# Writing

Writing is one of the most (if not **the most**) difficult academic activity that students are asked to perform.  To become proficient, students require lots of practice.  Students with language difficulties usually fall into one of two groups when it comes to writing assignments.  They either write nothing or very little, or else they write pages and pages of words that are one long run-on sentence.

Students may have writing problems for a variety of reasons.  Some experts say that there are 25+ skills that are implicated in the writing process.  Here is a non-exhaustive list of typical areas of difficulty that educators may observe in their students and possible solutions at a glance.  As you will see, many of the difficulties are speech or language-based.

| DIFFICULTY | POTENTIAL SOLUTION |
|---|---|
| Fine motor challenges:<br>• Student can't hold a writing implement<br>• Student can't use a keyboard<br>• Student can't form legible letters | Consult OT for evaluation and strategies<br>iPad apps that allow student to select and drag letters (e.g. SoundLiteracy)<br>Magnetic board + magnetic letters<br>Felt board + felt letters |
| Spelling difficulties | Ensure knowledge of letter-sound correspondences<br>Build phonological awareness<br>Build morphological awareness (e.g. Structured Word Analysis)<br>Utilize SoundPrint Resources<br>Provide reference charts<br>Allow student to compile a personal reference list of high-frequency words for which he/she is prone to make errors (e.g. *because, very, some*) |
| Difficulty generating ideas | Supply pictures, photos, story starters, graphic organizers |
| Difficulty with word choice (imprecise vocabulary) | Increase awareness of specific versus nonspecific words<br>Provide focused practice on generating synonyms<br>Build subject-specific vocabulary<br>Model specific vocabulary usage<br>Have student build a personal theme-based word bank which he/she can consult during writing |
| Difficulty formulating grammatical sentences | Pay close attention to student's oral language skills: does their written grammar reflect oral language difficulties? |
| Difficulty with punctuation | Ensure that the student understands the concept of the complete sentence.<br>Provide focused, explicit instruction on the use of commas, apostrophes, etc.?  Suggested resource: |

| | *Everyday Editing* by Jeff Anderson |
|---|---|
| Difficulty with capitalization | Offer explicit teaching of specific rules, one a time, with plenty of opportunity for practice. |
| Difficulty with discourse level writing (paragraphs, essays, stories, etc.) | Use of the 6+ Writing Traits™ model<br>Explicit instruction in the organization of text structures<br>(http://www.literacyleader.com/?q=textstructure)<br>Use of graphic organizers<br>(http://my.hrw.com/nsmedia/intgos/html/igo.htm) |
| Difficulty answering exam questions | Ensure understanding of the language in the questions (e.g. *elaborate, explain, compare*)<br>Use of strategies for test taking<br>(www.testtakingtips.com) |

## What are the relationships between reading, writing and language functioning?

Writing difficulties/dysgraphia may occur on their own as a single disability, or they may co-occur with dyslexia (reading disability) or with dysphasia (oral language disability, also referred to as specific language impairment).

As there is a mutually interdependent relationship between literacy and language, it is important to determine if the student's oral language development is proceeding in a typical fashion. A student cannot be expected to express him/herself in writing at a level more advanced than his/her oral language skills. You may consult the chart provided elsewhere in this website for this purpose: http://www.emsb.qc.ca/centreofexcellence/pdf/childdevelopmentinfo.com-Language_Development_In_Children.pdf

## How can a classroom teacher identify if a writing problem exists?

Analysis of **independently-produced, unedited** writing samples is a powerful tool for understanding a student's difficulties with writing. The beauty of this is that:

- It's **FREE**!!!!
- It's **ACCESSIBLE**!!! You don't have to rely on a reading specialist, psychologist or speech-language pathologist to do it, although it is advisable to consult one if available, for consultation, resources and strategies.
- You can keep a **PORTFOLIO** that allows for careful monitoring of progress.

