

Helping Students with Disabilities

Common challenges:

- not always knowing which students have disabilities
- feeling lost when attempting to help because you are not a disability services specialist
- not knowing whether a student is failing to meet your expectations because of a disability or due to other factors

Students with disabilities at CSI say:

- “It’s a big help when professors show us examples of papers from other students.”
- “I’m an ‘A’ student—usually—but I still get overwhelmed with research papers. However, when professors give us feedback along the way, I feel more comfortable with the process.”
- “I’ve always struggled with my writing. One semester, I had a professor who used rubrics when he assigned papers. At first, I had no idea what a rubric was, but once I understood the purpose of rubrics and how to use them, I did so much better.”

Suggestions: Just like wheelchair ramps make life easier for people pushing strollers and carts, courses designed with students with disabilities in mind have the potential to help *all* of your students produce their best written work. Research shows that students with disabilities benefit most from explicit instructions and pre-writing activities. Here are a few simple suggestions developed by the WAC team and the CSI Office of Disability Services based on research and work with CSI students that can help you develop assignments that bring out your students’ best writing:

1. Include a statement about the Office of Disability Services in your syllabi

We recommend that faculty include the following statement in their syllabi to encourage students with disabilities to seek assistance from the Office of Disability Services early in the semester:

Any student with a documented disability may be eligible for reasonable accommodations. To determine eligibility and to receive related services, students should contact the Office of Disability Services, which is located on the first floor of the Center for the Arts (1P-101). Please communicate with me regarding your eligibility for accommodations in this course as soon as possible.

2. Give both written and verbal writing prompts and instructions

When instructors explain the assignment in class and in writing, the expectations are clearer for students with learning styles that favor the spoken word and those who learn best when looking at text, helping more students understand the assignment.

3. Ask students to paraphrase the writing prompt and instructions

When students verbally explain or jot down the requirements of the assignment in their own words, their brains switch into an “active” mode and they are likely to begin to think about ideas for their writing, how they will organize their work, and what they need to do to complete the piece. Pre-planning may help students with many types of disabilities work steadily on the assignment and can help students feel less anxious about writing.

4. Let students know from the beginning how their writing will be graded

Students with disabilities benefit from knowing their instructor’s tangible goals for their writing as they work on assignments. One way to communicate these goals is a rubric or list of expectations. A simple rubric handed out with the writing prompt and instructions can help students with disabilities set clear goals for their writing and target areas for improvement in their writing that the instructor considers most important.

5. Show models of finished assignments when giving the initial instructions

Finished assignments show the expectations that the instructor has for written work. Having a model to emulate can help students who may have for years battled anxiety about writing due to their disability feel confident enough to start their assignments sooner, leaving more time to organize and edit their work.

6. Break longer assignments like research papers into smaller, graded parts

Receiving feedback at multiple stages in the process of researching, organizing, writing, and editing longer assignments can give students with disabilities confidence because they know their project is on track due to regular feedback from their instructor. These checkpoints help break the work into manageable segments that students can use when they set goals for their work throughout the semester.

Further reading:

Graham, Steve, Charles MacArthur, Shirley Schwartz, and Victoria Page-Voth. “Improving the Compositions of Students with Learning Disabilities: Using a Strategy Involving Product and Process Goal Setting.” *Exceptional Children* 58, no. 4 (1992): 322-334.

This article concluded that elementary school students with learning disabilities wrote better essays after the assignments were broken into several smaller assignments and the students set goals for what their papers would accomplish.

——— and Karen R. Harris. “Students with Learning Disabilities and the Process of Writing: A Meta-Analysis of SRSD Studies.” In *Handbook of Learning Disabilities*, 323-344. Edited by H. Lee Swanson, Karen R. Harris, and Steven Graham. New York: Guilford Press, 2003.

“In this chapter, we examine how we have tackled this problem” of helping LD students develop a more sophisticated approach to composing papers “head on, by explicitly and directly teaching planning, revising, and other self-regulation procedures for writing to student with LD.” (323-4)

Gregg, Noel. “College Learning Disabled Writer: Error Patterns and Instructional Alternatives.” *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 16, no. 6 (1983): 334-338.

This article contains “a discussion of error patterns of college learning disabled, normal, and basic writers across different tasks” and suggests “a few instructional approaches successful in improving the written language skills of college learning disabled writers, such as sentence combining and guided compositions.” (334)

Johnson, Bruce. “Teaching Writing to Students with Disabilities.” *WAC Journal* 6 (1995): 71-80.
<http://wac.colostate.edu/journal/vol6/johnson.pdf>

“In order to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities, I have made some changes in the way I teach writing to composition students. I used to teach writing as a process stressing drafts and revisions, but I now teach writing as a process stressing prewriting activities and a more step-by-step approach including drafts and revisions.” (71)

Troia, Gary A. and Steve Graham. “The Effectiveness of a Highly Explicit, Teacher-Directed Strategy Instruction Routine: Changing the Writing Performance of Students with Learning Disabilities.” *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 35, no. 4 (2002): 290-305.

This article concluded that elementary school students with learning disabilities “who were taught three planning strategies—goal setting, brainstorming, and organizing—spent more time planning stories in advance of writing and produced stories that were qualitatively better. One month after the end of instruction, students who had been taught the strategies not only maintained their advantage in story quality but also produced longer stories than those produced by their peers who were taught process writing,” although this training did not “transfer to an uninstructed genre, persuasive essay writing.” (290)

Examples of course materials:

A syllabus with a sequenced research paper assignment

A website with an automatic and quick rubric generator: <http://rubistar.4teachers.org/>

Examples of clear writing assignments

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