



Enabling Strategies in the Postsecondary  
Composition Classroom

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## 1. Overview

New composition teachers have a tough audience: college freshmen. They are, almost to an individual, beginning writers who do not consider themselves to *be* writers—only students who, more often than not, would rather be elsewhere. Many of them have been inadvertently trained to think of writing as difficult, or even as nonessential to their own plans for their futures. Used to television, movies, and action-filled video games, they may not have developed the patience to have an immediately positive reaction to composition.

Granted, most composition classrooms are much less bleak than the preceding paragraph might suggest. Student motivation and enthusiasm do exist, and some freshman papers are a pleasure to read. Nonetheless, the students writing those papers are frequently trying to adapt to college life for the first time. Composition can be a hard sell, especially to traditional freshmen who believe they haven't experienced anything about which they may write.

The basic composition classroom is a strange set of shifting, unstable circumstances and personalities, but very often the domain of our newest teachers. To basic composition classrooms go the part-timers with barely-dry Master's degrees, and the ubiquitous Graduate Assistants. Although these instructors are usually intelligent and dedicated, it is unquestionable that one of the trickiest tasks in higher education is commonly undertaken by the least experienced educators.

A learning disability, then, only further complicates an already complex situation.

Very few of these new teachers come from special education backgrounds. Some of them may have no formal training in education at all. So what happens when a student with a learning disability enters the classroom?

## 2. No Need for Alarm

In the increasingly likely event that a composition teacher with no grounding in special education encounters a student with a mild or moderate learning disability in his or her classroom, the news is not grim at all. There are lots of ways to assist students with learning disabilities, many of which will already be familiar to teachers of writing because they are the same techniques used to teach any composition student, with minor modifications.

In addition to teaching strategies, which may be employed to aid any struggling student, assistive technology may be useful to some students with specific learning disabilities: these may be either hardware or software. For example, Maag Library maintains several adaptive technology workstations on the fourth floor. There, students have access to JAWS 4.0, Zoom Text, and Open Book—details about these programs are included in Appendix 1.

Most universities now have a Disability Services department. Over the past twelve years educators at all levels, parents, and the students themselves have grown increasingly active in seeking not only minimal legal compliance from colleges and universities, but truly equal learning environments. As a result of encouraged self-advocacy, many students with learning or other disabilities know what they need and can speak for themselves. However, any college instructor would be well advised to seek a basic familiarity with his or her institution's

equivalent of Disability Services, both to better serve all students and to insure his or her own compliance with the law. For contact information for Disability Services at Youngstown State University, see Appendix 1.

The information above may lead some instructors to believe that it is their responsibility to make certain that students with learning disabilities receive all of the aid to which they are entitled. This is not quite true. Institutions are not required by any existing legislation to lower standards. Nor is it the responsibility of the instructor, or even the university, to seek out or diagnose students with learning disabilities. In fact, according to Caryl Sills, privacy laws proscribe asking a student directly whether he or she has a learning disability. What this essentially means is that the learning-disabled student, identified or not, bears the responsibility for his or her own success as an adult at the university level.

In her legal overview for students moving on after high school, Patricia Latham gives the following advice:

You need to disclose your disability to the college, request specific accommodations, and supply supporting professional documentation. In public school, the school system has a duty to identify students with disabilities. This is not so in college. The student has the responsibility to disclose the disability and to request accommodations. You must be specific about the accommodations that you need because of your disability. It is not enough to say that you have learning disabilities, so the college must help you.

### 3. Background

One of the biggest challenges facing instructors in the special education field at any level is the comparatively recent emergence of solid research. The current movement had its genesis in 1974, with the Education For All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142). This law was later renamed the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act. It required the mainstreaming of students with disabilities into regular classrooms, and implemented Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for them.

A later law, the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act of 1990—also known as IDEA—includes provisions for children aged 3-21 who have a variety of handicaps. IDEA protects children who have been determined by a multidisciplinary team to have one or more of the following disabilities: autism, deafness, deaf-blindness, hearing impairments, mental retardation, orthopedic impairments, serious emotional disturbance, specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment.

