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Helping twice-exceptional children reach their potential.

Why is Writing So Hard for Some Kids?

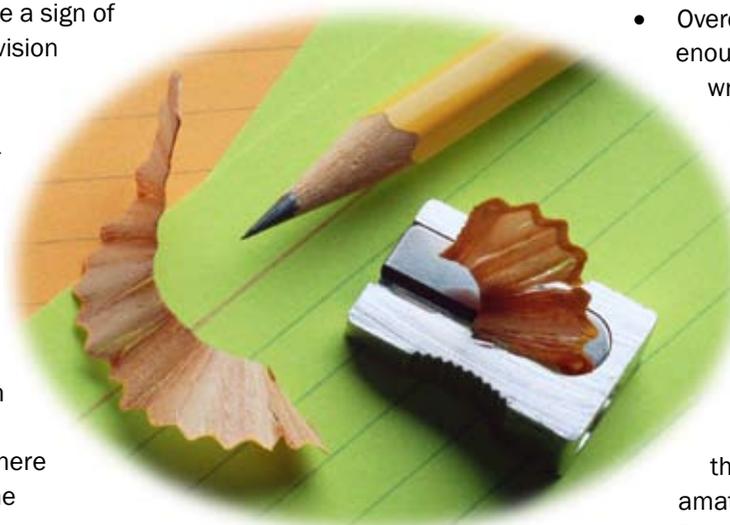
By Miriam Damell

Have you ever thought of all the skills you need to have in place in order to be an effective writer? Let's have a look, shall we? In order to be a good writer, you have to...

- Have a good grasp of spoken language and be able to speak coherently. Children who have speech problems often have writing problems.
- Have full use of the fine muscles in the hand and arm, including pencil grip, wrist strength, and forearm position. Many children have delayed fine motor skills or low muscle tone.
- Have proper sitting posture in the back, neck, shoulders, and arms. Poor posture causes quick exhaustion and may be a sign of binocular vision problems.
- Have eye/hand coordination. The brain needs to have proper communication with the hand, telling it where to go on the page.
- Have visual perception enough to align words on a page. Some children misalign their words. They start at the center of the page instead of the edge and slant the words off to the side, leaving half the page or more unused (also a

sign of a developmental vision problem).

- Be able to read and understand written words.
- Be able to organize a wealth of thoughts in order to convey smaller, concise ideas in a logical sequence. Sequencing difficulties are the most common cause of writing delays.
- Understand how words are spelled and the basic concepts of grammar and punctuation, which utilizes auditory and visual memory as well as major sequencing skills. Punctuation is heard before it is seen. You have to be able to HEAR a period, comma, or a question mark or you'll never understand where they go in a sentence.
 - Overcome perfectionism enough to take a shot at writing, even if the first draft doesn't look as good as desired. Gifted children are most often the guilty ones in this area – they need their prose to sound like a professional wrote it and can't forgive their own errors or amateur abilities.
 - Be emotionally and mentally engaged in the task of writing for sustained attention and motivation. In the case of AD/HD, just sitting still long enough to write is an agony in itself.



Quote

Labels are starting points, not destinations – and certainly not destinies.

–Fernette and

Brock Eide

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2e: *Twice-Exceptional Newsletter* is a bi-monthly publication about twice-exceptional children, children who are gifted and who have LDs – learning difficulties that go by many names, including learning disabilities, learning disorders, and just plain learning differences. Our goal is to promote a holistic view of the 2e child – not just the high IQ, or the quirkiness, or the disabilities, but the child as a whole person. Comments and suggestions are always welcome by phone, fax, or e-mail.





Why Is Writing So Hard, continued

In short, to be able to write effectively, a child needs to have language; speech; fine-motor; gross-motor; visual-perceptual; sequential; auditory-processing; memory; and physical, mental, and emotional coping skills all strong and intact. Considering all that's involved in simply putting words onto paper, it's a wonder any of us can write at all!

Of all the important skills listed above, however, one of them has the power to correct all the rest single-handedly. Can you guess which one?

