

## TWELVE TYPES OF “CHALLENGING” WRITING STUDENTS

Here are some further descriptions of different kinds of challenging writing students (descriptions are anecdotal with some academic references). Note that the solutions provided here for such students may vary, although we have provided some very basic and informal solutions to these student's concerns:

### 1. UNPREPARED STUDENTS (VERY COMMON)

#### *Conditions*

Students can be “unprepared” for college writing, because of the inexperience with vital college writing skills. There is definitely a lack of awareness of the conventions and expectations of college writing. As Sondra Perl suggests:

Traditionally, these students have been labeled ‘remedial’ which usually implies that teaching ought to remedy what is ‘wrong’ in their written products. Since the surface features in the writing of unskilled writers seriously interfere with the extraction of meaning from the page, much class time is devoted to examining the rules of the standard code. The pedagogical soundness of this procedure has been questioned frequently, but in spite of the debate, the practice continues, and it results in a further complication, namely that students begin to conceive of writing as a “cosmetic” process where concern for correct form supersedes development of ideas. As a result, the excitement of composing, of constructing and discovering meaning, is cut off almost before it has begun (Perl "The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers")

Sondra Perl, Janet Emig, Joseph Harris, David Bartholomae, and other basic writing theorists such as Mina Shaughnessy point comprehensive problems plaguing such students, including:

Poor Handwriting Difficulties

- Spelling Problems
- Poor Vocabulary (lack of variety and sophistication)
- Expletives (there is, it is, that is, etc.)
- Idiomatic Phrases
- Figurative Language
- Colloquialisms
- Common Homonym Confusion
- Subject-Verb Agreement Conflict
- Pronoun-Antecedent Confusion
- Fragments
- Run-on's/Commas Splices
- Long-Sentences
- Sentences Containing Multiple Ideas (contributing to clarity problems)
- Lack of Combined Sentences (mostly simple sentences)
- No Indentations (Formatting)
- Overly Long Paragraphs (No Breaks)
- Overly Short Paragraphs (Underdeveloped)
- Loss of Order of Ideas/Organizational Problems
- Tangents (Unnecessary Material) or Diverging Thoughts
- Tense Changes/Shifts (within Sentences and/or Paragraphs)
- Point of View Changes (within and/or Paragraphs)
- Lack of a Thesis Statements and/or Focus
- Lack of Support and/or Examples

- Lack of a sound introduction and/or sound conclusion
- Lack of Topic Development

### *Solutions*

The maxim, "If you teach a person to fish, then you do not have to fish for them" holds the key to working with Unprepared Students. Remediation in the areas of difficulty is recommended and is possible. Some students have a few isolated difficulties, while other students have multiple difficulties. Offering an assessment and analyzing the assessment to find such difficulties is warranted. Then, consulting directly with the student to address these issues is often a good strategy. Otherwise, suggesting classroom work plus tutoring is always an option. If a writing center is available, recommending that the student attend sessions to address the issues is advisable.

## 2. NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS (COMMON)

### *Conditions*

A temporal gap/space between time of writing skills learned and finally reused seems to be the main issue for these students (usually seen in students who have reentered the college/university setting after years of working). Sometimes, these students lack confidence in their college writing skills, yet they are quick to learn and adapt to whatever they need to be successful.

### *Solutions*

Supportive environments are helpful for re-entry/non-traditional students. Like plants, which need careful attention, they need special attention to foster interest, persistence, and growth. Be aware: Non-Traditional students can be highly successful, provided that they have realistic goals for themselves and realistic expectations of the course. Oftentimes, non-traditional students have problems with new technologies (e.g., even the most basic word-processing technology or classroom management software can be a mystery). Therefore, practice patience and be ready to provide help with any technological challenges.

## 3. COGNITIVELY-DEFICIENT STUDENTS (THEORITICAL)

### *Conditions*

Some scholars suggest that this type of student lacks the cognitive ability to perform common writing tasks. And, although there are many critics of this cause, the basis of these conditions was first proposed by Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, and expanded later by Andrea Lunsford, Ann E. Berthoff, and others. According to Andrea Lunsford, in "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer":

They have not attained that level of cognitive development which would allow them to form abstractions or conceptions. That is, they are most often unable to practice analysis and synthesis and to apply successfully the principles thus derived to college tasks. In short, our students might well perform a given task in a specific situation, but they have great difficulty abstracting from it or replicating it in another context" (Lunsford).

