

## Learning Difficulties Australia

Learning Difficulties Australia is an association of teachers and other professionals dedicated to assisting students with learning difficulties through effective teaching practices based on scientific research.



 [www.ldaustralia.org](http://www.ldaustralia.org)
 @LearningDifficultiesAustralia

 [enquiries@ldaustralia.org](mailto:enquiries@ldaustralia.org)
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## Robyn Bartram Occupational Therapist

B. App. Sci. (OT)



Robyn is a Victorian Occupational Therapist and runs her own Private Practice. In both her Private Practice, and while she was working with students with hand injuries at the Royal Children's Hospital, Robyn has been involved in applying to the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority for Special Examination Arrangements for more than 20 years.

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## Handwriting for Secondary School Exams

Robyn Bartram  
Occupational Therapist B. App. Sci.(O.T.)



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## Writing Challenges in Senior School

In previous LDA webinars I have focused on developing writing skill with primarily younger students.

In this session I will be focusing on the older student and the challenges they face.

Lockdowns have resulted in an explosion of applications for Special Provisions.



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## Special Provisions Caseload

Many will be students I have seen in the past – approximately half.

The other half will be new to me – may never have seen anyone for their writing before.

**It is a great help if teachers have documented the issue in reports and in feedback on assessments.**



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## Differing School Attitudes

Some schools are highly organized and well prepared.

They recommend students seek handwriting assessment, save a handwritten exam paper from year 11 and refer on for assessment, provide me with due dates for reports and examples of student challenges.



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## Differing School Attitudes

Some schools are not so supportive.

They advise students that applying for Special Provisions is a waste of time, despite the student having catastrophically slow writing, severe pain, highly illegible writing or extreme difficulty converting their thoughts into writing.

Students at these schools are often advised to try harder to write faster or make their writing neater, or to ignore their pain. Sometimes these students are just considered to be low achievers.



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## I am here to advise you that.....

There is help.

In Victoria, the VCAA has policies in place for Unit 3&4 exams and will give advice on implementing supports for students for exams and assessments in the years leading up to VCE.

This can be very motivating for students to receive early assistance as they begin to pass exams instead of failing.



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## Assessments

- DASH and DASH 17+.
- Handwriting Legibility Scale.
- Wong Baker Faces Pain Scale.
- Beighton Scale of Joint Hypermobility
- Clinical examination of the hand.
- Description of pen grip and handwriting.



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## DASH and DASH 17+

- Version 2 of this test should be available soon.
- This test gives the best picture of students' writing speed with info gathered over a number of subtests.
- The DASH 17+ is essentially the same test but with norms for older students. Very useful for tertiary students.
- In Victoria the test is mandated for some Special Provisions applications.



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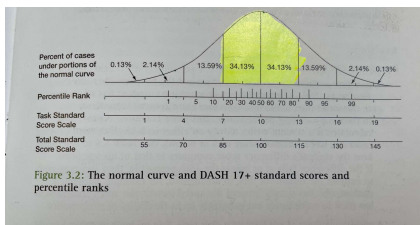
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## The Normal Curve



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## Dysgraphia or Specific Learning Disorder in Written Expression

### Subtypes:

- Letter formation and legibility – graphomotor dysgraphia
- Writing speed – graphomotor dysgraphia
- Spelling difficulties - dyslexic dysgraphia
- Grammar and composition difficulties
- Executive dysgraphia – retrieval, sequencing, fluency, working memory



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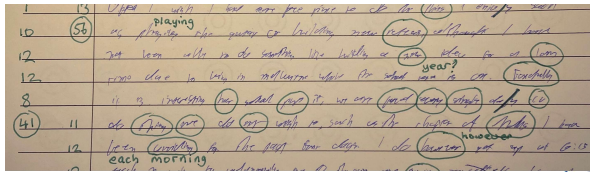
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### Illegible Writing –like this.....



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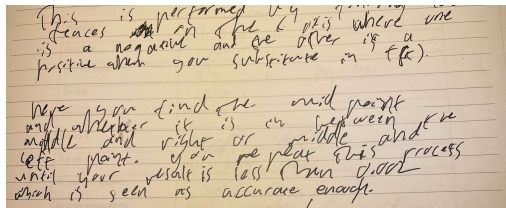
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### Or like this.....



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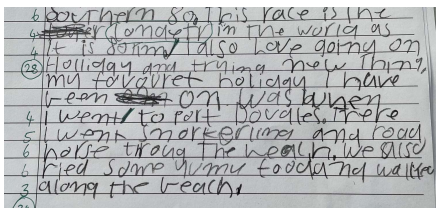
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### Or this.....



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Or like this.....

4 a hobby of mine is video games on my computer  
10 with my friends. i play many games such as risk  
9 csgo and fortnite. i often play these games being  
10 on average friends probably play from around 2-3 hours  
2 per day.



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## Handwriting Legibility Scale

### • Reference:

\* Barnett A, Prunty M, Rosenblum S, Development of the Handwriting Legibility Scale - A Preliminary Examination of Reliability and Validity, Research in Developmental Disabilities 72 (2018) 240-247.



