

Preparing Students With Learning Disabilities for Writing Tasks: Introduction to a Special Issue

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In order to successfully engage in the process of putting thoughts on paper or into a keyboard, we must be proficient in language convention skills (e.g., spelling, grammar, punctuation), be sufficiently motivated to tackle this challenging task, and have at least a basic concept of what we want to write about (Alamargot, Caporossi, Chesnet, & Ros, 2011). All these require skills that are often compromised in students with learning disabilities (LD) (Graham, Collins, & Rigby-Wills, 2017).

This special series issue of *Insights Into Learning Disabilities* (ILD) is devoted to research papers on approaches designed to equip children and youth with LD with the necessary skills to succeed in translating their thoughts into written language. In the opening article, entitled “Contingency Contracting and Its Impact on the Use of Punctuation Skills by Fifth Graders With Learning Disabilities,” the authors demonstrate that written agreements between teachers and students, coupled with a reward scheme, can significantly increase the ratio by which children with LD use punctuation marks correctly. Helping struggling learners to better concentrate on properly using commas, periods, exclamation marks, parentheses, dashes, and so on, gradually increases automaticity and enables them to focus more on the content of the message that they want to put across and less on the mechanics of writing.

The second paper is entitled “The Impact of Explicit Timing, Immediate Feedback, and Positive Reinforcement on the Writing Outcomes of Academically and Behaviorally Struggling Fifth-Grade Students.” Just as the first article, it documents the potency of motivational strategies. But this time, the authors move one step further, and zoom in on text production instead of centering on a prerequisite skill like the ability to correctly use punctuations. Specifically, they applied a multicomponent performance feedback system to encourage academically challenged children to produce longer, more complete, and qualitatively better essays. The results clearly suggest that the intervention measures up to the expectations.

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In the third article, entitled “Effects of the STOP & LIST Strategy on the Writing Performance of a Sixth Grader With Learning Disabilities,” the authors provide evidence that teaching a simple planning strategy can elicit marked improvements in text length and quality. By instructing a 12-year-old boy not to jump right into writing, but to first develop goals, generate ideas, and organize his thoughts, his performance increased remarkably.

The last paper, “Improving the Length and Quality of Texts Written by Fourth Graders With Learning Disabilities Through a Peer-Tutoring Graphic Organizing Strategy,” supports the assumption that teachers do not always have to be in the spotlight when it comes to imparting essential writing planning abilities to students with LD. Instruction can also be effectively delivered through schoolmates. In this final article, high-performing peers used story maps to teach struggling writers in their class how to graphically outline the basic blueprint of a text before engaging in the actual process of producing it. The results give rise to the hope that even rather ambitious planning abilities can be imparted with relatively little effort.

Just as composing a story, a report, or an argumentative essay is challenging for most students with LD, so it is challenging for teachers in inclusive settings to instruct them (Gillespie & Kiuahara, 2017; Grünke & Leonard Zabel, 2015). The articles in this issue are geared towards special educators who are having to effectively support these children and youth as they try to learn how to put their ideas in writing. The four studies published here examine highly effective interventions that can be implemented with minimum effort. It is our hope that their ideas will be widely disseminated throughout schools that offer services to students with LD, who usually need far above-average support in their writing endeavors.

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