A Collaborative Approach to Supporting the Written Expression Needs of Students with Specific Learning Disabilities

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Decades of research have identified effective strategies for improving the written expression skills of students with specific learning disabilities (SLD; Datchuk et al., 2020; Gillespie & Graham, 2014; Kokkali & Antoniou, 2024) yet translating these evidence-based practices into daily classroom instruction remains a persistent challenge. For students with SLD, written expression difficulties often reflect underlying linguistic and cognitive weaknesses that require coordinated, comprehensive intervention. Both the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) emphasize interdisciplinary collaboration as essential for addressing these needs. Within frameworks such as multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) and individualized education programs (IEPs), speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and special education teachers are uniquely positioned to integrate language, literacy, and writing instruction. This paper bridges research and practice by highlighting evidence-based strategies for written expression intervention, presenting collaborative models between SLPs and special educators, and offering practical tools to support effective implementation in school settings.

Written Expression Needs of Students with Learning Disabilities

Students with SLD often present with needs in several areas of literacy, including written expression. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5) defines Specific Learning Disorder – written language, as a disorder characterized by difficulties in writing skills—including spelling, grammar, organization, and clarity—that are unexpected based on cognitive abilities and provided instruction (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

Indeed, research suggests that students with SLD evidence greater challenges in written expression compared to non-disabled peers, including in the areas of writing quantity and quality, organization, vocabulary, sentence fluency, grammatical and spelling conventions, handwriting, use of genre elements, and motivation and self-efficacy (Graham et al., 2017; Troia, 2021). These students lack the strategic awareness of typically achieving writers, may fail to fully understand the expectations of a writing assignment and the planning required to complete it, struggle with text production skills (e.g., sentence fluency and variety, handwriting, spelling, and grammar/syntax), and subsequently engage in a process known as 'knowledge telling' where they write everything they know about a topic without regard to planning, organization, structure, and clarity (Gillespie & Graham, 2014; Graham et al., 2017; Santangelo, 2014).

Moreover, writing development is closely linked to both oral language and reading (Kokkali & Antoniou, 2024; Shanahan, 2019), as all three modalities are grounded in shared linguistic (e.g., phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, vocabulary), cognitive (e.g., automatic retrieval of letter names and sounds), and executive functions (e.g., working memory, self-regulatory behaviors). This interdependence underscores the importance of integrated language and literacy instruction for students with SLD as it builds bridges for communication by enhancing the ability to communicate and write, supporting cognitive and language

development, and fostering academic and post-secondary success, all while building confidence and independence (Archibald, 2017; ASHA, n.d.; Shanahan, 2019).

Supporting the Written Expression Needs of Students with SLD in the Classroom

Supporting students with SLD in written expression involves a combination of structured teaching, targeted interventions, and interprofessional collaboration. Interprofessional collaboration between special educators and SLPs is essential for addressing the complex written expression needs of students with SLD. This partnership enables the co-development of integrated and functional IEP goals that reflect shared priorities in both language and literacy domains. By working together to assess, plan, and implement evidence-based interventions, professionals can create cohesive strategies that target foundational language skills (e.g., morphology, syntax, vocabulary) alongside writing process elements such as planning, organization, and revision.

To further enhance access and engagement, teams can incorporate assistive technology solutions—such as speech-to-text tools—to support students with transcription difficulties and text-to-speech software to aid in self-editing and revision. These tools not only reduce the cognitive load during writing tasks but also promote greater independence and active participation in the writing process (Matre & Cameron, 2022). When used within a collaborative framework, technology becomes a bridge, enabling students to demonstrate their knowledge more effectively while receiving targeted support from both educators and speech-language pathologists.

Evidence-Based Instruction. Writing is a linguistic process that requires the development of skills across language domains. Evidence-based practices for supporting writing instruction for students with SLD largely focus on the use of explicit and systematic instruction,

strategy instruction (e.g. Self-Regulated Strategy Development [SRSD] model), and scaffolding

writing over time (Gillespie & Graham, 2014). Direct instruction needs to be explicit and

systematic following a logical, developmental progression around core dimensions of writing,

including spelling, handwriting, grammar, sentence structure, generative processes for writing

extended text (e.g. composition skills), and motivation. Instruction needs to target specific

strategies that are designed around student planning, organizing, writing, revising, and editing

compositions. Therefore, effective writing instruction should integrate targeted language

activities that are developmentally appropriate, linguistically explicit, and cognitively supportive.