The chart above may be used as a general guideline for assessing writing ability. Teachers may use developmental milestone charts in guiding their analysis of writing samples. Here are links to resources that will guide you in analysing your student's writing samples:

- This website offers a developmental chart that is based on grade level from Kindergarten to Grade 4 and touches on a variety of reading and writing skills: http://foundationsforliteracy.cllrnet.ca/index.php/Reading_and_writing_development

- *The Continuum of Literacy Learning* by Fountas and Pinnell is also an excellent resource for this purpose (see http://www.heinemann.com/fountasandpinnell/teaching-resources.aspx)
- The Ministry of Education offers guidelines concerning the expected progression of learning for English Language Arts:
    - Elementary:
      http://www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/progression/anglais/index.asp?page=language
    - Secondary:
      http://www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/progression/secondaire/englishLanguageArt/index_en.asp?page=learning

## Can writing difficulties/dysgraphia be overcome?

The answer is **yes**, and it is never too late to intervene.  Even adolescents and adults with severe dygraphia can benefit from specialized writing instruction delivered by a highly trained instructor.  Alternatively, there are exciting new assistive technologies now available that permit students with a variety of writing difficulties to complete writing assignments that would otherwise be impossible for them.  These technologies permit the student to function academically by giving them the tools to compensate for their writing difficulties, just as eyeglasses and hearing aids compensate for vision and hearing impairments.  They are not a crutch; they are a necessity.

## General Considerations for treating dysgraphia:

- **Early identification and treatment**
- **Help from a teacher (tutor or therapist) who is specially trained** in using a multisensory, structured approach
- **Consistent, explicit, focused and systematic** are key words to consider when implementing a writing intervention program.  Teachers who are **systematic in their approach to teaching writing** have significantly more success in teaching their students to write effectively than those who do not.  In fact, it doesn't matter which program the teacher is using, as long as it is systematic in its approach to building writing skills.
    - The 6+1 Writing Traits Model™ is a model that is being used in many Quebec classrooms.
    - "emPOWER" is another example of such a systematic approach (http://www.architectsforlearning.com/empower.html).

  Free writing, such as journal writing, offers practice but is not as effective as a more guided, structured approach that is focused on building specific skills.  Think of writing as you would any other skill to be learned.  Guidance or coaching is a requirement, at least at the beginning, to build competence.

## CLASSROOM STRATEGIES and ADAPTATIONS

Although it may be difficult to implement intensive, consistent and systematic writing instruction at the same time as targeting curricular content, classroom teachers may weave in a variety of strategies to facilitate writing skill improvement in the context of everyday teaching.   Here are some key areas that will be helpful to your students with writing challenges:

- **Phonological Awareness**: Explicit teaching about how speech and language map onto print.  In the context of guided reading, you may pause from time to time to break words down into their individual sounds, blend them back into words, search for rhyming words (i.e. word families) and/or substitute and omit sounds to produce new words.  This should be done orally and visually.  Here's a great way to use your Smart Board interactively!!!  Essentially, the idea is to "play" with sounds.  Suggested resources:  Lynn Senecal's website www.shapesofmind.ca

- Use of **multisensory programs** to build knowledge of **sound-letter correspondences**.  Jolly Phonics™ and Raconte-Moi les Sons™ are two such programs.  Earobics™ software can augment classroom teaching if needed.  Lexia Learning Systems, Inc.™ and Lexercise™ are examples of computer-based literacy programs that support both reading and writing development.  Here's a fun website that many teachers are using: http://www.spellingcity.com/.

- **Morphological Awareness**:  Explicit teaching about the meanings of base words (roots), prefixes, suffixes and inflectional markers.   An example of such an approach is *Structured Word Analysis* (see www.WordWorksKingston.com for information).

- **Wall charts and word walls** provide valuable visual scaffolding for students who require such support.  This allows students to practice spelling words correctly, rather than incorrectly.  Suggested resources: SoundPrints at www.shapesofmind.ca and www.readingresource.net

- **Daily opportunities to interact with print**.  Reading skills support writing skills.  Exposure to print allows the student to see spellings and to acquire a sense of the organization of text structure.  In many classrooms, students spend the entire class listening to the teacher's lecture.  Teachers may opt to set aside a certain amount of class time to let students learn the material by reading independently to themselves.  Students with reading disabilities do not enjoy reading outside of school so this may be their only opportunity to do so.  Assistive technology and audiobooks may be used in the case of a student who cannot decode grade level material independently.
    Suggested resources:    Kurzweil™ (www.kurzweiledu.com)
                            NaturalReader (www.naturalreaders.com)
                            E-books are widely available on-line, sometimes free
                            (e.g. http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/search.html)

