Writing Center.

To whom are the results regularly distributed?

Students receive results in a one-on-one conference.

Are results available by division or discipline?

Currently, no.

Are results comparable to data of other universities?

No.

Sophomore Writing Experience 2001-2002



Executive Summary

In May 2002, after thirteen years as the university's writing assessment, the SWE was discontinued. A record number of sophomores completed their SWE requirement in the assessment's final year. An interim writing assessment will be put in place for the 2002-2003 academic year, while a permanent replacement is being designed. Faculty benefited both professionally and personally from their interactions with students as well as from their discussions with other faculty members at reading days and staff meetings. At the end of the Spring 2002 semester, faculty, administrators, and family members gathered to honor students who completed the SWE with distinction at the SWE Awards Ceremony. Students were congratulated by the Director of Writing Assessment and presented with a certificate of merit by the Vice President for Academic Affairs. Faculty were also honored for their participation and their dedication to writing assessment.

Faculty Participation and Benefits

Faculty readers and conference facilitators came from seven divisions on campus, 25 faculty members conducted conferences and 17 faculty members participated in the ranking of SWE essays.

Table 1: Faculty Readers and Conference Facilitators By Division

	<u>Readers (17)</u>	<u>Conference Staff (25)</u>
Education	1	--
Fine Arts	2	4
Human Potential and Performance	1	1
Language and Literature	6	10
Math and Computer Science	--	1
Science	3	3
Social Science	4	6

Faculty asserted that they benefited as much as the students did from the experience. In fact, faculty often stated that Reading Days were a wonderful mixture of intellectual and professional development. By participating in Reading Days faculty not only engaged in professional discourse about writing with colleagues from a variety of disciplines, but also learned how to teach and evaluate student writing in their courses more efficiently and accurately.

Faculty who conferred with students also reported that their involvement with the SWE has taught them about what kinds of feedback on writing students find most

valuable. Conference facilitators often noted that participating in the SWE allowed them to interact with students they would normally not have had a chance to meet. This, in turn, helps faculty to gain a wider perspective on the educational experience of Truman's undergraduates.

All but three of the faculty rankers and conference facilitators this year were experienced participants in the writing assessment program. The new conference facilitators trained by the Director of Writing Assessment sat in on at least two conferences before conferring with students themselves and participated in at least one Reading Day during the year. Conference staff on average conferred with 3 to 5 students per week and attended on-going staff training and support meetings throughout the year. SWE readers attended at least one, but often 2 or 3, of the Reading Days or evening ranking sessions throughout the year. New readers learned to rank holistically, while more experienced readers honed their holistic ranking skills during the training portion of each Reading Day. As in past years, faculty readers consistently achieved close to a 95% accuracy rating at these rankings sessions. This means that the two faculty readers reading each SWE essay gave identical or "touching" scores an average of 95% of the time. In a holistic scoring session of this kind, a reliability rating of 80% or above is considered satisfactory.

In addition to faculty participating in the writing assessment program, 2 part-time conference facilitators were retained to increase the number of conferences offered to students.

Faculty who participated in the SWE program were honored at the 2002 SWE Honorary Reception for their university service and dedication to helping students become better writers.

Student Participation

A total of 1,240 students took the writing assessment during the 2001 – 2002 fiscal year. While this number is lower than last year, the percentage of students who took the assessment as sophomores was the highest ever at 68%. As a consequence, the number of upperclassmen taking the SWE fell to 25% for juniors and 7% for seniors. What is even more impressive is that 1,467 students completed their SWE conferences during the 2001–2002 fiscal year.

The increased student conference participation can be credited to the full implementation of the 1999 university policy making the SWE not only a graduation requirement, but a requirement for junior registration and a prerequisite for all JINS courses. Formal letters, notices to advisors, emails, and an ad in the Index were all used to alert students to the approaching deadlines. However, student procrastination continued to be a problem. One hundred forty-five students were blocked from registering as juniors and enrolling in JINS courses

during Spring 2002 registration because they failed to complete their SWE requirement. This number dropped to 80 students during Fall 2002 registration.

At the end of spring semester, faculty, administrators, and family members gathered to honor students who had completed the SWE with distinction at the 2002 SWE Honorary Reception. Students invited to this ceremony received a rank of 5 or higher on their SWE essays, which placed them in the top 5% of students taking the assessment. At the reception, students were congratulated by the Director of Writing Assessment and presented with a certificate of merit by the Vice President of Academic Affairs.