The following figure outlines evidence-informed activities that support written expression

through the five key language domains, with suggestions tailored to different school-age levels

(early elementary, upper elementary, middle school, and high school).

Phonology

Phonological awareness supports early writing by enabling students to map sounds to letters

(i.e., phoneme-grapheme correspondence), a critical foundation for encoding and spelling.

Early Elementary

- Use Elkonin Boxes (sound boxes) with counters or chips to segment individual

  phonemes in spoken words.

  - Engage in phoneme manipulation tasks (e.g., substitution, deletion of

    sounds) using letter tiles to build metalinguistic awareness of sound

    structures.

Upper Elementary

- Incorporate dictation of nonsense words to reinforce phoneme-grapheme mapping

  without reliance on sight word memory.

o   Use spelling games focused on identifying and categorizing syllable types (e.g., open, closed, vowel-consonant-e) to build decoding and encoding fluency.

Morphology

Morphological awareness enhances students' ability to decode multisyllabic words, spell with accuracy, and construct more complex written sentences.

Early Elementary

- Use hands-on manipulatives to build and break apart simple words using common prefixes and suffixes (e.g. un-, -ing, -ed).

  o   Introduce affix meanings in context to support early spelling and vocabulary development.

Upper Elementary

- Use hands-on manipulatives to build and break apart simple words using common affixes, roots, and base words.

  o   Create morphological maps or graphic organizers for common root words (e.g., struct, act), helping students connect form, meaning, and use across multiple derived words.

  o   Introduce compound word building and affix manipulation in short writing activities.

Middle School +

- Implement word-building games using Greek and Latin word parts (prefixes, root, suffixes) to facilitate development of domain-specific vocabulary.

o   Integrate academic writing tasks that prompt students to apply targeted

Greek and Latin morphemes (e.g., *bio-*, *-ology*, *-ism*, *-tion*, *-ment*) to

construct and use domain-specific vocabulary. During revision, provide

guided feedback emphasizing morphological awareness and encouraging

students to refine word precision and sophistication in their writing.

▪   Bio (life); -ology (study of) = Biology = "study of life"

Syntax

Syntactic knowledge supports the generation of grammatically correct and cohesive sentences,

facilitating more structured and coherent written texts.

Early Elementary

- Use sentence unscrambling tasks to help students recognize sentence structure.

   o   Employ graphic organizers or sentence starters and stems (e.g., Who?

   What? Where?) to expand simple sentences and scaffold syntactic growth.

Middle Elementary

- Introduce sentence combining and expansion exercises to help students vary

   sentence length and structure.

   o   Use mentor sentences from read-aloud texts to model effective sentence

   construction.

   o   Use kernel sentences (e.g., simple base sentences that can be expanded or

   joined together) to combine sentences by focusing on key details and the

   use of coordinating conjunctions (i.e., for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).

   ▪   Example kernel sentences: The dog ran. The dog is brown.

Middle School

- Facilitate interactive sentence transformation (e.g. changing active to passive voice) and expansion tasks using authentic mentor texts.
  - Emphasize embedded clauses and transitional phrases to increase sentence complexity in expository and narrative writing.
  - Use sentence combining to build complex and compound-complex sentences.

High School

- Facilitate interactive sentence transformation and expansion tasks to address writer's craft (e.g., tone, mood).
  - Teach style-based sentence variation in argumentative and analytical writing to improve tone and rhetorical effectiveness.
  - Conduct grammar-focused editing workshops addressing clause types, punctuation, and rhetorical coherence.

Semantics

Semantic knowledge—depth and breadth of word meaning—enhances idea development, elaboration, and word choice in writing.

Early Elementary

- Provide instructional supports to vary vocabulary use.
  - Use semantic webs and picture dictionaries to support vocabulary development and thematic writing.
  - Encourage students to maintain vocabulary journals with illustrations and usage examples.

Upper Elementary

- Provide instructional supports to vary vocabulary use.

  o Engage students in word substitution activities (e.g., replacing "tired" words with precise verbs and adjectives, replacing repetitive word [e.g., "said" when writing dialogue]).

  o Teach context clue strategies to infer and apply new vocabulary in written paragraphs.

