

**Engaging and Effectively Teaching  
Writing Skills to High School Students  
with Disabilities**

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**Abstract**

*Writing effectively is an imperative skill that nearly every job requires, yet students with disabilities often have trouble writing. After consistent failure with writing, students with disabilities give up on writing. My research explored the views of students with disabilities about their writing, what methods can effectively teach them to write and explored methods teachers use to engage students with disabilities in writing.*

**Section 1****1.1 Introduction**

Writing effectively is an imperative skill that nearly every job requires. Professionals must, usually, conduct research and write about it. Administrative jobs require written reports. Retail workers must order products. Mechanics need to write a report clearly stating the issue occurring to a vehicle. Writing is also an essential skill in all content areas subjects in high school. State exams require students to write essays and short answer questions. What happens when students cannot write effectively?

Students with disabilities often have an overall trouble with writing. When comparing the writing difficulties of students with learning disabilities to non-disabled peers, they produce writing that is shorter, less cohesive, and poorer in overall quality (Harris, Graham, Mason & Saddler, 2002). These students also demonstrate a progressively more negative attitude towards writing (Harris et al., 2002). After consistent failure with writing, students give up on writing. My students struggle with this every day. Many have checked out. What can I do to change their minds? How can we engage students with disabilities in writing? What are the effective strategies of teaching writing to adolescent students with learning disabilities?

**1.2 My Story**

Through my years of education, I made the honor roll and always received good grades. I never struggled or hated going to school. My parents valued education and always impressed

upon me the importance of getting an education. Although I received good grades, I do not recall having too many effective-writing teachers.

My freshman college composition teacher was the most effective writing teacher I have ever had. I remember him telling us not to worry about our grades in his class. He took us through the writing process step by step. He guided us with our writing and taught us how to be an effective writer. He gave us writing checklists so that we could look for flaws in our writing. Peer editing was utilized in class as well. He would even sit with us one-on-one and help us revise our work when we needed it. Our grade came after we went through this process and it paid off. I finally felt like I had a teacher who truly cared about whether or not I understood. He wanted me to be the best writer that I could be.

Why did it take this long for me to get a teacher like this? It would have been so useful to have this guidance before this point in my life. What about my classmates in high school who did not go on to college? I guess they were just left to find out for themselves. Why are students graduating from high school without these valuable and necessary skills? I reflect upon my own education in writing and wonder what it is like for my students. I had supportive parents and was a strong student. What is school like for my students with learning disabilities?

Students with learning disabilities demonstrate a progressively more negative attitude towards writing (Harris et al., 2002). Where exactly does it break down for these students and what can teachers do to help them?

If students are supported in the development of writing strategies across grades, genres, and settings, a powerful repertoire of writing and self-regulation strategies will become theirs. Using these strategies across grades and writing demands will enhance students' development as life-long strategic learners. (Harris et al., 2002, p. 114)

Recent research shows that writing disabilities are derived from deficiencies in the left hemisphere of the brain (Duer 1998). What does this specifically mean? What particular skills in writing do these students lack? Duer argues that:

Writing difficulties are often a result of a student's inability to process and synthesize information. Most students suffer from deficiencies in perceptions, as well as visual and auditory memory or recall. Because writing is a motor skill filters and affects other motor skills. Writing disabilities are divided into three categories: handwriting, spelling, and composition. (1988, p. 5)

Since writing performance is essential, it is important to identify skills that enhance student achievement in writing. Pajares is correct to say that "teachers would do well to take seriously their share of responsibility in nurturing the self-beliefs of their pupils, for it is clear that these self-beliefs can have beneficial or destructive influences" (2003, p. 153).

## *Section 2*

### **2.1 Literature Review that Informed My Research; an Overview:**

Three major themes emerged while examining current studies on writing for students with disabilities. The first theme identified is written ideas. For many students with a writing disability, they cannot get their ideas down on paper. Next, a writing plan or using the writing process helped improve student writing. Last, a student's view of failure in writing can be hindering to student success with writing. Once they have failed so many times, they don't find the value of trying, while others believe that some failure is just a part of writing.

### **2.2 Written Ideas**

Students often have difficulties getting their ideas out on paper. They often sit there and not write much. It is like they hit a roadblock. When they do write, it is minimal and their writing sounds more like their spoken word. Instead of using the word "because," they may use "cuz," etc.

Johnson, Bardos & Tayebi found that students with learning disabilities wrote fewer words and wrote for fewer minutes than their peers without learning disabilities (2003). This study contained 96 students, 48 with a disability and 48 without a disability. The ages of the students in the study ranged from 11 – 15 years of age. On average, the group with learning disabilities wrote 66 fewer words and wrote for three minutes less than the group without learning disabilities on the Written Expression subtest (Johnson et al., 2003). Strength of this study is that they used two forms of writing assessment, the Cognitive Assessment System (CAS) and the writing subtest of the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT) for assessing students' writing abilities.

### **2.3 Writing Plan Process**

How can teachers help students get beyond the deficits in written ideas of writing shared by many students with learning disabilities? There must be strategies that teachers can use to help these struggling students. Two studies discuss the writing process and how it can help.

Johnson et al. states there is a significant relationship between planning and written expression for students with disabilities (2003). This may mean that difficulties in some aspects of writing may be due to poor planning processes (Johnson et al., 2003). Teaching students to use planning strategies has shown positive results in improving the quantity of writing, and, often the quality of the writing of students with learning disabilities (Johnson et al., 2003). Planning can provide supports for students that will aid them with writing.

