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# topic facts

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## **What is dysgraphia?**

### **What to do when children have trouble with writing**

**J**ack was in the third grade when his mother called me. She said Jack was frustrated in school, spending time with the principal almost daily. When he had to put pencil to paper, he had a meltdown, crumpling and shredding papers he was expected to hand in. His spelling was poor; his handwriting barely legible. Yet Jack was a very bright boy. What was going on?

*The  
difficulty  
Jack was  
having with  
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affected his  
attitude  
toward  
school and  
his self-  
esteem.*

Jack has dysgraphia, a neurological disorder that involves writing. Some characteristics of dysgraphia include difficulty with the physical aspects of handwriting, spelling, or putting thoughts on paper. Other signs are difficulty writing within the margins, inconsistent spacing between words, and letter reversals. Jack's challenges with writing were affecting his attitude in class and his self-esteem. Jack needed help.

### **What parents can do**

Children with learning disabilities often need extra support at home from their families. Here are some suggestions for helping a child who is struggling with writing.

- Be patient and encouraging with your child at home in order to avoid a meltdown.
- As needed, write as your child dictates information to help reduce the frustration of writing.
- Help organize your child's writing by discussing what he or she will write about. Thinking out loud will help your child plan and organize thoughts before writing. You may want to jot down some notes.

- Encourage your child to use word processing and/or speech-to-print technology.
- Make sure directions are clear.
- Discuss accommodations with your child's teacher.

### **Help in school**

Susan Jones, M.Ed., author of *Accommodations and Modifications for Students with Handwriting Problems and/or Dysgraphia* (Learning Disabilities OnLine-www.ldonline.org), explains that children with writing problems need accommodations, changes in assignments and expectations, and direct instruction. Listed below are examples she recommends for teachers and other professionals.

### **Let's begin with accommodations for changing the demands of writing rate.**

- Allow more time for written tasks including note taking, copying, and tests.
- Enable students to begin assignments early.
- Encourage keyboarding skills to increase speed and legibility of written work.



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### **Next, think about "adjusting the volume" of work.**

- Instead of writing a complete set of notes, provide a partially completed outline so the student can fill in details under major headings, or provide details and have the student provide the headings.
- Enable the student to dictate to another individual (a scribe).
- Remove neatness and/or spelling as a grading criteria for some assignments giving consideration to the purpose.

### **Consider changing the complexity of work the child must complete.**

- Provide a writing binder that includes models for forming letters and templates for written formats.
- Break writing into stages and use the computer to revise assignments. Print out rough drafts in order to show the difference with and without revisions.
- Use a spellchecker.

### **Use different writing tools to accommodate the physical aspects of writing.**

- Allow students to use graph paper for math, or to turn lined paper sideways to help with lining up columns of numbers.
- Allow students to use a writing instrument that is most comfortable for them, such as mechanical pencils or a pencil grip.
- Enable the child to use word processing. Some keyboarding programs address the needs of students with learning disabilities by teaching the keys alphabetically or using a sensory approach.
- Consider using speech recognition software, if the student is willing to invest the time to learn it.

### **Modify or change assignments or expectations to meet a student's needs.**

- Reduce the amount of copying on assignments and tests. Let the student answer in phrases or words.
- Decrease the length of written assignments; stress quality over quantity.
- Use different grading procedures for written assignments; on some grammar may not count, on others spelling may not count.

- Develop cooperative writing projects.
- Work on structuring assignments and due dates with students and parents.
- Offer an alternative project, such as an oral report or visual project.
- Use a rubric or grid to guide expectations.
- Provide models for paragraph and essay formats.

### **Children with dysgraphia benefit from direct instruction or remediation.**

- Build handwriting instruction into the student's schedule.
- Provide occupational therapy or other special education services based on the child's individual needs.
- Teach alternative handwriting methods, such as "Handwriting Without Tears."

The ultimate goal is to help students with dysgraphia write without conscious effort. When a student is able to write automatically, he or she can think and develop ideas effortlessly, solve problems, and develop an individual writing style. It is also important to acknowledge the struggle students with dysgraphia experience and affirm their hard work. With appropriate help, Jack can learn to write more easily and feel better about being in school.