

What Does Writing for Students with Significant Disabilities Look Like?

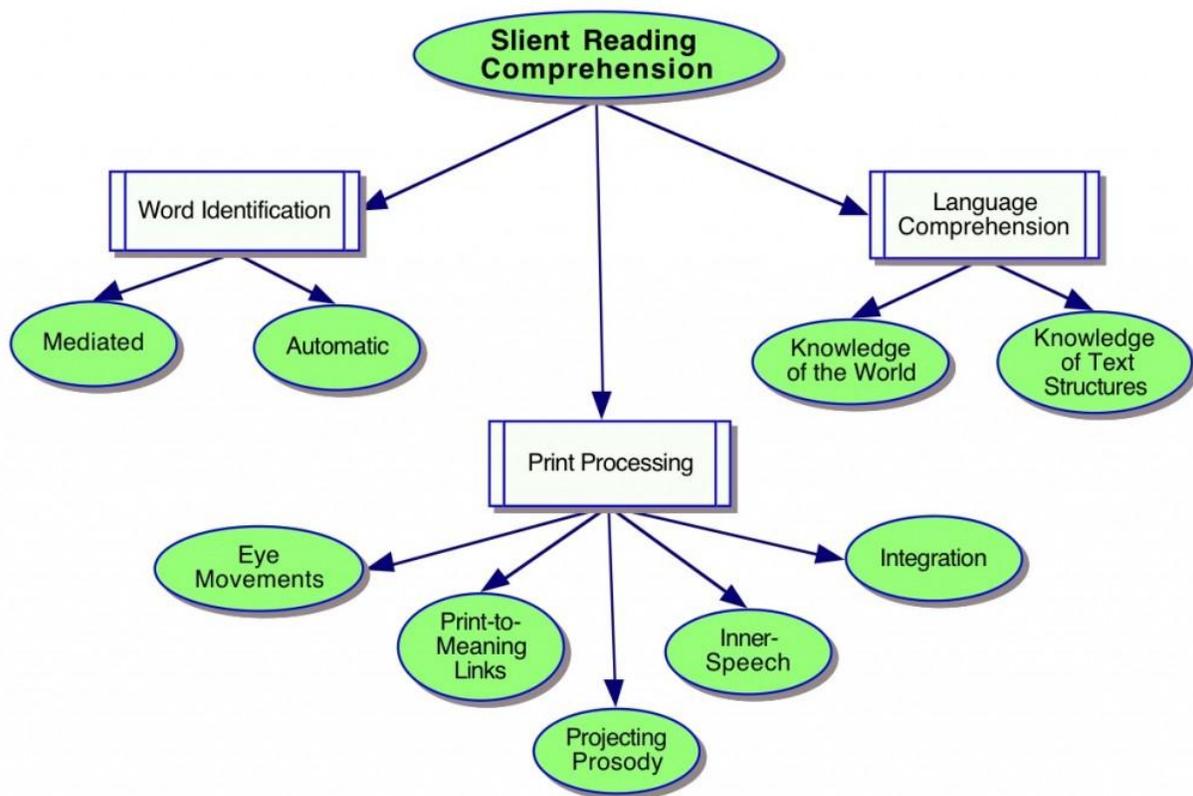
See more at: <http://www.thinkinclusive.us/what-does-writing-for-students-with-significant-disabilities-look-like/#sthash.iGF9srRH.dpuf>

By **Monica Braat**

A version of this article was originally published on the blog: [Eliminating the Box](#). Monica has given us permission to publish it again here.

What does writing for students with significant disabilities look like? How can we engage them in the process of writing?

It is important not to mistake tasks that develop matching, memorizing, copying or fine motor skills with the learning process of writing. Students with disabilities need to experience the same processes as those without when developing writing. They need to scribble and explore and progress from being emergent to conventional writers.