Troia and Maddox conducted a study utilizing eight special education teachers and 10 regular education teachers of middle school students (2004). Special education teachers of this study reported focusing on prewriting activities and advance planning strategies (Troia & Maddox, 2004). The general education teachers express a deeply held belief that writing is a

reflection of students' thinking and that many instructional techniques applied to the craft of writing, such as advance planning activities, graphic organizers, and revision conferences, also help students clarify and deepen their thinking and thus are beneficial for all academic disciplines (Troia & Maddox, 2004). One can see that both special education and regular education teachers agree that planning is an essential part of effective writing, however, how do these children view themselves?

#### **2.4 Views of Failure**

I found contradicting findings about students' views of failure. Younger students tended to view failure as part of the learning process. There is no one that can write perfect and that making mistakes does not make you a bad writer was the view of one student (Perry et al., 2003). This study also identified that students had effective strategies for coping with reading and writing difficulties and that students did not shy away from challenging tasks (Perry et al., 2003).

Once students reach middle school, this view of failure seems to change. When middle school students with disabilities were pulled from the regular classroom for small group instruction, they were left feeling "left out in the cold" (Mattson & Roll-Pettersson, 2007, p. 249). Troia and Maddox state that middle school students are unwilling to take risks in their writing for fear of failure (2004). Students may desire to remain "invisible" to avoid the ridicule of their peers and therefore refrain from sharing personal values and feelings in their writing (Troia & Maddox, 2004).

#### **2.5 Outcomes of the Literature Review**

It is difficult for secondary teachers to teach writing skills to students when they have no desire to become better writers. However difficult, it is an essential skill they must learn. Teaching the writing process helps students with disabilities to become better writers. It is also

evident that by the time students with disabilities reach high school, they have already “checked out” and given up on writing. The research is lacking methods that show how to re-engage these students and leave many questions unanswered. There is the additional question of whether teachers know how these particular students feel about writing.

### *Section 3*

#### **3.1 Sample**

The population targeted for my study was regular and special education teachers as well as students with disabilities at the high school level. There were 44 total participants in my study, which included faculty and students with disabilities. The sampling method I used was convenience.

All 67 students with disabilities that had an Individualized Education Program (IEP) in the high school were invited to participate in the study by having a parent or guardian fill out a consent form. The consent form included information about the purpose of the study. The parents and guardians were also informed that the methods of data collection included a questionnaire, possible interview, and a timed writing sample. The study would take place over four weeks and during that time, their educational experience would not be interrupted and their identity would remain confidential. Ten out of the 67 students with disabilities returned the signed copy of the parental/guardian informed consent form. These ten students also signed a consent form giving their own permission.

Ninety seven teachers were invited to participate in the study by placing a consent form with the questionnaire attached in their mailbox. As with the letter for the parents and guardians, the cover letter informed the teachers about the purpose of the research and about the confidentiality of the participants. They were informed that their participation was voluntary.



Thirty four teachers signed the consent forms and completed the questionnaires. They were given the option of placing their name on the questionnaire; however, they were informed that no names would be disclosed when the report was done. Written permission from the high school principal was obtained before the study began. SUNY Oswego's Human Subject Committee had also approved the research design prior to the start of the study.

#### *Teacher/ Faculty Participants*

Thirty-four (34) secondary teachers participated in the study. They ranged from having one (1) to thirty-three (33) years of teaching experience. Table 1 below shows the number of participants from each content area.

<b># of Participants</b>	<b>Content Area</b>
9	Special Education Teachers
7	English/Literacy
5	Foreign Language
5	Science
4	Social Studies
3	Mathematics
1	Family & consumer Science

*Table 1*

#### *Student Participants*

Ten students with disabilities participated in this study. The disabilities ranged from mild to severe. Five were male and five were female. Their ages ranged from 14 to 19. All 10 students participated in the questionnaire and timed writing. Two of the 10 students participated in the interview. The first student that participated in the interview was a 15 year old male. He was

identified as a special education student in the third grade with a learning disability in reading and writing. The second student that participated was a 16 year old female. She has been identified since fourth grade as having a learning disability in reading, writing and mathematics.

### **3.2 Instruments**

Questionnaire: The first instrument used was a questionnaire. There was one for students with disabilities and a separate one for the teachers. The student questionnaire consisted of 13 questions. These questions asked about how they view the quality of their writing, the aspects of writing they struggle with and how teachers can help them improve the quality of their writing. The teacher questionnaire consisted of a total of 22 questions. The first 13 questions were identical to the student questionnaire but asked the teachers' view. The teacher questionnaire also had some short answer questions about what strategies they are using that work, why those strategies work, how they may teach writing to students with disabilities differently than regular education students, and what they might be able to do to change student's' attitudes towards writing.

Interviews: The second instrument used was student interviews. Two students answered questions about how they felt about their writing and why. They spoke of teachers past and present that used strategies that helped them with their writing as well as strategies that had not helped them. Their self-esteem about their writing struggles was discussed too.

Timed writing: The third and final instrument used was a timed writing sample. The students had two picture prompts to choose from. They had 40 minutes to use the picture prompt and write a creative story in which the picture was one scene of their story. I counted the number of words written during this time frame. The average number of words that the students wrote in the time period provided a baseline of student writing abilities.

### 3.3 Procedure

In the weeks prior to beginning my research, I obtained permission from the principal at the high school (Appendix A). I also spoke to the special education staff at our department meeting to distribute the parent (Appendix B) and student (Appendix C) permission letters. As high school students, these letters were being sent home with the students. Student questionnaires (Appendix D) were also distributed to special education teachers at this time so that they could have their students complete them as the permission letters were returned.

Completed permission letters and questionnaires were placed in my mailbox or delivered to my classroom. I allowed three weeks for permission letters and questionnaires to be completed and returned.

