

What is a written language LD or dysgraphia?



A written language learning disability, or dysgraphia, can be a specific learning disability that affects an individual's ability to write. In order to determine whether it is a disability, an individual's written language achievement must be significantly lower than what is expected. While there are no specific criteria for determining if an individual has a written language disability, an individual may be diagnosed if he/she shows difficulties in the following areas:

- Handwriting
- Spacing and orienting
- Spelling with either decodable words or irregular words
- Idea formation (expression)
- Sequencing and organization of ideas
- Grammar and/or syntax

What are some signs of a written language disability?

- Poor grip or body posture
- Words are broken up or unevenly spaced on page
- Handwriting is illegible
- Letters are reversed or omitted beyond what is developmentally expected
- Talking out-loud while writing
- Easily tires or spends extensive time on a small amount of writing
- Difficulty organizing thoughts into paragraphs and/or paragraphs into logical order
- Difficulty applying grammar rules and following syntactic structure

How is a specific learning disability in written language (dysgraphia) identified?

There are several steps involved in determining whether or not an individual has a learning disability impacting the area of written language.

Step 1: Review of past written work by trained professionals, e.g. teachers, special educators, or learning disability specialist.

Step 2: History of past interventions/accommodations (if any), and measure of their effectiveness.

Step 3: Assuming interventions (usually school-based) are not effective, then referral for a psycho-educational assessment (such as those conducted by LDA or school officials) is appropriate. An assessment consists of the administration of standardized tests to measure ability (IQ), educational achievement in written language (and other academic areas), and determination of information processing strengths and weaknesses.

Step 4: Analysis of handwriting, spelling, written expression, fluency, usage, and other aspects of written language.

Step 5: Compilation of assessment data into an assessment summary report containing relevant historical information, academic history, interpretation, and diagnosis.

Step 6: If a learning disability is diagnosed, then specific interventions and strategies to enhance instruction should be provided to teachers and employers, and reasonable accommodations be implemented.

What are some strategies that can help individuals who have a writing disability?



There is no one place in the brain that is responsible for writing and there are several different ways a writing disability can manifest itself. The strategies or methods used should target where the breakdown is occurring.

1. If the student has difficulty gripping a writing utensil, then experiment with different pens or pencils, encourage proper grip and posture, or develop keyboarding skills to compensate.
2. If the student has difficulty remembering how to form letters, reinforce letter formation with large motor movements, smaller hand/finger motions, and multi-sensory reinforcements such as visual and auditory cues. Practice the letters and sounds many different ways (see it, hear it, say it, trace it with a body part). Find tricks to help the student remember letters, e.g. for the direction of b's and d's use your hands to make the shape of a bed. With both hands make a fist, the palms toward you. Leave your thumbs up. Your thumbs form the top of the b (headboard) and the d (foot of the bed). You can always remember the direction of b and d using this trick.
3. If the student has difficulty spelling or sequencing letters, use multi-sensory techniques to establish visual, auditory, and motor memory.
4. If the student has difficulty organizing thoughts, use the steps of the writing process:
 - a. P-Plan what you are going to write about.
 - b. O-Organize with idea maps or outlines.
 - c. W-Write your thoughts-if you can't get started with a blank page, start with an index card.
 - d. E-Edit your own writing as well as have someone else edit your draft.
 - e. R-Revise your draft with your own and someone else's edits.

Additionally, help the student find someone whose writing he/she really likes and ask the person to model how to get started, organize ideas, etc.. It even helps to have the model edit the individual's writing. Encourage them to ask the model what they are thinking when they make changes or edits. **The law of good writing is that every writer gets help, especially good writers.**

5. If the student has a voice in his/her head that is critical during writing, help him/her develop a response to it. For example, if writing reminds him/her of a teacher that said he/she was a terrible speller, teach them to respond by saying, "Maybe I am a poor speller, but I can revise it later and use spell-check."
6. If the student can't get ideas down on paper, provide him/her time to talk them out or dictate them into a tape recorder. With taped notes he/she can fast-forward through ideas or stop the tape when an idea needs to be fleshed out.
7. If the student has difficulty generating ideas, teach him/her to pay attention to how the authors organize their ideas. It isn't cheating to organize ones ideas in the same way as long as the ideas/ wording aren't the same. Also pay attention to phrases or words the author uses. One can always start with wording that he/she likes and develop ideas from there.

Where can I get more information on writing disabilities?



- LDA of Minnesota: <http://www.ldaminnesota.org> or 952-922-8374
- LDA of America: <http://www.ldaamerica.org>
- National Center for Learning Disabilities: <http://www.nclد.org/>
- LD Online: http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/process_deficit/visual_auditory.html
- Feifer, S. & Fina, P. (2002). The neuropsychology of writing disorders: Diagnosis and Intervention workbook. School Neuropsych Press: Middletown, MD.
- Hopkins School District, Hopkins Minnesota Learning Disabilities Research page http://www.hopkins.k12.mn.us/Pages/North/LD_Research/

LDA of Minnesota

For more than 36 years, **Learning Disabilities Association of Minnesota** has been serving the needs of people of all ages with or at risk for learning disabilities or related learning difficulties by maximizing their potential so that they may lead more productive and fulfilled lives. Services include educational assessments, individualized and small group tutoring, consultations, family literacy activities, school-to-work transition programming, professional training, public education, and high-quality educational products.

LDA of Minnesota is the state affiliate of LDA of America, a non-profit organization of volunteers dedicated to identifying causes, promoting prevention of learning disabilities, and enhancing the quality of life for all individuals with learning disabilities and their families by encouraging effective identification and intervention, fostering research, and protecting their rights under law.