

## COLLEGE COMPOSITION: RECOGNIZING THE LEARNING DISABLED WRITER

Writing disabled students often struggle in the college classroom, the nature of their dysfunction unrecognized by themselves or their teachers. Some, more fortunate, carry a diagnosis with them from high school and enter a college program sympathetic to their needs, but many more remain misunderstood. Generally, the strategy of college composition instructors who receive a student paper similar to the excerpt that follows is to redouble the usual remedial measures:

The storie billy, is a tragie asapic of the problems, of the rasening a retard Child. the mother does'en the problem that th boy has,

When the remediative techniques for spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure have little or no effect, instructor and student share confusion and failure. The baffled student often drops and enrolls in freshman English repeatedly, hoping to overcome the problem under each new teacher. In consequence, each succeeding teacher mutters about the failure of secondary schools, low standards of community colleges, college admission standards, and, even more darkly, about mental retardation or emotional disturbance. This scenario of frustration becomes most complex in large urban universities where students from a variety of cultures, educational preparations, and age groups enter, leave, return, and leave again.

The chief hope for the writing disabled student in the college classroom is that English composition instructors learn how to make tentative identification of writing dysfunction. Students thus singled out can be referred for testing and diagnosis that may result in appropriate educational intervention; or, if facilities for special testing and teaching are not available, they at least can be recognized—not as mentally retarded, emotionally impaired, or grossly illiterate but as students having a disability that prevents them from processing language adequately, a disability that does not yield to usual remediative techniques.

Identifying the kinds of writing errors which result from learning disability proves difficult for college teachers. Very few have had educational preparation that includes a review of language disorders. In fact, although colleges regularly accommodate physically and sensorially handicapped

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*Amy K. Richards is Associate Professor of English at Wayne State University, Detroit, MI. With Constance Gefvert and Richard Raspa she coauthored Keys to American English (Harcourt, 1975). Her forthcoming workbook, The Confident Writer, is being published by W. W. Norton.*

people, they often do not anticipate the enrollment of the learning disabled. Thus, unknown and unannounced, these arrive and remain unrecognized. In addition, teachers aware of writing dysfunction have difficulty diagnosing it, often reserving diagnosis because uncertain whether the errors reveal writing dysfunction or only gross inexperience with writing. Moreover, in remedial classes where genuinely atypical errors in spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure join a welter of typical grammatical, mechanical, and syntactical problems in the disabled student's essay, the task of distinguishing between these two kinds of errors is formidable. The guidelines spelled out in this paper contrast writing errors characteristic of inexperienced writers with errors characteristic of writing disabled students, offering a touchstone for the teacher insecure or confused about the nature of a student's error.

Some general comments about the nature of learning disabilities, of which writing disability or dysfunction is only one facet, may be helpful to the teacher about to attempt a tentative diagnosis. The study of learning disability has given rise to several theories about its cause (see Vellutino, 1981); but since the etiology of the problem bears little relevance to the practical function of the checklist herein outlined, only one widely accepted theory will be noted in order to picture more clearly for the teacher the learning disabled handicap. Johnson and Myklebust claim that the learning disabled person reveals behavioral or neurological evidence of a dysfunction of the brain. These persons, although not mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, cerebral palsied, or sensorially impaired, do not learn normally. Learning disability manifests itself in the academic area as reading disability, writing disability, and mathematical disability. In the college composition classroom, learning disability emerges as writing dysfunction. Occasionally these writing disabled students also have a reading disability but problems with reading do not consistently present themselves with these students at the college level.

