

Dysgraphia – overview from a parent

Dysgraphia is not a well-known learning disability. As of last spring, FWISD reported no resources for students with it. Sources have increased noticeably in the few years I've searching for them. Here is a short summary and a list of a few internet sources. I'm happy to discuss any time.

Children with Dysgraphia have difficulty writing. What their brain sends to the fingers apparently doesn't get through clearly. Though they know how to form the letters and have the fine motor skills to perform other tasks, even drawing, handwriting is poorly formed and spaced, and inconsistent. The quality of handwriting often deteriorates the longer they write in a sitting.

Dysgraphia is not related to IQ and poor writing is not from a lack of trying. Shame, embarrassment, and stress are common complications.

Creative writing can be stifled by the need to write by hand. I have observed dramatic differences in handwritten sentences versus dictated or recited ones.

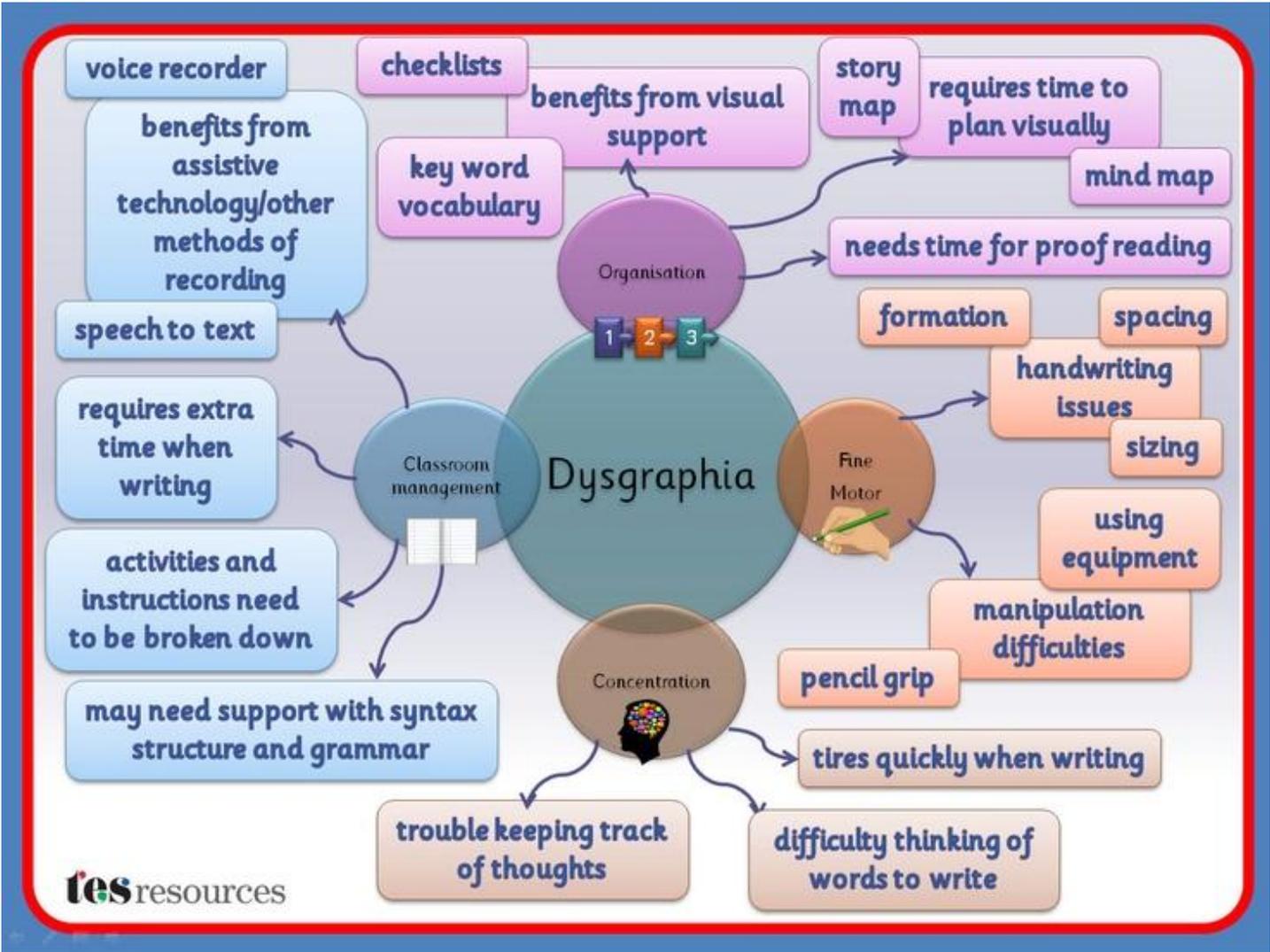
I don't know what the connection is, but Dysgraphia seems to also affect typing speed. As important as typing is to avoid writing, pressure to complete in a time limit has hindered my students' willingness to practice.

