KS3-4

Dysgraphia

Supporting neurodiversity

SEND TOOLKIT

teachit

By Abigail Hawkins

Contents

Introduction

By the time children join secondary school, we expect that they have developed a basic skill set. One of the things expected is fast, fluent, legible and neat handwriting. Whilst secondary teachers are less focused on the development of cursive handwriting (they are generally satisfied with legible print), they do require students to be able to produce class notes quickly. Unlike the primary environment, where the students can quickly finish off a prior lesson before moving on, secondary school is ruled by bells and chimes and the need to move from one task to another rapidly.

As each new year arrives, so too do a number of students who just haven't got a fast, fluent handwriting style and, with little time to deliver an intervention, it is up to the subject teachers to find methods that work.

This pack has been written for the staff in secondary schools who want to support students with handwriting difficulties. It explains the potential causes of handwriting difficulties and offers classroom support strategies. For those students who need more, there are additional suggestions around intervention and how this can run alongside lessons rather than withdrawing students from the class.

About the author

Abigail Hawkins runs SENDCO Solutions, an SEN consultancy, and SENsible SENCO CIC, a not-for-profit networking support group. She has been a SENCO for over 25 years and has taught a multitude of subjects across all phases, from two-year-olds to adults. Abigail works with software companies developing supportive software for SEN and safeguarding purposes, has developed and delivers a teaching assistant apprenticeship programme, has authored several books on SEN and exclusions, and runs a support network for over 10,000 SENCOs. She still works as a SENCO for part of her week. Abigail has a no-nonsense, practical approach to SEN issues faced by schools, believing that many high-incidence needs can be met in the classroom with basic teaching tweaks.

What is neurodiversity?

by Abigail Hawkins and Helen Ross

The term *neurodiversity* was coined in the early 1990s by journalist Harvey Blume and Australian autism activist Judy Singer. It can be defined as an understanding that neurological differences are to be honoured and respected just like any other human variation, including diversity in race, ethnicity, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, and so on (Armstrong, 2017).

When Singer originally coined the phrase, she was looking to move thinking from a medical model to a more social one. She wanted everyone to understand that there is no 'typical' brain or 'normal' mind and that everyone is different as part of regular human variation.

This standpoint has major implications for how we, as teachers, work to support young people in our care. Understanding and accepting that there are young people whose way of processing and engaging with the world is different from our own means that we, as professionals working to support them, need to update our knowledge and practice.

Although the term originated within the autism community, *neurodiversity* is now taken as encompassing a range of medical and educational needs, including ADHD, autistic spectrum condition (ASC) or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia / developmental coordination disorder (DCD), dyscalculia and Tourette syndrome. Dysgraphia and specific language impairment or developmental language delay may also be included. These needs are also referred to as *specific learning difficulties* (SpLD) as they affect the way in which information is learned and processed. All neurodiversities are independent of intelligence, are lifelong conditions that are likely to run in families and can vary in degree from one individual to the next.

Neurodiverse students may need some accommodations in school so that they can engage meaningfully in the curriculum and in wider social life. These accommodations may include wearing headphones to minimise sensory overload or having a coloured overlay when reading to reduce visual discomfort and imbalance. In school, some young people may need fidget toys or wobble cushions as an outlet for their need to move associated with ADHD, whilst others may need to have access to quiet spaces to reset because of ASD and other sensory needs. Those with dyslexia may need to have support in accessing the written word, whilst individuals with dyscalculia might find that having concrete objects to support them whilst engaging with maths problems transforms their ability to share their knowledge and understanding of those challenges they face.

There is a lack of official diagnoses of dysgraphia for the reasons cited above, alongside the lack of research and other factors often considered to be at play in generating 'messy writing' (gender, age, lack of opportunities, or 'another reason').

The education system

Handwriting is just one part of literacy, and difficulties may lead to problems in all areas of the curriculum. When students enter secondary school, there is a huge variation in their handwriting skills. Different feeder schools will have used different schemes, followed a different approach and policy, and had different attitudes towards the teaching of handwriting. The national curriculum at primary school encourages the use of fluent and legibly produced text in printed and joined writing. A competent writer is likely to have two styles: one is produced quickly, is used for note-taking and might appear untidy but is still legible; the other is a good-quality script used for more formal purposes.

What we see

Handwriting for the dysgraphic profile is generally illegible. As a quick assessment, take a piece of text written by a student and, starting at the last written word, read each sentence backwards. This takes the words out of context and forces the reader to 'read' the word rather than guess the word. If more than 25% of the words are illegible (due to handwriting or spelling errors), then there is an issue that could be regarded as dysgraphic in nature.

Theories

The causes of dysgraphia are not definitively known. What we can say is that if the poor handwriting can be attributed to something else (for example, a palsy), then it is labelled as 'handwriting difficulties', whereas dysgraphia is used only when no other reason can be found for handwriting difficulties and, despite targeted interventions, those difficulties persist, are present from school age and are not better accounted for by another diagnosis.

Various theories are proposed as to the underlying cause of handwriting difficulties. Some focus on a problem within the child, whereas others locate the problem within the structure of the education system. The education system may result in inadequate teaching, a failure to provide opportunities to consolidate learning and provide efficient routines, and missed opportunities to practise. The Covid pandemic certainly saw an increase in the latter.

Classroom strategies

Have you ever wondered at what rate the average secondary student produces legible handwriting?

Average words per minute	
Year 7	13.8
Year 8	14.3
Year 9	15.6
Year 10	14.7
Year 11	16.1

(Note the dip in Y10, when the academic content gets heavier and expectations of a more complex technical vocabulary increase.)