Although teachers of these students will identify them almost entirely through the peculiarities of writing behaviors, they also may notice that some lack of sense of time, read haltingly, stutter, have directional disorientation, or poor handwriting, all possible attendant behaviors of the basic neurological problems. Christopher Johnson gives a useful overview of the educational and psychological characteristics of learning disabled young adults in a *Journal of Learning Disabilities* (1984). In addition to the disability based problems, these students can bring to college the emotional damage done by twelve years of failing to satisfy their language arts teachers. Years of failure may affect their actions in many ways; but the one most frequently encountered, especially in freshmen, is evasiveness: the evasion of diagnostic essays, in-class writing, final exams, and even private conferences as they attempt to escape another defeat. Despite their difficulties, many writing disabled students in college manifest considerable intellectual integrity; among the students who provided data for this checklist, one had finished his group requirements as a physics major, another was a registered nurse, a third was active in union management, and others performed successfully in pre-law, history, and art curricula. Each one

demonstrated sufficient skill in some field to permit entrance to the university.

Cognitive dysfunction is a concern far removed from the competency of composition teachers; consequently, English teachers are ill equipped to treat the symptoms of writing dysfunction. If, however, they can identify the symptomatic errors as different from errors characteristic of inexperienced writing, they will at least be able to evaluate student writing from a more helpful perspective. The guidelines that follow have grown from the analysis of the papers of thirty students who have presented atypical writing behavior in English composition classes at Wayne State University over the last eight years. Identification of the writers as learning disabled has come first from the behaviors observed on student essays, but in addition almost all have been identified as learning disabled either by public school testing, a state agency, or qualified personnel within the university. The testing results have given a simple verification of learning disability but no identifications of specific abnormalities in language processing.

The characterizations of typical errors of inexperienced writers used in this study come from *Errors and Expectations* (Shaughnessy, 1977) and *Black English* (Dillard, 1972). The categories of comparison for typical and atypical errors are those within which the errors of writing disability most often appear on student papers. These categories are *spelling*, *punctuation*, and *sentence clarity*.

## SPELLING

### *Errors of Inexperience*

The misspellings of inexperienced writers follow easily discernible patterns, the accountable malformation of words setting these misspellings apart from the unpredictable errors of the writing disabled. Inexperienced writers, in general, make the following kinds of errors:

*Letters Added.* Students often add letters that occur in their pronunciation of a word but do not exist in its correct written form: *integration* becomes *intergration* and *future* becomes *furture*.

*Letters Dropped.* Students often drop letters that they do not pronounce: *pregnant* becomes *pregant*, *constitution* becomes *consitution*, *laboratory* becomes *labratory*, *interest* becomes *intrest*.

*Spelling Rules not Followed.* Students may be unclear about spelling rules for dropping and doubling letters: *studying* thus becomes *studing*, *writing* becomes *writting*, *coming* becomes *comeing*, *misspelling* becomes *mispeelling*, and *dropped*, *dropped*.

*Words Confused.* They may confuse homonyms: *site* or *sight* may replace *cite*, *decent* or *descent* may replace *dissent*. In addition, inexperienced writers may distort an unfamiliar word, confusing it with another unfamiliar word which is visually or aurally similar: *differentiate* thus becomes *differinitiate*.

*Spelling Demons.* Students may forget or fail to memorize the words that appear on the lists of words most commonly misspelled, words like

*occasion, separate, comprehensible, or receive.* (See a list of words often misspelled in *Harbrace College Handbook*.)

*Dialect Transferred.* Black dialect speakers sometimes transfer their grammatical formulas into their writing. Common features of dialect transference are the absence of -s in the plural and possessive of nouns and in the third person singular present tense of verbs and the absence of -ed with the past tense or past participle. In the excerpt reported in the first paragraph of this paper, for example, the absence of the -ed at the end of *retard* is probably the result of dialect transference. In the examples that follow, the rules of Black English have been employed:

*Bill go (es) home.*  
*He has twenty dollar (s).*  
*Mary ('s) coat is red.*  
*Last year he support (-ed) his mother.*  
*The expect (-ed) check never came.*

#### *Errors of Writing Disability*

Writing disabled students may make the same errors as inexperienced spellers, but they will also misspell words in other unusual, unpredictable ways. Although these unpredictably distorted spellings can be "characterized," they cannot be associated with causes such as transference of pronunciation or dialect variants, ignorance of English spelling rules, or some factor that causes a widespread tendency to misspell them. The characteristics of the misspellings of writing dysfunction are seemingly random distortions, letter reversals, and the dropping of end letters. Following are samples from these categories taken from the papers of writing disabled students:

*Random Distortions.* The context of the essays established the meanings of these distorted words: *enscaced* meant *enacted*, *hem* meant *him*, *beinging* meant *beginning*, *faracy* meant *fantasy*, *maxinguinize* meant *maximize*, *sarger* meant *surgery*, and *cerreary* meant *career*. In the excerpt quoted in the first paragraph *asapic* means *aspect*, and *rasening* means *raising*.