This year students were given the option to fill out a survey about their SWE conference experiences. Of the 1,456 students who completed their SWE conferences in 2001-2002 academic year, 228 students, roughly 15%, returned these surveys to The Writing Center; 57% of these students stated that they found the conference portion of the SWE “extremely valuable,” citing that the conference facilitators were both “knowledgeable” and “friendly” and provided them with feedback that helped them address their writing weaknesses as well as gain a new appreciation for their writing strengths. Students appreciated that conference facilitators encouraged them to reflect on a wide range of writing experiences, rather than focus solely on the SWE essay as a definitive representation of their writing ability.

It is interesting to note that the students who responded that they found the SWE conference “somewhat valuable” gave the same positive feedback about their conference experience as those who rated the conferences “extremely valuable.” However, the “somewhat valuable” students felt that the amount of time needed to complete the entire writing assessment process (writing session and conference) detracted from their conference experience. They also registered dissatisfaction with being judged on a timed writing sample on a topic not of their choosing. Some students suggested that the conferences could be just as beneficial if the student submitted a paper or portfolio of papers they had previously written for a course.

Only 5% of the students responding to the survey reported that they found their SWE conference “not valuable at all.” These students also cited dissatisfaction with being judged on a timed writing sample on a topic not of their choosing. Additionally, they registered frustration with the amount of assessment at the university and stated that they felt writing assessment would be better accomplished if embedded in a course. These students were also more likely to state they were disappointed with the low scores they received. A few students felt the conferences were redundant, because they regularly met with professors to discuss and reflect on their writing.

The student surveys provided extremely valuable feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the SWE as a writing assessment tool and will be helpful in formulating a new writing assessment for the university.

Forging Bonds Between the SWE and the JINS Program

The 1999 university legislation that made the SWE a requirement for junior registration and a prerequisite for all JINS seminars also sought to establish a strong link between the Sophomore Writing Experience and the Junior Interdisciplinary Seminars. As mandated in the university legislation, JINS instructors were given copies of their students' goals sheets at the beginning of the fall and spring semesters, along with a letter which stated that they could request copies of their students' SWE essays.

In the letter accompanying the goals sheets, professors were encouraged to meet with their students individually to discuss the self-assessment and goals questionnaire early in the semester, so that students understood how their SWE materials would be utilized within the course. Instructors were also asked to refer to the self-assessment and goals sheets when providing students with relevant feedback on written assignments, in order to aid students in achieving the goals they had set for themselves in their SWE conference. At the end of the term, the goals and self-assessment questionnaire were expected to help instructors evaluate the progress the students had made toward achieving their goals.

The link between the two programs, however, remained tenuous. Twenty-nine of the 49 faculty members who have taught JINS courses responded to a survey conducted by the Director of Interdisciplinary Studies, asking how JINS instructors used the SWE goal sheets in their seminars. Of the instructors who responded, 72% said they did not meet with their students to discuss the goals the students listed on their SWE goals sheet, 55% said that the SWE conference sheets did not influence the feedback they gave to students on written assignments, and 82% said that they did not incorporate the SWE goals sheets in any other way into their class activities.

JINS instructors who did use the SWE materials reported that the goals sheets familiarized them with their students' writing strengths and weaknesses. They also stated that they found the SWE's 6-point ranking scale a useful tool when discussing their writing expectations with students.

Scores

The SWE was administered somewhat differently this year. Students were given prompts when they scheduled writing sessions and instead of being given pamphlets pertaining to the prompts, they were asked to do their own research. The directions given to students also differed from previous years. This year's

prompts specifically asked students to consider audience and tone when composing their writing samples and emphasized the importance of narrowing the topic and integrating research and personal experience.

These changes had little effect on student scores, though. This year's scores on the SWE remained within a few percentage points of last year's, increasingly only slightly [see Table 2]. Although the percentage of students scoring in the upper (6-5) holistic range, dropped by 0.77%, compared to 2000-2001, the number of students earning scores of 4.5 or 4 increased by 1.97%. In addition, barely passing scores of 2.5 decreased by 1.84% and non-passing scores (2 or below) decreased by 0.42%, while the mid-level scores (3.5 or 3) remained within a percentage point of last year at 63.95%.

