



NetNews

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Dysgraphia Defined

The previous issue of *NetNews* focused on the reading disability, dyslexia. In this issue, the focus will be on **dysgraphia**, a form of writing disability. Both dyslexia and dysgraphia fall under the category of specific learning disability. They may be related because significant language processing problems can impact both reading and spelling - although there is less incidence of dysgraphia. Dysgraphia specifically impacts spelling and writing because the basic prerequisite skills for motor movement and letter formation are inefficient. This causes an energy drain that may greatly interfere with the overall writing process.

Dyslexia and dysgraphia may be related because significant language processing problems can impact both reading and spelling.

The writing process is very complex. There is no one place in the brain that is responsible for writing, but rather it requires cooperation from several parts of the brain. Most often dysgraphia will include a combination of difficulties such as:

- illegible handwriting
- poor letter formation
- poor pencil grip
- irregular spacing
- misspelling of words
- poor idea organization or sequencing
- poor sentence or paragraph structure
- incorrect grammar or word usage
- limited expression of ideas
- very slow rate of writing

Many adults with significant writing difficulties try to avoid writing altogether. But writing is an important adult activity necessary for filling out forms, taking messages or notes, creating letters or lists, writing checks, signing documents, and using email. Everyone needs to acquire a certain level of writing skills even if they cannot write for a long period of time. The best way to improve writing is to write; however, if writing is challenging in the first place, writing practice or assignments can actually be an interference to progress. Purposeful assessment that determines writing breakdowns, meaningful instruction and practice, and appropriate accommodations or assistive devices are the tools for remediating dysgraphia.

Writing Assessment

Because writing is a set of skills, there are different types of assessment. If **spelling** is the primary focus, then a dictated spelling test of words is typically used. The assumption is that as the person improves their spelling abilities, they will be able to spell more words correctly. The *Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE)* includes a multiple choice spelling survey of words that results in scale scores and grade equivalents. The *Wide Range Achievement Test - Revised (WRAT-3)* includes a subtest for spelling that results in standard, percentile, and grade equivalent scores - although the *WRAT-3* should be viewed as a screening only or estimate of basic skill levels.



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Writing Assessment *continued...*

The *Test of Written Spelling (TWS-3)* is a diagnostic assessment to specifically measure strengths and weaknesses in spelling. *The TWS-3* includes two lists of spelling words: predictable (words that follow spelling rules) and unpredictable (words that need to be memorized). The results are reported as standard scores, percentiles, age and grade equivalents - but normed on children grades 1-12.

Grammar and usage are typically measured by multiple choice tests. A sentence with a missing word or word form (such as a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, pronoun, preposition, plural, possessive, or article) is presented and the examinee selects the correct answer from a list of choices. The *TABE* includes a multiple choice language survey that results in scale scores and grade equivalents. The *Test of Written Language-Second Edition (TOWL-2)* is a diagnostic assessment to measure the following components of written expression: mechanics, spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and written product. It results in standard and percentile scores - but normed on children grades 2-12.

If **written expression** is the primary focus, the learner may be asked to write a short essay that is scored “holistically” using a rubric of 1-4 or 1-5 or 1-6, with 1 being a beginning level of written expression and 4, 5, or 6 being a more advanced level. Each level is usually clearly described to assist with scoring and progress is measured by improvements in the holistic score. The NW Regional Educational Laboratory (www.nwrel.org) has such rubric assessments for purchase.

Another use of this rubric type of assessment is to determine a criterion for writing proficiency. The essay tests for the *Minnesota Basic Skills Testing (BST)* and *GED Testing* use this format for determining a passing score on standardized writing tests.

An informal way to assess writing is to ask the learner to write a short paragraph about themselves or their life. Observe them writing, record how long it took to write the paragraph, and note errors in spelling, spacing, capitalization, punctuation, usage, or grammar. Use this “baseline” paragraph as a comparison to later writing. An easy way to organize these comparative writings is in a separate journal with each entry dated for reference.

Improving Basic Writing Skills

An important aspect for beginning writers involves **pencil grip**. New writers should be taught and encouraged to use a consistent and efficient pencil grip. The distance between the finger and the pencil tip should be between 3/4 - 1 inch. Pressure on the pencil should be moderate, not too light or too heavy. The angle of the pencil should be about 45%. The page should be slanted towards the writing arm. For adults with long-standing poor pencil grip, instructors need to decide whether the effort to change their habit is worthwhile.

Beginning writers also need **instruction in letter formation** and multi-sensory practice in order to develop auditory, visual, and motor memory of letters. They need to be taught how to form large letters in the air (using large muscles) and small letters on paper (using small muscles). They need to practice enough so that writing both the upper and lower case letters of the alphabet is fluent. For adults, it is not necessary to teach both the manuscript (printed) and cursive form of letters. Most struggling adults will choose to print. Legibility is the priority!

Sequencing problems related to dysgraphia can cause **spelling** difficulties. As mentioned earlier, some learners may also have dyslexia, which can interfere with language processing and acquisition of the sound/symbol system. Adults with dyslexia or dysgraphia need direct, systematic, sequential, and multi-sensory instruction in the code of English for both reading and spelling (see *NetNews 5.2*). If they can at least spell phonetically, they can use a spell-checker that recognizes phonetic approximations and provides suggestions of correct spellings. Franklin Electronic Publishers at www.franklin.com, has a series of electronic tools for spelling, meaning, language, pronunciation, and translation.

A word bank of key words or ideas created before writing is extremely valuable for beginning or struggling writers. This list of spellings to copy allows them to write with greater fluency. They will not get stuck on the spellings of words used frequently in their writing assignment.