It is significant that IDEA provides for children until age 21, when they are legally adults and old enough to have nearly finished a college education, at least by the traditional educational model. Until relatively recently, most students with learning disabilities probably elected not to pursue higher education. According to Sheryl Day and Barbara Edwards, this is no longer the case. In the *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, they write “As a result of being placed in least restrictive environments, many students with disabilities have taken sufficient academic coursework prerequisite to attending college.”

This is, of course, the place where special education and the teaching of writing crash headlong into one another. Whether or not it is “politically correct” to admit, many beginning composition teachers have some degree of apprehension about encountering a disabled student among the merely under-prepared ones about whom the members of our profession collectively complain and joke. With any luck, such a student will enter the classroom with a recently prepared IEP at the ready; if diagnostic essays and classroom performance reveal the possibility of an unidentified disability, there are two courses of action open to the instructor and are best pursued concurrently. The first is to ask for advisement from Disability Services; the second is to ask the student some indirect questions, such as “Has reading always been a big problem for you?” or “Have you ever seen a writing tutor?” Sills writes that “Even though they have been identified as learning disabled, some students will be unwilling to admit their condition to the instructor.” She goes on to suggest that asking these questions in a supportive, discreet way might lead the student to disclose his or her disability and employ the accommodations offered by the university.

It is important to note that Disability Services cannot diagnose learning disabilities any more than most composition instructors can: what Disability Services *can* do is guide the student to a consultation with a qualified psychologist.

#### 4. Students with Learning Disabilities at Youngstown State University

The diagnostic essay sample many composition instructors collect on the first day or in the first week of the term aids in identifying those students who might have difficulty completing the course. Some of these students so identified might

have registered for the course in error; others might have learning disabilities, either diagnosed or undiagnosed. Students whose disabilities have been diagnosed and documented will fall into two categories: those who know about the help available from Disability Services, and those who do not. As previously mentioned, some students from any of these groups may be unwilling to disclose a learning disability or suspected learning disability.

Students who are both aware of the availability and type of help they need *and* fully committed to their studies are likely to inform the instructor of their needs. The short, brutal summation is that we are concerned mainly with students who have willingly disclosed their identified, thoroughly documented disabilities to us. We as teachers are constrained by law and lack of training from doing very much for the others.

So—one of these hypothetical students should, on the first day of class, furnish the teacher with documents describing, in some detail, the accommodations to which he or she is entitled. One such document might be an IEP. The 12<sup>th</sup> grade IEP for John K. is appended to illustrate what an IEP is, and what information it may provide.

For those students unfamiliar with Disability Services, the instructor should include this information in his or her syllabus. The standard departmental syllabus includes the telephone number, building, and room number for Disability Services, but some students may not have read this document in full before the term begins. Subsequent reminders for latecomers may help a reluctant student, and certainly do no harm.

Regardless of how these students arrive in the classroom, what remains to be addressed is how to help them learn to write once they get there. The research indicates several approaches to instruction for students with dysgraphia, among several other disabilities that will have an effect on the student's ability for written discourse.

Gaskins (1995), who attended a seminar at Landmark College in Putney, Vermont found that college's method to "rely...in most respects on what is already known about the teaching of writing." Gaskins broke the principles into ten parts that should be familiar to most of us who teach writing. He stresses the exploitation of "the inter-relatedness of reading, writing, speaking, and listening."

## 5. Getting Started: John K. Has Dysgraphia

John has entered his first composition class at Youngstown State, at the 1550 level. He has had an Individualized Education Plan since third grade. Ordinarily, children disabilities are screened much sooner, but John is sufficiently bright that he was able to compensate for his weaknesses—he has some difficulty reading, but his high-order math skills may have contributed to his teachers' failure to notice his reading disability. He also has good social skills, which further aided him in compensating for his difficulties.