Short list of recommendations for schoolwork:

- Allow use of printing or cursive.
- Use large graph paper to help with spacing and keep lines straight.
- Reduce the volume of writing at a sitting.
- Encourage/allow technical solutions (dictate and correct by typing, applications that support math, electronic worksheets).
- Avoid/prevent teasing, shaming, comparing writing appearance or the time to complete an assignment.
- Use alternate ways to assess knowledge.

Sources

- 1 <http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/dysgraphia/dysgraphia.htm>
- 2 <http://handwriting-solutions.com/dysgraphia.asp>
- 3 <http://www.wrightslaw.com/info/read.dysgraphia.facts.htm#sthash.uyyMy9k4.dpuf>
- 4 <http://www.ldonline.org/article/5890>
- 5 <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/dysgraphia/dysgraphia-what-youre-seeing-in-your-middle-schooler>



This is some material from the sources listed above:

“Dysgraphia is a deficiency in the ability to write, regardless of the ability to read, not due to intellectual impairment. In childhood, the disorder generally emerges when children are first introduced to writing. ... The DSM IV identifies Dysgraphia as a “Disorder of Written Expression” as “writing skills (that) ...are substantially below those expected given the person's ...age, measured intelligence, and age-appropriate education.””²

General Symptoms of Dysgraphia

(Handwriting Solutions)

- A mixture of upper case/lower case letters
- Irregular letter sizes and shapes
- Unfinished letters
- Struggle to use writing as a communications tool
- Odd writing grip
- Many spelling mistakes (Sometimes)
- Decreased or increased speed of writing and copying
- Talks to self while writing
- General illegibility
- Reluctance or refusal to complete writing tasks
- Crying and stress (which can be created by the frustration with the task of writing and/or spelling. This can also be brought on in Dysgraphic students by common environmental sources such as high levels of environmental noise and/or over-illumination).
- Experiencing physical pain in the hand and/or arm when writing
- Poor use of lines and spaces

Stress and Dysgraphia

“There are some common problems not related to Dysgraphia but often associated with Dysgraphia - the most common of which is stress. Often children (and adults) with Dysgraphia will become extremely frustrated with the task of writing (and spelling); younger children may cry or refuse to complete written assignments. This frustration can cause the child (or adult) a great deal of stress and can lead to stress related illnesses.

It is often thought that continued handwriting practice will improve a Dysgraphic student's ability to use paper and pencil alone as a useful tool to complete all their written schoolwork. This is rarely the case. While Occupational Therapy and Vision Therapy can sometimes help to improve a Dysgraphic student's letter and number formation in isolation and/or in short writing samples, this improvement is, 99.9% of the time, not able to be sustained when kids are actually using their handwriting to complete their written schoolwork. The same thing is true of making kids re-do written assignments to make them more legible. In cases of Dysgraphia, “practice does not make perfect.””²

Recommendations for Young students

- Allow use of print or cursive — whichever is more comfortable.
- Use large graph paper for math calculation to keep columns and rows organized.
- Allow extra time for writing assignments.
- Begin writing assignments creatively with drawing, or speaking ideas into a tape recorder
- Alternate focus of writing assignments — put the emphasis on some for neatness and spelling, others for grammar or organization of ideas.
- Explicitly teach different types of writing — expository and personal essays, short stories, poems, etc.
- Do not judge timed assignments on neatness and spelling.
- Have students proofread work after a delay — it's easier to see mistakes after a break.
- Help students create a checklist for editing work — spelling, neatness, grammar, syntax, clear progression of ideas, etc.
- Encourage use of a spell checker — speaking spell checkers are available for handwritten work
- Reduce amount of copying; instead, focus on writing original answers and ideas
- Have student complete tasks in small steps instead of all at once.
- Find alternative means of assessing knowledge, such as oral reports or visual projects
- Encourage practice through low-stress opportunities for writing such as letters, a diary, making household lists or keeping track of sports teams.