When children are excited emotionally and mentally, they overcome all kinds of obstacles they never thought they could. They might have every single delay mentioned above – the process of writing could be a sheer agony for them – and they would still become great writers if their imaginations were on fire and their emotions were captured and engaged. When properly motivated, kids will do impossible tasks and not even complain about it. Learning disabilities require work, lots and lots and lots of hard work and practice to overcome. The only way to get kids to work at it is to motivate them emotionally.

Befriending my students and engaging their imaginations has worked better for me than any formal therapy could, though I highly recommend a combination of both! Following is a compilation of experiences I've had in trying to motivate some of the most reluctant students to write.

1. The Story of the Kid Who Refused to Write

This middle school student came into my classroom and told me in no uncertain terms, "I hate writing. Don't even ask me to pick up a pen because I won't. They kicked me out of my last two schools because of it."

I said, "Okay, I won't ask you to write."

His eyes got wide for a moment and then he said, "You're kidding, right? This is a school, isn't it?"

I flashed him a devious smile and responded simply, "We do things differently here."

I kept my promise and never asked this child to write anything with his own hand. I discovered over time that his writing difficulties stemmed from a combination of learning disabilities, including delayed fine motor skills, horrible sequencing, AD/HD, and giftedness with a healthy slice of perfectionism. He was brilliant. He had so many story ideas racing around his mind that there was no way he could possibly get them onto paper and do them the justice they deserved with his disabilities.

I started out by taking dictation for him. That's how I discovered that he had great ideas and was very bright. It was also how I discovered that he had sequencing problems be-

cause the ideas were completely disorganized on the way out of his mouth. I had to ask him to slow down and clarify and explain things as we went so that I could make sense of it all. He really appreciated the fact that I took an interest in his ideas at all and was asking these questions of him. Most people in the past had tuned him out after the first few sentences. With a little help on the organization front, what was coming out as a jumbled mess turned into a fluid story that captured my imagination and excited him to no end.

Once we connected on an emotional level and I got him to loosen up, I managed to talk him into writing every 10th sentence on his own. Over the next few weeks, we worked our way down to every 5th sentence, then every other, until at last he was writing his story on his own with lots of praise and rewards. Not long afterward, he picked up the art of keyboarding and did the rest of his work from then on using the laptop computer his parents promptly bought him.

Handwriting and organizing his thoughts are still hard for this child. They probably always will be, but that's what secretaries and editors are for, right? The important thing is that writing no longer causes him anxiety. Now his wonderful stories can be expressed on paper and enjoyed by others. The last time I saw this child a few months ago, he was still working on his novel and was up to 200 pages. The new *Eragon*? We'll see!

2. The Anime Fanatic

This girl came to my classroom a year ago a broken child. She was different from the other girls at her old school. Her imagination was on overdrive; she loved to draw; and she was an anime fanatic, the more violent the material the better. She was a tomboy and proud of it – outspoken, boisterous, tough. She loved to write, especially poetry, but rarely did so (because grammar, spelling, and writing structure were too difficult); and she hated to read.

In addition to the social isolation she had suffered, the teachers at her previous schools had been brutal with her, insisting that she focus on the surface details of writing (the basic mechanics) and ditch her own interests for ones the teachers deemed to be more "appropriate." She was regularly punished and given poor grades for her writing mistakes and was never recognized for her vibrant imagination. Her self-esteem was so low when she came to our school, I could have scraped it off the floor.

Reading was a difficult task, and that was where I knew I had to start with her. As I read with her the first time, I saw the symptoms of dyslexia and sequencing defi-



Why Is Writing So Hard, continued

cits; and I could easily understand why she didn't like to read.

Taking advantage of her amazing intellect, imagination, and visual learning style, I turned her on to the wonders of comic books. Particularly the *ElfQuest* graphic novels, Volumes 1 through 3. I sat and read the comics with her, each of us choosing characters to read aloud. She became deeply involved in the *ElfQuest* books and was soon struggling through them on her own (skipping recess in the process) just to read more. When she had finished the first several books of the series, she discovered that there were shelves full of anime graphic novels at all the major bookstores. It wasn't long before she was devouring one of those 100-page novels a day. Then it was an easy jump from that to real novels. She moved herself up three reading grades in one year with nothing but motivation.

