

I Hate to Write

TIPS FOR HELPING KIDS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER BECOME HAPPY, SUCCESSFUL WRITERS

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**Why is the writing process
so hard for kids with ASD?**

Let's look at a few of the skills
needed for writing:

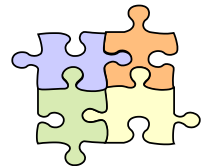
A few of the skills needed for writing:

- language skills
- Imitation skills
- Organization
- Problem solving
- Auditory and visual memory
- Sensory regulation
- Balance and Proprioception
- Gross motor control
- Fine motor control

Now let's look at a few of the skills that
are hard for kids with ASD:

Sound familiar?

- language skills
- Imitation skills
- Organization
- Problem solving
- Auditory and visual memory
- Sensory regulation
- Balance and Proprioception
- Gross motor control
- Fine motor control



Brain Research and autism: it's all about connections



**Writing skill: ability to imitate motor
movements. "Make your letters like this."**



The brains of individuals with ASD show
differences in the mirror neurons of the
parietal lobe. These are often referred to
as the 'monkey see / monkey do' neurons
– controlling a person's ability to imitate
motor movements.

Manzar Ashtari, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, J. Lindner Center for Autism, North Shore
Long Island Jewish Health System in Bethpage, NY, 2007



Writing skill: ability to remember how to form letters *“What do you mean you don’t remember how to make a ‘W’?”*

The brains of individuals with ASD have fewer neural connections between the cortex (new information) and the cerebellum (automatic, long term memory)

Stewart H. Mostofsky, Stephanie K. Powell, Daniel J. Simmonds, Melissa C. Goldberg, Brian Caffo, James J. Pekar, Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, 2009

Writing skill: ability to organize letters into words, words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, etc. *“This doesn’t make sense!”*



The brains of individuals with ASD have more white matter, but far fewer connections between sections of the brain, i.e., less organization

Dr. Martha Herbert, Harvard Medical School, Pediatric Neurologist at Massachusetts General Hospital, TRANSCEND Research Program

Stewart H. Mostofsky, Stephanie K. Powell, Daniel J. Simmonds, Melissa C. Goldberg, Brian Caffo and James J. Pekar

Writing skill: ability to process language *“Why didn’t you write down my directions for the assignment?”*



- The brains of individuals with high functioning ASD have more activation in Wernicke’s area and less activation in Broca’s area – the two primary language areas of the brain, resulting in poor information integration, even in those with strong language skills.

M.A. Just, Vladimir L. Cherkassky, Imoathy A. Keller, Nancy L. Minshew, Brain Journal of Neurology 2003

Stewart H. Mostofsky, Stephanie K. Powell, Daniel J. Simmonds, Melissa C. Goldberg, Brian Caffo and James J. Pekar

“BUT.....as a teacher, I’m required to help students meet academic standards in writing – whether they have ASD or not. HELP!!!?”



Writing challenges can be grouped into four main categories:

- Language
- Organization
- Sensory
- Motor



As teachers, we can help!

GETTING STARTED

Teacher Concern: “When I give him a writing assignment, he just sits there. Even when it’s an easy task, well within his ability, he seems to freeze.”

National Common Core Standard for Writing: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Getting started...

why it happens, and what a teacher can do to help

Consider the four main areas of difficulty:

- Language
- Organization
- Sensory
- Motor

'Getting started'...might be due to difficulty with motor planning.

"Even when I am highly motivated, and know what to do and how, I still don't do it. Instead, I sit and think about it or plan exactly what I am going to do in minute detail. I am stuck in inertia."

Scientifically, inertia appears to be a function of the neurological processes that control a person's ability to shift attention and plan voluntary motor movements. When a person has difficulty in these two areas, the result is often a tendency to stay still.

- **Try this...**

'Getting started'...might be due to sensory issues.

To help a student with autism break the cycle of inertia, we need to help him
WAKE UP HIS SYSTEM.

- **Try this...**

'Getting started'...might be due to difficulty with language.

Almost all individuals with autism, even those with very high abilities, have trouble understanding abstract concepts. They have difficulty with instructions such as, "Take out your journal and write about anything you are interested in," or "Write about your favorite season." In order to understand what you want them to write about, they need for the instructions to be very concrete.

Try this:

'Getting started'...might be due to difficulty with organization.

A simple graphic organizer can be a powerful tool to engage the student by visually guiding him through the writing process, helping him break out of the 'inertia' pattern.

Try this:

GETTING STUCK

Teacher Concern: "He gets stuck on an idea when he is writing. He likes to write about the same thing over and over. Sometimes he gets stuck on one little detail and can't make himself move on."