This application is problematic, yet it helps to generate a unique view of the writer, when we understand that they are neither underprepared, non-traditional, nor limited by cultural/racial differences contesting the "status quo." (See Lunsford for more details.). Note: There have been many contestations to this model (See the works of Mike Rose).

### *Solutions*

Predictably, time would be the evidential solution for students with Cognitive-Deficiencies, given that growth and practice spur development and that age increases their intelligence quotient to

some capacity. Another suggestion: Practice, practice, and more practice. Since repetition is the best method for familiarizing and aiding in the progression of any skill, then having the student practice writing in different situations is warranted. The more writing that they can do, the better....

#### 4. UPPER-LEVEL ESL STUDENTS (COMMON)

##### *Conditions*

When ESL students complete their initial ESL education, many are placed into basic writing programs in order to achieve the add practice needed to be successful college writers. Although some ESL students elect to take high-level English courses, many are faced with taking basic writing courses in preparation for much more comprehensive composition courses.

##### *Solutions*

Time and practice, as well as heavy exposure to language, may help the concerns of such students. Encourage such students to read and analyze texts which seem particularly interesting or accessible to them (e.g., magazines, audio books, etc.). Likewise, encourage them to write daily. Exposure seems important in their development, since it has been key to their success previous to not having been exposed to the language. Encourage the student to read English passages daily and write. Tutoring can be a great benefit, although you must encourage the tutor not to do the work for the student.

#### 5. UNDETECTED-ESL STUDENTS (RARE)

##### *Conditions*

These students have second language acquisition problems, which maybe undiscovered because faulty placement testing or the student's own inability to reveal their primary linguistic background. Take for example: Maria (pseudonym), who was born in Mexico, attended elementary school there and is not a native speaker. Yet, she has been acculturated so well and has obtained residence that the faculty couldn't tell that she was born and attended school in Mexico. A constant problem is assessment. The text, *The Bilingualism Reader*, by Li Wei, contains a number of methodological issues and antecedents to the conditions of these writers.

##### *Solutions*

Recognizing such students is the first step to helping them. Once you have helped them to realize the "dominant nature" of their primary language, then isolating the concerns related to such practices is inevitably the method for addressing such issues. Oftentimes, you can find identify such students by allow them to do some sort of autobiographical assignment. Using such information may help to triangulate such concerns. Once you have confirmed their ESL background, then you should work accordingly to help the student.

#### 6. STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES (FAIRLY COMMON)

##### *Conditions*

Disability, simple or complex (e.g., undiagnosed disabilities preventing formulation, organization, and usage of writing nuances/processes), is generally found in these students and the problem is evident in their work. It has been observed that 15% of the general population of the United States have learning disabilities (Monarez). *Public Law (P.L.) 101-476*, under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA), defines a learning disability as a "disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written language, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations..." and includes "such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and basic aphasia."

Writers with disabilities may have the following concerns:

- Letter or word reversals when reading (such as was/saw, b/d, p/q)
- Letter or word reversals in writing
- Poor handwriting or printing ability
- Reversing letters or words when spelling words that are presented orally
- Difficulty comprehending written or spoken directions
- Difficulty with right – left directionality
- Difficulty putting their thoughts on paper

Common Learning Disabilities, which affect the ability to read, write, spell, reason, integrate thoughts and organize, include:

- + Aphasia (concerns the loss of ability to create or comprehend language)
- +Dyslexia (concerns with reading and writing words)
- +Dysgraphia (concerns with forming letters or writing within a defined space)
- +Difficulty with visual perception (concern with sensory perception despite normal hearing and vision)
- +Difficulty with auditory perception/Auditory Processing Disorder
- +Hearing-impaired learners (e.g. Deaf Cultural nuances in writing)
- +Nonverbal Learning Disability (concerns with visual-spatial, organization, or other right-hemisphere functions)
- +Slight Mental Retardation (or Cognitive Impairment)
- +Attention-Deficit Disorder (concerns with inattention and difficulty concentrating to complete a task)
- +Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (concerns with inattention and difficulty concentrating to complete a task)

Other Circumstances Resulting in Learning Disabilities (not as common):

- +Early Onset Dementia
- +Alzheimer's Disease
- +Traumatic Brain Injury
- + Strokes/Transient Ischemic Events