In the meantime, the girl's writing was taking off as well. With her reading confidence rising so quickly, she decided to write anime stories and comics of her own, and spent hours every day doing so. Yes, her writing still needed a lot of editing for grammar and spelling and such, but it was making more sense than anything she had written before. All that reading had given her a feel for the organization and natural flow of words.

Currently, this child has written over a hundred pages, and her grammar and spelling skills have improved dramatically along the way. Most importantly, the content of her writing is superior in its maturity and eloquence. With a little editing, every word sounds like poetry.

3. Saved by Druidawn

This child was one of dozens of boys who came to our school whose first words were, "Don't ask me to write anything, because I won't. I HATE WRITING!!!"

After investigating the causes of this attitude, sure enough, I found a sequencing deficit, poor fine motor skills, low self-esteem, and little knowledge of the mechanics of writing. I did the same thing with this child that I've done with many, many others. I turned him on to *Legends of Druidawn*. [For a description

of this fantasy role-playing game developed by Miriam Darnell to teach writing, see the article "One Teacher's Quest: Getting Non-writers to Write" in the August, 2005 issue of 2e: Twice-Exceptional Newsletter.]

I started out by saying, "You don't need to write to play this game. You can dictate to me or to my assistant. If you do choose to write for yourself, you will get double points for each word written. Words are worth money on [the planet] Druidawn. You can use them to purchase items and pets and magic powers for your character."

The child did exactly what the others have always done. He chose to fill out the character sheet himself, since the form [which describes the attributes of the character the child has assumed for the game] doesn't require complete sentences or proper spelling. Filling out the character sheet for this game is a terrific icebreaker. What these kids hate most is a blank page staring at them. Then all the pressure is on them to fill it up. But when they see that the character sheet is already crammed with words, and all they have to do is fill in small parts, some of which are only numbers, it takes all the pressure off. It changes from a writing activity to a gaming activity. Much better!

Many kids enjoy filling out the character sheet so much that they make several characters before they even start playing the game! It gives them power they would never have in the real world – to create a player from the ground up and exert complete control over him. Plus, the game comes with numerous lists of choices for personal features and magic powers – fun choices to make and exciting things to think about. Even

though the character sheet requires a small amount of writing, it's easy and so enjoyable that the kids hardly notice it.

Next, we play the game as if no further writing needs to happen. With all the pressure off, kids begin to write things on their own just so they can rack up points. Their words are worth triple points if they work on editing and spell-checking their writing, and parents and teachers can help them with these tasks. This system is highly motivating. 





Why Is Writing So Hard, continued

As they write more, they become better writers, especially if they get feedback on their work.

Legends of Druidawn worked beautifully for this particular child, and now he's a self-proclaimed writer, whose story will be published in the next volume of *Druidawn*, an anthology of fantasy short stories and artwork that are an outgrowth of the game and written and illustrated by young people.

In Conclusion

So what did it take to get these students past their dread of writing? The first and most important thing I had to do in order to reach them, and all of my students, had nothing to do with methodology or clever curriculum. It had everything to do with emotional connection. I had to leave my "adult" persona at the door and try to relate to my students from the perspective of the child within me. The non-threatening, playful, imaginative child, whose only desire was to get to know these students better and marvel at their genius. The willingness to do that – to get beyond my grown-up ego and to view my students as equals to myself with every bit as much to teach me as I have to teach them – has enabled me to work successfully with twice-exceptional children for 20 years.

Miriam Darnell is the twice-exceptional daughter of Dr. Linda Silverman of the Gifted Development Center in Denver.

