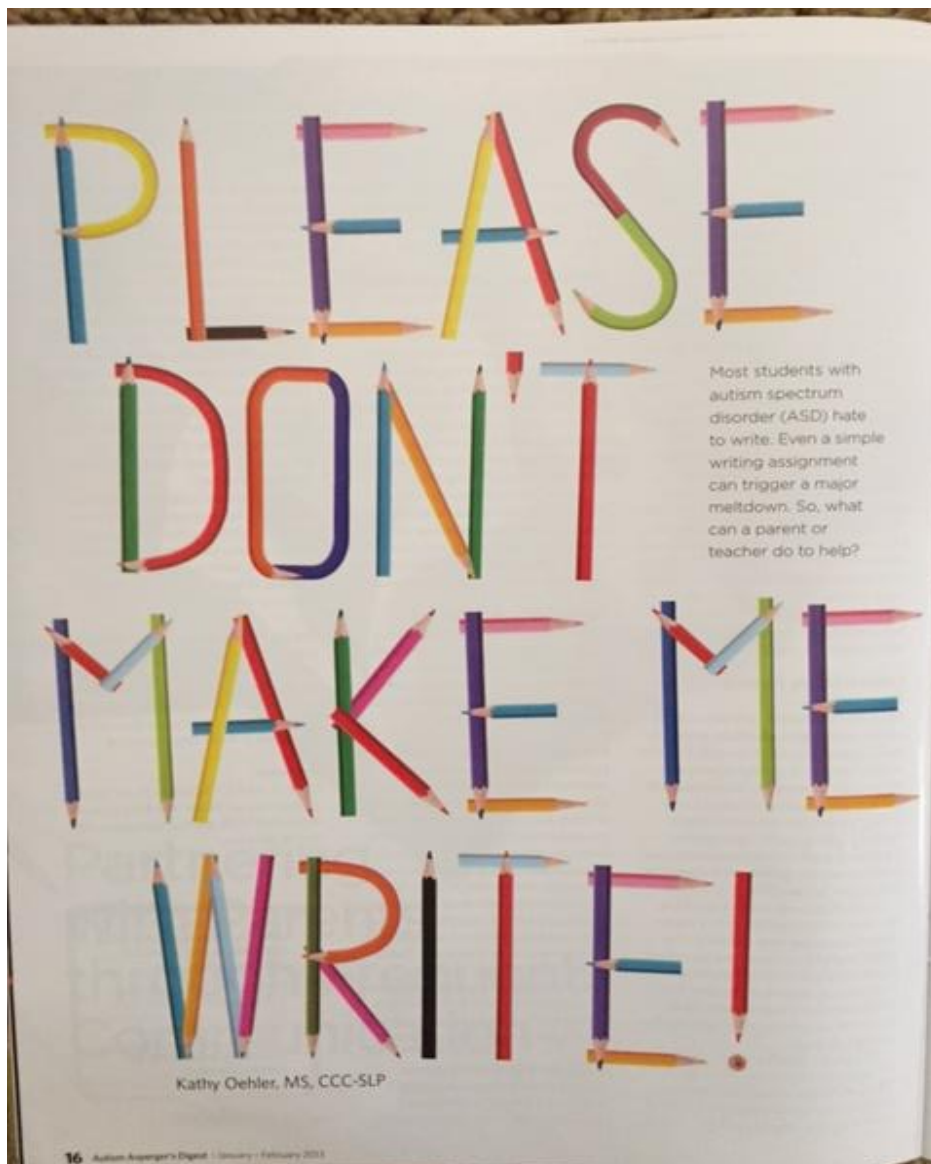


Please Don't Make Me Write!

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Why is writing so difficult?

The process of writing requires much more than the ability to form pretty letters. The writing process involves skills in language, organization, motor control and planning, and sensory processing: four areas that are problematic for many individuals with ASD. It is essential that parents and teachers consider how each of these areas may be affecting a student's aversion to the writing process.

Language difficulties can influence a student's ability to come up with ideas to write about. Organizational challenges affect the student's ability to sequence words into sentences that make sense, and then sequence those sentences into a logical order for a paragraph. Motor control and planning difficulties affect the student's ability to orient and stabilize his body while he tries to coordinate his fine motor muscles to hold a pencil or maneuver around on a keyboard. And throughout the entire writing process, the student must use sensory regulation to filter out the bombardment of sights, sounds, smells, and movements that surround him. The wise parent or teacher will consider each of these potential problem areas when helping students with ASD find success with writing tasks.

Why is writing so important?

First, regardless of a student's cognitive level, the ability to write can affect his ability to graduate with a diploma. Writing is a high-stakes skill. Forty-six states now require proficiency in the Common Core Standards (English Language Arts, Literacy in History / Social Studies, Science, Technical Subjects, and Mathematics) in order for students to graduate from high school. Each of these areas includes a writing component. In order to achieve these standards, a student must be able to write. If students can't (or won't) write, they are in danger of failing to achieve standards required to graduate with a diploma.

Second, writing demands can have a major impact on student behavior. When asked to write, students with ASD often express extreme frustration because it's too hard to put their ideas on paper. In my experience, the most frequent trigger of behavior outbursts in the schools is a "request to do work." What does this phrase usually mean? Write something! When asked to write, challenges in the areas described above often lead to refusal, negative behavior, or even a meltdown. To meet the educational and behavioral needs of students with ASD it is essential that teachers implement evidence-based strategies uniquely designed to meet the writing needs of these students.

What does research tell us?