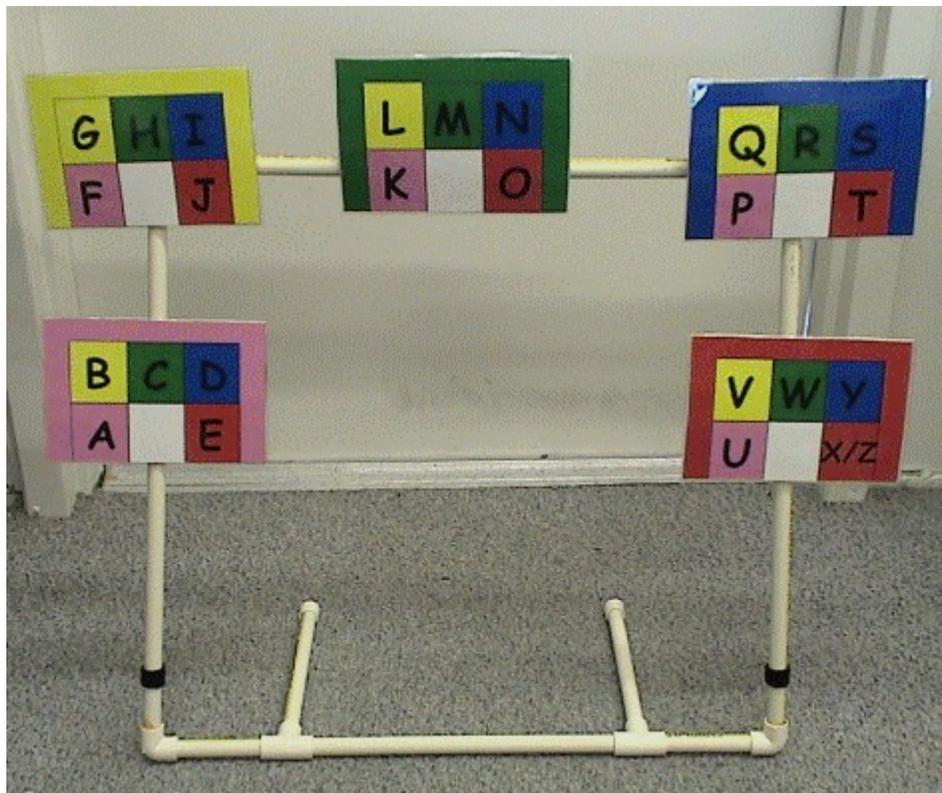
Writing also supports the development of reading skills. Above is a diagram of the “Whole to Part Literacy Framework” which outlines the need to develop skills in word identification, language comprehension and print processing in order to achieve the goal of silent reading with comprehension. Guided reading, writing and developing communication system skills all fall under the “language comprehension” umbrella. The writing tasks that we do with the students

that I work with cross between developing communication skills, communication system skills and engaging in and learning the writing process.

Below is an outline of some of the things are now embedded in to writing programs for students, some things that we are developing as part of their writing programs and a couple of things that I am looking to add to writing programs this fall. Some of these things are done in general education classes drawing on content from those subjects, some fit right in to the literacy structures that exist in classrooms as all students have choice in their writing and some are done in a one-on-one or small group direct instruction setting. Many have only been added in the past two years after I had attended workshops and courses by Linda Burkhart, Karen Erickson, David Koppenhaver and Caroline Musselwhite. Before that the “writing” we were doing was the practice on matching, memorizing, copying and fine motor skills I referenced a the beginning of this post.

Alternate Pencils

Many students with complex needs either cannot or have significant difficulty using a pencil. Alternate pencils offer the opportunity for students to do letter-by-letter generative writing.



One no-tech Alternate Pencil is an eye gaze board (example above). To use this system, the student first gazes to one of the five clusters of letters. Once the student has picked the cluster they want, they then do a second gaze to one of the five areas and use the color coding system to say which color of letter they would like to write from the initial cluster. That process generates one letter that the person working with the student would write down.

For example, a student might gaze to the cluster of letters in the top right hand corner. This means he/she wants to write the letter P, Q, R, S or T. The student then gazes to the top left hand corner which means that he/she is choosing the yellow letter from the first cluster of letters indicated. The letter the partner writes down is “Q”.



Another no-tech option is a flip chart. An example of this is included above. The top of the chart contains clusters of letters. This process requires that the student that is doing the writing has a definitive yes and no response. This could be using switches or any body action. We try to encourage head movement sideways for no and up or down for yes as that is generally universally understood but if that is not possible then we find whatever is going to work. In the letter-by-letter approach we would ask a continuous string of questions starting with “A?”. If the answer is no, we ask the next letter. If the answer is yes, we write it down. Once we write a letter down we continue by asking that letter again and keep moving through. The process can also be done in clusters – asking the student if he/she wants one of the letters on the first page and if he/she says yes then go through the letters one at a time. This is partner-assisted step scanning process is one that is familiar to our students that we use this method of writing with as we use it for choice making and when communicating with [P.O.D.D. books](#) (have written about these before but will be adding a new post about these again soon).



A couple of less complex alternate pencils that can be used with student who have more functional use of their hands but still struggle with the fine motor aspect of printing include options like letter stamps, magnetic letters, letter cards, letter stickers, keyboards...etc. There are several options for keyboards for those with fine motor challenges. The example above is the “Big Keys” keyboard. [IntelliKeys](#) is another option that offers a lot of versatility including making tactile representations.