In fact, John is probably gifted as well as well as having a learning disability. In an article reproduced on the Learning Disabilities OnLine website, Susan Baum writes that "Recent advances in both fields have alerted professionals to the possibility that both sets of behavior can exist simultaneously. . . . Children who are

both gifted and learning disabled exhibit remarkable talents or strengths in some areas and disabling weaknesses in others.”

She goes on to group such students into three categories: gifted students with subtle learning disabilities, students whose gifts and disabilities “cancel out” so that the student appears to be average, and gifted students with identified learning disabilities. John K. falls into the last category because his IEP team—himself, his parents, and (in his last year of high school) his senior English teacher—has been working with a disability identified years before.

## 6. In the Classroom: *Your Classroom*

One of the most valuable concepts embedded in the Landmark Method may be “micro-units.” Jacob Gaskins quotes the Landmark Institute handbook: “Break written assignments into stages and assess and respond to each stage (e.g., give feedback or assess students’ brainstorm, outlines, etc.)”

In practice, this may mean a more regimented, regulated approach to an essay assignment than some teachers have used previously. However, since one notorious pitfall for college students has always been procrastination, this regulation is useful. Although any student might benefit from the use of a chart like the one in Appendix 3; for the college student with a learning disability it is necessary.

What this means in practical terms is that an assignment like the one in Week 5 of the sample course schedule, the first formal essay, might be divided like this:



February 12<sup>th</sup> – First Formal Essay Assigned

In this course, February 12<sup>th</sup> is a computer lab day. The students and instructor will discuss the essay requirements and do a brainstorming exercise in class. John, unlike the other students, will turn his brainstorming work in for comments. He could turn it in at the end of class, or on the next day the class meets, February 14<sup>th</sup>. Allowing John to keep and continue to work with his ideas may be helpful. This brainstorming sheet should not be graded and is intended to be a low-threat requirement. John should be made aware that it will not detract from his grade but will allow his instructor to guide his writing process.



#### February 14<sup>th</sup> – In-Class Topic Workshop

On this date the class will discuss potential topics, guided by the instructor. Students might be asked to take notes on their own topic ideas as well as those mentioned by other students. John might be asked to submit a photocopy of his class notes for comment. Again, these class notes should not be graded, but should be given comments. If John uses a scribe to take notes for him, this is less important. In the latter case, it might prove helpful if the instructor pointed out any particularly interesting or useful parts.



### February 17<sup>th</sup> – In-Class Mind Mapping and Clustering

As before, John should receive comments on his exercises.

Mind mapping has the advantages of being easy to use and adapt to different learning styles. Mind maps are non-linear, so order is less important. The student may include pictures; traditional outlining does not allow this sort of expansion or innovation.



### February 28<sup>th</sup> – Scheduled Peer Review

For this class, students should bring their drafts and an Author's Note. The instructor will have explained to the students that the Author's Note should contain requests for peer reviewers to pay special attention to certain things, and that putting certain aspects of the draft "off-limits" is acceptable. Again, John should get comments on his Author's Note.



### March 7<sup>th</sup> – Formal Essay Due Date

If extra time on assignments is one of the accommodations listed on John's documentation, then his paper will be collected at a later time.

## 7. Conclusion

Although it is not the responsibility of a composition teacher to identify learning disabilities in his or her students, or to redesign an entire course around any particular student, there are adjustments to the usual process-oriented approach to composition pedagogies that are relatively easy to make. In the main, these adjustments simply require the emplacement of more checkpoints during the course of an assignment. Certain techniques, such as mind mapping and clustering, are beneficial to most beginning writers, but are of special importance to students with less organizational prowess.

The greatest service a composition teacher can probably provide is an awareness of different learning styles, and vary the classroom approach accordingly to use more of these pathways. Such variation, while of particular value to students with learning disabilities, will not hurt the other students—and will almost certainly help keep their interest in the class high. The de-emphasis on lecture in recent composition pedagogy has only helped make the subject less boring to students, and the process approach fits in very well with special education theory regarding the difficulties many students with learning disabilities have with processing information. Less lecture time only helps these students.

