Writing and LDs: A Snapshot

About Writing.

Writing is a very complex task for anyone – and when writing isn't working, figuring out what's gone wrong is equally complex. However, it is possible to improve situations for those who struggle with written language. Writing is composed of a great variety of skills, abilities and knowledge, including

- specific fine-motor functions
- visual-spatial abilities
- language and reading skills
- organization and sequencing abilities
- problem-solving and thinking skills
- memory and attention
- advanced writing skills such as editing and revising

Writing and Learning Disabilities.

Deficits in any of the above listed areas can lead to a learning disability that affects writing. Students who struggle with writing can find the task "taxing, unrewarding and perhaps even humiliating" (Levine, Educational Care) and thus discouraging. However, the challenges related to writing change with time. As an individual moves through their educational carer and into the workforce, they may write less and less, whether because their day-to-day activities do not require them to, or because they use assistive technologies, such as a PDA or computer.

What Helps?

Find Out What's Not Working.

Determining which element of writing is not working or developing is crucial to solving or addressing the problem. Defining the issue helps shape and determine the intervention strategies or accommodations. For example, problems in graphomotor function – the fine motor functions related to writing and drawing – can be addressed very specifically through practice, remediation and compensation. Problems with language or reading need to be addressed in order to help with writing, as do problems with attention and organization.

Identify and Intervene Early.

The earlier problems can be identified, the better. A student struggling with writing may need very specific remediation in the early years of school. For example, a graphomotor problem

may be remediated through occupational therapy, but at the same time the young student could dictate stories, answer tests orally, and be given more time to copy things off the board.

Later the student can be accommodated through keyboarding, verbal test-taking, and receiving teacher's lesson plan and lecture notes. A combination of remediation and accommodation can be very helpful and healthy, and it is important that a student be able to reap the benefits of writing, the ability to fully express the creative flow of ideas, at the same time as the more technical elements of writing are addressed.

An older student who has struggled with writing for years will likely also have related secondary issues including curriculum gaps, low self-esteem, and motivation issues. Often these older students are labelled as having an 'attitude problem' when teachers don't realize how much they have been struggling. Turning this situation around can be challenging, and requires understanding.

Break Down Writing into Steps.

For students who struggle with writing, being specific and deliberate in the process and requirements can really help. Graphic organizers can help students structure their ideas before writing. (A graphic organizer is a visual and graphic display that depicts the relationships between facts, terms, and or ideas within a learning task. Graphic organizers are also sometimes referred to as knowledge maps, concept maps, story maps, cognitive organizers, advance organizers, or concept diagrams.) Marking specific skills at different times can relieve pressures (i.e. creative free writing need not be marked for spelling). In addition, a full exploration and use of the editing process (use of multiple unmarked drafts, collaborative writing, use of editor's marks) can make a tremendous difference for students.

Assistive Technology.

There are some computer programs that assist with writing. Word-prediction software presents possible words in a dropdown-menu as letters are typed; spell-checking and grammar-checking software is commonplace in word-processors; and voice dictation software can work well for some students.

Which tools to use should be carefully evaluated based on the student's needs.