

Practical Solutions + Writing

The purpose of writing

The purpose of writing is communication; to show what you know and to help you to think clearly, and to show others what you know, what you think, what you mean or what you intend. Too often this important purpose is overlooked because a variety of skill weaknesses get in the way.

The thing that dyslexic individuals, and others who struggle with literacy, fear most is 'writing it down'. This is not surprising because 'writing it down' consists of so many separate skills which have to be drawn together in perfect harmony if writing is to be accurate, fluent, speedy and effortless. In addition once something is written down it appears to be a permanent record of that individual's ability in this area, if those abilities are weaker than expected it only serves as a reminder for that individual that they are not as competent in these skills as their peers. Anxiety is further heightened as often such work will be marked or assessed.

Many dyslexic people get over, or learn to live with, some of the other difficulties associated with dyslexia, but continue to struggle with writing things down throughout life, others sometimes give up completely.

Writing to communicate

What happens when a dyslexic individual is asked to 'write a story', 'find out about', 'do a project on...'? At best there may be large chunks downloaded from the Internet, copied inaccurately from a text book or a friend, which nobody can read or, at worse, a couple of pieces of paper, crumpled, crossed out or even 'lost'.

For dyslexic individuals, the task of producing a well-presented piece of writing is a huge one. They may go into 'overload', not knowing where to start or how to break the task down into manageable steps. They need a system of diminishing support, which allows them to learn the processes involved and so begin to take control.

Common features of the dyslexic individual's writing may be:

- Little evidence of planning.
- Getting writer's block – not knowing how to start.
- Ideas which are not sequential.
- Inclusion of non-relevant material. 'Losing the plot'.
- Poor handwriting, spelling, punctuation and grammar.

- Limited range of vocabulary.
- Poor structure – no obvious conclusion.
- Not being able to read it back or proof-read it.

The dyslexic individual who struggles with reading will have to expend so much effort to decode the words, that meaning is often lost. They, therefore, have little experience of the structure and rules of written language. They also may experience problems with receptive and expressive language and not understand to use the correct structures in speech.

If you cannot say it, can you write it?

Therefore there needs to be as highlighted by Jim Rose lots of practice in Speaking and Listening in which these rules will need to be taught.

It is essential to analyse a piece of free writing and note the breakdown points.

Writing frames can be an enormous help to set up good habits.

Note taking

Taking notes in class or in a lecture or making notes from a book, article, etc is not an easy task for the majority of dyslexic individuals. The difficulties they experience with working memory, speed of processing, writing speed and confidence with spelling, all work against them. They find it hard to decide what to write down and where. Often the first, crucial part of the task is lost and they soon lose the thread of what is being said. The skills involved in note taking/making are:

- Understanding the language.
- Selecting what is important.
- Organising the information gained.
- Reorganising that information and presenting it in a different way.

The dyslexic individual will need guidance to find a note-taking/making style that suits them. Guidance will also be needed on how to decide between relevant and irrelevant information. Lots of unpressurised practice using short talks or videos, or reduced texts will help to teach the skills required.

There are a number of ways to structure not taking – the key word being ‘structure’.

Preparation for Note Taking

The student needs to:

- Make sure they have completed any background reading or preparation before the lecture/class and have made a note of any important questions they have to be aware of. The use of Post-its is excellent in pinpointing questions about a text.
- If they are still decoding to read, comprehension will suffer so it is important that the teacher checks the readability and if necessary offers simplified text.

- Using either a linear or patterned format, note the main points as key words and phrases.
- Use abbreviations wherever possible but write a key in case they forget what they stand for.
- Leave out the little words such as *the, is, to*, but make sure they remember that *no* and *not* are important words.
- Record numbers, names, dates and titles.
- Highlight copied definitions.
- Record the teacher's conclusions clearly and concisely.
- Mark any points not understood.
- Copy diagrams carefully.
- Have a friend or classmate who will take notes if they are absent and share their legible notes. These can be photocopied.
- If possible, tape any important lectures so that details can be added to the key-word notes later in the day.
- In exam preparation, the teacher should ensure that the dyslexic student receives clear handouts, preferably using bullet points. The student should then be encouraged to make a mind map from them.

