



## **Accommodations and Modifications for Students with Handwriting Problems and/or Dysgraphia**

Susan Jones, M.Ed.

12/98

Many students struggle to produce neat, expressive written work, whether or not they have accompanying physical or cognitive difficulties. They may learn much less from an assignment because they must focus on writing mechanics instead of content. After spending more time on an assignment than their peers, these students understand the material less. Not surprisingly, belief in their ability to learn suffers. When the writing task is the primary barrier to learning or demonstrating knowledge, then accommodations, modifications, and remediation for these problems may be in order.

There are sound academic reasons for students to write extensively. Writing is a complex task that takes years of practice to develop. Effective writing helps people remember, organize, and process information. However, for some students writing is a laborious exercise in frustration that does none of those things. Two students can labor over the same assignment. One may labor with organizing the concepts and expressing them, learning a lot from the 'ordeal.' The other will force words together, perhaps with greater effort (perhaps less if the language and information has not been processed), with none of the benefits either to developing writing skills or organizing and expressing knowledge.

How can a teacher determine when and what accommodations are merited? The teacher should meet with the student and/or parent(s), to express concern about the student's writing and listen to the student's perspective. It is important to stress that the issue is not that the student can't learn the material or do the work, but that the writing problems may be interfering with learning instead of helping. Discuss how the student can make up for what writing doesn't seem to be providing -- are there other ways he can be sure to be learning? Are there ways to learn to write better? How can writing assignments be changed to help him learn the most from those assignments? From this discussion, everyone involved can build a plan of modifications, accommodations, and remediations that will engage the student in reaching his best potential.

### **SIGNS OF DYSGRAPHIA:**

- Generally illegible writing (despite appropriate time and attention given the task)

- Inconsistencies: mixtures of print and cursive, upper and lower case, or irregular sizes, shapes, or slant of letters
- Unfinished words or letters, omitted words
- Inconsistent position on page with respect to lines and margins
- Inconsistent spaces between words and letters
- Cramped or unusual grip, especially holding the writing instrument very close to the paper, or holding thumb over two fingers and writing from the wrist
- Strange wrist, body, or paper position
- Talking to self while writing, or carefully watching the hand that is writing
- Slow or labored copying or writing - even if it is neat and legible
- Content which does not reflect the student's other language skills

#### **WHAT TO DO ABOUT DYSGRAPHIA:**

- Accommodate -- reduce the impact that writing has on learning or expressing knowledge -- without substantially changing the process or the product.
- Modify -- change the assignments or expectations to meet the student's individual needs for learning
- Remediate - provide instruction and opportunity for improving handwriting

#### **ACCOMMODATIONS FOR DYSGRAPHIA:**

When considering accommodating or modifying expectations to deal with dysgraphia, consider changes in

- The **rate** of producing written work,
- The **volume** of the work to be produced,
- The **complexity** of the writing task, and
- The **tools** used to produce the written product, and
- The **format** of the product.

#### **Change the demands of writing rate:**

- Allow more time for written tasks including note-taking, copying, and tests
- Allow students to begin projects or assignments early
- Include time in the student's schedule for being a 'library assistant' or 'office assistant' that could also be used for catching up or getting ahead on written work, or doing alternative activities related to the material being learned.
- Encourage learning keyboarding skills to increase the speed and legibility of written work.
- Have the student prepare assignment papers in advance with required headings

(Name, Date, etc.), possibly using the template described below under "changes in complexity."

### Adjust the **volume**:

- Instead of having the student write a complete set of notes, provide a partially completed outline so the student can fill in the details under major headings (or provide the details and have the student provide the headings).
- Allow the student to dictate some assignments or tests (or parts of tests) a 'scribe'. Train the 'scribe' to write what the student says verbatim ("I'm going to be your secretary") and then allow the student to make changes, without assistance from the scribe.
- Remove 'neatness' or 'spelling' (or both) as grading criteria for some assignments, or design assignments to be evaluated on specific parts of the writing process.
- Allow abbreviations in some writing (such as b/c for because). Have the student develop a repertoire of abbreviations in a notebook. These will come in handy in future note-taking situations.
- Reduce copying aspects of work; for example, in Math, provide a worksheet with the problems already on it instead of having the student copy the problems.