Compensatory strategies

The overall goal of compensations is to help the student perform more automatically and still participate in and benefit from the writing task. The goal is to allow the student to go around the problem so that she can then focus more completely on the content. Some example strategies include:

- **Understanding**-Understand the student's inconsistencies and performance variabilities.
- **Print or cursive**-Allow the student to use either form. Many dysgraphic students are more comfortable with manuscript printing.
- If getting started is a problem, **encourage pre-organization strategies**, such as use of graphic organizers.
- **Computer**-Encourage student to become comfortable using a word processor on a computer. Students can be taught as early as 1st grade to type sentences directly on the keyboard. In doing so, do not eliminate handwriting for the child: handwriting is still important but computer skills will be invaluable for longer and important tasks.
- For older students, encourage use of a **speech recognition** program combined with the word processor so the student can dictate his papers rather than type them. This increases speed and efficiency and allows the student to focus more completely on complex thoughts and ideas.
- Encourage consistent **use of spell checker** to decrease the overall demands of the writing task and encourage students to wait until the end to worry about spelling.

- Encourage **use of an electronic resource** such as the spell check component in a Franklin Language Master® to further decrease the demands. If student has concurrent reading problems, a Language Master® with a speaking component is most helpful because it will read/say the words. This author prefers the Language Master 6000 because of its large font size and speech clarity.
- Do not count off for poor **spelling** on first drafts, in-class assignments, or on tests. However, depending on age, student may be held responsible for spelling in final drafts completed at home.
- Have student **proofread papers after a delay**, using a checklist of the points to check. If students proofread immediately after writing, they may *read* what they intended rather than what was actually written.
- If necessary, **shorten** writing assignments.
- Allow **extra time** for writing activities.
- **Note taking:** Provide student with copy of completed **notes** (perhaps through a note taking buddy who can use carbon paper) to fill in missing parts of his own notes.
- **Note taking:** provide a partially completed outline so the student can fill in the details under major headings. As a variety, provide the details and have student fill in headings while listening.
- Allow student to **tape record important assignments** and/or take oral tests.
- **Staging:** have students complete tasks in logical steps or increments instead of all at once.
- **Prioritization:** stress or de-emphasize certain task components during a complex activity. For example, students can focus on using descriptive words in one assignment, and in another, focus on using compound sentences. Also, design assignments to be **evaluated** on specific parts of the writing process (prioritization).
- **Remove neatness** as a grading criteria, except on computer-generated papers.
- **Reduce copying** aspects of tasks, such as providing a math worksheet rather than requiring student to copy problems from the book. A *copying buddy* can be helpful in copying the problems using carbon paper.
- Have younger students use large **graph paper** for math calculation to keep columns and rows straight. Older student may use loose leaf paper turned sideways to help maintain straight columns.
- Allow and encourage use of **abbreviations** for in-class writing assignments (such as *b/4* for "before" or *b/c* for "because"). Have the student keep a list of appropriate abbreviations in his note book and taped to his desk for easy reference. Begin with only a few and increase as the first few become automatic.
- Reinforce the **positive aspects** of student's efforts.
- Be **patient**.
- **Encourage student to be patient** with himself.⁴

Accommodations – idonline.org

When considering accommodating or modifying expectations to deal with dysgraphia, consider changes in:

1. The rate of producing written work
2. The volume of the work to be produced
3. The complexity of the writing task
4. The tools used to produce the written product
5. The format of the product

Change the demands of writing rate

- Allow more time for written tasks including note-taking, copying, and tests
- Allow students to begin projects or assignments early
- Include time in the student's schedule for being a 'library assistant' or 'office assistant' that could also be used for catching up or getting ahead on written work, or doing alternative activities related to the material being learned.
- Encourage learning keyboarding skills to increase the speed and legibility of written work.
- Have the student prepare assignment papers in advance with required headings (Name, Date, etc.), possibly using the template described below under "changes in complexity."

Adjust the volume

- Instead of having the student write a complete set of notes, provide a partially completed outline so the student can fill in the details under major headings (or provide the details and have the student provide the headings).
- Allow the student to dictate some assignments or tests (or parts of tests) a 'scribe'. Train the 'scribe' to write what the student says verbatim ("I'm going to be your secretary") and then allow the student to make changes, without assistance from the scribe.
- Remove 'neatness' or 'spelling' (or both) as grading criteria for some assignments, or design assignments to be evaluated on specific parts of the writing process.
- Allow abbreviations in some writing (such as b/c for because). Have the student develop a repertoire of abbreviations in a notebook. These will come in handy in future note-taking situations.
- Reduce copying aspects of work; for example, in Math, provide a worksheet with the problems already on it instead of having the student copy the problems.