As questionnaires were turned in, I inputted the quantitative data into surveygizmo.com. For open-ended questions, I looked for key words and phrases to look for emerging patterns.

Faculty was given their permission letter (Appendix E) and questionnaire (Appendix F). They were handed out in faculty mailboxes. Faculty was instructed to return the completed permission letters and questionnaires to my mailbox or classroom.

They had a two-week deadline for completion. Like with the student data, I inputted the results into surveygizmo.com and looked for key words and phrases for patterns.

The same students that completed the questionnaire participated in the timed writing piece (Appendix G). It was completed with their special education teacher. Students were given the writing prompt and provided 40 minutes to write. This allowed me to count the number of words written by all students during this time. This also provided me data about reluctant writers and students that struggle with written expression. The data was entered in Microsoft Excel.

During the last week, I interviewed (Appendix H) two students. During the interviews, I asked many of the same questions that were on the questionnaire. However, I probed the students to provide more details about their writing experiences thus far in their education. This qualitative data was summarized so that commonalties could be made.

## *Section 4*

### **Data Analysis**

#### **4.1 Analysis**

Once my questionnaires were complete and returned to me from teachers and students, I put the data from each questionnaire onto the website, surveygizmo.com and it generated tables and graphs with the entire questionnaire data compiled. For the open-ended questions, the table just restated each answer the participants responded. I looked through the list of responses and looked for key words and phrases to group the answers accordingly.

For the timed writing piece, I counted the number of words and number of sentences each student wrote. These numbers were placed into a table to display the results. The student interviews were typed into Microsoft Word and key responses were highlighted for the summary.

## *Section 5*

### **5.1 Results and Findings**

#### *Timed Writing Piece*

Eight students with disabilities completed the timed writing sample. Given the allotted 40 minutes to write a story, these results show low numbers. Table 2 shows the number of sentences written ranged from four to 57, giving an average of 15 sentences written in the time allowed. The number of words written ranged from 45 to 420. There was an average of 182 words written during the 40 minutes.

<b>Student</b>	<b># of sentences</b>	<b># of words</b>
1	57	420
2	4	128
3	12	210
4	7	45
5	24	384
6	4	47
7	5	80
8	10	193
<b>Average</b>	15	188

*Table 2**Questionnaires*

The teacher and student questionnaire had thirteen questions that were the same and comparing that data provided valuable feedback. Faculty and students were asked about the satisfaction of the quality of student writing. There were no students that were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their writing, yet 50% and 3%, respectively, of the teachers were disappointed or very disappointed with their students' writing. 40% of students were satisfied, while only 15% of teachers were satisfied. Neutral replies were a little more equal with 50% of students and 32% of teachers feeling this way. 40% of students are satisfied with their writing, while only 15% of teachers feel this way. Last, 10% of students were very satisfied, while no teachers responded to this. The students seem to be content or happy with the way they write, while 86% of teachers are either neutral or dissatisfied in some way with the writing of their students with disabilities. This result could possibly be a result of the students that participated in the study. These 10 students may all be fairly motivated. Overall, it shows that teachers are not satisfied with the writing of their students with disabilities.

The next question on both of the questionnaires asked students to rate their own writing and asked teachers to rate the writing of their students with disabilities. The students were overall satisfied, with 20% excellent, 50% good, and 30% fair. Again, the teachers felt differently with

only 6% stating their writing is good, 35% stating fair, 56% stating poor, and 3% responded very poor. Again, these differences could be that the students participating in the study are motivated students. However, the timed writing piece results show that these students are not writing a significant amount of words or sentences.

Next in the questionnaire, 100% of teachers stated that their students with disabilities struggle with writing. Of the 10 student participants, 70% responded they struggle with writing and 30% responded that they did not. To further this question, participants were asked how many years this struggle has occurred. Of the student responses, 13% stated one to two years, 50% three to five years, 13% six to eight years, and 25% nine or more years. The teacher responses were 3% one to two years, 29% six to eight years, and 68% nine years or more.

The student responses seem low for the amount of years that they have struggled. While I am sure that many have struggled since elementary school, they may not have realized it. It is possible that they answered this question based on when they realized that they struggled with writing versus how many years it has actually been occurring.

Both questionnaires then asked what aspects of writing do students struggle with the most. Students and teachers could choose as many responses as they wished. The student and teacher response, table 3 and table 4 respectively, are shown in the tables below. The more difficult writing tasks are displayed at the top of the chart and decrease as they are listed. Ninety percent (90%) of the students felt they struggled with organizing their thoughts, 60% felt spelling, the length of the writing piece, and grammar were difficult, 50% struggle with expressing their ideas and transitions, while only 30% of students felt sentence structure and punctuation are the most difficult tasks.

The teachers also responded that organizing their thoughts (91.2%) and spelling (88.2%) were difficult. The rest of their responses were a little different from the students. Eighty-five and three tenths percent (85.3%) thought students struggle with sentence structure. Eighty-two and four tenths percent (82.4%) stated grammar and 76.5% stated punctuation. Expressing their ideas and transitions both had 73.5%. Last, only 55.9% of teachers felt students struggled with the length of the writing piece. Although the percentage of students and teachers that felt the length of the writing piece was in the range of 55 to 60 percent, the students had it listed in the top five struggles, while the teachers had it listed last. This is significant to me because the length of the writing seems to be very important for the student and the teachers do not see it the same way.

