
Teaching Writing to Students with Learning Disabilities

by Bruce Johnson

In order to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities, I have made some changes in the way I teach writing to composition students. I used to teach writing as a process stressing drafts and revisions, but I now teach writing as a process stressing prewriting activities and a more step-by-step approach including drafts and revisions. The new model centers around individualized education, helps each student concentrate on areas of need, and encourages all students towards their own limits. For example, the student with a learning disability who needs more help with brainstorming activities in order to begin writing can concentrate more on brainstorming activities. In another example, the student with a learning disability who needs more help with seeing connections can concentrate more on the outlining steps. These changes were first made in order to assist the student with a learning disability, but what I have learned recently is that what works best for a student with a learning disability also works well for the majority of other students. Most students benefit from writing as a process including the prewriting activities and other various steps.

First of all, I encourage students to use a writing process which includes: brainstorming ideas, creating a focus line, and writing an outline, first draft, revisions, and additional drafts and revisions as needed.

Students are free to tailor this process to their own desires, but for the student with a learning disability, the structure is important. This structure offers the student a way to approach writing as a step-by-step assignment, or put in another way, mini assignments. When the first step is complete, the student moves on to the second step. Instead of seeing one huge assignment, the student, particularly the student with difficulty processing information or a short attention span, sees many different, smaller, easier to manage and easier to complete, assignments.

When a student receives a new assignment, whether a composition assignment or a writing assignment in another discipline, the first step is to understand the assignment. For a student with a learning disability, it is important that the assignment be presented in both oral and written form. Some students are auditory learners, meaning they learn best by listening, and some students are visual learners, meaning they learn best by seeing, yet most students are a combination of auditory and visual learners and learn best by a combination of hearing and seeing. Assignments presented in a step-by-step fashion, even using numbers, first, second, and third, help students decipher what needs to be accomplished.

Next, the student begins to brainstorm possible paper topics or answers to the assignment. This allows the student with a learning disability, particularly the student with difficulty storing, processing, or producing information, as well as the student who has difficulty with poor memory, to see that he/she has useable ideas he/she didn't even know he/she had. Brainstorming can be a simple list of answers, or it can

be a lengthy freewrite, writing down all of the information previously known about the topic. Students are free to write down any responses, correct or incorrect, but are encouraged to write down responses. Soon, the list becomes lengthy, and the student can use what's needed and throw out what's not needed. For some students, however, this list may become too lengthy, and students may need additional help on how to use the written information. Still, the process of writing unused ideas oftentimes leads to the best ideas, and therefore this brainstorming becomes necessary.

One particular LD student who seemed to have difficulty storing information, difficulty processing information, and a poor memory needed additional help on brainstorming ideas and then using those brainstormed ideas. She often sat down at the computer keyboard and said, "I had this terrific idea on the way to class, but now I can't remember it," or "I have these wonderful thoughts, but I don't know how to write them down." She needed to learn strategies to help her retrieve her thoughts. Brainstorming became a particularly important step in her writing process. Once she was able to learn how to start with writing down related ideas, she found she was able to eventually retrieve the ideas she had lost or the thoughts she had wanted to share.

With the list of brainstormed ideas, the student is ready to create a focus line. Donald Murray defines the focus line as "the words writers use to record the focus, the starting point of the writing process" (41). The focus line can be a basic sentence beginning with "This paper is about..." and continuing with a short answer. The sentence is not meant to be used in the

paper, although if worded appropriately can be used, but instead is used by the writer as a guide of what to include in the paper. This focus line is particularly important for the student with difficulty producing information and discriminating ideas because the student then has, in his/her own mind, a main idea as to what his/her paper is about. The student can then proceed while keeping in mind a focus and can create answers to the assignment and complete a first draft with a clear focus. In addition, in revising the paper, the student can look back at the focus statement, point to each paragraph, and ask, "Does this paragraph, or this information, relate to my focus?" The student has something tangible to point at, something to look for, a purpose when revising.

Another LD student who seemed to have difficulty producing ideas and discriminating between main ideas, details, and what's important and what's not important, needed extra help with focusing. She enjoyed writing, and therefore, she wrote on and on, trying to answer the assigned questions, and hoping that eventually she would answer the questions. In short, she was channeling her writing energies in nonproductive areas. She needed to learn to determine a focus line designed to answer the assigned questions, and then while brainstorming, outlining, writing and revising, be sure that all of her thoughts related to that focus line. Eventually, instead of writing on and on, she started writing only what was important and only what would answer the assignment.

In the next step, the student is ready to create an outline. Many students are comfortable with standard outline format, with Roman numeral I, capital A, etc. This may be too confusing for the student with process-

ing information difficulties or sensory problems, and many other outline formats may produce a better, more manageable visual. For example, a simple list 1, 2, 3, or beginning, middle, and end, may be best. Another possible outline includes folding a paper in half vertically, writing main ideas in the left column, and matching appropriate details in the right column. This helps the student see that his/her paper has a beginning, middle, and end, plus helps the student begin to see paragraph groupings, connections, and transitions. An additional possibility, a variation of the outline, is a word map, consisting of main ideas in the middle of the page and details connected with lines. This, too, helps the student see a whole picture plus paragraph groupings, connections, and transitions.