Change the complexity

- Have a 'writing binder' option. This 3-ring binder could include:
 - A model of cursive or print letters on the inside cover (this is easier to refer to than one on the wall or blackboard).
 - A laminated template of the required format for written work. Make a cut-out where the name, date, and assignment would go and model it next to the cutout. Three-hole punch it and put it into the binder on top of the student's writing paper. Then the student can set up his paper and copy the heading

information in the holes, then flip the template out of the way to finish the assignment. He can do this with worksheets, too.

- Sample Template
- Break writing into stages and teach students to do the same. Teach the stages of the writing process (brainstorming, drafting, editing, and proofreading, etc.). Consider grading these stages even on some 'one-sitting' written exercises, so that points are awarded on a short essay for brainstorming and a rough draft, as well as the final product. If writing is laborious, allow the student to make some editing marks rather than recopying the whole thing. On a computer, a student can make a rough draft, copy it, and then revise the copy, so that both the rough draft and final product can be evaluated without extra typing.
- Do not count spelling on rough drafts or one-sitting assignments.
- Encourage the student to use a spellchecker and to have someone else proofread his work, too. Speaking spellcheckers are recommended, especially if the student may not be able to recognize the correct word (headphones are usually included).

Change the tools

- Allow the student to use cursive or manuscript, whichever is most legible
- Consider teaching cursive earlier than would be expected, as some students find cursive easier to manage, and this will allow the student more time to learn it.
- Encourage primary students to use paper with the raised lines to keep writing on the line.
- Allow older students to use the line width of their choice. Keep in mind that some students use small writing to disguise its messiness or spelling, though.
- Allow students to use paper or writing instruments of different colors.
- Allow student to use graph paper for math, or to turn lined paper sideways, to help with lining up columns of numbers.
- Allow the student to use the writing instrument that is most comfortable. Many students have difficulty writing with ballpoint pens, preferring pencils or pens which have more friction in contact with the paper. Mechanical pencils are very popular. Let the student find a 'favorite pen' or pencil (and then get more than one like that).
- Have some fun grips available for everybody, no matter what the grade. Sometimes high school kids will enjoy the novelty of pencil grips or even big "primary pencils."
- Word Processing should be an option for many reasons. Bear in mind that for many of these students, learning to use a word processor will be difficult for the same reasons that handwriting is difficult. There are some keyboarding instructional programs which address the needs of learning disabled students. Features may include teaching the keys alphabetically (instead of the "home row" sequence), or sensors to change the 'feel' of the D and K keys so that the student can find the right position kinesthetically.
- Consider whether use of speech recognition software will be helpful. As with word processing, the same issues which make writing difficult can make learning to use speech recognition software difficult, especially if the student has reading or speech challenges. However, if the student and teacher are willing to invest time and effort in 'training' the software to the student's voice and learning to use it, the student can be freed from the motor processes of writing or keyboarding.

Modifications – idonline.org

For some students and situations, accommodations will be inadequate to remove the barriers that their writing problems pose. Here are some ways assignments can be modified without sacrificing learning.

Adjust the volume

- Reduce the copying elements of assignments and tests. For example, if students are expected to 'answer in complete sentences that reflect the question,' have the student do this for three questions that you select, then answer the rest in phrases or words (or drawings). If students are expected to copy definitions, allow the student to shorten them or give him the definitions and have him highlight the important phrases and words or write an example or drawing of the word instead of copying the definition.
- Reduce the length requirements on written assignments -- stress quality over quantity.

Change the complexity

- Grade different assignments on individual parts of the writing process, so that for some assignments "spelling doesn't count," for others, grammar.
- Develop cooperative writing projects where different students can take on 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 coach him through the stages so that he doesn't get behind. Discuss with the student and parents the possibility of enforcing the due dates by working after school with the teacher in the event a deadline arrives and the work is not up-to-date.

Change the format

- Offer the student an alternative project such as an oral report or visual project. Establish a rubric to define what you want the student to include. For instance, if the original assignment was a 3-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:
 - 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

Remediation – idonline.org

Consider these options:

- 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.
- If the writing problem is severe enough, the student may benefit from occupational therapy or other special education services to provide intensive remediation.
- Keep in mind that handwriting habits are entrenched early. Before engaging in a battle over a student's grip or whether they should be writing in cursive or print, 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."
- Even if the student employs accommodations for writing, and uses a word processor for most work, it is still important to develop and maintain legible writing. 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.