Organisation of notes

If making linear notes the student should:

- Use wide-lined A4 paper.
- Leave wide margins on both edges of the sheets or divide the page lengthways and only write on two-thirds.
- Leave gaps for additions and corrections.
- Use coloured pens and highlighters.
- Use headings and subheadings, marking sub-sections with letters or numbers.

When using patterned notes or spider grams:

- Use plain, coloured paper in a landscape position.
- Make use of coloured pens.

For both kinds of notes:

- Write only on one side of each page so that extra pages can be inserted later for e.g. observations of practical work, additional reading or own thoughts.
- The aim should be to have one set of notes that ties together all the aspects of a particular topic.
- Use particular colours of paper or pens, folders or dividers for different subjects/topics.
- Make sure the student attaches an index of content to each section perhaps by sorting them into: Main point > Supporting points > Summary.

Note making

Students of all ages need to know how to learn from their reading of texts. Many will find it difficult to skim and scan a page and select and process the information without specific, strategic help. They will need effective modelling of techniques for handling texts and, sometimes, constant support and reminders about the procedures they need to adopt when looking for information in books and other texts.

Once they have found the information from the page, they need to organise it in ways which will enable them to:

- Sort the information.
- Determine priorities.
- Make considered judgements.

Putting information into their own words, rather than just copying it, is a highly sophisticated language task and therefore the most scaffolding that can be provided for them, the greater the chances for them to participate fully in activities that involve them in reading to learn.

Older students who are making notes from textbooks should be encouraged to:

- Get an overview of the chapter by reading the first and last paragraphs and by taking note of any headings, sub-headings, maps, charts and diagrams, etc.
- Make a note of the book, chapter and page for later reference.

Using a spidergram format or a linear format, allowing space for additional information later, they should:

- As they read each paragraph think carefully about the key point – the ‘essence’ of the paragraph and what the supporting details are, and make a note, using as few words as possible.

The advantages of this approach are that:

- Students will process the information more deeply as they think about the key points and, therefore, have a greater understanding of the text and will be more likely to remember the information in the future.
- If they have to stop part way through the task, they just need to re-read their notes before starting again.
- They will end up with a summary of the chapter, which can be kept for later reference and revision.

Examples of note making grids:

KWL Grid. This format allows existing knowledge to be used as a beginning for an investigation. Findings are summarised in the final column.

What I Know	What I Want to know	What I've Learnt

QUADS Grid. This builds on the KWL grid and provides an extended, more detailed approach to recording the outcomes of an investigation.

Question	Answer	Detail	Source

Free writing

Individuals who are dyslexic are often good at imaginative writing but their stories can be very rambling, lacking in structure and difficult to mark.

They need a lot of help and support to plan their work and to keep to the plan as they write. Initially they should be provided with a scaffolding format, which helps them to plan a definite sequence of events with an ending. The individual should brainstorm or thought shower words that they would like to use so that help can be given with spelling.

They should be encouraged to use the five senses to give variety to their selection and to cater for a range of readers. Sight – Sound – Feeling/tactile – Smell and Taste.

Creative Writing

The writing of continuous prose involves a number of skills. For a story to make sense the individual's working memory will need to be at an acceptable level. The individual has to think of what they want to say, put the idea into a sentence and retain it for long enough to write it down. Having to also consider spelling, punctuation and all the other necessary skills involved in writing continuous prose, may well lead to the sequence of the sentence or, in fact, the whole story becoming jumbled.

For this reason the flow of words or the creative development of a storyline should not be inhibited by the technical aspects of writing. These can be considered at the redrafting and checking stages. It is sometimes helpful for an individual to dictate/tell the story on to a recording device and write it up later or to use a scribe if done as a homework assignment. In this way once the ideas are recorded the individual can concentrate on the technical skills of committing it to paper and also control the flow, thereby reducing the burden on working memory.

Creative ideas come from the right side of the brain whilst spelling from recall is situated in the left side so it is hard to access both at once.