The emergence of the process-centered approach has, despite the fact that most composition teachers lack a formal grounding in special education, made this lack less important in those instances where a non-specialist encounters a special student.

Concentration on the writing process is, in a way, the answer to most questions arising from the presence of students with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms—what helps one student may very well help them all.

## Works Cited

Baum, Susan. Gifted but Learning Disabled: A Puzzling Paradox. 1990. LD Online.

Available: [http://www.ldonline.org/ld\\_indepth/gt\\_ld/eric\\_digest479.html](http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/gt_ld/eric_digest479.html).

November 29 2002.

Day, Sheryl and Barbara Edwards. "Assistive Technology for Postsecondary Students with Learning Disabilities." Journal of Learning Disabilities 29.5

(1996): 486-92, 503.

Gaskins, Jacob. "Teaching Writing to Students with Learning Disabilities."

Teaching English in the Two-Year College 22.2 (19 95): 116-22.

Latham, Patricia. Learning Disabilities and the Law after High School: An Overview for Students. LD Online. Available:

[http://www.ldonline.org/ld\\_indepth/legal\\_legislative/latham\\_ld.html](http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/legal_legislative/latham_ld.html). 29

November 2002.

Sills, Caryl. "Success for Learning Disabled Writers across the Curriculum."

College Teaching 43.2 (1995): 66-71.

## Appendix 1 - Disability Services at Youngstown State University

### **Mission Statement:**

Disability Services provides a range of accommodations for students with documented disabilities to enable them to reach their full potential in post-secondary education while attending Youngstown State University.

### **Confidentiality:**

Federal law protects a student's right to privacy. All information and records that students, parents/guardians and other offices submitted to Disability Services will be treated as confidential. No information will be released about a specific student's disability unless the student expressly gives his/her written permission to do so. This information is maintained in locked, confidential files in the Disability Services office and is not included in the student's permanent university record.

### **Disability Services**

Youngstown State University  
Beeghly Hall, Room 3310  
Youngstown, OH 44555

Voice: 330.941.1372  
TDD : 330.941.1564  
Fax : 330.941.7470

**Jain Savage, Coordinator:** [jasavage@cc.yzu.edu](mailto:jasavage@cc.yzu.edu)

Office Hours:

8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. Fall and Spring semesters

8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. Summer semester

(Voice mail available after hours)

### **AVAILABLE SERVICES**

**Services for students with documented disabilities may include but are not limited to the following:**

\*Early registration

\*Testing and classroom accommodations

\*Escort Services available on campus

- \*Limited loan of adaptive equipment
- \*Books on tape
- \*Interpreters/court reporters for the hearing impaired
- \*Advocacy
- \*Information, referral, and awareness services
- \*Liaison with YSU departments and local agencies
- \*Cushwa Hall Lounge for students with severe disabilities
- \*Adaptive technology computer work stations, which contain programs such as JAWS 4.0, Open Book and Zoom Text, are available on the fourth floor of the Maag Library at YSU.

JAWS 4.0 is a screen reader; Open Book is a language-learning program; Zoom Text is a screen-magnification utility. Computer lab hours are as follow:

	Regular Hours	Finals Week Hours	Break Hours
Monday-Thursday	7:30am-9:45pm	7:00am-9:45pm	8:00am-4:45pm
Friday	7:30am-4:45pm	7:00am-4:45pm	8:00am-4:45pm
Saturday	9:00am-4:45pm	9:00am-4:45pm	Closed
Sunday	1:00pm-8:45pm	1:00pm-8:45pm	Closed

*Each student is assisted on an individual basis. The services provided are matched with each student's needs.*

The Disability Services website also contains information regarding the rights and responsibilities of students with disabilities, YSU's Code of Student Rights, Responsibilities, & Conduct, and self-advocacy.

The site features other documents in Adobe PDF format.

Most of the information in Appendix 1 was taken directly from the Disability Services website at <http://www.yzu.edu/services/disabilityservices/index.htm>.

Other information, such as the lab hours for Maag Library, was obtained from the library website at <http://www.maag.yzu.edu/lab/labhome.html>.

