Interventions for Dysgraphia

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In this article, Susan Jones provides advice on how to accommodate for the needs of students with dysgraphia.

Adapted from Dysgraphia Accommodations and Modifications by Susan Jones (1999)

Two students can labor over the same assignment. One may labor with organizing the concepts and expressing them, learning a lot from the "ordeal." The other will force words together, perhaps with greater effort (perhaps less if the language and information have not been processed), with none of the benefits either to developing writing skills or organizing and expressing knowledge. For those in the latter group, writing is a laborious exercise in frustration.

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

Accommodate

Reduce the impact writing has on learning or expressing knowledge without substantially changing the process/product by changing the following:

1. The rate of producing written work

    o   Allow more time for written tasks, including notetaking, copying, and tests.

    o   Allow students to begin projects or assignments early.

    o   Build time in the student's schedule for catching up or getting ahead on written work, or doing alternative activities related to the material being learned.

    o   Encourage keyboarding to increase the speed and legibility of written work.

    o   Have the student prepare assignment papers in advance with required headings (name, date, etc.), using a template like the one below.
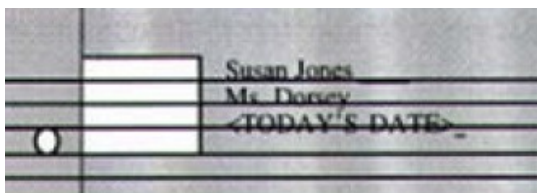
2. The volume of the work to be produced

    o   Instead of having the student write a complete set of notes, provide a partial outline to fill in.

    o   Allow the student to dictate some assignments or tests to a "scribe." Train the scribe to write what the student says verbatim; then have the student make changes without the scribe's help.

    o   Remove neatness and spelling as grading criteria for some assignments, or design assignments to be evaluated on specific parts of the writing process.

    o   Allow abbreviations in some writing (such as b/c for because). Have the student develop a repertoire of abbreviations to use in note-taking.

    o   Reduce copying. For example, instead of having the student copy math problems, provide a worksheet with the problems already on it.

3. The complexity of the writing task

    o   Provide a model of written work. *[See "A Model of Written Work" below to find out what the model should include.]*

should include.)

- Break writing into stages (brainstorming, drafting, editing, and proofreading, etc.) and teach students to do the same. Consider grading each stage separately.
- Do not count spelling on rough drafts or onesitting assignments.

- Encourage the student to use a spell-checker and to have someone else proofread his/her work, too. Speaking spell-checkers are recommended, especially if the student may not be able to recognize the correct word. (Headphones are usually included).

4. The tools used to produce the written product

- Allow students to:

  - Use cursive or manuscript, whichever is most legible, and consider teaching cursive early. Some students find cursive easier to manage, and this will give a student more time to learn it.

  - Use paper or writing instruments of different colors.

  - Find a favorite pen or pencil (and then get more than one like that). Many students have difficulty writing with ballpoint pens, preferring pencils or pens with more friction in contact with the paper, such as mechanical pencils.

  - Use graph paper for math or turn lined paper sideways to help with lining up columns of numbers.

- Encourage primary students to use paper with raised lines to keep writing on the line.

- Allow older students to use the line width of their choice, but remember that some students write small to disguise messiness or bad spelling.

- Have some fun grips available for everybody, no matter what the grade. High school kids can enjoy the novelty of pencil grips or even big primary pencils.

- Make word processing software available but remember that learning to use it will be difficult for the same reasons that handwriting is difficult. Look for keyboarding instruction programs that address the needs of learning-disabled students.

- Consider the use of speech recognition software. Learning to use to use it may take time and effort, especially if the student has reading or speech challenges; but it can ultimately free the student from writing or keyboarding.

Modify

Change assignments/expectations to meet the student's individual learning needs. If accommodations are inadequate, modify assignments in the following ways to remove the barriers without sacrificing learning:

1. The volume of the work to be produced

- Reduce copying in assignments and tests. For example, instead of asking students to answer in complete sentences that reflect the question, have them do it for three questions you select, then answer the rest in phrases, words, or drawings.

- Reduce length requirements on written assignments, stressing quality over quantity.

2. The complexity of the writing task

- Grade individual parts of the writing process so that for some assignments spelling doesn't count, and for others grammar doesn't count.

- Develop cooperative writing projects where students play different roles such as the brainstormer, organizer of information, writer, proofreader, and illustrator.

- Provide extra structure and intermittent deadlines for long-term assignments. Help the student arrange for someone to serve as "coach," ensuring the student doesn't get behind. Discuss with the student and parents the possibility of working after school with the teacher if the student seems unable to meet an approaching deadline.

3. The format

- Offer alternatives to written assignments. *[See "Structuring Alternative Asignments" below for ideas on how to structure an alternative assignment.]*
- Evaluate how well the student presented the required information in the alternative format.

Remediate

Use options such as these to provide instruction and opportunity for improving handwriting:

- Build handwriting instruction into the student's schedule. The details and degree of independence will depend on the student's age and attitude, but many students would like to have better handwriting if they could.

- Consider occupational therapy or other special education services if the writing problem is severe.

- Because handwriting habits become entrenched early, consider whether enforcing a change in habits will eventually make the writing task a lot easier for the student, or whether this is a chance for the student to make his or her own choices.

- Teach alternative handwriting methods such as Handwriting Without Tears®.

- Consider balancing accommodations and modifications in content area work with continued work on handwriting or other written language skills. For example, a student for whom you are not going to grade spelling or neatness on certain assignments may be required to add a page of spelling or handwriting practice to his portfolio.

A Model of Written Work

Provide the student with a three-ring writing binder that includes:

- Writing paper

- A model of cursive or print letters on the inside cover of the binder. Having his/her own copy is easier to refer to than one on the wall or blackboard.

- A laminated template, like the one shown earlier in this article, of the required format for written work. Cut out a space where the name, date, and assignment should go and model it next to the cut-out. Three-hole punch the template and put it into the binder on top of the student's writing paper. The student can copy the heading information in the holes and then flip the template out of the way to continue with the assignment. The template can work with worksheets as well.

Structuring Alternative Assignments

Give dysgraphic students the opportunity to substitute an oral report or visual assignment for a written one. Be sure to establish a rubric to define what the assignment should include. For instance, if the original assignment is a three-page description of one aspect of the Roaring Twenties (record-breaking feats, the Harlem Renaissance, Prohibition, etc.) you may want the written assignment to include the following:

- A general description of that aspect (with at least two details)

- Four important people and their accomplishments

- Four important events – when, where, who and what Three good things and three bad things about the Roaring Twenties.

*Susan Jones has a master's degree in learning disabilities and has completed graduate work in gifted education and in assistive and instructional technology. She has been working with young adult and adult learners with interesting challenges for about 25 years, and is the founder of the Resource Room (**http://www.resourceroom.net/**), a website where she shares original articles and resources from her classroom teaching days. Currently, Susan provides tutoring and coaching in the community college setting and explores interactive online learning for diverse learners.*

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