



The Brake Shop Clinic

Putting the Brakes On Writing Difficulties



Students with 'leaky brakes' may resist writing for different reasons. Fine motor difficulties are associated with Tourette Syndrome; various tics (e.g. pen-flicking) that cannot be resisted may interfere with the work to be completed and serve as a frustration. Perfectionistic tendencies associated with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder can drive the student to write and rewrite answers again and again until they look "just right"; this feeling of being "trapped" can be so distressful that the student is desperate to avoid the whole thing. Individuals with ADHD may find it hard to focus on all the rules of grammar, spelling, and punctuation at the same time without getting distracted. Finally, those with sensory sensitivities may find the sound of a pencil on paper to be intolerable, akin to a person running their fingernails down a blackboard.

What is important to note is this: **in NONE of the above-described scenarios was this a resistance to homework itself.** The IDEA of homework – that is, to complete the assignment, learn more in a particular area, get a good mark and please the adults in his/her life – may still be very appealing to the student. (S)He just doesn't know any detours around the road-blocks (s)he is encountering.

The other important thing to note is that the overall purpose of that homework assignment can be completely lost when the student has to expend every bit of his/her energy into the mechanics of writing. Feeling the pencil in your grip and holding it so that it feels right, making each letter "e" just so, keeping all of the rules of writing on-line, and resisting urges to crumple or rip the paper, or flick the pen across it is energy-consuming. It also takes away from the truly important aspects of the assignment: things like creativity, organization, and accessing one's knowledge base on a subject. In other words, the point of a lesson can be wasted when the student must devote so many resources to the actual physical act of writing that (s)he "has nothing left" to devote to the actual point of the assignment.



So let's



- Consider requesting if a referral for an occupational therapy assessment would be appropriate for your child via the School Health Support Program (organized through your child's school via the principal, Learning Support Teacher, or Special Education Resource Teacher). Your child's performance of fine motor coordination and written production skills can be compared to same-aged peers.
- Students with poor written language skills may benefit from answering examination, test, or assignment questions orally either directly to the teacher or onto a tape or digital medium. Oral testing will help to more accurately ascertain what the student has actually learned and retained. When writing is so difficult for the student valuable energy is wasted in the MEDIUM for expression of his knowledge.
- Alternatively, students could be allowed to dictate their answers to a parent, volunteer, or resource teacher. The student could also be encouraged to outline the answer in point form or complete as much as is possible within a time limit but be allowed to elaborate upon his/her answer verbally. Finally, use multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and true-false test formats as much as possible to minimize writing demands, and provide extra time for completion of tests and assignments when writing IS required.
- Assignments should be well structured with plenty of scaffolding to indicate exactly what and how much information is required for a satisfactory answer.
- Encourage the student to do writing assignments on computer. In addition to "spell-check" and "grammar-check" features available in word processing programs, special software is available to help students with writing difficulties to organize and sequence what it is (s)he wishes to write:
 - A program called **Inspiration** (<http://www.inspiration.com>) allows students to brainstorm and lay out ideas in visual boxes which can then be automatically converted to a written outline and exported to the word processing software of their choice.
 - Given the quick advances in technology many strides are being made for programs and software to support students with written production difficulties. It is best to check with school personnel in regards to programs that your child **might qualify for** such as the newest versions of **Dragon**

Naturally Speaking (<http://www.naturallyspeaking.com>) and **Microsoft Office** (<http://www.microsoft.com/office/>). Programs such as this offer excellent speech-to-text capabilities and require only a microphone that can be attached to the computer and a sound card. After 15 minutes of training to the student's voice, these programs are now able to convert what (s)he says to words on the screen with great accuracy, thus enabling him/her to rely upon stronger oral skills to complete writing assignments.

- Depending upon the severity of this learning disability, keeping up with homework demands may be difficult. Homework assignments should be chosen purposefully; "homework for the sake of homework" that serves more as busywork than furthering particular academic goals should be reconsidered and avoided.
- Teach report writing skills to older students. A study guide that states exactly what is required can be helpful for students to organize their reports.
- Encourage proof-reading skills. If necessary, develop a checklist for the student with reminders for punctuation, use of capital letters, spacing, title, opening and closing sentence, and so on. Suggest that the student proof-read by re-reading orally and to check his/her work from the reader's point of view. The self-correcting writer needs a soft eraser, paper that's not brittle, and double-spacing.
- Proof-reading teacher-supplied sentences can also be a valuable remedial technique. For example, students can be given sentences with incorrect grammar and punctuation to correct.

This is not to say that the student should never be expected to write, though! Think of it this way:

- When the point of an exercise is to improve cursive/printing skills, it makes sense to expect the student to write as well.
- Give the student oral/other options when the point of an exercise is NOT specifically about developing better cursive/printing skills. This helps to avoid losing the point of other exercises in the midst of struggles to force the student to write.

Parents, be sure you request that any relevant accommodations found on this hand-out are added to a formalized **I**ndividualized **E**ducation **P**lan (IEP). An informal IEP need not be implemented or transitioned, whereas a formal IEP is a legislated process that also includes the **I**dentification Placement and **R**eview **C**ommittee (I.P.R.C.) that **must** be adhered to, under the Education Act, (Education Act, Regulation 181/98). Any child with identified special needs has access to this process.



Finally, it will be vital to ensure students understand that NONE of the above suggestions in any way indicate that they are of low ability or incapable of anything that any other typical student their age can do. Given the 'leaky brakes' involved and the way they think and work best, the above plan is simply the best way for them to achieve at the age-appropriate level they desire. Figuring THAT out shows just how capable they are, and is something to be proud of.

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