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## Appendix 2 – Annotated Bibliography

Day, Sheryl and Barbara Edwards. "Assistive Technology for Postsecondary Students with Learning Disabilities." Journal of Learning Disabilities 29.5 (1996): 486-92, 503.

This article is useful because it reports in-depth on legal and effectiveness issues relating to assistive technology, and discusses ways to use technology effectively to help LD students. It has a section devoted to technology in the post-secondary classroom.

Gaskins, Jacob. "Teaching Writing to Students with Learning Disabilities." Teaching English in the Two-Year College 22.2 (1995): 116-22.

Landmark College was founded in 1985 and as of 1995 was the only college serving students with LD and dyslexia exclusively. The author of this article attended a week-long training program to study Landmark's methods of teaching writing to students with learning disabilities.

Graham, Steve, Karen Harris, and Lynn Larsen. "Prevention and Intervention of Writing Difficulties for Students with Learning Disabilities." Learning Disabilities Research & Practice 16.2 (2001): 74-84.

*Abstract. Many students with LD experience difficulties mastering the process of writing. We examine how schools can help these children become skilled writers. Six principles designed to prevent as well as alleviate writing difficulties are presented. These include providing effective writing instruction, tailoring writing instruction to meet each child 's needs, intervening early to provide additional assistance, expecting that each child will learn to write, identifying and addressing academic and nonacademic roadblocks to writing, and deploying technological tools that improve writing performance.*

The article is focused on younger students, but contains a few useful tables of strategies for writing instruction, and some extremely useful information regarding LD students and their word processing tendencies.

Isaacson, Stephen and Mary Gleason. Mechanical Obstacles to Writing: What Can Teachers Do to Help Students with Learning Problems? 1997. LD Online. Available:  
<[http://www.ldonline.org/ld\\_indepth/writing/isaacson\\_obstacles.html](http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/writing/isaacson_obstacles.html)>. October 12 2002.

The article contains eight methods for overcoming mechanical obstacles to composition. All seem useful for application in secondary and middle school students, but three of them (use of word processors, dictation, and self-checking) appear to have potential for use in college classrooms. The article discusses the relative merits of each technique.

Jones, Megan. Providing a Quality Accommodated Experience in Preparation for and During Post-Secondary School. 09/26/2002 2002. website. National Center on Secondary Education and Transition. Available: <<http://www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id=198>>. October 12 2002.

The article is a single case study of a blind university freshman, 18 years old, who was mainstreamed in high school with support from a special resource teacher. It outlines challenges inherent in secondary and post-secondary environments, and suggest possible steps for parents, students, teachers, and administrators who want to provide a quality educational experience for students who require extra accommodation—as opposed to simple compliance with federal and state mandates.

Long, Cynthia. “Opportunities Made Equal: Accommodating Students with Learning Disabilities.” Academe 83.3 (1997): 48-51.

This article is very intriguing—it’s especially useful and interesting for its vivid conceptual explanations of ADHD and dyslexia, and discusses students who are both gifted and have learning disabilities. Learning disabled students who make it as far as a university classroom may very well be gifted in other respects, and needful only of strategies to help them cope with their disabilities.

Richards, Regina. Strategies for Dealing with Dysgraphia. 1999. LD Online. Available: <[http://www.ldonline.org/ld\\_indepth/writing/dysgraphia\\_strategies.html](http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/writing/dysgraphia_strategies.html)>. October 12 2002.

Aimed at younger children whose writing takes place mainly on paper and with a pencil or pen, the article contains strategies with specific application to in-class writing, including freewriting, quizzes, or drafting in a non-lab environment.

---. Strategies for the Reluctant Writer. 2002. LD Online. Available: <[http://www.ldonline.org/ld\\_indepth/writing/reluctant\\_writer.html](http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/writing/reluctant_writer.html)>. October 12 2002.