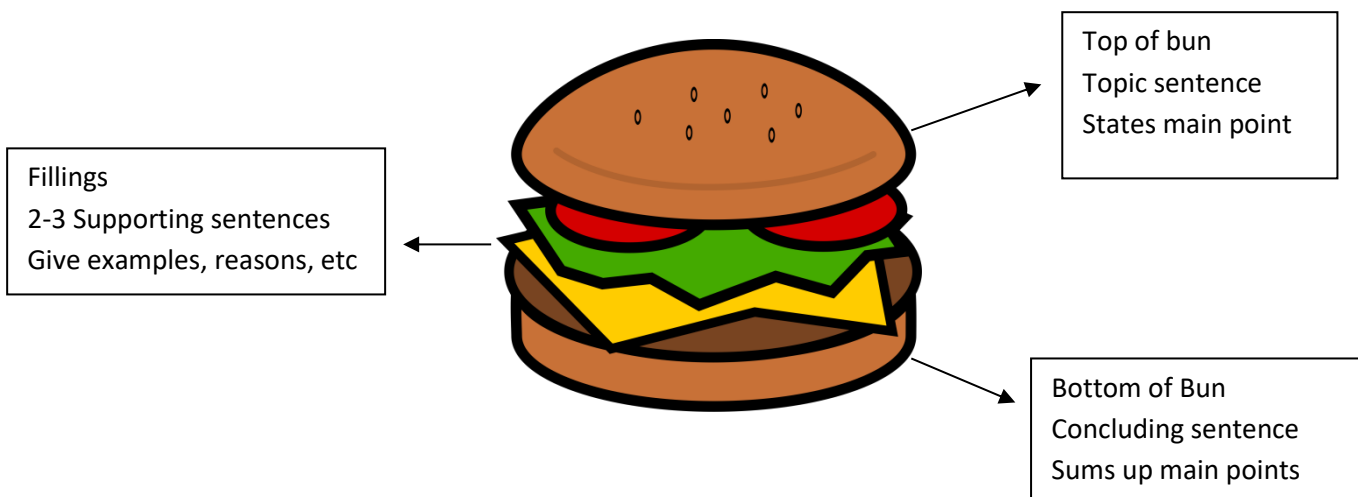
Writing essays

Writing essays is all about showing what you know and have understood and about communicating thoughts and ideas, rather than covering the paper or pleasing the teacher.

Three factors should be considered; **Relevance** to title, Inclusion of enough **Facts** or evidence, **Understanding**.

The basis is the same as the story hump discussed above – the essay needs to have a beginning, middle and an end and to be written in structured paragraphs.

The hamburger analogy can be a useful outline for remembering how to write a structured paragraph.



Planning essays is key.

For example an argumentative essay works well if a linear plan is drawn up with one column for FOR and another for AGAINST.

Whilst all these plans will help to ensure correct sequencing, the dyslexic individual will need encouragement to expand, to build up atmosphere in creative writing or ideas in factual writing and to put in fine detail or evidence. This can only be achieved gradually and by discussion of how to improve existing work.

Dealing with **factual essays** rather than creative writing demands other skills in addition to those already mentioned.

The individual needs to be able to:

- Analyse the essay question, finding key words and instructions.
- Brainstorm ideas.
- Collect information from notes and books, etc.
- Discard irrelevant information.

- Structure and create links between relevant pieces of information. Make a list of useful link words e.g. Firstly, furthermore, in addition, therefore, consequently...
- Sequence ideas whilst making the paragraphs flow smoothly and logically.
- Use examples or references to support ideas, points.
- Possibly insert diagrams, etc.
- Proof read/check.

Analysing the question and brainstorming ideas

One difficulty the dyslexic individual may have is to be able to answer the question precisely and not include irrelevant material. To do this it is a good idea for them to start with a four-part analysis of the question. The word **SARI** will help the pupil to remember the initial letters of four words:

Subject What is the question about?
Aspect Definite content. Examiners will never ask an individual to write Everything they know about a subject.