#### Student Responses

Value	Count	Percent %
organizing their thoughts	9	90%
spelling	6	60%
length of the writing piece	6	60%
grammar	6	60%
expressing their ideas	5	50%
transitions	5	50%
sentence structure	3	30%
punctuation	3	30%

*Table 3*

#### Teacher Responses

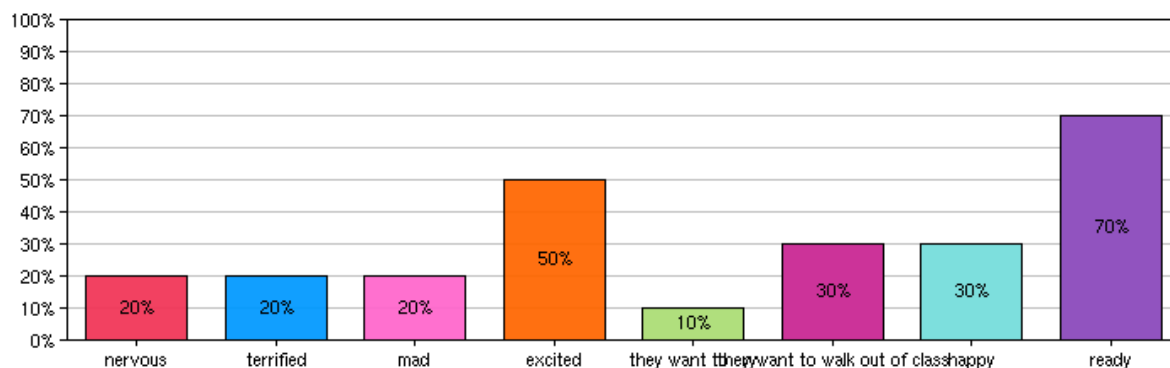
Value	Count	Percent %
organizing their thoughts	31	91.2%
spelling	30	88.2%
sentence structure	29	85.3%
grammar	28	82.4%
punctuation	26	76.5%
expressing their ideas	25	73.5%
transitions	25	73.5%
length of the writing piece	19	55.9%

*Table 4*

The next question related to how much effort students with disabilities put into their writing. They were asked to rate their effort on a scale of one to 10, one being the least effort and ten being the most effort. The students felt they put a lot of effort into their work and had responses that ranged from five to ten. The teachers' responses ranged from two to nine. 20 teachers rated student effort between two and five, while only 14 teachers rated their effort between six and nine.

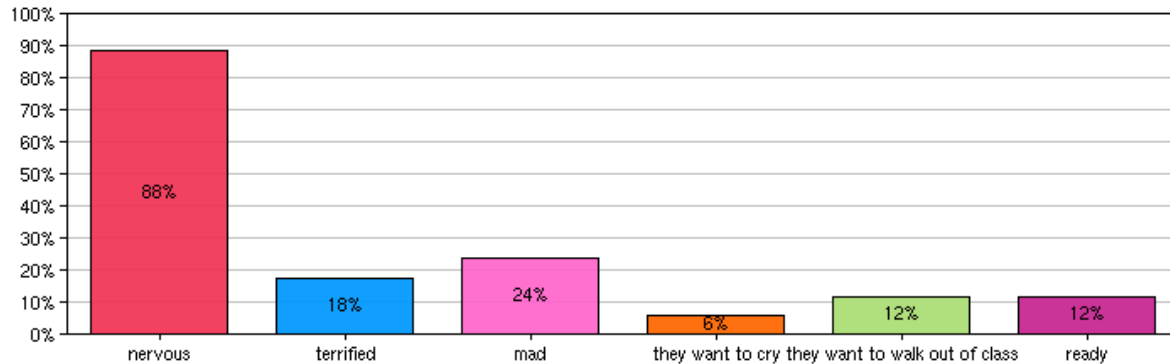
After looking at effort, they were asked if they thought writing negatively affects all schoolwork and grades. Sixty percent (60%) of students with disabilities agree that it does affect schoolwork and grades while about 83% of teachers agreed with this statement. This is significant when 40% of students do not believe that their writing skills affect their schoolwork and grades.

When asked how students feel when they are asked to complete a writing assignment, the students and teachers responded very differently. Figure 1 shows the students' responses while figure 2 displays the teacher responses. When looking at this data, the majority of students feel ready and excited when it is time to complete a writing assignment. The majority of teachers responded that they thought students with disabilities are nervous when they ask them to complete a writing assignment.



*Figure 1: Students' feelings towards writing*





*Figure 2: Teachers assessment of students' feelings towards writing*

When students with disabilities are asked to complete these writing assignments, how many paragraphs do students with disabilities write? 40% of students stated they write two, 30% stated they write three, and 30% stated that they write five or more paragraphs when asked to write. The teachers felt the opposite. 50% responded that their students write only one paragraph, 29% responded with two paragraphs, 18% stated three paragraphs, and only 3% replied that they write five or more paragraphs.

Teachers and students were asked to rate the quality of these paragraphs. Eighty percent (80%) of the students stated their paragraphs were fair, good, or excellent while only 20% responded that the paragraphs were poor or very poor. The teachers had only two responses. Fifty-six percent (56%) rated the quality of the paragraphs poor and 44% rated them as fair. Overall, the students feel they write more and of substantial quality. The teachers believe they write less and what they are writing is only of fair or poor quality.

The next two questions asked about the importance of writing for success in high school and in life, job, and career. Students and teachers responded very similarly to these questions. 80% of students and 76.5% of teachers felt that writing is very important for success in high school. Ten percent (10%) of students and 23.5% of teachers feel that it is somewhat important. Just 10% of students feel that writing is not important for success in high school. Seventy

percent (70%) of students and 67.6% of teachers feel writing is important in life, job, and career. 20% of students and 29.4% feel it is somewhat important. Last, only 10% of students and 2.9% of teachers feel that writing is not important for success in life, job, and career.

