

A Quick Guide to Working with Students with Dysgraphia

Characteristics of the Condition

This is a general term is used to describe any of several distinct difficulties in producing written language. These problems may be developmental in origin or may result from a brain injury or neurological disease. They often occur with other difficulties (e.g., dyslexia), but may be encountered in isolation.

- Specific difficulties with the physical process of writing include
 - General motor difficulty impeding writing and typing
 - Specific motor difficulty selectively affecting handwriting or typing
 - Selective difficulty in generating one or more aspects of the orthographic system (e.g., print vs. cursive forms; upper case vs. lower case letters)
- Specific difficulties with central representations of written language, including
 - Ability to learn one or more aspects of the orthographic system (e.g., print or cursive; upper case or lower case letters)
 - Ability to produce appropriate letter case or punctuation for the written context
 - Ability to acquire or retain knowledge of specific word spellings

Impact on Classroom Performance/Writing

- Student may be unable to take effective notes in class or from readings.
- Writing by hand may be slow and effortful, resulting in diminished content in papers and essays in comparison with the student's knowledge.
- Legibility of written work may be poor, becoming increasingly worse from the beginning to the end of the document.
- Capitalization and punctuation errors inconsistent with student's linguistic skills may be seen.
- Spelling may be inaccurate and/or inconsistent.
- Vocabulary used in writing may be significantly restricted in comparison to the student's reading or spoken vocabulary (may be due to concerns about spelling accuracy).
- Content of written work may be impoverished due to effort required by the physical act of writing

Interaction with Student

- Determine whether output problems are limited to one modality (e.g., only handwriting or typing).
- If so, encourage the student to focus on use of the output form that works best, even if this means developing or improving skills (e.g., keyboarding proficiency, experimentation with printing).
- Handwriting can sometimes be improved by having the student develop an orthographic style that is more natural for them than the style of writing they have been taught in school; example: conventional cursive may be difficult but a more calligraphic print style may become more legible and more fluent.
- Particularly if motor output difficulties apply to both handwriting and typing, encourage the student to try using dictation software (e.g., Dragon Naturally Speaking). [Note: Patience may be needed in the initial training of this

system; DSS staff may be able to help with advice and strategies for making the system work effectively].

- Punctuation and capitalization problems can be very difficult to improve. Teach self-monitoring for accuracy on this dimension. Have papers proofread, if necessary. Minimize penalties for these errors.
- Spelling is also very difficult to improve. Develop skills in use of spell checking. Mark errors but have the student to make the corrections. Develop a list of particularly troublesome words, especially those that are frequently used. Focus on distinctions that spell checkers miss, e.g., heterographic homophones, like "hear-here," "there-their," "whether-weather," etc.
- Encourage the student to value a rich vocabulary over one that is easily spelled. Have the student mark those "stretch" words for later spelling check, then, help the student ensure that the spelling of those words is accurate.