*Letters Reversed.* Spellings that at first glance appear to be random distortions may actually be letter reversals: *ferinds* should be *friends*, *parnets* should be *parents*, *onec* should be *once*, *adveci* should be *advice*, *direffently* should be *differently*, *porvoke* should be *provoke*, and *form* should be *from*.

*Final Letters Dropped.* A dropping of final letters that does not reflect pronunciation appears in such spellings as *cam* instead of *came*, *th* instead of *the*, *nobl* instead of *noble*, *stuf* instead of *stuff*, *of* instead of *off*, and *befor* instead of *before*.

No predictive factor seems to exist for these misspellings although extensive testing might reveal the reasons for a particular student's writing behavior. The words listed above do not constitute a list of words most frequently misspelled by disabled writers, nor is any one the consistent

idiosyncrasy of a writer. In fact, even within one person's paper a word may undergo changes. In one paper the spelling of *convince* was *convines*, *convise*, and *convince*; in another, *check* became *chach* and *chech*, and *decide* became *decied* and *dicede*. Sometimes homonyms will be confused and again spelled correctly within the space of a page; occasionally a student will misspell a dozen words in two pages on one day and only one on the next day.

### *Frequency of Misspellings*

Arbitrarily establishing a frequency rate for misspelled words that will distinguish the learning disabled from the typical remedial student is impossible. But if compared to classmates, a student has twice as many misspellings, there is a need to examine the nature of the misspellings for signs of distorted words, reversals, or dropped letters. Students labelled by themselves or teachers as "terrible spellers" are likely candidates for learning disability testing or special help; this remark usually implies not only a high frequency of errors but errors of an unusual sort. Simply put, an exceptionally high number of errors in spelling often signals the possibility of writing disability.

On the other hand, there are students who, because they have mastered spelling rules, have eliminated errors due to pronunciation or other causes, or because they only intermittently fall prey to their dysfunction, have only two or three misspellings per one hundred words. These words draw attention not because of their numbers but because of their strange appearance. How then does a teacher know whether a student who leaves the *d* off *and* and confuses *there* and *their* is a candidate for special help or is just careless? Common sense dictates that these two misspellings alone do not indicate a problem. Even if these two errors exist in the company of *opessed*, the latter is probably a phonetic attempt at the unfamiliar word *obsessed*. But if the preceding are found (as in the case of one paper) in the company of *seans* (scenes), *fsce* (wish), *sinde* (single), *assaicaisse* (accident), and *patasy* (patsy), making a total of only eight misspelled words in a 500-word theme, the evidence for writing disability exists.

## PUNCTUATION

### *Errors of Inexperience*

The lack of training that accounts for typical errors in punctuation reveals itself in consistent errors of certain types. Commonly, for example, if a student does not capitalize the first word of a sentence, he or she continues to make the same error until corrected. If a student fails to use a comma where needed or includes one where not needed, the error falls into a general pattern of student confusion over punctuation of subordinate clauses, series, or compound sentences.

*Capitalization.* Characteristic errors of inexperience in capitalization may result from students not knowing or forgetting to capitalize the first letter

of a dialogue, a word derived from a proper name, a pronoun referring to God or the name of a country or the like. Out of confusion or ignorance they may capitalize words such as *freshman*, *summer*, or *spring* unnecessarily. They may not know to capitalize titles of books or articles nor which words in a title to capitalize. In other words, the inexperienced student will find difficulty with conventions of capitalization but will not erratically dispense capitals within or at the beginning of sentences.