What can teachers do to help improve writing of students with disabilities? The students and teachers responded and the data is displayed as tables in table 5 and table 6 below respectively. Looking at the data listed in these tables, students prefer extra time, small group help, use of a graphic organizer, one-on-one help, and using the writing process. The teacher data shows that they feel, for the most part, that all of these strategies are useful and beneficial. These teachers should look at what the students need. This may change throughout the school year or from year to year based on the students and their individual needs.

#### Student results

Value	Count	Percent %
Provide extra time	9	90%
Provide small group help	7	70%
Provide graphic organizers	6	60%
Teach the writing process	6	60%
Provide 1-on-1 help	6	60%
Explain the assignment more than once	3	30%
Provide good/detailed information	3	30%
Other	2	20%

*Table 5: Students suggestions of ways to improve writing*

## Teacher results

Value	Count	Percent %
Provide 1-on-1 help	30	88.2%
Provide extra time	26	76.5%
Provide small group help	25	73.5%
Provide good/detailed information	23	68.6%
Provide graphic organizers	23	68.6%
Explain the assignment more than once	23	68.6%
Teach the writing process	22	64.7%
Other	9	26.5%

*Table 6 Teachers suggestions of ways to improve writing*

The next question asked if teachers believe students with disabilities need to be taught writing differently than their peers. Seventy-nine and four tenths percent (79.4%) responded yes and 20.6% responded no.

When asked to explain their answer, a few common answers were recorded. Ten teachers replied that these students learn differently because their brains function differently than most students. Seven replied that they struggle with basic spelling, grammar, and sentence structure and should work on their basic writing skills. Three felt that they process information differently. Two responded that these students also struggle with reading and therefore require assistance in this area as well.

To further investigate this question, they were asked how they could be taught differently. Eight teachers felt that by breaking down the task of writing it will provide the scaffolding that these students need. Three stated that the teacher needs to find out what works

best for that individual student. Three felt that one-on-one time is beneficial. Last, three had no idea and felt that was the magic question.

Next, teachers were asked what they believe they can do to change students with disabilities' view/attitude of writing. Twelve teachers felt that encouragement and praise is the best solution. There were other great answers as well. Allowing the students to write about what they know or having some choice in the topic they write about was the response of five. Breaking the writing process down into even smaller steps would help students to not become overwhelmed. Last, two teachers felt that allowing students to re-write writing pieces would take some of the pressure off of the students.

Teachers then provided strategies and methods they have used in the past to teach writing to students with disabilities. There were five responses that kept reoccurring by many of the teacher participants. Using graphic organizers helps the students organize their information. Brainstorming and outlining help them get their ideas out. Modeling and providing examples by the teacher is important. Last, working one-on-one with the student so that they can see their mistakes and the teacher can provide immediate feedback. When the teachers were asked which of these strategies they felt were most effective, they responded with graphic organizers and one-on-one support.

Last, the teacher participants could list any other thoughts or ideas they have about the writing of students with disabilities. Table 7 below displays the insightful responses from this questionnaire item.

Categories of Responses	Teacher Comments
More support for students	<p data-bbox="820 268 1421 415">“I wish we had more time to work one-on-one.” “Revising writings for an improved grade should be a building wide policy for all students.”</p> <p data-bbox="820 451 1421 632">“I think teaching writing in a foreign language is more difficult when students don't have a grasp on their own language, but by starting small and writing together and correcting mistakes, it seems to help.”</p>
Struggles of students	<p data-bbox="820 636 1437 856">“I think writing is a struggle for many students. Due to their fear and nervousness, behavior problems occur because they'd rather be ‘cool’ and get in trouble than look ‘dumb’. English teachers need to reinforce the writing process every year.”</p> <p data-bbox="820 892 1437 1071">“Somehow it needs to be improved cross grade level as one of the biggest factors holding our students with disabilities back is writing. Without it they cannot pass a NYS History Regents exam.”</p> <p data-bbox="820 1106 1437 1222">“They need to do it, but in a way that is not so overwhelming that they want to give up before they get started.”</p> <p data-bbox="820 1257 1437 1768">“Writing is such a complex process and every individual w/ disabilities tend to struggle more in this area now days. Including the use of more technology/word processing and such might improve to be more helpful it begun earlier, i.e. elementary school. Some of the frustration that I see students experience in this area come from having to write by hand and re-write over and over again. It is so much easier to edit writing on a computer. Also, many students are not becoming proficient w/ handwriting so they have more of a resistance to writing tasks just based on the laborious effort needed to write and spell.”</p> <p data-bbox="820 1803 1437 1873">“I think all people are different. Some can write well and some can't, just as some are</p>

	good artists and others not. Sometimes we fail students by trying to make them do things they will never be good at. They need an alternative - tech track!”
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*Table 7**Student Interviews*

I interviewed two students with disabilities about their current and past writing experiences. Both of these students had many commonalities in their responses. Feeling overwhelmed seems to happen frequently when they are asked to write for a class. They do feel that when teachers shorten the assignment, provide one-on-one help, and allow them to use tools like graphic organizers, it helps them. They really want the extra help. When a teacher sits with them, they are able to see exactly what they are doing wrong and get immediate feedback. When looking back at their past teachers that they had success with writing, these teachers always had the same things in common. These teachers were encouraging and supportive which told the students that they cared. These teachers also provided some one-on-one help. The responses that these students provided supported most of the statements teachers provided in the open-ended questions of the teacher questionnaire.

