

Difficulties with Writing

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<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/misunderstoodminds/writingdiffs.html>

What Can Inhibit Writing Development?

Like all learning problems, difficulties in writing can be devastating to a child's education and self-esteem. As children progress through school, they are increasingly expected to express what they know about many different subjects through writing. If a child fails to develop certain basic skills, he will be unable to write with the speed and fluency required to excel as these demands increase. Indeed, for a child struggling with a writing problem, the writing process itself interferes with learning. Students faced with such difficult odds have trouble staying motivated.

Writing problems rarely occur in isolation, and improvements in writing go hand in hand with the development of other non-writing-specific skills. Thus, a problem with the development in one of these areas is likely to interfere with a child's progress as a writer.

In his book *Developmental Variation and Learning Disorders*, Dr. Mel Levine identifies the following neurodevelopmental problems and their potential impacts on writing.

Attention Problem

Children who struggle with attention may be inattentive and impulsive. An attention problem may manifest itself as:

- difficulty getting started on writing assignments
- easy distractibility during writing tasks
- mental fatigue or tiredness while writing
- inconsistent legibility in writing
- uneven writing tempo
- many careless errors
- poorly planned papers and reports

Spatial Ordering Problem

Children who struggle with spatial ordering have decreased awareness regarding the spatial arrangement of letters, words, or sentences on a page. A spatial ordering problem may manifest itself in a child's writing as:

- poor use of lines on the paper
- organizational problems
- uneven spacing between letters
- many misspelled words

Sequential Ordering Problem

Children who struggle with sequential ordering have difficulty putting or maintaining letters, processes, or ideas in order. A sequential ordering problem may manifest itself in a child's writing as:

- poor letter formation
- transposed letters and spelling omissions
- poor narrative sequencing
- lack of transitions

Memory Problem

Because so many writing processes need to be automatic, active working memory is critical. Children may have difficulty recalling spelling, grammar, and punctuation rules, accessing prior knowledge while writing, or organizing ideas. A memory problem may manifest itself in a child's writing as:

- poor vocabulary
- many misspelled words
- frequent capitalization, punctuation, and grammar errors

Language Problem

Good writing relies on a child's language abilities improving steadily over time. A language problem may manifest itself in a child's writing as:

- poor vocabulary
- awkward phrasing and unconventional grammar
- inappropriate use of colloquial language
- difficulty with sentence structure and word order
- trouble reading back what is written
- difficulty with word sounds, spelling, and meanings

Higher-Order Cognition Problem

Children who have difficulty with higher-order cognition are often unable to use writing to present a sound argument or convey sophisticated or abstract ideas. A higher-order cognition problem might manifest itself in a child's:

- trouble generating ideas or elaborating on them
- difficulty developing and organizing ideas
- lack of opinion or sense of audience
- difficulty with writing tasks that require creativity and/or critical thinking

Graphomotor Problem

Children with graphomotor problems struggle to coordinate the small muscles of the fingers in order to manoeuvre a pen or pencil, especially as assignment length increases. A child with a graphomotor problem might:

- write only very short passages
- write exceptionally slowly and with great effort
- use an awkward pencil grip
- lack fluidity in cursive writing
- find it hard to form letters

It's important to remember that many children and adolescents make mistakes or experience problems as part of the process of becoming better writers. They may reverse words, spell poorly, or have difficulty producing their thoughts in writing, or exhibit other of the signs above. As in any academic area, teachers and parents must watch carefully and try to understand an individual child's strengths and weaknesses to ensure progress. One way to monitor progress is through collecting a portfolio of a child's work over time. This may help in identifying a problem early on and developing effective strategies.