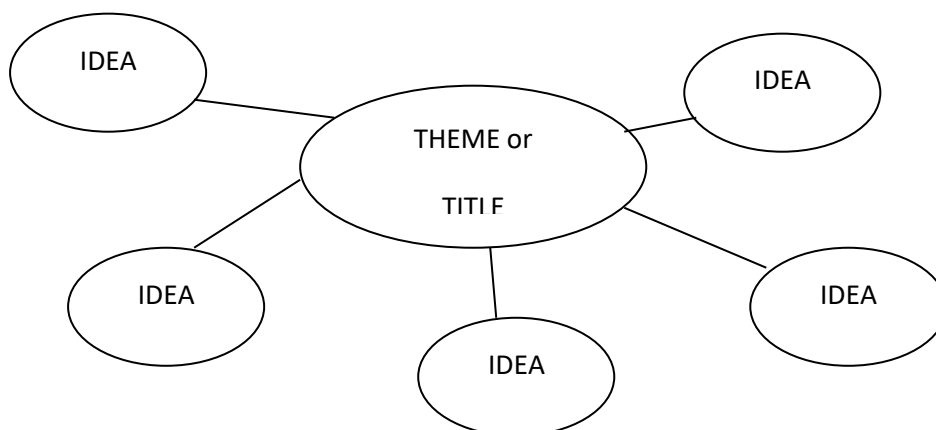
The individual must decide which aspect or aspects of the subject must be covered in the answer.

Restrictions Do any words limit the form or scope of the answer e.g. only, not, two, four, between the dates of, brief, concise, outline?

Instructions Are any words instructions? If so, they must be followed e.g. 'compare', 'explain', 'summarise'.

After making sure they have understood what the question is really asking, the individual needs to **brainstorm** some ideas about what should be included in the answer. This should be just keywords on a mind map or a list of words with plenty of space around for adding other information. Separate cards or sticky notes could be used so that they can be moved around when it comes to sorting into sets or sequencing ideas.

An example of a spidergram or concept map (each spoke can be extended further):



Again, asking the question words: What? Why? When? How? Where? Who? Will act as mental tin-openers and will stimulate further questions and allow the individual to add to their notes. The brainstorming session should have highlighted what they know and what they do not know. Information that is not relevant to the question should then be discarded.

Collecting Information

Dyslexic individuals may become confused if there is too wide a choice of reference material and so it may be better for them to have a couple of books suggested to them to start with, others may be added later if necessary.

Information from the reference sources should be added to the mind map or cards, again in key words or phrases. A note should always be made of the title, chapter and page from the books being used so it can be found again later.

Planning

The individual must think about the main point they want to make in each paragraph. This will form the topic sentence. Details to support the main idea can then be added – this might include quotations, explanations or arguments for and against.

The individual should keep going back to the essay title to make sure that what they are planning is relevant.

The sections then need to be sequenced to give a logical order, either numbering the branches on the mind map, or sorting the cards or sticky notes into order.

Drafting

The next step is to write the introduction – if the essay is factual they will need to outline what the essay is going to cover, if it is an imaginative piece it needs to ‘grab’ the reader’s attention.

The other paragraphs need to follow on logically, keeping to one main idea in each paragraph and developing it by explain it or giving examples.

The conclusion needs to pull the essay together by summarising the arguments, giving opinions or finishing with a good punch line.

Revising/redrafting

It is important at this stage that the individual looks back over the work, making sure that:

- The information is relevant and the question has been answered.
- The paragraphs are in a logical order and flow smoothly.

- Sentence structure is good.
- The essay is the right length.
- Spelling and punctuation are correct.

Checking

Even at this stage we cannot expect the writing to be error free. Copying from corrections can still be difficult. When working memory skills are weak, the individual may not be able to retain the correct spelling pattern for long enough to transcribe it correctly or it may become jumbled in the process of transcription. Proof reading is therefore quite a difficult task for many dyslexic individuals and guidance will be needed. They should:

1. Have a break between writing and proof reading.
2. Check questions are numbered correctly.
3. Read the work forwards, preferably aloud.
4. Check for one thing at a time.
5. Keep in mind the type of error they usually make. Perhaps, they leave 'ed' off past tenses, for example.
6. Check for typos.
7. Check for omissions.
8. Check for punctuation – full stops, question marks, commas, speech marks, etc.
9. Use their finger or a pencil to point at the words as they say them.
10. Read the work backwards – it is easier to spot spelling mistakes if the words are seen in isolation.