*Section 6***6.1 Summary**

My research explored the views of students with disabilities about their writing, what methods can effectively teach them to write adequately, and methods teachers are already using to engage students with disabilities in writing. To find out the answers to these questions, I used a teacher and student questionnaire, conducted student interviews, and gave the students a timed writing piece. My research shows that students with disabilities are writing far less than their peers. It also shows that there are many differences between the student and teacher views on

various aspects of writing. Teachers should be aware of how students with disabilities are feeling towards writing. How can teachers effectively help students if they do not know how the students feel or what they need?

## **6.2 Discussion**

The timed writing piece shows the range of difficulties that students with disabilities have with writing and written expression. They are also consistent with Johnson, Bardos & Tayebi who found that students with learning disabilities wrote fewer words and wrote for fewer minutes than their peers without learning disabilities (2003). The numbers are more common with elementary students, than high school students. This shows that more needs to be done teaching writing to students with disabilities at the high school level. Some of the results, like student two, wrote 128 words, but only four sentences. There were numerous run-on sentences and inappropriate punctuation. I found this to be true for more than one of these students.

When asked in the questionnaires to rate their own writing and for teachers to rate the writing of their students with disabilities, the results were the following. The students were overall satisfied, with 20% excellent, 50% good, and 30% fair. Again, the teachers felt differently with only 6% stating their writing is good, 35% stating fair, 56% stating poor, and 3% responded very poor. Again, these differences could be that the students participating in the study are motivated students. However, the timed writing piece results showed that these students are not writing a significant amount of words or sentences.

So, how does effort play into this equation? Teacher and students were asked to rate their effort on a scale of one to 10, one being the least effort and 10 being the most effort. The students felt they put a lot of effort into their work and had responses that ranged from five to ten. The teachers' responses ranged from two to nine. Twenty teachers rated student effort

between two and five, while only 14 teachers rated their effort between six and nine. The teachers need to know that these students are trying their best. Many of these students may give up completely if they found out that their teacher thinks their effort is minimal. When asked how students feel when they are asked to complete a writing assignment, the students and teachers responded very differently. The majority of students feel ready and excited when it is time to complete a writing assignment. The majority of teachers responded that they thought students with disabilities are nervous when they ask them to complete a writing assignment.

Students prefer extra time, small group help, use of a graphic organizer, one-on-one help, and using the writing process. The teacher data showed that they feel extra help, small groups, graphic organizers, using the writing process, one-on-one help, explaining the assignment more than once and providing good/detailed information to the student would help. This is consistent with what Troia and Maddox (2004) found. The general education teachers express a deeply held belief that writing is a reflection of students' thinking and that many instructional techniques applied to the craft of writing, such as advance planning activities, graphic organizers, and revision conferences, also help students clarify and deepen their thinking and thus are beneficial for all academic disciplines (Troia & Maddox, 2004). These teachers should look at what the students need. This may change throughout the school year or from year to year based on the students and their individual needs.

It is important for students and teachers to realize how important writing is throughout life. As individuals, we must be able to communicate clearly both verbally and in written form. To graduate from high school in New York State, students must complete many Regents exams. These exams all have writing portions on them. Life also has many instances such as parents writing a note to a teacher or a mechanic writing down what he/she fixed and how it was done.



Teachers provided strategies and methods they have used in the past to teach writing to students with disabilities. When the teachers were asked which of these strategies they felt were most effective, they responded with graphic organizers and one-on-one support. Johnson et al (2003) would agree with the results of my questionnaire. Teaching students to use planning strategies has shown positive results in improving the quantity of writing, and, often the quality of the writing of students with learning disabilities (Johnson et al., 2003).

### **6.3 Limitations**

**Time:** My study did have some limitations. Time was definitely one that I had. Four weeks was not enough time to collect adequate data. I felt rushed and could have conducted more student interviews and possibly conduct some teacher interviews as well.

**Low student participation:** While I had many teachers participate, I would have liked more than just 10 students' participants. I think this is a direct reflection of students with disabilities feelings about writing. Those students that have lost interest in writing and already "checked out" did not want to participate. The students that did participate were motivated students that are still interested in writing. This could have had a large impact on my data and study.

### **6.4 Implications**

My research implies that teachers and students with disabilities do not view their writing the same way. While students are poor performers with writing, they seem content with their work. Teachers, on the other hand, seem very dissatisfied. Teachers need to listen to student needs and how they can personally be helped to improve their writing. I am basing this on the data that I did receive from the students with disabilities that were happy with their writing skills. These were students that enjoyed writing.

## **6.5 Recommendation for Further Research**

In order for more conclusions to be made, a study using a larger number of students with disabilities would be beneficial. These students should range from those who have given up on writing to those who still enjoy writing. I feel it is essential to get the views of those unmotivated students and find out what may turn their views on writing around. Without this valuable information, teachers do not know what direction they should go with these students.

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## **Appendices**

**Appendix A** - Letter Requesting Permission of the School District

**Appendix B** – Permission from the Parents for Participation

**Appendix C** – Permission for Students for Participation

**Appendix D** – Student Questionnaire

**Appendix E** – Letter requesting Permission for Faculty

**Appendix F** – Teacher/Faculty Questionnaire

**Appendix G** – Timed Writing Sample

**Appendix H** – Student Interview Questions

## Appendix A

### Letter Requesting Permission of the School District

Dear High School Principal :

My name is Jennifer Smith and this is my fourth year teaching special education at [REDACTED] High School. I am currently a Curriculum and Instruction graduate student at Oswego State University. To finish my graduate program, I need to complete my action research project. My research topic is “How to engage and effectively teach writing to students with disabilities.” The study would entail giving questionnaires to students, teachers, and administration, student interviews, and observations of students in the writing process. To conduct my research, I need your assistance.