Of course, this is affected by many factors, including any underlying learning difficulties, fatigue, the technical and creative content of the writing, whether English is the first language and whether students know what they want to write.

A survey of American adults suggests that 45% can't read their own writing, 7/10 find it difficult to read a co-worker's handwriting, and 23% are terrified to write in front of others (Sadlier, 2021). This has implications in the classroom when we ask students to mark peers' work, resulting in comments and embarrassment – and further consequences when students produce work for their final exams that may not always be legible without mediation.

In the reality of the regular secondary classroom, we don't have the time to teach handwriting alongside our curriculum content, but we can encourage and support students to develop fluency and legibility.

Handwriting difficulties assessment record

Name:		**Age:**	
Concerns:			
Date of initial assessment:		**Work attached:**	
Interventions and provisions put in place:			
Date of reassessment:		**Work attached:**	

Aspect	**Never/NA**	**Rarely/Mild**	**Often/Moderate**	**Frequent/Severe**
Spacing				
Drifts away from the margin				
Inconsistent letter spacing				
Inconsistent word spacing				
Layout of the page is confused				
Writing is not 'on the line'				

Visual motor skills

Hand–eye coordination is required in order to develop fluent writing. Visual processing is a collection of multiple skills.

Stage X

- Can draw left-to-right lines between the lines of tracks.
- Can link dots from left to right using only simple straight lines.
- Can link dots from top to bottom using simple straight lines.
- Can trace a finger from left to right under reading-related content.
- Can trace basic shapes (squares, circles, etc.).
- Colours inside clearly defined bold lines.
- Traces over basic writing designs.
- Is able to trace over simple shapes (squares, circles, etc.)

Stage Y

- Can depict a face with a mouth, nose and eyes.
- Can depict a human with at least six distinct body parts.
- Can draw a basic 2D form.
- Can generate/create pictures of recognisable items.
- Can reproduce intricate handwriting patterns below a given example.
- Can trace with a basic stencil.

Stage Z

- Can colour cleanly inside the outline of the borders of more complicated patterns.
- Can write on lines with adequate space between words.
- Colours within the lines of increasingly complex shapes.
- Can write numbers on squared paper (in the squares).
- Writes with finger gaps between words.

An intervention programme

Select the appropriate phase based on the student's assessment profile then use the relevant suggestions from the detailed list on pp.38–69.

There are six phases in the proposed programme. Students may not need to access all phases. Use the assessment grid to help select activities that work on areas of weakness.

Visual motor skills	
Phase 1	Visual focusing
Manipulation	
Phase 2a	Gross motor skills
Phase 2b	Fine motor skills
Formation	
Phase 3a + 4a	Letters
Phase 3b + 4b	Words
Organisation	
Phase 5a	Planning sentences
Phase 5b	Memory
Adaptations/Technology	
Phase 6	Teach to use adaptive resources

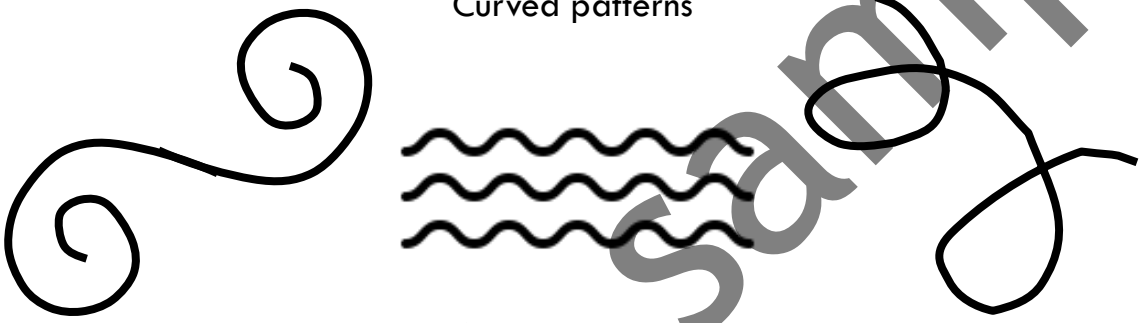
A curated list of dysgraphia products is provided here: **https://amzn.eu/iU3hRol**

Other suppliers are available, and the list should be used only to identify and support the identification of the items.

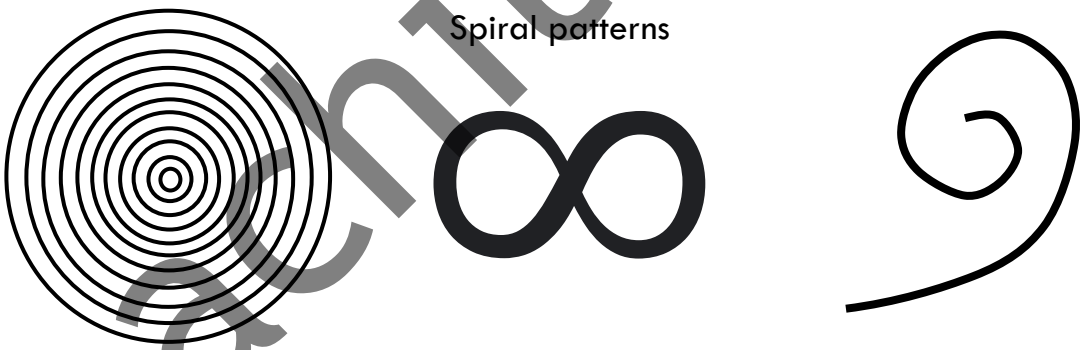
Shapes, patterns and pictures

Straight-line patterns

Curved patterns



Spiral patterns



Creative patterns