

Right Brain Writing (When Other Methods Haven't Worked)

By Dianne Craft, MA, CNHP

"Help! My teenager can't even write a paragraph by himself."

"My child loves to 'journal' but won't write an organized paragraph for anything."

For many children and teens, writing comes naturally. For others, the writing process needs to be taught in detail, and after the instructional and practice time they learn to write well and their writing continues to improve. However, for some children and teens, writing never becomes easy, and they avoid it like the plague. If you have one of these "really struggling" writers, you likely now have about three different writing curricula. Your other children are doing great with them, but this child continues to struggle with the process of writing a cohesive paragraph or composition.

What is going on?

Many of these children and teens have an undiagnosed dysgraphia, or blocked writing gate. They are the ones who reversed letters and numbers longer than their siblings did, switched handedness when younger, and exhibited many visual/spatial issues, such as lining up math problems incorrectly, etc. In other words, the act of writing, or "head to hand" processing did not transfer properly to their automatic brain hemisphere. For this reason, "thinking and writing at the same time" takes much more battery energy for them than for others without this visual/spatial block.¹

For several years I taught "twice exceptional" or what I informally called "gifted with a glitch" sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders in the public school system. These wonderful teens and pre-teens were in my Resource Room Language Arts program because they were not writing at grade level. They were struggling in three areas that I needed to correct in one year: (1) dysgraphia, (2) spelling, and (3) paragraph and composition writing.

Prior to coming to my Resource Room, all of these students had been carefully taught for many years, using all the "regular" methods of writing, such as reading a passage and highlighting the main ideas to include in their writing, making a list of action verbs or colorful adjectives to use, outlining their topic, and using the "spider webbing" process. While all these methods are excellent, these students continued to be "non-writers." They could journal just fine, since process that did not include any organization of thoughts but rather merely a conversational "rambling," which suited their style well.

What I discovered is that "loose thought patterns" plague many of these children and teens, particularly those suffering with dysgraphia, ADD, or auditory processing problems. They could not easily think in an organized manner and therefore could not write in an organized manner, no matter how much practice they had using various workbook and worksheet methods of

teaching. For them to be successful and not need to be in my remedial Resource Room for more than a year, I needed to come up with a method of teaching them writing that would move them forward to becoming fluent, independent writers. None of the curricula I had available in the classroom or from catalogs had been working, so I developed my own strategy of teaching writing to this particular population.

The Universal Writing Method

In developing this Right Brain Writing Method, I kept several of my observations of these students in mind:

1. Because they could not transfer the “pieces” (left brain) to the “whole” (right brain), the detailed, sequential method of outlining absolutely did not work for them.
2. Because of their “loose thought patterns,” I needed to help them see the entire paragraph or paper in their head before they could write it.
3. Having them do “re-writes” or editing after they wrote their papers was a totally useless exercise for this group.
4. Correcting spelling errors on their papers was very defeating to them.
5. Immediate feedback and motivating strategies were necessary. Praising work was not enough.

Using these observations, I developed the Right Brain Writing Method using a simple formula:

1. *Right Brain Webbing*, versus the more piecemeal outlines or spider webbing, enabling them to see the “whole” paragraph or composition before they even began the writing process.
2. *Modeling, modeling, modeling*. I put the webbing on the board, and together we came up with the topic sentence, three “blobs” of information about the topic, and then the conclusion. I helped them generate ideas (which felt a great deal like going to the dentist for a root canal at the beginning), and I wrote only the trigger words on the webbing.

I did not have them write on the webbing for many months. I continued to model this process until after Christmas. By that time, they had “gotten it” and could easily do this process on their own with any topic of choice. I needed to show them that they could write any topic on a blank sheet of paper—not just out of a workbook, with the sentences given to them.

3. *No re-writes*. This was very important, I found. These kids were not going to tolerate markings on their papers or “editing” of their work. That method had already been proven to be totally unsuccessful for them. Then how did I handle misspellings? I “harvested” their misspelled words from their paper. I

did not mark them on their paper but rather made a list of their misspellings for my own use. These were added to our list of spelling words for the week. I then taught them how to use their photographic memory to store these tricky spelling words.

How did I handle corrections of punctuation, sentence structure, style, etc.? I "shaped" their writing skills in a subtle way by giving them points for every good thing that was on the paper. For example, they got a point for starting with a capital letter, ending with a period, giving good adjectives, etc. I ignored mistakes in punctuation or style. I taught those skills the next week, just before we wrote our next paper.

One powerful element of this method was that each point was assigned a "reward." For example, each point could be rewarded with "prizes" such as one less math problem to do, more time on a computer game, staying up later, money, etc. You can get creative with this. No matter what the age, all the kids liked to get the rewards and wrote volumes more to earn the rewards, no matter how small the rewards seemed.

4. *Baby steps.* We wrote only one paper a week. Each week I did the webbing on the board, with their ideas, putting in all the transitional phrases. They wrote the paper from the webbing.

The next week, before we did the webbing for the next paper, I would teach a lesson that was customized to the mistakes they had made in their previous paper. For example, if they had written many "run-on" sentences the week before, prior to doing this week's paper I taught them how to avoid run-on sentences. If they were putting numerous adjectives in a sentence without commas, I taught that skill. This way I could "shape" their writing when they were approaching the assignment rather than after they had written it. This method proved to be so much more successful for them.

Also, each week I would add another "example" or thought to our "three blobs of information" about the topic we were writing. As a result of these baby steps, by the end of the year all my students were writing four-page papers on their own by just being given a topic to write about. It was impressive and easy.

The next year, they didn't need my "remedial" writing method any more. They were ready to use any of the very good writing methods that focused on more of a "polishing technique" in their instruction. These students had become writers.

I am amazed at the large number of my former students, now attending college, who tell me that they are majoring in journalism because they like writing so much! How good is that?!

Why do I call this the Universal Writing Method? I do so because I have seen that it always works, no matter what the struggles of the child or teen. After they have learned how to "think" while writing, then they can move on to successfully use all the good writing programs that are readily available.

Over the years, many homeschooling parents have used this easy “remedial writing” method. If you want to avail yourself of this method and you can follow my written directions, then you can email me for a free copy of the Right Brain Writing Instructions at [http://www.craft@ecentral.com](mailto:craft@ecentral.com). In the subject line, just put “Right Brain Writing Instructions.” We will send the instructions right out to you.²

*Dianne Craft has a master’s degree in learning disabilities. She speaks widely at homeschool conventions across the country. Her books, **Brain Integration Therapy Manual, Right Brain Phonics Program, and her DVDs, Understanding & Helping the Struggling Learner, Teaching the Right Brain Child, Smart Kids—Who Hate to Write, and The Biology of Behavior** have helped hundreds of families remove learning blocks in their struggling children at home. Visit her website, www.diannecraft.org, for many articles on children and learning and to download her free Daily Lesson Plans for the Struggling Reader and Writer.*

Endnotes:

1. A checklist of the symptoms of dysgraphia article is available on my website in the article titled “Smart Kids Who Hate to Write.”
2. If you want to see this method demonstrated for Beginning writers (those not even writing sentences yet), Intermediate writers (those ready to start writing paragraphs), and Advanced writers (those moving on to sophisticated paragraphing and composition), I invite you to watch the new *Right Brain Writing* DVD available on my website. This is a “Teacher Training” video that shows you how to use this method with your struggling writer and all of your beginning writers at home. There is no curriculum to purchase. This is simply a unique teaching method. It just requires you to use these new teaching strategies and paper.

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