



## Dysgraphia: When Writing Hurts

A little-known disorder may be responsible for students' poor and illegible handwriting.

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*I hate my life because it is unfar and no fun being how I am. I hat my life because I cam not right ore math ore stody. And esseshaly the warstis that I get hert all the time and Im not good at any spart. I amly have three friends but they might be sing me to amd hate me. I cant do emy thying weth out losine a freind ore herting my self. Id rather be a dog ar a dalfen. Id be loved more and have more frend. Id be happy.*

From *Eli: The Boy Who Hated to Write*, by Regina and Eli Richards (2000).

Imagine having a bright, articulate student in your school whose only problem seems to be taking too long on writing assignments, which are usually sloppy and have spelling errors when handed in. The first thought that runs through your mind is that the student is lazy and careless. But you could be wrong. They could be showing signs of a little-known disorder called dysgraphia, which the Council for Exceptional Children defines as “a severe difficulty in producing handwriting that is legible and written at an age-appropriate speed” (Lokerson 1992).

Children with dysgraphia—over 75 percent of whom are male (Cavey 1987)—frequently display characteristics that are common to many students with learning disabilities, such as lack of motivation, inability to focus attention, perceptual disorders, or lack of coordination (Cavey 1987).

Writing a simple sentence involves a complex series of flexing and contracting of muscles in the hand and arm, and the fine motor skills and higher cognition needed to write the sentence all combine to make a delicate ballet of senses, thought, and movement that is interrupted or slowed with dysgraphia.

Students with the most severe forms of dysgraphia are unable to hold a pencil correctly or draw a straight line. Students that have it to a lesser degree may be unable to copy letters, or may tire easily while writing. Still others may be able to draw or trace simple forms, but are unable to write letters or words consistently (Richards 1999a). Children with dysgraphia have difficulty forming words and sentences. Their writing production will often be of poor quality and illegible.

### **Dealing with Dysgraphia**

Identifying students that have dysgraphia can be a challenge because it affects them to different degrees or is often combined with other types of learning problems (Cavey 1987). Although the accurate determination of dysgraphia requires the input of a qualified clinician, such as an occupational therapist, parents and teachers can observe symptoms of this handwriting difficulty (*see box*). Students showing these symptoms can be assessed for language and fine motor skills, and are eligible for special education.

There is no cure for dysgraphia. Instead, students must be taught both compensation and remediation strategies to help them cope with or improve their writing abilit (Richards 1999b). It may be helpful for some students to begin the day with simple warmup exercises before any writing activity, such as stretching rubber bands, pressing their fingers together, opening and closing fists rapidly, rapidly shaking hands and fingers, or molding clay.

Pencil grips can help some students who grip pencils incorrectly while writing. Teachers may need to try several different kinds of grips to find one that best suits the particular child. Teachers may also need to model the correct way to hold a pencil, while making sure the

student is not gripping the pencil too hard. This can lead to hand fatigue while writing, a problem experienced by most people with dysgraphia. Such students may need to take breaks during writing to stretch out their hands.

Jones (2004) suggests a number of accommodations for students with dysgraphia, including reducing the rate and complexity of writing assignments, as well as the amount of writing that must be completed. She also suggests allowing more time for students to write or allowing them to begin an assignment early, breaking the written task down into stages (brainstorming, drafting, editing, etc.) and reducing the amount students have to write by allowing them to dictate some assignments or use abbreviations.

Other compensatory strategies suggested by Richards (1999b) include

- Providing the student with a brief outline of lecture material;
- Having a buddy or aide take notes and provide a copy to the student;
- Having the student proofread his or her written work after a short time period;
- Prioritizing writing assignments; and
- Encouraging the student to work on one thing at a time.

#### **The Power of POWER**

Students with dysgraphia, like many other students, often have a hard time getting started on a writing assignment. A helpful compensatory strategy for all such students would be to teach and encourage the use of pre-organization strategies (Richards 1999b). These can include outlining, color-coding main ideas, or writing main ideas on flash cards and rearranging them in the desired order. A strategy developed to assist students who have problems organizing their writings into correct paragraph form is the mnemonic POWER:

- P - Plan your paper;
- O - Organize your thoughts and ideas;
- W - Write your draft;
- E - Edit your work; and
- R - Revise your work before producing a final draft (Richards 1999b).

Word processing is a good alternative to handwriting and a useful way to encourage students to produce written products. Computers can also help students with misspelled words. But all of these interventions and accommodations must be linked to recognition of dysgraphia. Principals should instruct teachers to observe students who may be experiencing significant handwriting difficulties, and to make appropriate referrals if simple techniques do not adequately address the problems.

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**Common Characteristics of Dysgraphia**

- Inconsistent space between words;
- Slow or labored writing or copying;
- Cramped fingers on a writing tool;
- Gripping writing instrument too tightly;
- Inconsistent letter formations;
- Excessive erasures; and
- Inconsistencies (e.g., upper and lower case, slant of letters, or shape of letters).

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