*Apostrophe.* Characteristic error in the use of the apostrophe usually falls into three limited categories: failing to place an apostrophe before or after the *s* in the possessive case or positioning it incorrectly to indicate the number intended (the boy's books when the boys' books was meant), failing to use the apostrophe of contraction, and substituting the contraction *it's* for the possessive pronoun *its*.

*Marks of Closure and Enclosure.* The incorrect use of periods by inexperienced writers usually results from their weak sense of sentence closure: Periods separate clauses or phrases from main clauses or lengthy subjects from predicates, resulting in sentence fragments; periods fail to materialize between independent clauses, resulting in run-on sentences. In addition, student writers may leave out periods after abbreviations and in documentations either through neglect or ignorance.

Inexperienced writers ordinarily place commas where they sense separation. As a result, they inappropriately enclose long prepositional phrases or relative clauses in commas, separate sentences with a comma instead of a period, and place a comma before an adverb clause that ends a sentence. The absence of needed commas often happens at the end of a subordinate clause introducing a sentence, before the conjunction in a compound sentence, on either or both sides of an appositive, or in a series.

Colons and semicolons become problems for student writers because, if used at all, their function is often reversed, the sentence of anticipation completed with a semicolon, or two independent clauses separated by a colon.

This same group of writers may fail to include direct quotations within quotation marks, leaving out one or both sets, or include indirect quotations in quotation marks. They may also use quotation marks too liberally as a rhetorical device for emphasis.

### *Errors of Writing Disability*

The punctuation errors of the writing disabled occur erratically with no comprehensible rationale for error.

*Capitalization.* A characteristically irrational or random use of capitals occurs in the excerpt in the first paragraph of this paper. There the student sometimes capitalizes the first word of a sentence, and sometimes not. In addition he fails to capitalize *Billy* which is not only a child's name but is also the title of the story he discusses. He capitalizes the word *child* which appears in the middle of the sentence, and he continues to capitalize randomly throughout the paper from which the excerpt is taken.

*Apostrophe.* Students with writing disability frequently misuse the apostrophes of possession and contraction. Apostrophes sometimes show up before the plural nonpossessive -s or before a final -s as in the *The bu's came*. In the excerpt the apostrophe of contraction is misplaced in the word *doesn't* which becomes *does'en*.

*Marks of Closure and Enclosure.* Students with writing disability may dispense periods, colons, and other marks indiscriminately throughout a paper. They may also devise strange constructions by using arrows, hyphens, underlinings, ellipses, and asterisks. For example, *enjoy* appeared on one paper as *in-joy* and *understand* as *under...stand*.

*Frequency of Punctuation Error.* Common sense again dictates that a careless or preoccupied student may produce two or three peculiar punctuation errors, in addition to others, in a 500-word theme. The student with writing dysfunction will make typical as well as atypical punctuation errors, but the latter will generally occur in the company of atypical spelling or syntax errors. In only one case among those papers examined for this study was atypical punctuation the only evidence for writing dysfunction. The surface of this paper had the odd look of a wild scatter of punctuating signals.

## SENTENCE CLARITY

### *Errors of Inexperience*

The sentence errors made by inexperienced writers, that are most easily confused with those of learning disabled writers, fall into the category that Shaughnessy labels *faulty consolidation*. In sentences integrated inappropriately the reader must untangle connections of unequal syntactical units, insecure comparisons, inefficient management of adverbial clauses, and faulty predication. These sentence problems all make demands on the readers' understanding and require that they supply missing parts that equalize units, justify comparisons, or modify logic.

*Connecting Unequal Syntactical Units.* The connections of unequal syntactical units by *and*, *but*, *not only*, and *but also* lead to such sentences as: *For weeks she had been searching for explanations and not to find one.* Or, *Not only did a vein swell in his temple but also a twitching cheek.*

Sometimes the writer's failure to find a secure point of comparison results in unbalanced and unclear sentences such as: *I love to go downtown like rock concerts.* Or, *The weather here is as good as Michigan.*

Dependent clauses improperly handled also can produce garbled writing. The following unit of ineffectively related clauses was intended as a sentence: *Although students have to hold down jobs which is hard in college while taking classes.* The use of *because* in place of the inappropriate *which* in the following two sentences would clarify them: *I was considered an outsider which I was treated like dirt.* Also, *Before a storm the cat will groom itself which the storm makes it apprehensive.*

The composition teacher normally recognizes problems of consolidation as arising from inexperienced students' attempts to manage written

constructs they are unfamiliar with.

