

## INTRODUCTION

In the twelve years since *When they can't write . . .* was first published, the urgency to improve writing instruction for all students has heightened nationwide. Educators now recognize the importance of written composition, not only as a means of communication, but as a vital component of cognitive development. Much has been published about teaching writing to all students—the gifted, that elusive “average” student, the child with an attention deficit, the young person who is learning English as a second language and, to a lesser extent, the language learning disabled.

This text provides a hierarchical structure for teaching composition skills that is workable for any student but, most importantly, has proven successful with the student who is dyslexic. These young people, particularly, have problems communicating their ideas and knowledge in writing. It isn't just that they don't like to write—they can't write. But like their non-dyslexic peers they need to have at their command those expressive skills necessary for independence and success in secondary school, college, or society at large.

This process for teaching/learning composition evolved at The New Community School in Richmond, Virginia, over a period of twenty years. During this time, as the national focus on writing has intensified, the school has been exploring the theories and strategies that have proven successful for teaching language skills to adolescents with dyslexia. Time after time research has validated the multisensory, structured, developmental strategies the school has studied and applied to language instruction. Some theorists may view this text as a confirmation and pragmatic application of their findings, while others may continue to be skeptical. But as the studies and debates continue, student writers at The New Community School are improving prodigiously in structure, accuracy, clarity, and expressive facility. In almost all cases these students refine and expand their written expression—the most convincing crucible for educators.

A considerable portion of my own theoretical basis concerning learning disabled students and instruction was instilled by Alice Ansara during my intern year (1976) at The New Community School. She taught me certain underlying concepts about working with students who are dyslexic which need to be considered when diagnosing and teaching. The rationale and guidelines in Chapter 1 echo her ideas. My eight-year association with The Orton Dyslexia Society (now The International Dyslexia Association) provided invaluable and timely information on research findings and instructional developments in the field.

National and statewide Orton conferences exposed me to scholars, research experts, and practitioners who have explored cognitive styles and learning needs of students with dyslexia. Fortunately, I have had the opportunity and privilege to discuss some of these ideas with leaders in the field such as Margaret Rawson and Roger Saunders. And *The English Journal*, published by the National Council of Teachers of English, almost monthly includes an article or two on—or devotes an entire issue to—the topic of composition and how to teach it (though rarely how to teach it to students with dyslexia). Repeatedly the NCTE has called for more studies and information from teachers about effective instructional methods. In part, this book is a practical response to that appeal.

With the enormous number of composition texts and workbooks on the market, an addition may at first appear redundant. Clearly I do not consider that to be the case. This text is predominantly for the teacher of students who have writing problems, so the approach is first and foremost remedial. Two mechanical aspects of written communication often emphasized for the disabled writer—handwriting and spelling—are not included here. Rather, this deals with composing, constructing meaning. And the focus is not merely on the skill development of one writing entity—the sentence, the paragraph, the essay—as in many composition workbooks. Instead, this comprehensive teachers' reference moves sequentially from the simplest sentence through the paragraph, with additional suggestions for encouraging creativity and improving fluency and accuracy and applying the strategies and processes to longer writing tasks.

I have arrived at what I consider a workable compromise concerning the issue of whether to use traditional grammar terminology when teaching writing. I have not eliminated it completely, as certain modern guides suggest, since I have found a few identifying categories useful for students not only as they organize to write, but also as they adapt to other programs once they leave The New Community School or the remedial/tutorial setting. On the other hand, I have omitted the preponderance of grammatical labeling (both traditional and new) and replaced that fragmented, abstract deconstructive approach with a simple questioning process for sentence development and expansion. In my experience, scholarly nomenclature for phrases and functions of words only serves to confuse most students with language disability, and may foster the false notion that writing is something they'll never master. I liken it to using the terminology of calculus when initially teaching arithmetic. I have not found it detrimental to teach composing first,

without the bulk of the specialized vocabulary, and to introduce grammatical jargon only after a strong base is established, as needed (IF needed).

Finally, the two issues of audience and evaluation, which have received considerable attention in print, will not be explored in depth in this text, though they will be addressed, with certain suggestions, where most pertinent.

Many of the isolated ideas in this text may have been proposed in the past, but the organization, instructional suggestions and models, and practice exercises are unique and were devised with the specific problems and needs of students with dyslexia in mind. Such a structured, thought-provoking process, effectively taught, should aid many other students with writing problems as well.

I have endeavored to alternate personal pronouns equitably in the text, with a clear intention of reflecting gender fairness.

Thanks to continued field testing at The New Community School over the past twelve years, as well as feedback from my presentations at state and national workshops and conferences, plus my own additional experiences working with students with writing deficits at the community college level, the revisions of *When they can't write . . .* should enhance its usefulness in the classroom. Information on process has been expanded. References and allusions in the examples have been updated. Additions to the Suggested Readings reflect current writing theory and practice. My teaching experiences as well as interaction with educators have deepened my awareness of the continuing need for such a reference text. Despite a growing body of research, practitioners are still often at a loss for what to do to help students with persistent writing deficits.

It is impossible to give credit to every expert I have heard or read during my twenty years of work in this field. However, certain people continuously offered support, assistance, and encouragement. Julia Ann Greenwood, long-time friend and visionary Head of The New Community School, spurred me to work on this project and found the funds for its initial writing and current revision. Barbara Allaire, Mary Ann Marsh, Nancy Ring, Sharon Stratton, and Kathleen Welsch initially shared in the enterprise as English teachers over a period of six years. In the last decade Katy Haas, Steve Humphrey, Livia McCoy, Christy Mullins, Kathy Watkins, and, particularly, Beth White have continued to field test the ideas, strategies, and lessons. All have evaluated, made suggestions for changes, created assignments tailored to the appropriate structures and strategies suggested, refined, and given

me feedback about what worked, what didn't, and why. Their capable, enthusiastic commitment to working with the writing difficulties of dyslexic students was invaluable, as it not only broadened the numbers and ages of the students and the student work I was able to study, but also because they themselves worked so diligently, shared their observations and ideas so openly, and listened to my concerns, failings, and excitements not only as colleagues but as sustaining friends.

A considerable amount of my own learning has occurred as a result of teaching. My profound gratitude goes to the students at The New Community School. They showed me, most clearly and compellingly, that their composition problems were as complex and "special" as their reading and spelling difficulties, and forced me to realize that teaching them writing in a traditional fashion was just as inappropriate as relying solely on the look-say method of reading instruction. This book enables me to share with others what I have learned along the way.

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