Table 2: A Comparison of Student SWE Scores by Year

Scores	6	5.5 or 5	4.5 or 4	3.5 or 3	2.5	2	1.5 or 1<
Total Score Breakdown 2001 - 2002	3 0.24%	40 3.23%	329 26.53%	793 63.95%	64 5.16%	11 0.88%	0 0%
Total Score Breakdown 2000-2001	9 0.51%	66 3.73%	435 24.56%	1,114 62.90%	124 7.00%	23 1.30%	0 0%
Total Score Breakdown 1999 - 2000	8 0.46%	101 5.87%	579 33.70%	912 53.08%	100 5.82%	12 0.69%	6 0.34%

As the comparison of the last three years of data demonstrates [see Table 2], the number of students scoring a 4 or higher on the SWE has dropped 10.03% since the SWE became a registration requirement for juniors and a prerequisite for JINS course. In that time, the number of sophomores taking the test has increased from 38% to over 68%.

Table 3: 2001-2002 SWE Score Breakdown

Total # of Students	Soph.	Juniors	All Seniors	Seniors	Grad. Seniors
1,240	850	306	84	62	22
	68%	25%	7%	5%	2%

Scores	6	5.5 or 5	4.5 or 4	3.5 or 3	2.5	2	1.5 or 1<
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Total Score Breakdown	3 .24%	40 3.23%	329 26.53%	793 63.95%	64 5.16%	11 .88%	0 0%
Soph. Score Breakdown	2 .24%	24 2.82%	225 26.47%	547 64.35%	43 3.46%	9 .72%	0 0%
Junior Score Breakdown	1 0.33%	12 3.92%	83 27.12%	194 63.40%	15 4.90%	1 .33%	0 0%
Senior Score Breakdown	0 0%	4 4.76%	21 25.00%	52 61.90%	6 7.14%	1 1.19%	0 0%
Senior Breakdown	0 0%	3 4.84%	16 25.81%	38 61.29%	4 6.45%	1 1.61%	0 0%
Grad Sr. Breakdown	0 0%	1 4.55%	5 22.73%	14 63.64%	2 9.09%	0 0%	0 0%

Historically, sophomores have tended to outscore upperclassmen at all levels of the SWE. This year's data [see Table 3] show that although the difference between the scores of sophomores and upperclassmen is slight, the juniors outscored the sophomores, and the seniors had the highest percentage of 5 and 5.5 scores.

Self-Assessment Questionnaire

For the tenth year, students' written responses on the Self-Assessment Questionnaire, which students fill out after completing their SWE writing session, were studied to get a sense of how students felt about their essay, the process by which it was composed, and the writing session itself.

As in past years, a sampling of 10% of the questionnaires was randomly selected and divided into two groups: sophomores and upperclassmen. This year, 85 sophomore and 38 upperclassmen questionnaires were studied, focusing on the following six prompts:

1. How do you feel about your finished sample?
2. How representative is this sample of your writing?
3. Describe your preparation for this writing session.
4. Describe your writing process during this writing session?
5. What do you feel is especially strong about your writing sample?
6. What do you feel is somewhat weak about your writing sample?

In sharp contrast to the historical trend, upperclassmen were nearly twice as likely as sophomores to report that they felt “good” or “great” about their SWE writing sample and that it represented their “best effort” [see Table 4]. Sophomores were more likely to say they felt “OK” or “decent” about the sample they wrote. This may correlate with the fact that upperclassmen scored slightly higher on the SWE than sophomores this year, which is also anomalous in light of past data.

Table 4: How do you feel about your finished sample?

	<u>Sophomores</u>	<u>Upperclassmen</u>
Great	6.31%	8.82%
Good/Best Effort	25.26%	50.00%
OK/Decent	61.05%	32.35%
Bad/Dissatisfied	3.15%	8.82%
Don't know	4.21%	0%

Despite the upperclassmen’s higher satisfaction with their writing samples, a vast majority of upperclassmen, like the vast majority of sophomores considered their essays to be only “somewhat representative” of their usual writing style [see Table 5].