Miriam began to follow in her mother's footsteps at age 22, when she began working with learning dis-



*abled children at an elementary school in Kansas. She has since taught 2e children at several schools in Colorado, including The Logan School and The Rocky Mountain School for Gifted and Creative. Most recently she served as head of the Language Arts Department at Brideun School for Exceptional Children. In addition, Miriam is a professional writer, the editor of a popular teen fantasy/literary publication called *Druidawn*, and teaches creative writing clubs and workshops. To learn more about her work, visit www.creative-writing-solutions.com and www.druidawn.com.*

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Miriam Darnell's Steps for Getting 2e Kids to Write

Getting a child with a unique learning style to write can be a difficult process, especially if the child has a learning disability. Though most bright children are good writers on the inside (able to create multi-chapter books in their minds), the physical act of putting pen to paper may be an agonizing task. The writing process involves a complex set of skills that nearly any learning disability can hamper. Here are three steps to follow in getting these children to write.

Identify where the difficulty lies. Once you know what the problem is, it's easier to make accommodations to help the child. To the right, read examples of disabilities that can interfere with a child's ability to write.

1a. Auditory Sequencing Deficit. A child with this deficit has trouble with spelling and writing sentences that follow a logical sequence. Also affected is memory for small details such as grammar rules, sentence structure, and vocabulary usage. Children with this disability can't see their own errors until they are pointed out by someone else.

1b. Visual-Perceptual Deficit. Skewed spatial relationships may make it difficult to write straight on the page. Words may have no spaces between them or may curve downward until they fall off the page, leaving half of the usable space untouched. Sentences may run on and on with no punctuation or paragraph breaks. Letters may be backwards, mirror image, or switched.

1c. Kinesthetic/Fine Motor Deficit. Affected is the ability to use the fingers efficiently, including poor pencil grip, difficulty in keyboarding, and poor posture when writing. The child may not have chosen a dominant hand yet, and neither hand is strong enough to write legibly. The weak fine muscles tire easily, causing exhaustion, frustration, and task avoidance.

1d. Organizational Difficulties. The child may have too many scattered ideas, or one big idea with no knowledge of how to sequentially break it down into workable parts. He or she may frequently get stuck with the beginning, middle, or conclusion of a story and then promptly give up before seeking help.

1e. Perfectionism/Giftedness. While this may not be considered a handicap in most cases, when it comes to writing, the desire for perfection (or getting the exact picture the child has in mind onto paper) can be overwhelming and stifling. The child's ideas are often too big and too complex for his writing skill level. His frustration at his perceived inadequacy may cause him to give up before even attempting to write. When gifted-perfectionism is combined with a significant writing disability, watch out! You'll be lucky to get the child to pick up a pen at all.

1f. AD/HD. In the case of the AD/HD child, writing simply takes too long. It's labor intensive, and the slow editing process, with all the attention one must pay to the minor details of proper grammar, spelling, and organization, is enough to make a highly active and impatient child want to climb out of his skin.

3a. Tell the child to get her ideas on paper any way she wants to with no worries about spelling or grammar.

3b. Offer to write every other sentence for the child.

3c. Allow the child to type the paper. Encourage use of an AlphaSmart keyboard or a computer.

3d. If nothing else works, allow the child to dictate the paper to you and work your way up to having her write small parts independently.

3e. Another way to take the pressure off of poor spellers or the sequentially impaired is to have them dictate to you while you write or type it. Then they have to copy the whole thing in their own handwriting or typing, relieving them from the pressure of spelling and organizing the information.

3f. Remember that the first few times you do this, you may have to do more of the work for the child than you want to. Allow the child to get used to the system. It takes time and patience to help a child overcome writing anxiety.

3g. Springboard into more complex forms of writing and editing techniques once the child has overcome anxiety and has learned ways to compensate for her disabilities.

Work with the child's areas of strength and interest. The most common areas of strength for bright children reside in their verbal expression and vivid imagination. Their interests tend to encompass things that engage their imaginations, affect them emotionally, and present them with open-ended problems to be solved creatively.

Provide accommodations and support. To the right is a list of ways you can assist a child who has learning disabilities or just difficulties with writing.