### *Solutions*

Since the students cannot necessarily change their conditions, they must be taught "coping" mechanisms for writing and practicing writing. Additionally, the instructor must also become involved in the situation (learning as much as possible about the nature of such limitations and addressing possible "coping" strategies). Because Federal Laws forbid instructors from discriminating against students, you may find it necessary to approach the student directly (by making them aware of possible concerns you have about the writing or classwork - without divulging that you suspect a learning disability or difference) and work out a plan for them to complete the work well, just as you would for any other student. Or, discuss other options with your Accessibility Services/Disability Services Department on campus (they might facilitate such meetings and be able to offer the student accommodations in your course). Make sure to advocate for the use of such accommodations even if the student declines them, although do not embarrass, expose, or pressure them publicly.

## 7. RESISTANT STUDENT (FAIRLY COMMON)

### *Conditions*

There is an inherent yet unrecognized resistance to mainstream cultural literacies and grammars. A person of different class, color, and even gender may develop a resistance to language acquisition and learning by recognizing or realizing the manifestation of assimilation in

a given cultural situation. This conflict is very similar to the idea of early “childhood trauma.” In a sense, a student develops a disdain for learning and even for teachers. This idea is more closely related to early childhood allegiances to cultural paradigms and ways of thinking which sometimes run contrary to Standard English language use and academic intent. Oftentimes, in terms of cultural resistance, this manifestation occurs in many colleges in the western half of the United States, making it especially prevalent in areas close to the Mexican border and/or Native American reservations, where there is anti-American sentiment, which tends to make writing choices deliberate in some cases. Keith Gilyard in his work, *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*, describes this condition in terms of African-American students and their cultural negotiations in the academy. Other times, a student may just hate education and educators in general.

### *Solutions*

The maxim "You can take the tiger out of the jungle, but you cannot take the jungle out of the tiger," may have some serious resonance with such students. Asking the class to write autobiographic material, which you use to isolate the concerns of this student and understand the previous history of this student, may be necessary. Students who are resistant need some encouragement and some special attention. And, they need to find some sort of positive experience in the classroom in order that they may be able to "rewrite" cultural and psychological scripts which have been put in place before they have arrived in your classroom. You may choose to help them or (conversely) you may see if they are able to "rewrite" such scripts on their own within a positive classroom experience. Since very little research has been written (with any practical implications), making a determination is difficult.

Another factor, which might be important to a student who is resistant, is their focus on achievement and completion. Some students have grown up thinking that education is worthless (and may have been pressured to attend school by family and/or friends). You can point to models which have relevance and provide a foundation for why school may be important. For example, Microsoft founder, Bill Gates may have dropped out of college, but he still went to college. Oftentimes, actors and musicians quit school, but many of them still long to go back to school and finish.

## **8. STUDENTS WITH SUPPRESSED/UNDERDEVELOPED BILINGUALISMS (RARE)**

### *Conditions*

Here, a student is unaware of their use of these bilingualisms. Many of these students seem to begin school in other areas/countries and move to the areas where the college/university is located. Another manifestation of suppressed students are students of color born in households with bilingual parents or at least one bilingual parent, where the student may begin to acquire the second language, but never quite learns the language. However, he/she hears the language many times a day while learning key grammatical concepts in early childhood education. Tony, a student in Perl's "The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers," "He was able to speak Spanish, but he considered English his native tongue..." (Perl). Perl considered this, but never spoke to the important role that being bicultural plays in basic writing. These concerns were, however, addressed by Victor Villanueva, who suggests: "Biculturalism [as in culture and language] does not mean to me an equal ease with two cultures. That is an ideal. Rather, biculturalism means the tensions within, which are caused by being unable to deny the old and the new..." (Villanueva, *Bootstraps*). See Li Wei's *The Bilingualisms Reader* for important antecedents and descriptions relevant to this series of conditions.

### *Solutions*

Similar to resistant students, these students may not only have second-language concerns, but they may have cultural/psychological scripts which need to be rewritten or even written (since they may never have encountered the college course before). Understanding their individual language concerns and making an action plan may be necessary. Likewise, encourage a positive experience in the classroom may be a worthwhile endeavor to help such students.