National Common Core Standard for Writing: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Getting stuck...

why it happens, and what a teacher can do to help

Consider the four main areas of difficulty:

- Language
- Organization
- Sensory
- Motor

'Getting stuck'...might be due to difficulty with language

- **Language / Concrete thinking:** Most individuals with ASD are very concrete in their thinking. Imagination and creative thought are areas of weakness. This difficulty with imagination makes it hard to come up with new ideas.
- **Try this...**

"Getting stuck"...might be due to difficulty with organization.

- **Organization / Perseverative thought:** Perseveration, or the tendency to repeat an idea or action over and over, is one of the common traits of autism. In the writing process, this tendency makes it a challenge to transition from one idea or sentence to the next.
- **Try this:**

"Getting stuck"...might be due to difficulty with sensory issues.

- **Sensory / Perfectionism:** Students with ASD are often perfectionists. They may spend lots of time erasing or correcting work that isn't perfect to their way of thinking. They often become anxious or angry if their work doesn't look right to them.
- **Try this:**

'Getting stuck'...might be due to difficulty with motor skills.

- **Gross and fine motor skills:** Holding a pencil can actually be painful for a person with autism. When that discomfort is added to the challenge of coordinating all the muscle groups needed to write, students often give up or melt down.
- **Try this...**

"Getting Stuck" might be due to challenges with Motor Skills

- A pencil grip may help. Try practicing for short periods in order for the student to "give it a try" and avoid frustration
- Offer a variety of tools
- Try taking turns with the physical component of writing, you write a sentence and then he writes a sentence
- Dictation/ After dictation the student recopies or types what he has dictated to you
- Try using a portable word processor

KNOWING WHAT TO WRITE

Teacher Concern: *“He has good ideas, but when it is time to write he can’t think of anything to say.”*

National Common Core Academic Standards for Writing: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

Difficulty knowing what to write...

why it happens, and what a teacher can do to help

Consider the four main areas of difficulty:

- Language
- Organization
- Sensory
- Motor

Difficulty knowing what to write might be due to difficulty with organization

Sequential thought is often a big challenge for students with ASD. Just as they have difficulty organizing their supplies, they also have trouble organizing thoughts into logical sequence and order.

- **Try this...**

Difficulty with “knowing what to write” might be due to sensory needs.

There is a strong link between the vestibular system and the language areas of the brain. The vestibular system is activated by MOVEMENT.

- **Try this...**

MISUNDERSTANDING THE DIRECTIONS

Teacher Concern: *“He seems to be listening, but sometimes he completely misunderstands the assignment.”*

National Common Core Standard for Writing: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

Misunderstanding the directions might be due to difficulty with language

Literal thinking: This common trait is often the source of misunderstanding for students with ASD. For example:

Teacher direction: *“For tonight’s homework, write down what you will be doing your science project on.”*

Student response: *“I will do it on poster board”*

- **Try this...**

'Misunderstanding the directions' might be due to sensory issues

It is more difficult for individuals with ASD to process language when they are in a large group setting. The student may go into survival mode as he works to filter out the sensory stimuli in the room. He may not be fully 'tuned in' to the teacher's voice, and may then miss important parts of the instructions.

• **Try this...**

ORGANIZING WORDS INTO SENTENCES

Teacher Concern: "He can't organize his words into a logical sentence. His sentences just don't make sense!"

National Common Core Academic Standards for Writing:

Produce, expand, and rearrange complete simple and compound sentences

'Difficulty organizing words into sentences' might be due to difficulty with language

Students with autism often have trouble perceiving words as separate units. To a person with ASD, a sentence sounds like one long, continuous word. The person may have a good understanding of each word in the sentence, but when the words are put together into sentences, the meaning may be lost.

• **Try this...**

"Difficulty organizing words into sentences" might be due to difficulty with organization.

Even the students with high abilities and strong vocabularies often have trouble perceiving words as separate units. They will need visual supports to help learn this skill.

• **Try this...**

WRITING COMPLETE SENTENCES

Teacher Concern: "He writes in sentence fragments – usually all nouns."

National Common Core Standards for Speaking and Listening:

Produce complete sentences when appropriate to task and situation in order to provide requested detail or clarification.

'Difficulty writing complete sentences' might be due to challenges with organization.

Most individuals with autism struggle with creative thought, auditory memory, organization, and language processing. When we say, **"Make up a sentence with this word,"** we are really asking the student to:

- Think of a sentence (creative thought)
- Remember it long enough to get it all on paper (auditory memory)
- Write it (organization and fine motor)
- Read / revise it (language processing)
- To teach students to write in complete sentences, we may need to break the task down.

• **Try this...**

'Difficulty writing complete sentences might be due to challenges with language.

'A picture is worth a thousand words.' For a struggling writer, a picture and a few key words will help get the sentence flowing.

- **Try this...**

WRITING THE BARE MINIMUM

Teacher Concern: "His sentences are so brief! He doesn't develop his ideas."

National Common Core Academic Standards for Writing:

: Develop the topic with relevant, well-chosen facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples.