*Dropped Copula.* Some sentences seem to demand completion not because of faulty consolidation but because the verb *to be* is lacking. Such sentences often have their source in Black dialect, the Black dialect speaker incorporating an element of Black English grammar into college prose. The sentences, *She beautiful.*, and *He coming along fine.*, result from such a transference of Black dialect.

### *Errors of Writing Disability*

The faulty consolidation of inexperience produces garbled sentences with syntactical disjunctions that can be recognized by the teacher. The dropped copula likewise is easily identified. The students with writing dysfunction may have these same problems but in addition they may produce garbles that result from a random loss of words and, occasionally, from reversals of words or in word sequencing.

*Word Loss.* The dropping of words in the sentences of the student with writing dysfunction is erratic, occurring as an aphasic function rather than as an inability to consolidate sentences or as a feature of Black dialect. For example, the writer of the following sentences left spaces for words, apparently hoping to fill them in during revision: *With the constancy bad habit of being late to things, like to class, appointments or events, I will in the longrun re..... this trait in the near future. Every since I was kid, I had the habit of being late to school. Even up to this day....., this problem.*

Most students, however, remain unaware of an aphasic tendency. They write sentences such as the following without attempts at revision: *He was so he drink and drink that h couldn't get the job car wash. And: James was that his son in a plane accident.* In most cases, seemingly hopeless sentences can be understood if the instructor can supply the absent words. In the following sentences lost words and suffixes are supplied in the brackets: *Hopeful[ly] you pass the test you were require\* [to take for entrance to] Wayne [.] it also tell\* you what subject that you are stronge [in] plus the subject that need\* some improve[ment].* (Asterisks appear above in features resulting from Black dialect interference.) In the excerpt at the beginning of this article there is a loss of *of* after *rasening* and *understand* after *does'en*. Unlike the consolidation errors of inexperience, these corrections seem impossible to group by their origin in specific syntactic structures.

*Sequencing of Words.* Only one student in my experience presented word reversal along with other writing disabled behaviors. Her sentence follows: *I am a Fresh[man] at Wayne State. Am I [I am] nice person to get along with. I like more do [to do more] kinds of sports.* The fact that only one example of writing which includes word reversal occurs in this study may mean that it appears less frequently at the college level.



## EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION

The number of students with writing dysfunctions in universities appears small. According to Weinstein (1984), the United States Department of Education statistics claim 5% of the school-age population have learning disabilities. If the elementary and high schools have 5% learning disabled of all types, it stands to reason that colleges and universities have a much smaller number and an even smaller number that are writing disabled. At Wayne State University, we identify through instructor referral, initially each fall, about twelve out of the 1,700 students in the basic writing courses. No doubt we miss some students, and no doubt open-admission colleges have a higher number. But all in all, the number of students with writing dysfunction remains low. Despite their small numbers, these students are a major concern for those of us who work with them. In seeking techniques to advance their writing skills, we have found several helpful strategies.

### *Self-monitoring of Error*

The effectiveness of teaching error monitoring is suggested by the research of the Institute for Research in Learning Disabilities at the University of Kansas, which has published reports describing strategies for teaching error monitoring. Our experience confirms that writing disabled students can learn to recognize and correct error. For one student this meant a concentrated application of spelling rules and the use of a dictionary in her freshman and sophomore years with the result that as an upper classwoman her essays were relatively free of error without the use of the dictionary; for another it meant checking the dictionary eight out of every ten words written and returning to his essay to apply the rules for the use of periods and commas in sentence after sentence, his vigilance continuing over six years of college (and probably for the rest of his life). The strategy for error correction described in the research report of the Institute for Research in Learning Disabilities (Schumaker) offers a concrete method for improving monitoring skills. It is a highly structured approach which directs students in the correction of sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and the paper's appearance.