I request permission to conduct my research at our school. I will abide by all ethical standards and district policy in this study. All results will be kept anonymous and confidential, all participants will be voluntary and parental permission will be obtained before any student information is used. I also plan to make the completed results of the study available for anyone who requests it.

If you have any further questions about the study, please contact me, Jennifer Smith at 341-2273 or Dr. Faith Maina at 312-2641 (academic advisor). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Friedman, Chair of the SUNY Oswego Human Subjects Committee at 312-6381.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Thank you in anticipation,

Jennifer Smith

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (full name and surname) give permission for  
Jennifer Smith to conduct research at [REDACTED] High School.

## Appendix B

### Permission from the Parents for Participation

Dear Parent or Guardian,

My name is Jennifer Smith. I am currently teaching my fourth year as a special education Teacher at ██████ High School and am currently completing my graduate program at Oswego State University. To complete my studies I am generating a research study on effective writing strategies to teach writing to students with disabilities. To do this, I have created a survey for students to complete. Along with the survey, your child may be asked to answer questions in a short interview. The questions asked are about how they feel about their writing, what has worked best for them in the past, and what they believe teachers can do to help them improve their writing.

I assure you that confidentiality will be maintained and your child will not be identified by me in any way. Your child's participation in this research is strictly voluntary. In addition, your child will not be denied any instruction or benefits because of my inquiry. If you have any further questions about the study, please contact me, Jennifer Smith at 341-2273 or Dr. Faith Maina at 312-2641 (academic advisor). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Friedman, Chair of the SUNY Oswego Human Subjects Committee at 312-6381.

If I have your permission to survey and interview \_\_\_\_\_ in my research, please return this form with your approval.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Smith



I grant my permission for \_\_\_\_\_ (child's name) to complete the survey and be interviewed in the research investigation conducted by Jennifer Smith. I understand that the confidentiality of my child will be maintained in any reports of this research. If I do not grant permission to participate in this research study, my child will not be denied any educational opportunity.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Name (print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Name (print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

## Appendix C

### Permission for Students for Participation

Dear Student,

My name is Jennifer Smith. I am currently teaching my fourth year at [REDACTED] High School and am currently completing my graduate program at Oswego State University. To complete my studies I am generating a research study on effective writing strategies to teach writing to students with disabilities. To do this, I have created a survey for students to complete. Along with the survey, you may be asked to answer questions in a short interview. The questions asked are about how you feel about your writing, what has worked best for you in the past, and what you believe teachers can do to help you improve your writing.

I assure you that confidentiality will be maintained and you will not be identified by me in any way. Your participation in this research is strictly voluntary. In addition, you will not be denied any instruction or benefits because of my inquiry. If you have any further questions about the study, please contact me, Jennifer Smith at 341-2273 or Dr. Faith Maina at 312-2641 (academic advisor). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Friedman, Chair of the SUNY Oswego Human Subjects Committee at 312-6381.

If I have your permission to survey and interview you in my research, please return this form with your approval.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Smith

I grant my permission for \_\_\_\_\_(your name) to complete the survey and be interviewed in the research investigation conducted by Jennifer Smith. I understand that my confidentiality will be maintained in any reports of this research. If I do not grant permission to participate in this research study, I will not be denied any educational opportunity.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student's Name (print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Name (print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

## Appendix D

### Student Questionnaire

Name (optional) \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is your gender?

a. Male

b. Female

2. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

3. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the quality of your writing?

Completely dissatisfied 1 2 3 4 5 6 completely satisfied

4. Please rate your writing.

very poor      poor      fair      good      excellent

5. Do you feel you struggle with writing?

a. yes

b. no

If you answered yes, then for how many years have you struggled?

a. 1 – 2

b. 3 – 5

c. 6 – 8

d. 9 or more

6. Which of the following do you struggle with when you write? (Check all that apply)

- a. Expressing your ideas (getting your ideas out) \_\_\_\_\_
- b. Organizing your thoughts \_\_\_\_\_
- c. Sentence structure \_\_\_\_\_
- d. Grammar \_\_\_\_\_
- e. Punctuation \_\_\_\_\_
- f. Spelling \_\_\_\_\_
- g. Transitions \_\_\_\_\_
- h. Length of the writing piece \_\_\_\_\_

7. First, imagine the least effort someone could put into their writing and call it “1”.

Second, imagine the most effort someone could put into their writing and call it “10”.

Where would you place your effort right now? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Overall, my writing negatively affects all of my schoolwork and grades.

- A) Strongly agree
- B) Moderately agree
- C) Slightly agree
- D) Neutral, no opinion, or undecided
- E) Slightly disagree
- F) Moderately disagree
- G) Strongly disagree

9. How do you feel when asked to complete a writing assignment in one of your classes?

(Check all that apply.)

Nervous \_\_\_\_\_

Terrified \_\_\_\_\_

Mad \_\_\_\_\_

Excited \_\_\_\_\_

You want to cry \_\_\_\_\_

You want to walk out of class \_\_\_\_\_

Happy \_\_\_\_\_

Ready \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_ What is the other? \_\_\_\_\_

10. When asked to write an essay, report, DBQ, etc., about how many paragraphs can you usually write?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5 or more

How would you rate the quality (how good) of these paragraphs?

very poor      poor      fair      good      excellent

11. How important do you believe writing is for success in high school?

very important          somewhat important          not important

12. How important do you believe writing is for success in life/job/career?

very important          somewhat important          not important

13. What can teachers do to help you improve your writing? (Check all that apply.)

Have you complete the assignment by yourself \_\_\_\_\_

Provide graphic organizers \_\_\_\_\_

Provide goo/detailed instructions \_\_\_\_\_

Provide small group help \_\_\_\_\_

Teach the writing process \_\_\_\_\_

Provide 1-on-1 help \_\_\_\_\_

Provide extra time \_\_\_\_\_

Explain the assignment more than once \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

If you checked other, please list

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Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey!