### Change the **Complexity**:

- Have a 'writing binder' option. This 3-ring binder could include:
  - A model of cursive or print letters on the inside cover (this is easier to refer to than one on the wall or blackboard).
  - A laminated template of the required format for written work. Make a cut-out where the name, date, and assignment would go and model it next to the cutout. Three-hole punch it and put it into the binder on top of the student's writing paper. Then the student can set up his paper and copy the heading information in the holes, then flip the template out of the way to finish the assignment. He can do this with worksheets, too.
- Break writing into stages and teach students to do the same. Teach the stages of the writing process (brainstorming, drafting, editing, and proofreading, etc.). Consider grading these stages even on some 'one-sitting' written exercises, so that points are awarded on a short essay for brainstorming and a rough draft, as well as the final product. If writing is laborious, allow the student to make some editing marks rather than recopying the whole thing. On a computer, a student can make a rough draft, copy it, and then revise the copy, so that both the rough draft and final product can be evaluated without extra typing.
- Do not count spelling on rough drafts or one-sitting assignments.
- Encourage the student to use a spellchecker and to have someone else proofread his work, too. Speaking spellcheckers are recommended, especially if the student may not be able to recognize the correct word (headphones are usually included).

### Change the **tools**:

- Allow the student to use cursive or manuscript, whichever is most legible
- Consider teaching cursive earlier than would be expected, as some students find cursive easier to manage, and this will allow the student more time to learn it.
- Encourage primary students to use paper with the raised lines to keep writing on the line.

- Allow older students to use the line width of their choice. Keep in mind that some students use small writing to disguise its messiness or spelling, though.
- Allow students to use paper or writing instruments of different colors.
- Allow student to use graph paper for math, or to turn lined paper sideways, to help with lining up columns of numbers.
- Allow the student to use the writing instrument that is most comfortable. Many students have difficulty writing with ballpoint pens, preferring pencils or pens, which have more friction in contact with the paper. Mechanical pencils are very popular. Let the student find a 'favorite pen' or pencil (and then get more than one like that).
- Have some fun grips available for everybody, no matter what the grade. Sometimes high school kids will enjoy the novelty of pencil grips or even big "primary pencils."
- Word Processing should be an option for many reasons. Bear in mind that for many of these students, learning to use a word processor will be difficult for the same reasons that handwriting is difficult. There are some keyboarding instructional programs which address the needs of learning disabled students. Features may include teaching the keys alphabetically (instead of the "home row" sequence), or sensors to change the 'feel' of the D and K keys so that the student can find the right position kinesthetically.
- Consider whether use of speech recognition software will be helpful. As with word processing, the same issues which make writing difficult can make learning to use speech recognition software difficult, especially if the student has reading or speech challenges. However, if the student and teacher are willing to invest time and effort in 'training' the software to the student's voice and learning to use it, the student can be freed from the motor processes of writing or keyboarding.

#### **MODIFICATIONS FOR DYSGRAPHIA:**

For some students and situations, accommodations will be inadequate to remove the barriers that their writing problems pose. Here are some ways assignments can be modified without sacrificing learning.

#### **Adjust the volume:**

- Reduce the copying elements of assignments and tests. For example, if students are expected to 'answer in complete sentences that reflect the question,' have the student do this for three questions that you select, then answer the rest in phrases or words (or drawings). If students are expected to copy definitions, allow the student to shorten them or give him the definitions and have him highlight the important phrases and words or write an example or drawing of the word instead of copying the definition.
- Reduce the length requirements on written assignments -- stress quality over quantity.

### Change the **complexity**:

- Grade different assignments on individual parts of the writing process, so that for some assignments "spelling doesn't count," for others, grammar.
- Develop cooperative writing projects where different students can take on roles such as the 'brainstormer,' 'organizer of information,' 'writer,' 'proofreader,' and 'illustrator.'
- Provide extra structure and intermittent deadlines for long-term assignments. Help the student arrange for someone to coach him through the stages so that he doesn't get behind. Discuss with the student and parents the possibility of enforcing the due dates by working after school with the teacher in the event a deadline arrives and the work is not up-to-date.