Another LD student who seemed to have difficulty processing information needed extra help with the outlining step. Because most writing assignments took him longer to complete than his peers, he was concentrating on drafting, quick revisions, and drafting again, convinced that this was the most important part of writing a paper. He basically spent his writing time copying or typing papers but not making major improvements. Although he was putting in tremendous effort, his attempts were channeled poorly. I started working with him on prewriting activities, brainstorming ideas, seeing connections, creating a simple outline, seeing more connections, and writing the first draft. It was the effort put into the outlining step which helped him the most. He was able to see that the amount of time he used to spend writing the first draft, he could now spend writing an outline. By concentrating on one step at a time, he was able to answer the assigned questions, confident his answers were correct, without

worrying about writing skills. When the outline was complete, he was able to double check his answers, and then he was able to check for main ideas, details, support, examples, and so on. Soon, he began spending more time on the outlining step of the writing process, less on drafting and revising, and he began seeing his papers improve. With this student, we used to joke that once the outline was completed, the paper was just about completed also.

With an outline in hand, the student is ready to work on the first draft which becomes a systematic step-by-step process of following the outline carefully. The student is free to deviate from the outline, add additional ideas, make changes, and so on, but the comfort of having ideas written down makes the first draft writing task more manageable. Instead of working on both ideas and writing skills at the same time, the student with difficulty storing, processing, or producing information, or the student with a short attention span or difficulty following directions, is concentrating on one task at a time, and here is concentrating on drafting skills.

With a first draft completed, the student is ready for editing and revising. At first, I provide students with a suggested checklist of what to look for. Many students tend to concentrate on grammatical mistakes, the easy corrections, such as spelling, punctuation, and so forth. I encourage students to look more deeply, double check the focus statement, look for opening paragraphs, look for main ideas and details, adding support, getting the point across, transitions, etc. At the same time, I suggest students choose one area to review at a time, for example, concentrate on checking whether the paper follows a focus statement, then concentrate

on checking whether the paper has an exciting opening. This helps the student with difficulties related to processing information or short attention span concentrate on the parts of the paper as opposed to being overwhelmed with the entire whole of the paper. This is a special concern to these students because they often see writing activities as jumbled puzzles requiring too much to do and asking themselves: "Where do I start?" or "Where do I go from here?" Seeing the paper in parts and fitting the parts together as a whole, helps these students see these papers as manageable pieces of work.

Additional drafts may be necessary. Sometimes one more draft is sufficient, and sometimes many more drafts are needed. Between drafts, the student needs to continue editing and revising. At some point, it is important for the student with a learning disability to participate in peer revisions. This involves students reading and revising peer work and at the same time, having peers revising their work. By revising someone else's paper, the student with a learning disability can see examples of alternative writing and consider using some of those same techniques in his/her writing. Similarly, by having someone else revise his/her paper, the student with a learning disability may learn that there are many different ways to write papers. This use of modeling and examples is particularly important to the student with a learning disability because this student needs to be exposed to a variety of learning strategies, and learning by seeing becomes another such strategy. Again, students are instructed to choose one, sometimes two or three, areas of writing to concentrate on while revising. Students continue this spiral process of drafting, editing, revising, and drafting, editing,

revising, and drafting, editing, and revising, until the assignment is finally determined to be the best work possible.

Teaching composition with the use of the computer as a writing tool in a computer laboratory yields additional benefits to the student with a learning disability. During the early stages of the writing process, the student is able to type up a first draft, print out, and most important for the student with eye-hand coordination and poor handwriting skills, then be able to read a neatly printed, double spaced paper, presenting an appropriate visual to read and work with. Once the first draft is typed and saved, the student then saves time, and instead of spending extra hours retyping drafts, is able to spend quality time making changes on the saved document and then reprint. This is especially important to the student with difficulty processing information because assignments often take more time than allotted, and by saving time on menial tasks such as rewriting and retyping, the student can spend more time on productive content tasks. For example, a student with processing or sequencing difficulties, instead of spending wasteful time typing or retyping, is able to spend quality time changing sentence or paragraph order easily by using computer commands. Most beneficial for the student with spelling difficulties or difficulties discriminating between different letters and sounds, is the use of the computer program spellcheckers in improving papers. Basically, students need to learn to spell the beginning of a word correctly, or spell a word close to the intended word, and the spellchecker becomes the tool to use for corrections.

The encouragement of a writing process is important, but what's most important is teacher contact

with students. The student with a learning disability often needs to be reassured that he / she is on the right track and that he / she has various successful ideas and writing skills. Some students with learning disabilities have traditionally not been successful in school, or have had unpleasant experiences in school, leading to a need for individual contact to boost confidence. I prefer teaching composition in a workshop setting which allows some class discussion and sharing of ideas, but also allows students the opportunity to work in class, and therefore, allows me the chance to meet and assist each student individually every session. If the student needs the assignment broken down into even smaller steps, I can do that. Similarly, if the student needs additional help brainstorming ideas, creating a focus line, writing an outline, first draft, revising, or whatever, I can do that on a one-to-one basis. Most importantly, I can monitor each student's needs and tailor my instruction to meet those needs.

Many colleges today have support services available to students. Plymouth State College offers such services through the Plymouth Academic Support Services program which offers the student with a learning disability the opportunity to learn about his/her disability and apply this knowledge to academics. The services are available to students but are also available to instructors needing assistance in working with the student with a learning disability. Jeanne Rudzinski is the contact person. She can be reached at 535-2270.

Work Cited

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