Middle School +

- Use advanced vocabulary with intention to enhance voice and clarity in academic and personal writing.

  o Incorporate revising for word choice in narrative and expository writing to enhance clarity, tone, and engagement.

  o Guide students in creating domain-specific vocabulary banks tied to content-area writing (e.g., science reports, historical narratives).

Pragmatics and Discourse

Pragmatic skills at the discourse level are essential for organizing ideas, considering audience, and producing coherent, purposeful texts.

Early Elementary

- Enhance ability to express ideas and maintain topic and order in writing tasks.

  o Use picture sequencing followed by oral and written retells to introduce story structure.

  o Provide visual story prompts for composing short narratives with a clear beginning, middle, and end.

Upper Elementary

- Strengthen discourse level skills to organize thoughts, consider the audience, and write with clarity.

  - Use graphic organizers (e.g., story mountain, compare-contrast charts) to structure narrative and expository writing.

  - Use SRSD strategies to structure narrative and expository writing.

  - Support perspective-taking in writing (e.g., "How would a dog describe a trip to the vet?") to build audience awareness.

Middle School +

- Apply strategies to plan, structure, and revise writing with a clear sense of purpose and audience.

  - Scaffold writing (e.g., through SRSD strategies) with organizers for narrative, argumentative, and explanatory genres.

  - Introduce multi-perspective writing tasks to enhance voice and purpose.

High School

- Apply strategies to plan, structure, and revise writing with a clear sense of purpose and audience.

  - Assign tasks that require students to write for authentic audiences and varied purposes (e.g., letters, blog posts, policy briefs).

  - Implement peer review and guided revision based on rhetorical intent and audience expectations.

Locating Evidence-Based Resources for Supporting the Writing Needs of Students with Specific Learning Disabilities

A variety of electronic and digital resources are currently available to support educators in enhancing students' written expression needs. These resources can be valuable for all stakeholders—including educators (general and special educators), related service providers (SLPs), families, and caregivers—in supporting students' writing growth across settings. The table below highlights several evidence-based electronic resources which provide guidance and interactive support to strengthen students' writing skills and overall language proficiency.

Name of Source	Link to Source	Description of What the Source Provides	Recommended Audience
Evidenced Based Practices for Writing Instruction	https://www.readingrockets.org/sites/default/files/guide/Evidence-based%2520practices%2520for%2520writing%2520instruction.pdf	An electronic document produced by the CEEDAR Center that provides 10 evidence-based practice components.	General and special educators, SLPs
Teaching Elementary Students to be Effective Writers	https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/practiceguide/17	A practice guide created by the What Works Clearinghouse that provides four recommendations for improving elementary students' writing alongside recommendations for implementation. (Grades 1-5)	General and special educators, SLPs
Teaching Secondary Students to be Effective Writers	https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/practiceguide/22	A practice guide created by the What Works Clearinghouse that provides four recommendations for improving secondary students' writing alongside recommendations for implementation. (Grades 6-12)	General and special educators, SLPs
ASHA Practice Portal – Written	www.asha.org/Practice-Portal/Clinical-Topics/Written-Language-Disorders/	An electronic resource providing resources centered around written language disorders.	SLPs

Language Disorders			
Iowa Reading Research Center	https://irrc.education.uiowa.edu/	Online website for a literacy center housed at the University of Iowa that provides access to free resources and professional learning materials. Electronic tools for teaching handwriting and cursive are also available (i.e., Literacy LIFTER and CLIFTER).	General and special educators, SLPs, families, and caregivers
SRSD Online	https://srsdonline.org/	A website developed to support use of the SRSD model that includes a set of mnemonic strategies for advancing writing instruction.	General and special educators
Think SRSD	https://thinksrsd.com/	A website providing professional development and free instructional resources for using SRSD.	General and special educators
National Center on Improving Literacy	https://www.improvingliteracy.org/	A comprehensive national resource center funded by the U.S. Department of Education that is dedicated to advancing evidence-based teaching methods for students with literacy-related disabilities.	General and special educators, SLPs

Conclusion

Intentionally supporting the written expression needs of students with SLD is critical to promoting their overall language proficiency and academic success, as it underpins broader language development across listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Working collaboratively

across service providers (e.g., special educators and SLPs) has the potential to maximize written expression supports to facilitate growth across language domains.

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