- **Daily opportunities to write.**  Typically developing children pass through predictable stages in their writing development.  From an early age, they utilize crayons and paper to practice putting

their ideas in writing.  At first, these look like scribbles, but as the child approaches school age, scribbling begin to look more like approximations of letters, then actual letters.  At some point, letters are grouped together to represent words, and so on.  This occurs via daily opportunities to engage in writing activities.  Students with disabilities tend not to have these same opportunities for a variety of reasons.  It is critical that we provide them with sufficient opportunity to develop their written expression abilities to their full potential.  This may entail printing one sentence about a picture with approximated spellings.  Please see the attached web article for excellent information on the subject of written language instruction: http://www.ldonline.org/article/6213.

- **Optimize classroom structure** by implementing the following:

  - The Daily 5™:  "...a structure that will help students develop the daily habits of reading, writing and working with peers that will lead to a lifetime of independent literacy." (quoted from: http://www.the2sisters.com/the_daily_5.html).  Please consult this website for more details about The Daily 5™.

  - Advanced 5:  The structure of The Daily 5™ adapted for secondary level classrooms by Lynn Senecal, Coordinator of the Inclusive Schools Network .  Please see www.shapesofmind.ca for more information.

- What about students with **developmental disabilities, such as Down syndrome, intellectual impairment or autism spectrum disorders?**  It is often the case that students with developmental disabilities have never had the opportunity to express themselves in writing.  According to Janet Sturm, PhD, it is important to allow all children, regardless of their disabilities, to pass through the same stages of writing development as typically developing children.

  Dr. Sturm has developed a writing instruction resource that may be highly beneficial for students with developmental disabilities.  It's called *Enriched Writer's Workshop*.  Check out the article below.  It describes the framework of instruction, its tools and the skills and strategies that are the focus of this resource: http://journals.lww.com/topicsinlanguagedisorders/Fulltext/2012/10000/An_Enriched_Writers__Workshop_for_Beginning.5.aspx

**Supporting academic success:**

- Provide quality tutoring in subject areas
- Adapt assignments: shorten assignments for students with dysgraphia to make them more manageable
- Reduce the student's course load
- Assign the student to smaller classes if available

- Provide assistive technology such as Kurzweil™, WordQ™, Dragon NaturallySpeaking™, as well as spelling and grammar checks.  Suggested online resources for more information:
    - http://www.wested.org/cs/tdl/print/docs/tdl/home.htm
    - http://www.ldonline.org/article/6237/
- Encourage the student to us graphic organizers.  These are so helpful for a variety of reasons, first and foremost in keeping the writer organized.  Here are some suggested online resources:
    - http://my.hrw.com/nsmedia/intgos/html/igo.htm
    - http://www.graphic.org/organizers/free-graphic-organizers.html
    - http://www.educationoasis.com/curriculum/graphic_organizers.htm#.Tz6KZQcAuZk.email
- Provide accommodations for exams such as extended time, oral exams and assistive technology, as permitted by MELS
- As the student approaches graduation, steer the him/her to a major course of study that capitalizes on areas of individual strength

**Final thoughts......**

Writing challenges can be tough to address.  The experts tell us that it is always possible to attain improvement with our students, no matter their grade level or the severity of their difficulties.  It is also important to understand that some of our students, despite optimal instruction, will fail to achieve grade level writing skills.  If we do all the right things, though, our students can reach their own potential.

Our students require ongoing guidance.  The demand for students to become competent writers increases throughout their school years.  It is extremely difficult for students to make up for lost time once they enter high school.

Two key points to keep in mind:
- *Some* degree of writing proficiency is better than *none at all*.
- The writing *process* is more important than the *product* when writing development is in progress.

The most important element is daily **structured** writing experiences!!!  This allows our students to reach their full individual academic potential.