Although it is expected that even the most severely disabled will to some extent monitor and correct their errors through determined application, not all will succeed equally. Some students we have worked with cannot see their errors in spelling, others cannot find a misspelled word in the dictionary, and others cannot copy it correctly after they find it, all these deficiencies limiting their degree of success.

### *Free Writing*

The inability to write at length is often characteristic of learning disabled writers, but it is not necessarily a symptom of language dysfunction. Students who through high school have had papers heavily corrected for

intractable mechanical errors are afraid to write at length because they feel that the more words written, the more errors generated. The focus of their experience in written expression has been on spelling, punctuation, or word loss and not on the pleasure of committing observations and ideas to prose. The teacher who, ignoring all errors for a time, encourages the writing disabled student to write freely in a journal and at periods set aside for free writing, will discover many disabled students increasing their fluency from a 75-word paragraph to a 700-word theme.

### *Techniques of Organization and Development*

Once fluency increases, problems characteristic of inexperienced writers emerge in the areas of paragraphing and organization. These typical problems often yield to the techniques ordinarily prescribed for teaching students how to group ideas, imitate models, and correct sentence confusion. The research reports of the Institute for Research in Learning Disabilities (Morah) at the University of Kansas recommend a highly structured approach to teaching paragraphing, sentence structure, and theme development for learning disabled students. Their research results show significant success for their students when using these techniques, some improving beyond their nondisabled classmates.

### *Resources*

The amount of published literature on the strategies that help adults overcome or compensate for the atypical errors in spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure characteristic of writing dysfunction remains small. The Institute for Research in Learning Disabilities at Kansas is now producing printed materials for teachers in the areas covered by their research reports. Instructive pamphlets for teaching learning disabled college students on a wide range of subjects, which include logic, grammar, composition, and spelling, can be obtained from Project HELDS at Central Washington University at Ellensburg (WA 98926). In addition, the latest in a series of workbooks for the learning disabled by Susan Brubaker (1984) now available at the Wayne State University Press, contains exercises for written expression, spelling, sentence completion, and sentence construction.

Persons working with learning disabled writers in college tutorial labs also have developed many techniques as yet unpublished, and much literature has been published on the teaching of writing skills to children with learning disabilities. Once the remedial laboratory achievements see publication and the techniques described for use with children are explored for their applicability to adults, these will become resources for the college composition teacher.

Individuals and groups in many universities and colleges are planning for or running learning disability testing, referral, and tutoring programs. I have, for example, talked with staff members at Western Carolina University (Cullowheen, NC) who have developed a plan for improving services

to the learning disabled within the administrative context of their institution; with staff at Piedmont Community College (Charlotte, NC) who have a program in place for identifying, monitoring, and tutoring the learning disabled; with members of the Special Education Department at Southern Illinois University which has had a well-known successful program underway for several years; and with a member of the California Association for Post-secondary Education of the Disabled (CAPED) that supports, among other programs, over one hundred programs for the learning disabled within the extensive California community college system.

A description of specific programs appears in an article by Vogel and Adelman (1981). In 1984, Mangrum and Strichart produced a comprehensive text which discusses the characteristics of learning disabled college students, how to develop and implement programs for them, and how to help them in the classroom. The text also contains appendices listing resource materials, college programs, and other information.

These publications reflect and certainly contribute to the movement toward helping the learning disabled succeed in college. Other members of the movement are those persons who institute or support programs for the students and who conduct research into their learning problems and develop materials that help them learn. That this movement exists may alone hearten many English teachers, but until college programs which include screening for writing disability and supply substantial aids for teaching are in place, it will be the English composition teacher and the remedial tutor who must identify the learning disabled writers through the kinds of spelling, punctuation, and composing errors displayed in their papers and who must seek the means to help them become efficient writers.

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