The article discusses reasons why students are reluctant to write, from various learning disabilities to boredom, or simple lack of interest in the topic. Richardson analyzes the subskills of effective writing, and lays out practical strategies for internalizing them. Techniques include “mind mapping” and mnemonics for editing.

---. Understanding Why Students Avoid Writing. 1999. LD Online. Available:

<[http://www.ldonline.org/ld\\_indepth/writing/richards\\_avoidwrtg.html](http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/writing/richards_avoidwrtg.html)>.  
October 12 2002.

The article provides some explanations for possible reasons students dislike writing. It relates to the previous article about coping strategies for students with dysgraphia and their teachers.

Schnapp, Linda. Writing Success for the Postsecondary Student with Learning Disabilities. NADE Online. Available:  
<http://www.nade.net/documents/SCP97/SCP97.16.pdf>. November 15 2002.

Taylor, Ronald. Assessment of Exceptional Students: Educational and Psychological Procedures. Fifth ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000.

Chapter Seven and Chapter Fifteen are detailed analyses of Portfolio Assessment and Assessment of Written Expression, respectively. Both should be of value for this project, but Chapter Seven is of particular interest since portfolio grading systems are a major part of current composition theory.

Turnbull, H. Rutherford III and Ann Turnbull. Free Appropriate Public Education. Sixth ed. Denver: Love Publishing Company, 2000.

The book contains legal particulars of the most recent developments in legislation governing the education of students with disabilities. It includes pre-1997 regulations and changes to the law with the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA.



## Appendix 4 – Sample Course Schedule

Text: *Literacies: Reading, Writing, Interpretation*

Week 1	13 JAN 03	Brief Introduction / Partner Interviews
	15 JAN 03	Lab: Letter of Introduction Assignment
	17 JAN 03	Angelou, “Mary” (3) Quiz 1
Week 2	20 JAN 03	No Class - Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday
	22 JAN 03	Lab: Letter of Introduction due at end of class
	24 JAN 03	Debate – Fairness in “Mary” & <b>Narrative Essay Assigned</b>
Week 3	27 JAN 03	Topic Workshop for Narrative Essay
	29 JAN 03	Lab: Work on Narrative Essay drafts
	31 JAN 03	Garson, “McDonald’s-We Do It All for You” (251) Quiz 2
Week 4	03 FEB 03	Narrative Essay Draft - Peer Review
	05 FEB 03	Lab: <b>Narrative Essay Due End of Class</b>
	07 FEB 03	Pollit, “Marooned on Gilligan’s Island” (399) Quiz 3

Week 5	10 FEB 03	Debate – Stereotypes of Men and Women
	12 FEB 03	Lab: <b>First Formal Essay Assigned</b>
	14 FEB 03	First Formal Essay - Topic Workshop
Week 6	17 FEB 03	Topic Development – Mind Mapping and Clustering
	19 FEB 03	Lab: Work on drafts; help as necessary
	21 FEB 03	Draft Conferences - Day 1
Week 7	24 FEB 03	Draft Conferences - Day 2
	26 FEB 03	Lab: Editing workshop
	28 FEB 03	<b>Peer Review - Bring 3 copies of draft</b>
Week 8	03 MAR 03	Handbook Exercises
	05 MAR 03	Lab: Last Ditch Effort Guided Editing Workshop
	07 MAR 03	<b>First Formal Essay Due - Midterm Portfolio Due</b>

## Appendix 5 – Webliography

### Learning Disabilities Online

<http://www.ldonline.org/>

### Grand Valley State University Faculty Guide

<http://www.gvsu.edu/oas/facultyhandbook/facultystaffguide.pdf>

### Learning Assistance Center at Southern Maine Technical College

<http://lac.smtc.net/Index.htm>

### NC State University Guide for Students with Learning Disabilities

[http://www.ncsu.edu/equal\\_op/dss/desk\\_ref/types.html](http://www.ncsu.edu/equal_op/dss/desk_ref/types.html)

### Landmark College

<http://www.landmarkcollege.org/natlinst/edservs/online/courses/writing.html>

### Teaching LD

<http://www.dldcec.org/>