The point of using alternate pencils is to allow student access to a way to generate letter-by-letter writing right from the “scribbling stage” of writing. A student does not have to be able to generate what we call “real words” to use an alternate keyboard just as a student doesn’t need to be able to write whole words before they start using a pencil. In fact, a child will use a pencil for a



long time before they generate conventional words. Alternate pencils create the same opportunities for exploration or students who cannot hold a pencil. When we use alternate pencils, we always work with the student to pick something that we are going to write about through some of the approaches outlined below (Weekend Words, Experience Books, Photo or Picture Captions, Remnant Books) or we pick a topic with the student related to something that he/she is reading or studying. Once we have a topic, we start writing and let them generate whatever series of letters they are going to generate. We do not direct or interfere and when the student is done we “read” what they have written about (make the letter sounds) and then talk about their topic with them.

Writing is one part of a student’s comprehensive literacy program. At the same time as a student is working on writing, they are also spending time doing word work and self-selected and guided reading. As they develop skills in these areas, they will move towards more conventional writing in a similar process as a scribbling child moves towards it. By allowing “scribbling” we are setting a student up for autonomous, generative writing rather than just copying.

The Center for Literacy and Disabilities Studies offers [further information and resources on Alternative Pencils](#).

Using Remnant Books for Writing Topics

A remnant book is very similar to a scrapbook. The book contains tactile items, short explanations and/or pictures that represent experiences, activities, places, people, etc. that make up a student’s narrative. Remnants might include things like souvenir that were bought, an item from nature, a receipt from going somewhere, packaging from a toy. The remnant is placed in the book along with a picture (if possible) and a short explanation on a sticky note. The short explanation is just so the communication partner would have something to talk about. It is not meant to be “perfect writing”.

A remnant book is meant to be used to facilitate and encourage social interactions and conversations. The items in the book give a focus for the conversation and allows for the same type of “what I did last night” or “remember when” conversations that other students have regularly.

Using remnant books requires commitment from home and school as the idea is to ensure that a student’s stories are recorded so that they can be talked about at different times. Ultimately a remnant book should travel between home and school and be added to anytime there is a story worth sharing. Although it is nice to have a an actual physical article, it is not necessary every time.



The remnant book can be used either as a way to facilitate conversations or as a resource to pick topics to write about. When using it for writing, the student would choose a story that he/she wants to write about and then alternate pencils would be used to create a picture of writing related to that object. The advantage of having the topic is that when the student is done writing we are able to have a conversation about what they wrote the same way as we would have conversations with other emergent writers who came to us with a picture they drew and emergent writing (scribbling) under the picture and wanted to tell us what they “wrote”. In this way, students come to understand the process of writing in the context that makes sense because there is a purpose of

writing – to tell a story.

We watch closely for signs of connection during this process. If we see word approximations or even single letters related to the topic emerge, we talk about these with the student. At the same time, we do not interfere too much as we do not want to disrupt he process of writing. We do also at times demonstrate using the alternate pencil for our own writing – so we pick a topic and go through the process as a demonstration so that the student can see what we are doing in generating words.

Note: We also add to the remnant books ourselves when an activity happens at school that would be something that can be a story to share at another time. This opens up opportunities for “how was your day at school” conversations at home.

Picture of Photo Captions

Pictures and photographs can be used a topics for writing in the same way as the pages and topics from a student’s remnant book can be used. Photographs have the added motivational factor of being personalized. Pictures can be tied to any topic or just pictures of things that a student likes or enjoys. For a student who is included, topics the pictures or photos could be linked to vocabulary of the topic that is being studied in that class. Again, students are allowed to

generate their own writing using their alternate pencil and what they write is added as a caption. If these are topic books for curriculum areas, we do also put the typed word in and sometimes include a PEC representation, a written definition and/or put the pictures in a talking photo album (like the one pictured at the right) and record the word or the definition of the word. For personal choice topics that are more related to a student just writing a story of their choosing, we do not add in all of these things and let the final piece of writing stand as the student's writing.



We can also do this activity online by using [Quizlet](#) and making cards with images on and then having the student use an alternative pencil to caption those images.

Weekend Words

This one that we have not yet tried. I was introduced to it through the [Literacy for All Community of Practice](#) that we have been involved in for the past two years. The idea is for parents to send a list of 5-10 Weekend Words to school each Monday morning. The words are meant to represent the student's weekend activities, interactions, feelings...etc. When it is time to write, the words are used just like the Remnant Book items or the Photos and Picture Captions outlined above.