The use of IT

The use of word processors for writing essays is invaluable, as redrafting is a very difficult thing for dyslexic individual to do – so much effort has been put into the drafting stage that the thought of having to correct it and rewrite it is a nightmare.

The use of a word processing program can act as a motivator in the creative writing process. The appearance of the work is greatly improved and spelling also improves with the use of a spell check facility. The individual needs to become proficient in the use of the keyboard but once fluency is established the need to completely redraft work is eliminated.

Potential benefits for the dyslexic learner using a word processor

Word processing can be a valuable enabling tool, which has the potential to level out some aspects of the playing field for the dyslexic learner. A word processor can give significant support to the dyslexic in the area of recording skills. The benefits offered cover a range of smaller points that cumulate into an impressive package of support. When compared to handwritten work, these benefits include:

- **Improved legibility and presentation**, not simply from a variety of font styles and sizes available, or from basic commands like Bold and Centred text, but also

because such handwritten difficulties like spacing, use of margin and line and the left to right flow of text are all mechanically taken care of with a word processor and cease to be troublesome;

- **Improved quality to the content of writing**, because thinking space is freed up by the word processor taking the pressure off the sheer slog of writing. The writer may also have access to thesaurus and grammar checking outboard computer devices;
- **Improved editing and proof reading skills**, because invisible deletion or errors, easy insertion of forgotten words and rearranging if the sequence of ideas using cut and paste, all contribute to making drafting and redrafting a non-threatening and quicker activity;
- **Improved spelling accuracy**, though this will vary according to the sophistication of the spell checker and the extremity of the spelling error made. It will also be dependent on the ability of the student to select the correct alternative e.g. [presentation, penetration]. Spelling accuracy can also be helped by the clear visual feedback that a student gets from the screen, making self-correction more viable for dyslexics at the milder end of the continuum;
- **Improved control of letter orientation**, not just because the keyboard is in capital letters and so letter like 'B' and 'D' are visually less confusing, but also because the letters are visually laid out in front of the user, and the choosing of a letter becomes a skill of recognition rather than recall;
- **Improved recording speed**, because a simple down stroke into a keyboard is potentially faster than the relatively complex pen movement needed to create the same shape. Yet if the speed benefit is to be realised keyboard skills will have to be taught.
- **Improved organisation**, because if work is saved, problem of lost books or crumpled essays with pages missing are lessened through a safer system with repeat print out capability;
- **Improved motivation, attention and self esteem**, because computers seem to suit the learning style of many dyslexic individuals, with the medium being very multi-sensory especially if there is speech feedback from a 'talking computer' facility. The screen can be rather magnetic, holding concentration for longer periods, and the improved quality of written work and the success that can be experienced using a word processor, makes for rising self-esteem.

Extract from Article: Dyslexia Review Spring 1998 Ros Kinloch

Conclusion

Dyslexic individuals are often full of ideas but lack the skills to get their ideas down on paper effectively and efficiently. It is important that they are able to develop appropriate strategies to assist in this activity. Such strategies are unlikely to be developed independently and it is therefore vital that:

- Such strategies are explicitly taught to dyslexic individuals.
- They are given enough opportunities to practice them in situations that are not pressured.

They can easily get disheartened by insensitive marking. Teachers should focus marking on targeted areas [e.g. correct facts, imaginative use of vocabulary, relevance to question, ability to write structured paragraphs, etc]. They should then mark for successes and focus on one or two targets to feed forward to the next piece of work.

Spelling can be targeted on key words and a system used where the correct letters are individually ticked and omissions or the incorrect sequence of letters noted.

It is worth using the suggestions outlined above with non-dyslexic individuals as well as they can only improve writing and develop the necessary skills.

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