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PREPARING STUDENTS WITH DYSLEXIA AND OTHER SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES FOR PARTICIPATION IN HIGH STAKES ASSESSMENTS

By Sandra J. Thompson and Winnelle Carpenter

Winnelle Carpenter is an educational consultant who prepares students with dyslexia and other specific learning disabilities for high stakes graduation tests. Through this experience, Winnelle has identified several areas of difficulty that are common to many students, some of which can be remediated through instruction and accommodations and others that could be reduced or even eliminated through the use of universal design. Universally designed assessments are designed and developed from the beginning to be accessible and valid for the widest range of students, including students with disabilities (Thurlow, Quenemoen, & Thompson, in press). Like the curb cuts and ramps that grew out of environmental and architectural universal design, universally designed assessments are likely to make tests better for everyone.

Winnelle believes, "All brains are awesome and all are wired differently." She emphasizes that each student's skills and needs are unique and what works best for one student may not work at all for another - so generalizations about instruction, accommodations, and test design cannot be made about an entire group. In this paper, Winnelle discusses eight common areas of assessment difficulty for students with dyslexia and other specific learning disabilities and suggests a variety of instructional strategies, test accommodations, and test design possibilities that may help alleviate these difficulties. This is followed by suggestions for specific test taking skills.

Time Constraints. Sometimes students who need extended time to complete a test will not use it because they do not want to be the last person finished. Self-advocacy is important here. Students should be able to respond to questions about why it takes them so long to finish a test with responses like "because that's what I need to do my best." Students who need extended time could also request to take a test in a different room so that no one sees how long it takes. Winnelle has even seen students who prefer to sit in a room with all of the other students and pretend to take a test, and then come in after school to take the test individually, with extended time.

Lining up columns on a math test. Math tests often require students to show their work, and then leave open space for writing. Sometimes graph paper is provided with tests; other times it may be allowed as an accommodation. However, graph paper is only useful for students who have experience using it to line up numbers.

Marking answers on a bubble sheet. Marking responses to test items on a separate answer sheet can be disastrous for a student who is accidentally off by one problem across most of the test. This can be remedied by requesting to write in the test booklet as an accommodation (after which a scribe transfers the responses to a bubble sheet). As a universal design feature, tests can be designed with scannable test booklets, eliminating the need for a separate answer sheet.

Narrow columns and hyphenated words. Because of problems with visual closure, it may be difficult for students with dyslexia to remember the part of a word that has been hyphenated long enough to connect it to the remainder of the word. Test items that extend text across a page and do not use the hyphens may be easier for these students to read.

Paragraph indentation. Some students have difficulty with test items that ask questions about specific paragraphs in a reading passage (e.g., instructional strategy and possibly an accommodation, students

should learn to use a highlighter to mark paragraph changes and to number paragraphs. To increase the universal accessibility of assessments, paragraphs can be pre-numbered on test booklets.

Distracting phrases. Distracting text that includes things like double negatives (e.g., "none but"), do not measure knowledge and skill, but instead measure a student's ability to recognize and work out the "tricks." Figurative language (e.g., "happy as a lark" or "out on a limb") is another distraction that is usually extraneous to the content an item is designed to measure. Universally designed assessments avoid these types of extraneous distractions for all students, which may increase the accuracy of test results.

Unfamiliar proper names in reading passages. In order to avoid cultural bias, tests often use proper names from a variety of countries. Students with dyslexia may not recognize these as names. Winnelle suggests that a simple solution in test item design is to use names that are simple and common across several cultures (e.g., "Kim" rather than "Eunjung") and to identify a word as a person's name, (e.g., "the girl named Maria". As an instructional strategy, students should practice looking for context cues that will help them recognize proper names.

Light sensitivity. Some students with dyslexia may experience light sensitivity that interferes with print resolution and affects reading ability (e.g., cause letters to appear to move on a page). To increase accessibility for a variety of students, tests should not be printed on white paper - for example, using dark print on light gray paper can reduce glare. As an accommodation, students may request seating for assessments that is not near windows or bright lights. It is also important for print to be very clear (e.g., excessive photo-copying may cause print to blur.) Larger print (e.g., 14 point) tends to be clearer and easier to read than small print (e.g., 10 point).

Test taking skills. Taking multiple-choice tests requires specific skills and strategies that students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities need to learn. It consists of much more than just taking a bunch of practice tests. Here is Winnelle's list of some of these important strategies and skills:

- . read through all of the possible answers
- . use a "process of elimination" to get rid of the least likely responses first
- . skip over difficult test questions and return to them at the end
- . mentally rewrite a test question. For example, for the question, "Which of these is a fact about Sarah Avery?" ask instead, "Three of these are opinions about Sarah and one is a fact. Which of these is a fact about Sarah Avery?"
- . isolate and practice specific skills like drawing conclusions, identifying the main idea, cause and effect; compare and contrast
- . track text with a pencil or finger tip
- . use a highlighter to mark key words and phrases
- . on a math test, identify and highlight key words that describe which operation should be used (e.g., add, more, sum, total).
- . relax by taking brief breaks and having a snack (if allowed). Sometimes frequent breaks are allowed as a test accommodation.

Knowing these strategies, however, will not help a student who is unfamiliar with the test content. Having access to content instruction along with useful strategies for learning and test-taking are the most critical tools students with learning disabilities can take with them into a test situation.

Reference

Thurlow, M. L., Quenemoen, R. F., & Thompson, S.J. (in press). *Universally Designed Assessments*. (Syntheses Report). University of Minnesota National Center on Educational Outcomes.

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