### Change the **format**:

- Offer the student an alternative project such as an oral report or visual project. Establish a rubric to define what you want the student to include. For instance, if the original assignment was a 3-page description of one aspect of the Roaring Twenties (record-breaking feats, the Harlem Renaissance, Prohibition, etc) you may want the written assignment to include:
  - A general description of that 'aspect' (with at least two details)
  - Four important people and their accomplishments
  - Four important events - when, where, who and what
  - Three good things and three bad things about the Roaring Twenties

You can evaluate the student's visual or oral presentation of that same information, in the alternative format.

### **REMEDIATION FOR DYSGRAPHIA:**

Consider these options:

- Build handwriting instruction into the student's schedule. The details and degree of independence will depend on the student's age and attitude, but many students would like to have better handwriting if they could.
- If the writing problem is severe enough, the student may benefit from occupational therapy or other special education services to provide intensive remediation. Keep in mind that handwriting habits are entrenched early. Before engaging in a battle over a student's grip or whether they should be writing in cursive or print, consider whether enforcing a change in habits will eventually make the writing task a lot easier for the student, or whether this is a chance for the student to make his or her own choices.
- Teach alternative handwriting methods such as "Handwriting Without Tears."
- Even if the student employs accommodations for writing, and uses a word processor for most work, it is still important to develop and maintain legible writing. Consider balancing accommodations and modifications in content area work with continued work on handwriting or other written language skills. For example, a student for

whom you are not going to grade spelling or neatness on certain assignments

may be required to add a page of spelling or handwriting practice to his portfolio.

**More information on Dysgraphia:**

Richards, Regina G. *The Writing Dilemma: Understanding Dysgraphia*. RET Center Press. 1998. This booklet defines and outlines the stages of writing, the effects of different pencil grips on writing, and dysgraphia symptoms. Guidelines are provided to identify students with dysgraphia and specific helps and compensations are provided. Regina G. Richards. Find it at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)

Levine, Melvin. *Educational Care: A System for Understanding and Helping Children with Learning Problems at Home and in School*. Cambridge, MA: Educator's Publishing Service. 1994. Concise, well organized descriptions of specific learning tasks, variations in the ways students process information, and concrete techniques that teachers and parents can use to bypass areas of difficulty. Find it at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)

Olsen, Jan Z. *Handwriting Without Tears*. Find it at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)

Shannon, Molly, OTR/L *Dysgraphia Defined: The Who, What, When, Where and Why of Dysgraphia* - conference presentation, 10/10/98. [web4246@charweb.org](mailto:web4246@charweb.org)

**Related articles:**

[When Writing's a Problem: A description of dysgraphia](#) - by Regina Richards, a great starting place.

[LD OnLine In Depth: Writing](#) (Many articles about writing and learning disabilities)

[Overview of Assistive Technology - 1998 - Marshall Raskind, Ph.D. and Eleanor Higgins, Ph.D.](#) His article, while focusing primarily on secondary and adult assistive technology for people with learning disabilities, provides specific descriptions of different types of assistive technology, such as writing assistance software. It also describes the process of determining how to choose and use assistive technology devices.

[Keyboarding programs for students with special needs](#) - part of LD OnLine's listing of Assistive Technology Resources for Students with Learning Disabilities.

[Making Technology Work in the Inclusive Classroom: A Spell CHECKing Strategy for Students with Learning Disabilities - 1998 - Dr. Tamarah Ashton, Ph.D.](#) This strategy helps the student with learning disabilities get the most out of spell checking software.

[From Illegible to Understandable: How Word Prediction and Speech Synthesis Can Help](#) - 1998 - Charles A. MacArthur, Ph.D. New software helps writers by predicting the word the student wants to type and reading what s/he has written. How, and how much, does this help with student writing and spelling?

Speech Recognition Software - **Daniel J. Rozmiarek, University of Delaware, February**

**1998** - A review of the new continuous speech recognition software now available.

A Manual For Implementing Dragon Dictate - **1998 - John Lubert and Scott Campbell.** A step-by-step manual for helping students with learning disabilities "train" Dragon Dictate to recognize their speech.

© Copyright 1998-1999, Susan Jones, Resource Room.

Reprinted at this site with the gracious permission of the author. Thanks Sue.