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## Handwriting Legibility Scale – 5 criteria

- Legibility – overall impression based on first reading.
- Effort – overall impression of effort to read first time.
- Layout on page – spacing, alignment to the line, margin etc.
- Letter and word formation – shape, closure size, slope.
- Alterations – none or overwriting evident in most words.
- 1-5 points for each item.
- Total words and spelling errors are counted.
- Years of experience of assessor also noted.



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## Pain -



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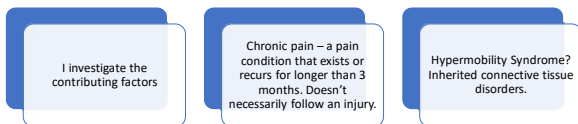
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## If pain is an issue....



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## Hypermobility Syndrome

- Inherited connective tissue disorders eg. Marfan Syndrome, Ehlers Danlos Syndrome, Loeys Dietz Syndrome.
- Structural differences in the connective tissue.
- Central pain sensitization occurs early in life.
- At risk of recurrent subluxations and dislocations, tissue fragility, nerve entrapments and sometimes spinal instability.



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### Beighton Scale of Hypermobility

- I always complete this scale which gives a score out of 9 for the degree of hypermobility.
- I add clinical observations as well. Scale does not include the distal finger joints – stability here is critical for a good pen grip.



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### Clinical Examination of the Writing Hand

- Thumb stability – MCP and IP joints
- Thumb Range of Movement – active and passive
- Stability of distal finger joints



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### Pen Grip and Pen Manipulation

- Describe the grip and the writing process
- Describe the pen manipulation skills



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### Pen manipulation



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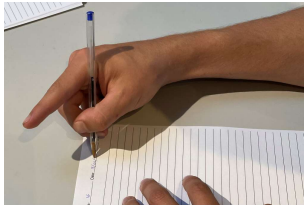
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### Altered grip post football injury



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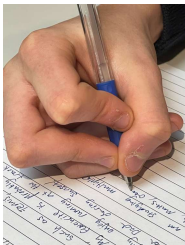
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### Hyper mobile finger or thumb joints



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## Assessment - TeleHealth

- I can usually complete this in 90 minutes.
- I can do most of this via Zoom if I have a good clear picture.
- Best picture of the student writing was often achieved through a good mobile phone because of the high-definition camera.
- Position of computer/phone angled towards writing from the non-writing side.



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## Face-to Face Assessment is ideal.

- In my practice the parent is welcome during the assessment and can often offer valuable insights.



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## Last minute applications

The ones I am involved in generally relate to a hand injury.

I have been asked if the student can remove their splint to write a 3-hour exam.



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## Report writing

- Keep reports concise.
- Include a summary of key findings.
- Include precise recommendations for this student.



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## Report Writing

**Provide helpful examples** – for example, a 16-year-old student is writing 15 words per minute for Free Writing in the DASH. The average speed at this age is 24 words per minute.

**Your report might say** "15 words per minute is the average writing speed of the typical 10-year-old student, so John, who is aged 16, could be considered to be writing 6 years below expectations for writing speed for his age"



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## Report writing

- Only use the term Dysgraphia if you have a confirmed diagnosis.
- Only ask for Special Provisions which can be justified and are fair and equitable – to help the student participate in the exams.
- Special Provisions are not to help a student achieve their potential – that should have been done in the years leading up to the exams.
- Special Provisions or Reasonable Adjustments are to enable the student to participate fully in the exam.



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## Links for each state

- **NSW:**  
<https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/11-12/hsc/disability-provisions/hsc-disability-provisions-guide-for-teachers-and-parents>
- **SA:**  
<https://www.sace.sa.edu.au/web/special-provisions>



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## More state links

- **Vic**  
<https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/administration/special-provision/Pages/SpecialExaminationArrangements.aspx>
- **WA**  
[https://senior-secondary.scsa.wa.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/76182/Schools-Guide-to-Special-Provisions-in-ATAR-Course-Examinations-2022-Information-for-Case-Coordinaors.pdf](https://senior-secondary.scsa.wa.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/76182/Schools-Guide-to-Special-Provisions-in-ATAR-Course-Examinations-2022-Information-for-Case-Coordinaors.pdf)



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- **Qld - Access Arrangements and Reasonable Adjustments**
- Principal reported – units 1&2
- QCAA approved –units 3&4  
<https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/senior/certificates-and-qualifications/qce-qcia-handbook/6-aara/6.4-reporting-q-approving>
- **Tas – Reasonable Adjustments**  
<https://www.tasc.tas.gov.au/students/years-11-and-12/preparing-for-exams/reasonable-adjustments/>

\*I did notice a closing date on the Tasmanian webpage



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References

- Dash and DASH 17+ handbooks
- Pain – The Noigroup
- Barnett A, Prunty M, Rosenblum S. Development of the Handwriting Legibility Scale - A Preliminary Examination of Reliability and Validity. *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 72 (2018) 240-247.
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- Sys D, DeWandele I, Rombaut L, Malfait F. Hypermobility, the Ehlers-Danlos syndromes and chronic pain. *Clinical and experimental rheumatology*. 2017;35 Suppl(107(5)):116-22.
- Voermans NC, Knoop H, Bleijenberg G, van Engelen BG. Pain in Ehlers-Danlos syndrome is common, severe, and associated with functional impairment. *Journal of pain and symptom management*. 2010;40(3):370-8.
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