Until recently, medical science believed that ASD affected only those areas of the brain that controlled social interactions, communication, and problem solving. However, with the advent of brain-imaging tools, new information has emerged. For example, recent brain research has shown that there are significant differences in the way the entire brain functions in individuals with ASD. The most important difference appears to be in the way the various areas of the brain

communicate with each other. In the brain of a person with ASD, messages don't get sent from one section of the brain to another with the same frequency and efficiency as they do in the neurotypical brain (Mostofsky et al. 2009) The "parts" often work well, but they don't "talk" with each other!

This poor communication between key areas of the brain has a dramatic impact on a student's ability to write. The writing process requires a high level of coordination between the various parts of the brain. In order to write, a person must activate the areas of the brain that govern motor control and planning, language skills, sensory feedback problem solving, imitation skills, memory, organization, and proprioception, the awareness of the position of one's own body in space and the body's parts in relation to each other. For this to happen, thousands of neural signals are sent back and forth throughout the brain. The brain of a person with ASD appears to send far fewer of these coordinating neural messages (Just et al. 2004). The result may be compared to a group of people crowded into a room, all working intently on the same project but never letting anyone know what they are doing – inefficient and frustrating, much like the writing process for a person with ASD.

How can a teacher help?

Be a detective. When a student refuses to write, look for the reason. Examine the writing task through the lens of a student with ASD. Consider all four areas of potential difficulty: language, organization, motor control and planning, and sensory regulation. Set the student up for success by implementing strategies to support each of these challenges. The following scenarios are examples of how a teacher or parent can support writing challenges and help individuals with ASD become successful writers.

Concern #1: Language. *"He has great ideas. However, when it's time to write, he can't think of anything to say!"*

Most people with ASD struggle with abstract language. They have difficulty with instructions such as "Take out your journal and write about anything you are interested in." Or "Write about your favorite season." In order to understand what you want them to write about, students need concrete examples and explicit instructions.

Narrow the choices and use pictures. For example, if the student is to write about his favorite season, show him four simple pictures of the seasons. Ask, "Which one do you like best?" When he indicates his favorite, have him write that choice as his title. Then ask, "Why do you like summer best?" As the student talks, the adult writes a list of keywords – one for each of the student's ideas. The student then writes one sentence for each keyword.

Concern #2: Organization. *"His writing is so disorganized. His paragraphs look like a laundry list of facts with no sense of order or sequence."*

Students with ASD have difficulty organizing and sequencing thoughts, especially in print format. They may be able to visualize a well-developed idea, but getting that idea on paper is similar to translating it into a different language. At the sentence level, words are often out of order. At the paragraph level, thoughts often don't logically follow each other. In longer writing tasks, time and sequence are often distorted.

Create a visual-support timeline facilitated by the adult. Draw a long horizontal line on a sheet of paper. Ask the student what he knows about the topic. As the student talks, the adult draws simple pictures (or writes keywords), representing the student's ideas along the straight line. The adult discreetly arranges the pictures in a logical order during this brainstorming process. At the end of the exercise, the student "reads" the assignment to the adult, using the pictures (or keywords) as prompts. This verbal rehearsal helps the student hear the logical flow of the language. The student then completes the writing assignment using the timeline as a visual support.

Concern #3: Motor Control and Planning. *"He can't get started. When I ask him to write, he just sits there."*

Think about inertia, which is defined as resistance or disinclination to motion, action, or change. Inertia appears to be a function of the neurological processes (Reed and McCarthy 2012) that control a person's ability to shift attention and plan voluntary motor movements (Minschew et al. 1997). According to Larson and colleagues (2008), when a person has difficulty with shifting attention and motor planning, the result is often a tendency to stay still (i.e., remain in a state of inertia). Inertia describes the difficulty many individuals with ASD have with getting started on writing assignments.

For younger students, provide hand-over-hand support for the first written word of the assignment. With each letter of the word, keep your hand in place, but slowly fade the pressure of your hand on the student's hand. When you feel that the student has begun to write, slowly fade the presence of your hand. Often this minimal physical prompt will be enough to break the cycle of inertia and allow the student to proceed with the assignment on his own.

For older students, break the cycle of inertia by lightly tapping the paper at the spot where the student is to start writing. Often this silent, noninvasive cue will be enough to help the student initiate movement. The tendency to revert to a state of inertia is strong with students on the spectrum, so the adult will need to be prepared to repeat this silent cue whenever the student appears to be stuck.

Concern #4: Sensory Regulation. *"Every time he's asked to write something, he has a meltdown!"*

The vestibular system controls many of the skills required for writing: equilibrium, balance, the ability to hold the head and neck upright against gravity, bilateral control between the two sides of the body, and eye/hand coordination. When individuals with ASD are required to regulate these sensorimotor challenges, manage the language and organizational challenges needed for

writing tasks, and at the same time filter out the bombardment of sights, sounds, smells, and movements that surround him, the result is often refusal or meltdown.

Provide a movement break *before* starting a writing assignment. Have the student do 30 wall push-ups before sitting down to write. Or, before starting a homework assignment, ask the individual to carry a full laundry basket up and down the stairs a few times. Intersperse fun movement breaks into the writing task (e.g., write five sentences, do five minutes of brisk game activity with a Wii, followed by five more sentences). Not only do these movement breaks provide positive reinforcement for work completion, they also stimulate the vestibular system and help regulate sensory integration needed for writing.

Writing is hard work for students with ASD. Even simple writing tasks require skills in language, organization, motor control and planning, and sensory regulation. Difficulty in these four areas can lead to refusal or meltdown when the student is asked to write. Consider which of the four areas might be affecting your student's ability to write, and intervene with this in mind. With appropriate supports at home and at school, students with ASD can become happy, successful writers!

Kathy Oehler and Cheryl Boucher are coauthors of *I Hate to Write! Tips for Helping Children with Autism Spectrum and Related Disorders Become Successful Writers* (AAPC 2013) Learn more at www.ihatetowrite.com

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