'Writing the bare minimum might be due to challenges with language.

Most students with autism have restricted areas of intense interest. USE THESE INTERESTS as topics for writing assignments.

- **Try this...**

'Writing the bare minimum might be due to challenges with organization.

Students with autism will do much better both behaviorally and with written output if they know EXACTLY what the teacher wants them to do. Provide the student with a visual support that lists: What do I do, how much do I do, and what do I do when I am finished. Be very precise.

- **Try this...**

"Writing the bare minimum" might be due to sensory challenges

- If a student is challenged with sensory regulation it will be very difficult for the student to focus and produce their personal best work
- Play detective what does his behavior tell you?
- Does he appear tired, lethargic?
- Or is he having difficulty even just sitting in a chair?

- **Try this**

ORGANIZING A PARAGRAPH

Teacher Concern: "There is no 'flow' to his paragraphs. They either look like one long, run-on sentence, or they look like a laundry list of facts."

National Common Core Academic Standards for Writing:

Use linking words and phrases (e.g., because, therefore, since, for example) to connect opinion and reasons or to connect ideas within categories of information (e.g., also, another, and, more, but)

“Organizing a Paragraph”
Why it is difficult and what a teacher can do to help



- Students with ASD have difficulty with organization at all levels
- The act of writing requires organization at many levels even before the student begins to attack the assignment of writing a paragraph.
- First he must organize the tools needed for writing. Next he must organize his ideas into a cohesive thought. Then he must organize sounds into words, and words into sentences.

“Organizing a paragraph” might be more challenged due to motor needs

- Think about what you are trying to teach the student. If your goal is to teach organizing sentences into paragraphs, you may need to reduce the motor demands.
- Writing the sentences may be so frustrating for students with ASD that they give up before they ever reach the organization stage. Have someone else type the sentences.
- Then have the student cut and paste (either by hand or using a keyboard) the sentences into an organized paragraph.

“Organizing a paragraph”
may be further challenged due to sensory needs

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- Whispering in the class, subtle sounds of pencil on paper and noises that others may be able to filter out, may further complicate the task of learning how to organize his thoughts.
- Visual sensitivities can also greatly impact concentration: fluorescent lighting, too many lines
- **Try This:**

WRITING ILLEGIBLY

Teacher Concern: “His writing is horrible! I can’t read it. The words are large, and they all run together. It’s just not legible.”

National Common Core Academic Standards for Writing:

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

“Writing Illegibly”
Why it may be difficult and what a teacher can do to help



- Students with an ASD are frequently challenged with many of the components that are needed for functional handwriting:
 Sensory processing, neuromuscular: muscle tone, strength, postural control, motor skills involving being able to cross the midline, bilateral integration and motor planning, poor fine motor coordination, poor visual perception as well as cognitive components.

WRITING AND EDITING

Teacher Concern: “When I ask him to edit and revise his work, he just looks at it, but he doesn’t make any changes.”

National Common Core Academic Standards for Writing:

With guidance and support from adults and peers, focus on a topic and strengthen writing as needed by revising and editing.

WRITING AND EDITING - Organization

Individuals with autism tend to be 'one track thinkers'. Their brains usually focus intensely on one thing at a time. When we ask a student to edit his work, we are asking him to consider MANY things – content as well as structure. Students will be much more successful if we give them a scaffold.

Try this:

WRITING AND EDITING - Language

“Rigidity of thought” has long been considered one of the ‘soft signs’ of autism. People with autism tend to think that their way is the only way. Editing and revising their written work is both difficult and *irritating!*

Try this:

WRITING A LAB REPORT

Teacher Concern: *“He likes doing the science projects, but he hates writing the lab reports.”*

National Core Academic Standards for Writing – Science / Technical:

Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.

WRITING A LAB REPORT- Language and Organization

Students with high functioning autism or Asperger Syndrome often thrive in the hands on, multisensory world of science. These students are often very precise and detail oriented. They gravitate to the factual nature of the scientific experiment. For students with ASD, the ‘doing’ of the Scientific Method comes naturally. The ‘writing’ of the Scientific Method does not. Even the most gifted students with ASD will be more successful with this task if the steps are broken down, visual supports are provided, and very specific timelines / due dates are established.

Try this:

WRITING A LAB REPORT- Language and Organization

Break the writing requirements of the lab report down into distinct chunks. Assign one step of the Scientific Method at a time. Use a separate piece of paper for each step of the Scientific Method. Allow the student with ASD to focus on just that one aspect of the Method until he has completed that step. Require the student to turn in each segment of the Lab Report as soon as it is completed.

Adding simple pictures as visual cues will help many students understand the directions more easily. HOWEVER, be sensitive to the age and social expectations of the student. Don't make the student's assignment look very different from peers'.

Here is a sample template, built for teaching the Scientific Method: