



## ***Students with Significant Disabilities, Including Deaf-Blindness: Getting Started with Emergent Writing (Hanser, 2007)***

When supporting beginning students with writing, it is essential that students have real reasons to write. Some quick and easy ideas are listed here. Students DO NOT need to know how to independently read or spell words in order to use any of the alternative pencils. Alternative pencils can be used as a way for students to explore the alphabet, in an effort to simulate the hundreds of hours that typical kids have with drawing and writing with a pencil. It is essential to keep a copy of all students' writing attempts. Students' writing samples offer excellent data to assess for change over a long period of time.

### **General Teaching Strategies**

#### **MODEL, MODEL, MODEL**

Watching peers and adults engaged in an activity or completing a skill is a primary means by which children learn. Language and communication in particular require modeling. Children who are learning to use an alternative pencil need to see the people in their family/classroom model its use.

#### **\*\*Attribute Meaning\*\***

When typical children begin scribbling and writing, their attempts are random and their intentions and writing are unclear to adults. However, based on the context, the adult attributes meaning to the child's attempts. A random mark made by a young child might be interpreted (and celebrated!) as helping mom write the grocery list or paying a bill. This happens repeatedly over time, and this helps the child begin to understand what they are doing and what their writing means. This strategy is equally important to use with students with significant disabilities.

#### **Pause**

When presenting choices, seeking a communication, or asking a question, wait at least 10 seconds (or more!) and keep the talk to a minimum. While the social interaction is critical, it is important to pause and give the student ample time to look at the letter/touch the Braille. Students need time to process the activity, process the print/Braille, think about their choices, and the time to make their body respond. Many students do this best when there is little or no auditory distraction, especially students with cortical vision impairment.



## **Do “Think Outlouds”**

As experienced readers/writers, there are a lot of basic things we have learned about literacy that are unspoken and assumed. Things such as: what writing is for; the functions of writings (lists, letters); and the relationship between letters, sounds, and words; are not obvious to children who are just getting started accessing the alphabet. Given vision, hearing, and motor issues, many students with significant disabilities have even more difficulty understanding this hidden information. Therefore, talking/signing about what you're doing and why will provide an important learning support.

## **Provide DAILY Opportunities**

Skills can't be learned without regular, successful practice. Children without disabilities write every day from the time they enter school, and many write every day beginning when they are very young and begin using crayons, markers, and chalk at home. Students with significant disabilities rarely have this level of opportunity - a fact that greatly influences their literacy learning progress. Daily opportunities to use the alphabet display in the way a very beginning writer might scribble or otherwise explore writing tools are important.

## **AVOID Testing and Known-Answer Questions**

Examples of testing or known-answer questions are: “Find the letter \_\_\_”, “Show me the letter \_\_\_.” These should be avoided as students are just beginning to learn how to manipulate the alphabet. Instead, ask them to write; work with them to interpret their selections; and write down the letters they select on a piece of paper, white board, computer, or something the child can see.

## **Connect The Print to Things the Student Knows About**

Writing is about constructing meaning with print. When connecting the print to things the student already knows, it helps them make sense of the print. For example, Jake writes: “mmhymp.” His mom comments/signs: “Wow, you've written a lot of Ms—that's the first letter of your brother's name—Max!”

## **Keep Copies of Students' Written Work and Celebrate!**

Start accumulating a pile of student writings to share and revisit. Date them and put them up in places for all to see - especially the student. Don't forget the refrigerator door! Change occurs over time so keep everything!



## **Fun and Easy Writing Activities**

**Alphabet Scavenger Hunt-** Student picks a letter and then you have to find something in that room that begins with that letter. Write down things as you find them and talk about them.

**Words About Things I Know-** Student picks a letter and then together you make a list of words that begin with that letter - that are related to things the student knows. Write them down and talk about them. It can be especially motivating to select **actions, pictures and foods** that the student is familiar with. Can later create a short letter/object book with the things you talk about.

**Tongue Twisters-** Student picks a letter and then you make up a short tongue twister using that letter. Write it down and talk about it. These can also be typed into a talking word processor for the student to reread later (using a switch as needed).

**Wheel of Fortune/Hangman-** You think of a short word or phrase that the student is familiar with and draw the lines for the letters. Give student the category that it is in (person, place, animal). As the student picks letters, you either write them on the correct line or in a separate space where un-needed letters are collected. Make it fun by recording a game show buzzer on a single message device, and ask the student to indicate when they are ready to pick another letter (Free sound effects available on web).

**Write Picture Captions-** Offer the student things such as favorite photos from a family photo album or pictures from a magazine or wordless book. Ask the student to pick one and then write about it. Don't expect students who are just getting started to write words or correct sentences. As students get started, they are likely to select random letters that are quite difficult to relate to the photo or picture selected.

**Start a Journal-** Most typical early writers experience writing in a journal. They often draw a picture and write about it - beginning well before they can actually spell any words or even write letters correctly. The same activity can be modified for students with significant disabilities. Help them find a picture and then experiment with alternative pencil to write about it.

**Sign Name for a Real Purpose-** It can be motivating to have students sign their name for a purpose, such as on artwork, reminder notes to family members, and holiday/special occasion cards. Record exactly what they choose on the alternative pencil. DO NOT provide a model for the student to copy while name writing, but make sure there are lots of models of name writing and use throughout the day.