On a side note, there is an excellent opportunity for communication here too as the words could start a conversation using the students communication system and there may perhaps be a need for messages to go back and forth to get more clarity. We use [step-by-step communicators](#) with some of the students I work with for messages to go back and forth between home and school. We are currently working on ensuring that the messages that go home on these are more student-driven and this might be a good step in to that as in the conversation to figure out the weekend words we might discover together some more questions that we need to ask and then can work to figure out the details of those questions and record it so that the conversation can continue at home.

Writing Book for Tar Heel Reader

[Tar Heel Reader](#) is a "collection of free, easy-to-read, and accessible books on a wide range of topics. Each book can be speech enabled and accessed using multiple interfaces, including touch screens, IntelliKeys with custom overlays and 1 to 3 switches." Students may also write and publish their own books using picture from the huge collection at Flickr or pictures they upload. The books can be on any topic and are very easy to write.

When writing books for Tar Heel Reader we move away from using Alternative Pencils and use the student's communication system instead. This means we are generating either sentences word by word or the student is giving general ideas and we are putting them in to words or sentences. This is because whatever books we finish should go up in the public library although you do have the option to just permanently leave them in draft form.

Because books are so easy to produce on Tar Heel Reader it is a great place to make accessible reading-level appropriate books for students on any topic of their choice so books can be made related to curriculum content of general education classes. It is often hard to find the time to do this but if it is being done as a writing activity, the book then is stored publicly for any future students taking that same class to access as they need it.

Make Your Own Class Newspaper with news-2-you

We have been using [news-2-you](#) for three years now. I've posted about it several times on this blog before. This past year they added a new feature that allows you to interactively create your own symbol supported class newspaper that mirrors the format of the current events paper that you get each week if you subscribe. It uses a series of interactive screens with questions about what will go in to the news story. The process involves a lot of communicating, choice making, and thinking as to construct the news story you need to be able to come up with the details of the event you are writing about. Once you are finished answering the questions on the interactive pages, it prints off in newspaper format.



This is a great process as you can embed listening comprehension in to the process. We have started with the city newspaper, found a story that is interesting, read the story and then answered the questions, picking out the key details of the story, using the students communication system through the whole process.

Writing Cards Using P.O.D.D. Books (Could use any communication system or partner assisted scanning process)

Authentic writing tasks are always a hit... particularly if you send something out and something comes back! This is something we did very extensively three years ago when we were in a fully self-contained setting. Parents sent in a list of important dates throughout the year and we would spend time every couple of weeks making and writing cards and then mailing them out. It was embedded in to a personal calendar learning process. At that point we did not yet have P.O.D.D. communication books. Our communication approaches were much more restrictive and so we relied on students agreeing or disagreeing with what we believed should be on the cards.



The P.O.D.D. book offers a lot more extensive vocabulary and allows the student to be a lot more autonomous in generating the message. Again, because this is a card that will be sent to someone, we do, for the most part fill in the blanks between the words the student picks using his/her P.O.D.D. book. We also have moved towards buying a pack of multi-purpose cards and using

similar looking books that can be shared. For students working on partner assisted scanning there are countless opportunities for that throughout the creation of the story.



If using this for story writing, it is worth thinking about adding in a “planning” stage that is not so visually stimulating before writing the story. There are a lot of great interactive planning tools to do this on the [Read-Write-Think Website](#). This website has many other ideas for writing and communication. For example: [Bio-cubes](#), [Essay Map](#), or [Trading Card Creator](#).

First Author Writing Software

This is a new product and I have just started exploring the trial version that I got. It looks promising particularly as a way to have student doing work on content-specific curriculum with minimal time needed for set up. Because the video does such a great job of explaining it, I’m just going to include an outline from the website and the video...

From the Don Johnson Website: *“**First Author** is a software tools that supports beginning writes, especially those with special needs, across all phases of the writing process. as a computer-based writing environment it operates in parallel with exemplary models of writing instruction. First Author provides the writer with essential accommodations such as picture prompts, word banks, on-screen keyboard, auditory feedback and other tools to ensure a successful writing experience. It is accessible to all students, including those with severe speech and physical impairments.”*

Exploring the website I also found a document on [First Author Writing Measures](#) that hold a lot of potential as a writing assessment tool for this population of students.

Monica Braat is an Inclusion Facilitator for k-12 students with multiple complex needs. She also is a mom to an amazing Wii-loving 14 year old who, along with her students, reminds her of what really matters in life every single day. She is currently completing her Masters with a focus area of Neuroscience and Inclusive Education through the University of Lethbridge. You can follow her on [Twitter](#) or on her [blog](#).

- See more at: <http://www.thinkinclusive.us/what-does-writing-for-students-with-significant-disabilities-look-like/#sthash.DF8yTNM8.dpuf>