When asked to explain, students often stated that the writing conditions of the SWE (the need to write under time pressure, the inability to leave and come back to the writing sample at a later time, the lack of feedback from peers and professors while writing) did not allow them to use their usual writing process. Other students felt that they were “rusty” when it came to writing opinion-oriented essays because their usual writing assignments required them to use a less personal style (research papers, literature reviews, business memos, etc.). Therefore, they saw the SWE essays as a departure from their usual writing style.

Table 5: How representative is this sample of your writing?

	<u>Sophomores</u>	<u>Upperclassmen</u>
Very Representative	14.63%	18.92%
Somewhat Representative	84.15%	81.08%
Not at all Representative	1.22%	0%

Sophomores and underclassmen differed significantly in how they prepared for the writing sessions [see Table 6]. The upperclassmen were more likely to brainstorm and draw upon personal experience and their conversations with others in their preparation. Upperclassmen were also much more likely (or at least more willing to admit) to have done no preparation for the writing sessions beforehand. The sophomores, in contrast, did much more “hard” research, consulting print sources, reviewing class materials and utilizing on-campus lectures to prepare for the writing sessions. A large number of sophomores and upperclassmen searched for sources on the Internet. Upperclassmen, though, were more likely to consult daily news reports (TV, newspapers, etc.).

Table 6: Describe your preparation for this writing session.

	<u>Sophomores</u>	<u>Upperclassmen</u>
Did research on Internet	40.63%	30.95%
Consulted print sources	41.67%	19.04%
Reviewed class materials	10.42%	2.38%
Discussed topic with others	5.21%	11.90%
Utilized on-campus speakers	2.08%	0%
Drew on personal experience	0%	11.90%
Consulted news media	0%	4.76%
Brainstormed	0%	4.76%
Did Nothing	0%	14.28%

Almost the same number of sophomores (35%) as upperclassmen (33.39%) “simply drafted” or “drafted with minimal revision and editing.” However, editing and revision did play a significant role in the writing process for a majority of students [see Table 7]. For 45% of sophomores and 51.43% of upperclassmen, editing and revision was distinct from the drafting process.

Table 7: Describe your writing process during this writing session.

	<u>Sophomores</u>	<u>Upperclassmen</u>
Simply drafted	15.00%	22.86%
Drafted with minimal revision and editing	20.00%	10.53%
Drafted, revising and editing as I went along	20.00%	14.29%
Drafted, then revised and edited	33.75%	51.43%
Wrote first draft out, edited and typed final draft	6.25%	0%
Drafted, then revised and edited multiple drafts	5.00%	0%

Overall, sophomores cited elements of argumentation as the strongest aspects of their writing samples, whereas upperclassmen tended to feel that their creativity and self-expression were the strongest elements of their writing [see Table 8]. Upperclassmen also took pride in their introductions, which they perceived as an area of the paper which requires creativity to catch their readers’ attention, while sophomores felt good about their grammar.

Table 8: What do you feel is especially strong about your writing sample?

<u>Sophomores</u>		<u>Upperclassmen</u>	
evidence/support	23.58%	personal examples/viewpoints	20.00%
ideas	18.87%	voice/tone	13.33%
thesis/purpose	11.32%	creativity	8.89%
grammar	10.38%	introduction/opening	8.89%

Although sophomores and upperclassmen differed widely in what they felt were the strengths of their writing samples, they agreed for the most part on the weaknesses [see Table 9]. Both groups cited a lack of evidence and a lack of organization as elements that concerned them, along with errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. In addition to these concerns, sophomores felt their sentence structure was weak and upperclassmen felt they needed to construct stronger transitions in order to make their writing “flow.”

It is interesting to note that, unlike the upperclassmen, what the sophomores listed as their major strengths were also the qualities they listed as their greatest writing concerns. This may simply demonstrate that the weaknesses shared by one group of sophomores may be another group's strengths. It may also indicate that at the sophomore level, students are focusing on argumentation and mechanics to the extent that it temporarily blocks out other writing concerns, such as attention to the needs of readers and the expression of personal viewpoints.

Table 9: What do you feel is somewhat weak about your writing sample?

<u>Sophomores</u>		<u>Upperclassmen</u>	
lack of evidence/support	25.89%	lack of evidence/support	21.74%
lack of organization/structure	21.43%	lack of organization/structure	15.22%
spelling/punctuation/grammar	16.07%	weak transitions/lack of flow	13.04%
sentence structure	11.61%	spelling/punctuation/grammar	10.87%

Conference Sheet

Student conference sheets were studied with student questionnaires for the fifth year. As in previous years, the conference sheets and questionnaires came from the same random sample of students.