## Appendix E

### Letter requesting Permission for Faculty

Dear Colleague:

My name is Jennifer Smith. This is my fourth year teaching special education here at [REDACTED] High School, and I am currently a graduate student at Oswego State University. To finish my graduate program, I need to complete my action research project. This survey you are about to complete is a portion of the action research project, on “How to engage and effectively teach writing to students with disabilities.”

This survey has been approved by the Faculty Research Committee on Human Subjects of the State University of New York at Oswego. Your participation in this research is voluntary. Please take time to complete the survey, and then place it in my mailbox by October 30, 2010. If you have any questions about the research, please contact Jennifer Smith by email, [jsmith3@oswego.org](mailto:jsmith3@oswego.org). If you have any further questions about the study, please contact me, Dr. Faith Maina at 312-2641 (academic advisor). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Friedman, Chair of the SUNY Oswego Human Subjects Committee at 312-6381.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Smith  
[REDACTED]

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I have read the above statement about the purpose of the nature of the study, and I freely consent to participate.



\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature                      Date                      Researcher's Signature                      Date

\*\*\*Please place the signed portion of the consent letter in my mailbox in the main office

## Appendix F

### Teacher/Faculty Questionnaire

Name (optional) \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher Writing Questionnaire

1. Number of years with teaching experience: \_\_\_\_\_ years

2. Content/ Certification Area: \_\_\_\_\_

3. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the quality of the writing of your students with disabilities?

Completely dissatisfied 1 2 3 4 5 6 completely satisfied

4. Please rate your students with disabilities' writing.

very poor      poor      fair      good      excellent

5. Do you feel your students with disabilities struggle with writing?

a. yes

b. no

If you answered yes, then for how many years do you think they have struggled?

a. 1 – 2

b. 3 – 5

c. 6 – 8

d. 9 or more

6. Which of the following do you believe your students with disabilities struggle with when they write? (Check all that apply)

- a. Expressing their ideas \_\_\_\_\_
- b. Organizing their thoughts \_\_\_\_\_
- c. Sentence structure \_\_\_\_\_
- d. Grammar \_\_\_\_\_
- e. Punctuation \_\_\_\_\_
- f. Spelling \_\_\_\_\_
- g. Transitions \_\_\_\_\_
- h. Length of the writing piece \_\_\_\_\_

7. First, imagine the least effort someone could put into their writing and call it “1”.

Second, imagine the most effort someone could put into their writing and call it “10”.

Where would you place your students with disabilities writing effort right now? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Overall, how do you think the writing of students with disabilities negatively affects all of their schoolwork and grades.

- H) Strongly agree
- I) Moderately agree
- J) Slightly agree
- K) Neutral, no opinion, or undecided
- L) Slightly disagree
- M) Moderately disagree
- N) Strongly disagree

9. How do you think students with disabilities feel when asked to complete a writing assignment in your class? (Check all that apply.)

Nervous \_\_\_\_\_

Terrified \_\_\_\_\_

Mad \_\_\_\_\_

Excited \_\_\_\_\_

They want to cry \_\_\_\_\_

They want to walk out of class \_\_\_\_\_

Happy \_\_\_\_\_

Ready \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_ What is the other? \_\_\_\_\_

10. When asked to write an essay, report, DBQ, etc., about how many paragraphs do your students with disabilities usually write?

a. 1

b. 2

c. 3

d. 4

e. 5 or more

How would you rate the quality of these paragraphs?

very poor

poor

fair

good

excellent

11. How important do you believe writing is for success in high school?

very important          somewhat important          not important

12. How important do you believe writing is for success in life/job/career?

very important          somewhat important          not important

13. What can teachers do to help improve the writing of students with disabilities? (Check all that apply.)

Provide graphic organizers \_\_\_\_\_

Provide goo/detailed instructions \_\_\_\_\_

Provide small group help \_\_\_\_\_

Teach the writing process \_\_\_\_\_

Provide 1-on-1 help \_\_\_\_\_

Provide extra time \_\_\_\_\_

Explain the assignment more than once \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

If you checked other, please list

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14. Do you believe students with disabilities need to be taught writing differently than their peers?

a. yes

b. no

Why?

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If yes, how?

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15. What can teachers do to change students with disabilities view/attitude of writing?

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16. What strategies/methods have you used in the past to teach writing to students with disabilities?

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Which of these do you think are the most effective and why?

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17. Do you have any other thoughts/ideas about the writing of students with disabilities?

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Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey!

## Appendix G

### Timed Writing

Please choose **one** picture below and write a creative story about it. Remember, this picture is only one scene in your story. You will have **40 minutes** to write your story.



Sample \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix H Student Interview Questions

1. How do you feel about your writing?
2. Are you good at writing?
3. How much effort do you put into writing?
4. Tell me about your writing and struggles you have had in the past.
5. What do you wish teachers would do to help you?
6. How can teachers help you improve your writing?
7. What have some of your teachers in the past done to help you with your writing?
8. When you look back on some of the best teachers you have had, what did they do to help you improve your writing?
9. Do you have trouble getting ideas out, spelling, etc?
10. How do you think you learn the best? What, specifically, can teachers do to help you with:

Expressing their ideas \_\_\_\_\_

Organizing their thoughts \_\_\_\_\_

Sentence structure \_\_\_\_\_

Grammar \_\_\_\_\_

Punctuation \_\_\_\_\_

Spelling \_\_\_\_\_

Transitions \_\_\_\_\_

Length of the writing piece \_\_\_\_\_