

Supporting Writing Difficulties

A practical guide from CALL Scotland

Who could help?

- Consult school ICT Coordinator, and colleagues.
- Consult local authority ICT SfL / ASN specialist.
- Check for contact details in your area: www.ictsls.org.uk/

Formulate an action plan for Next Steps, including list of possible technology(ies).

Clarify / launch procedures for obtaining technology needed.

Ensure child's views are taken into account. Share with parents.

Take account of training and support implications.

Establish or expand the Child's Plan, as per LA procedures.

Touchscreen.

A different mouse or large rollerball / trackball.

A joystick with different handle adaptations (T-bar, large foam ball).

A Glidepad or a laptop mouse track-pad.

A switch access system (interface box plus one or two switches) - which scans rows, columns etc.

Positioning for one or all of the above - keyboard risers, mats to prevent slipping etc.

Try to borrow to trial before buying, locally or from CALL Scotland (2 - 3 months only).

Check what is available in school, contact local specialist for further advice.

Word banks - topic dictionaries, sometimes support with pictures and / or text-to-speech.

Mind mapping to visually help plan and organise thoughts and ideas.

Audio: voice recording, often directly into the application (which can be saved for evidence).

Speech recognition - talking to a computer, speech is converted to text.

One of more of the above used in combination with each other, e.g. Clicker, Co:Writer, Texthelp Read@Write, Penfriend, Textease, WriteOnline etc.

Supportive software can include:

Picture or symbol support.

Text-to-speech - speech feedback, text is read aloud.

Word prediction - words are predicted in context after the first or second keypress - sometimes supported with pictures and text-to-speech.

Spell checking - phonetic, audio or symbol supported options are available. Support also available with homophones. Remember hand-held talking spell checkers, digital scanning pens etc.

If staff are not familiar with such software, training should be requested. Check local CPD calendar: Contact CALL Scotland.

- Refer to local SfL / ASN Guidance Document(s).
- Involve SfL / ASN team.
- Consult 'Addressing Dyslexia Toolkit'.
- Consider consulting OT, PT, SLT, Visual Impairment service as needed.

What do writing difficulties arise from?

- Dyslexia / specific learning difficulties with language, reading, spelling?
- Vision or visual processing - acuity, visual field, tracking?
- Cognition - learning, comprehension?
- Physical causes - poor coordination, pencil grip, seating, positioning?

1
Identifying the problems, gathering information, team approach.

2
Identifying problems with physical writing using a pencil/pen.

3
Have you tried the following?

4
Have you tried a computer, tablet or keyboard adaptation?

5
Have you tried customising the screen and computer settings?

6
Have you tried supportive software?

7
Have you tried different access methods?

8
Working in partnership with parents and professionals.

I have a pupil with writing difficulties.
What could help?

The pupil's writing takes excessive time and effort?
The quality of writing output is poor; legibility, spelling, letter shape, length of writing etc?
Is there a difference in quality between what the pupil can write and what they can verbalise, i.e. dictating to a scribe?
The pupil appears reluctant to write?

Poor writing is not because a pupil is lazy or stupid.

- A different size or style of pencil / pen?
- A pencil or pen grip?
- A writing slope?
- Different or better positioning; chair / table / lighting etc?
- One of more of the above in combination?
- Using appropriate writing technology?

Staff who 'don't do computers' is not a valid reason for the pupil not using technology! Hand writing is a life skill - true - but the physical process must be separated from producing content - language and ideas. Pupils must be prepared for a digital future.

Will a classroom computer suffice, or might the pupil need a personal, portable device?

There are different types of keyboards.
e.g. bigger, smaller, high contrast, upper, lower case, keyboard stickers.
Touch screen keyboards; on-screen keyboards controlled by a mouse pointer or external joystick.

If the pupil can't use a keyboard, why not?
Is the keyboard too big, too small, too high and / or wrong size, wrongly positioned?
Is the pupil unfamiliar with the keyboard, e.g. layout, upper case letters?
Do the computer settings need to be personalised?
Does the pupil require additional software to improve typing speed and accuracy?
Does the pupil require an alternative method to input text?

There are many accessories for keyboards.
Keyguards which fit over the keyboard to prevent errors.
Keyboard mounts / risers to aid hand / arm / head positioning.
Dycem mats to prevent keyboard slipping / movement.

Customising the screen can make all the difference, e.g. changing font style, size, background colour etc.
Have you considered adapting the built-in accessibility options such as FilterKeys, StickyKeys, large cursor etc?

If these options are 'locked down' or the pupil is unable to customise their personal settings i.e. make reasonable adjustments, the school could be breaching disability discrimination legislation.

Is the pupil doing appropriate keyboarding tasks? Is copying or typing notes into a word processor really worthwhile? Touch typing is NOT feasible for some pupils so 'keyboard familiarity' practice might be more useful.