Students complete the sheets at the end of their conferences as a way to retain the highlights of their discussion with their facilitator. The first of the two prompts on the sheet asks students to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses as writers. The second prompt asks them to set goals and devise strategies for their further development as writers and thinkers. Students keep one copy of their conference sheet for personal reference; a second copy is given to their future JINS instructors and a third remains in their SWE file.

The writing strengths upperclassmen listed on their goals sheets were similar to the strengths they originally identified in their writing samples: creativity and a unique voice and point of view. Likewise, sophomores listed strong evidence and support for their arguments as a strength of their normal writing style, as well as of their writing sample. However, after conferring with their conference facilitators, sophomores also included good organization and a unique voice among their typical writing strengths, while upperclassmen added good critical thinking skills [see Table 10].

Table 10: What are your typical writing strengths?

<u>Sophomores</u>		<u>Upperclassmen</u>	
Organization/Structure/Focus	18.49%	Creativity	15.28%

Evidence/support	15.97%	Unique POV/voice	8.33%
Unique POV/voice	13.64%	Critical Thinking	6.94%

Both sophomores and upperclassmen identified a lack of organization and grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors as areas of concern in their writing. They also felt they needed to improve their general argumentation skills, including the development and support of their ideas. Sophomores were particularly concerned with making their conclusions more effective, whereas upperclassmen desired to expand their vocabulary and eliminate awkward language.

Table 11: What are your typical writing weaknesses?

<u>Sophomores</u>		<u>Upperclassmen</u>	
Argumentation	16.50%	Organization/Structure/Focus	14.81%
Grammar/Spelling/Punctuation	15.53%	Poor Development/support	12.96%
Weak conclusions	13.59%	Grammar/Spelling/Punctuation	11.11%
Organization/structure/focus	12.62%	Awkward language/vocabulary	9.26%

When it came to setting goals, there was a clear difference between the sophomores and the upperclassmen [see Table 12]. While sophomores set goals to improve their writing style (the development of arguments and the strengthening of transitions), upperclassmen set goals to improve their writing process (setting aside more time to proofread, revise, and edit). The one goal both groups held in common was the desire to seek feedback from peers.

Table 12: What are your writing goals?

<u>Sophomores</u>		<u>Upperclassmen</u>	
Strengthen transitions	16.51%	Proofread/revise/edit	14.77%
Obtain feedback from peers	22.73%	Write more/read more	11.36%
Develop arguments	11.09%	Obtain feedback from peers	10.23%
Use research effectively	8.26%	Improve time management	9.09%

Future Directions

As the results of the student surveys demonstrated, the SWE's strengths as a writing assessment lay in the quality feedback students were given in their conferences. Most students benefited from the opportunity to reflect on past writing experiences and formulate goals for future progress.

The least beneficial aspect of the assessment, and the aspect most criticized by students, was the writing session, which required students to compose, edit and revise a writing sample within a three-hour period. Much of the negative feeling among students was generated because they felt they were being judged on a piece of writing which was not produced using their normal writing process and, therefore, did not accurately reflect their writing ability.

The university legislation that made the SWE a requirement for junior registration and a prerequisite for enrollment in a JINS course exacerbated student negativity to a large degree. Students were penalized for not completing the assessment in a timely manner, but received few incentives for performing to the best of their ability. The SWE Honorary Reception for those who scored in the top 5% was a move in the right direction. Incentives for a future writing assessment could include the privilege of advanced registration, the waiving of a writing-enhanced course, or a citation on the student's transcript.

It is unfortunate that the SWE was unable to form a stronger connection with the JINS program. If writing assessment data are to have an impact on student learning, a way must be found to communicate these data to faculty in a meaningful way that can then be used to provide students with beneficial feedback on writing assignments.

During the next year, the university will explore alternative methods of writing assessment that meet the assessment needs of students, faculty, and administrators. Possible alternatives to the SWE include having students submit a sophomore-level portfolio, embedding writing assessment in a course, or finding a nationally-normed writing exam that serves Truman's needs. Whatever writing assessment is developed to replace the Sophomore Writing Experience, it will be informed and strengthened by the lessons learned in the SWE's thirteen-year history.