#### 9. TECHNOLOGICALLY-DEPENDENT STUDENTS (COMMON)

##### *Conditions*

These students allow computerized grammar-correction software to compensate for a lack of understanding of typical conventions. Such students often see technology as the "great fix" for bad writing. The cause is strictly a dependence on technological literacy to solve all problems. Instances of plagiarism with such students is inevitably high.

##### *Solutions*

The solution is simple: Students must be remediated on basic grammatical and basic sentence structure concepts. They must be enlightened to the fact that such programs only locate about 70% of the errors in a given paper (mostly grammatical), although such software does not locate stylistic errors or formatting errors, such concepts are strictly found by the author.

#### 10. TECHNOLOGICALLY-INFLUENCED STUDENTS (THEORITICAL)

##### *Conditions*

Supposedly, the technologically-influenced student's writing mirrors the neologisms of technological literacy/practice, such as internet "chat" talk or internet shorthand, even cellular phone "texting". Student believe that these "shortcuts" are appropriate for all writing and have usually been "passed" from grade to grade without further repercussion or indication to the limitations of this type of "talk." These conditions have been proposed by several scholars; however, most recently, work by David Crystal (as found in his text, *Txtng: the Gr8 Db8*) may suggest otherwise; students, as Crystal suggests, are becoming more engaged in literacy as they engage in social networking and even the practice of texting. In fact, their interest in language becomes even more evident the more they "text."

##### *Solutions*

Hypothetically, reinforcing the differences between formal/informal language choices, as well as the difference between the modes of language (e.g., speaking and writing), should help to drive such students to change.

#### 11. STUDENTS WITH UNCONTROLLED MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS (COMMON)

##### *Conditions*

Typically, some students seek admission to the college/university with some difficulties (based in part or entirely on mental health; being either mentally-challenged or rehabilitating from some form of addiction). Even with treatment and counseling, these students are prone to mood swings (sometimes extreme), an inability to concentrate, impulsive behavior, delusions, anxiety, mania, depression, disorganized thinking, confusion, delirium, withdrawn social interactions, and other anomalous forms of behavior. Moreover, such difficulties make learning much more challenging for these students.

##### Typical Disorders:

- +Anxiety
- +Panic Disorder
- +Depression
- +Bipolar Disorder (Mania/Depression)

- +Psychotic Disorder (including Schizophrenia, substance-induced Psychosis, etc)
- +Body-Dismorphic Disorder (including Eating Disorders, Self-Image Disorders, etc)
- +Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
- +Personality Disorders (including Borderline Personalities, Multiple Personalities, Avoidant Behavior, Paranoid Behavior, Anti-social Behavior, etc)
- +Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders
- +Drug/Chemical Addiction
- +Sexual Addiction

#### *Solutions*

Since the range of mental health problems is mind-boggling, an instructor may simply monitor the situation and work with accessibility/disability services if needed. Otherwise, you might (with the help of a coworker - preferably a person from accessibility services/disability services/or counseling/advising) approach the student and explain how their illness/concerns may be interfering with their work and how they might need to adjust their care in order to successfully complete the course and their education in general).

## 12. STUDENTS WITH OVERLY-SOCIAL CAPACITIES OR TYPE-A PERSONALITIES (FAIRLY COMMON)

#### *Conditions*

Typically, some students, possessing strong, hyperactive, or even overbearing type-A personality, may use their social intelligence to compensate for the learning of the skills essential for good writing. In many cases (from the instructor's perspective - conscious or unconsciously), their charm and wit may be used as a substitute for their poor writing abilities, where the instructor allows themselves to be manipulated. If they do not achieve well in your course, they may become even more loveable or even (conversely) violent or malicious.

#### *Solutions*

An instructor may find it necessary to address an over-active student from the first-day of class, explaining how such behavior may be distracting to others, particularly "those with special needs and others who have difficulty concentrating." Such an address should be quick, direct, confidential, and thorough. Additionally, students who use charm to persuade the instructor should be "steered" into reality (e.g., allow the student to work with a more advanced student - allowing the type-A student to see how others are able to work much harder and to create much more substantial discourse - spurring drive in the student). Finally, students who resort to violent or malicious behavior should be advised to seek another class immediately (otherwise, contact the department chair/supervisor/security or the authorities, immediately if needed). You might explain something along these parameters: "Teachers are like shoes... not all shoes fit the wearer... you may need to find another instructor... one who may be able to give you the attention and help you need... I am not able to..." Then, work with an advisor/counselor to place the student into another section or other course.