Improving Written Expression

Explicitly teaching a multi-step process of writing is essential for improving written expression. The act of writing, as mentioned earlier, is complex and requires juggling and coordination of many skills all at the same time. A popular multi-step process is called **POWER** - an acronym for the steps **PLANNING, ORGANIZING, WRITING, EDITING, AND REVISING**. Each step of the POWER process needs to be modeled, practiced, and posted (or prompted with individual bookmarks) as an effective process for all types of writing.

The **PLANNING** step involves deciding on the purpose by answering the questions: Who am I writing for? Why am I writing? What do I know about the topic? and making a brainstorm list of key words or idea map. This step helps reluctant writers get started rather than sit and stare at a blank piece of paper!

The **ORGANIZING** step involves grouping or organizing the brainstorm list or idea map into possible sentences or paragraphs and determining the sequence. Some words or ideas will not “fit” and can be eliminated from the list. This step helps reluctant writers move from words to text.

The **WRITING** step involves writing a draft of sentences and paragraphs. The writer is focused on expressing their ideas, not the mechanics of writing. Encourage reluctant writers to write and not worry about spelling, capitalization, punctuation, etc.

The **EDITING** step involves looking over the draft for errors and mistakes. This is where the author or another proofer makes corrections in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar, and usage. It can be a set of teachable moments, where the teacher provides feedback and instructs the writer in the mechanics of writing.

The **REVISING** step involves rewriting the draft into a final version using the revisions, improvements, or enhancements from the editing step.

The **POWER** process is not linear; writers may need to circulate through the steps more than once. The end result is an organized work of writing that addresses the original purpose.

Some writers may enjoy creating their idea map using the computer software *Inspiration* available at www.inspiration.com. The user selects the topic, lists the key words, the software creates the idea map, and will also convert the map into a more traditional outline. Using the *Inspiration* software accomplishes the planning and organizing steps of the POWER process.

Other writers may prefer dictating their ideas into a tape recorder. The writer can then use the stop-rewind-fast forward buttons to organize their ideas.

A final note on improving written expression relates to motivation. Adults need purposeful instruction or practice that connects to their goals or everyday life. Generate writing topics with adult learners or select from old BST or GED essay topics similar to what they will have to write about someday.

Accommodating Dysgraphia

If dysgraphia severely impacts written expression, then reasonable accommodations and assistive devices may be necessary.

Examples of reasonable **accommodations** include:

- reduced copying or writing assignments
- extended time for writing assignments
- not counting off for spelling errors
- peer note taker
- peer proofreader
- use of a word processor
- use of a scribe (someone who writes down what the person dictates, but does not assist with organization)
- alternative oral presentation

Examples of **assistive devices** for writing include:

- Franklin Electronic Publishers (www.franklin.com)
- Co:Writer 3000/4000 (www.donjohnston.com)
- Dragon Naturally Speaking (www.dragontalk.com)

GED Accommodations for Dysgraphia

Currently, the General Education Development Testing Service (GEDTS) uses a specific process for requesting accommodations on GED testing. The process includes the completion of **Form L-15** for persons diagnosed with a learning disability or ADHD/ADD. This form is available from the GED Administrator or the local GED Examiner. Form L-15 is primarily completed by the “certifying professional” who provided the diagnostic assessment or by a “certifying advocate” who has access to the documentation of the disability. Each request is considered on an individual basis by the GED Administrator. Official and supporting documentation of the area of disability and the relationship to the requested accommodation(s) is essential!

Documentation of a learning disability according to GEDTS includes evidence of at least average ability, the presence of an information processing problem, and significant difficulties in reading, writing, or mathematics. Additionally, the learning disability cannot be the direct result of mental retardation, hearing, vision, or motor impairments, severe emotional disturbance, environmental or cultural differences. **In order to receive GED testing accommodations for dysgraphia, applicants must meet the criteria for a learning disability that impacts the area of writing.** They must demonstrate a past and current history of significant difficulties in handwriting, spelling, or written expression. Reasonable GED testing accommodations for dysgraphia may include:

- Extended time
- Supervised breaks
- Use of a private room
- Use of a scribe

LDA offers diagnostic learning disability assessment for GED accommodations at no cost to ABE learners through supplemental services. Following the GED Model, LDA acts as the certifying professionals who complete the L-15 and provide the supporting documentation. It is important for the adult learner and the referring instructor to understand that the diagnosis and documentation provided for the L-15 are in response to GED criteria and may not be acceptable at the post-secondary level.

If the requested accommodations for GED testing are approved, it is necessary that the candidate practice using the accommodations before taking the official test. They need to be familiar with the adjustment(s) to testing procedure and find out if they work!

Other test-taking recommendations include getting a good night's sleep, getting up with time to spare, eating a meal, wearing comfortable clothes, leaving early for the testing site, finding a comfortable seat with good lighting, giving yourself time to focus, and imagining yourself succeeding.

Please contact Marn Frank at mf@ldaminnesota.org for metro assessments and Mike Anderson at ma@ldaminnesota.org for travelling assessments (outside of the metro area).

What's Next?

The next issue of NetNews will focus on the third type of learning disability, dyscalculia or math disability.

The final issue of NetNews will be a summary of the LD/ESL diagnostic assessment pilot. LDA has completed or has in progress close to twenty alternative assessments as described in the resource *TAKING ACTION, a resource guide for instructors serving ESL adults with learning difficulties or learning disabilities*. LDA is still seeking referrals and we are especially interested in referrals of native Spanish speakers. Please contact Marn at 952-922-8374 if you are interested in referring ESL learners for this pilot assessment. The outcomes reported so far by participating ESL instructors have been very positive!