

## Learning Disabilities in the Writing Center

### Types of Learning Disabilities that Affect Writing

From *Learning Disabilities Sourcebook*

*Dysgraphia* is an umbrella term for a learning disability that affects writing

“Dysgraphia is a specific learning disability that affects how easily children acquire written language and how well they use written language to express their thoughts”  
(Learning Disabilities Sourcebook 93)

*Dyslexia* is “a language-based learning disability” (Learning Disabilities Sourcebook 100) that can hinder an individual’s reading, writing, spelling, and sometimes even speaking

*Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)\** is a disorder that can be divided into three sections: 1) hyperactive-impulsive type, where the individual is often restless, impulsive, and has difficulty waiting or sitting still for too long, 2) inattentive type, where it is often difficult for the individual to focus on finishing the task at hand, or 3) a combination of the two.

\*While ADHD is not technically a learning disability, it is a disorder that affects writing, and is often seen in conjunction with other learning disorders.

### How These Learning Disabilities Affect the Writing Process

From National Center for Disabilities Editorial Team – “What is Dysgraphia?” “What is Dyslexia?” and “How ADHD Affects Learning”

Individuals with *dysgraphia* have trouble organizing their thoughts on a page, as a result of either:

#### Visual Spatial Difficulties

- Troubling processing what the eyes sees

#### Language Processing Difficulty

- Trouble processing and making sense of what the ear hears

Individuals with dysgraphia will struggle with:

- Organizing thoughts on paper
- Keeping track of ideas already written down
- Syntax structure and grammar
- Transcribing spoken ideas to paper

Individuals with *dyslexia* often struggle with tasks such as:

- Reading aloud
- Distinguishing between words that look or sound alike
- Proofreading and self-correcting work
- Expressing written ideas in a logical manner

*ADHD* will affect students' writing differently according to the category in which it manifests itself

- **Hyperactive-impulsive** students may:
  - Start answering questions before they fully understand them
  - Have difficulty remaining seated
  - Be impatient about finishing a task
- **Inattentive** types may:
  - Be slow to process information
  - Have poor organizational skills
  - Not be able to pay attention long enough to learn new information
  - Struggle with attention to detail

### Common Struggles for Student with Learning Disabilities within the Writing Process

From Tanya Santangelo, Karen R. Harris, and Steven Graham's article "Using Self-Regulated Strategy Development to Support Students Who Have 'Trubol Giting Thangs Into Werds'"

- *Knowledge of Writing* – misconstruing “good writing” as meaning grammatically correct writing, rather than related to the substance or process of writing
- *Approach to Writing* – focus on writing as a generation of thoughts, rather than an organized discussion of a topic
- *Planning in Advance* – difficulty planning out the steps needed to complete a paper in advance
- *Generating Content* – lack of detail/ elaboration in writing due to difficulty transferring ideas into written form; no superfluous ideas to cut out during revision process
- *Revising* – difficulty evaluating and revising work; changes are mostly grammatical rather than contextual
- *Transcription Skills* – struggle with transcribing thoughts into writing; frequently misspelled words and improper usage of punctuation and capitalization
- *Persistence* – frustration with writing often leads to minimal time and effort put into the process, including abrupt beginnings and endings of thoughts without transitions, resolutions, or concluding statements

### How to Address These Common Struggles Most Effectively

From Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy (TEAL) – “Fact Sheet: Self-Regulated Strategy Development”

#### **Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD):**

“an instructional approach designed to help students learn, use, and adopt the strategies used by skilled writers. It is an approach that adds the element of self-regulation to strategy instruction for writing. It encourages students to monitor, evaluate, and revise their writing, which in turn reinforces self-regulation skills and independent learning” (TEAL).

## SRSD Strategies:

RAP – Read, Ask, and Paraphrase

- *Read* a paragraph or passage
- *Ask* questions like “What is the topic?” and “What is most important here?”
- *Paraphrase* the paragraph, or put it in your own words

POW + TREE –

- **P**ick an idea (and **p**ay attention to **p**rompt)
- **O**rganize
- **W**rite

+

- **T**opic sentence (the trunk of the tree that supports the whole argument)
- **R**easons (the roots of the argument)
- **E**xplain (tell more about each reason)
- **E**nding (like the earth, wraps up the whole argument)

From Russell Gersten and Scott Baker’s *Teaching Expressive Writing to Students with Learning Disabilities: A Meta-Analysis*

## Findings from Study:

- Gersten and Baker conducted instructional intervention studies to evaluate the effects of research-based instructional approaches for teaching writing to students with learning disabilities on the quality of students’ writing and understanding of writing process
  - Results showed an improvement in the quality of students’ written work, as well as an improvement in students’ understanding of writing
- Three forms of intervention were found to be the most consistent in improved outcomes:
  - 1) Adhering to the recursive structure of planning, writing, and revision, where each step may be revisited throughout the process
  - 2) Teaching text structures and explaining critical steps for different forms of writing (persuasive essay, narrative writing, etc.)
  - 3) Providing feedback guided by the information explicitly taught
- Affirms the efficacy of the Self-Regulated Strategy Development approach, but also a technique known as **Cognitive Strategy Instruction in Writing** (Englert et al., 1991) which advocates specific techniques to be used in the prewriting process, including brainstorming strategies, organizing strategies, comprehension strategies, and monitoring strategies

## Emerging Issues in Teaching Writing to Students with Learning Disabilities:

- **Dictation vs. actual writing** – dictating ideas to a scribe can eliminate many issues that students with learning disabilities may face in writing; however, Gersten and Baker suggest that there is a positive correlation between mastery of transcription skills and an increase in overall quality of writing, therefore, a scribe would deprive these students of achieving a better quality of writing
- **Regulation of strategies** learned by students with learning disabilities – not just for writing, but also for all forms of learning so that overall levels of academic achievement are raised

## Works Cited

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