

# SWIM

## PROJECT BRIEF

### #1

## KEY POINTS

- > Too often, writing instruction for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) focuses on the mechanics and orthography of writing (e.g., letter formation, punctuation) at the expense of the communication and cognition that are essential parts of the writing process.
- > To become writers, students need frequent, sustained opportunities to communicate and organize ideas and information. Students also must be afforded opportunities to translate those ideas into written text that is understandable to others.
- > SWIM provides a model for this type of writing instruction.
- > SWIM can be adapted for the full continuum of writing (pre-emergent, emergent, transitional, conventional) and provides options for how students with a range of disabilities can access the alphabet.



**SHARED  
WRITING**  
Instructional Model

# Meaningful Writing Instruction for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

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## Writing is important

Literacy instruction for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) has historically emphasized reading over writing.<sup>1</sup> However, writing is a necessary part of comprehensive literacy instruction that helps students develop reading comprehension and learn across the curriculum.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, communication is a commonly valued part of the curriculum for students with ID, and yet learning to communicate in writing is often not a major focus of instruction.

Writing is the product of a complex set of processes in which students translate and organize their ideas into a text that is understandable to others.<sup>3</sup>

Writing to communicate ideas can support academic learning (including in new content areas)<sup>4</sup>, attainment of communication goals, and self-advocacy skills. Writing is a critical tool for students with ID, including those with extensive support needs, to increase their communication skills, socialization and independence.<sup>5</sup> These outcomes can also support greater inclusion for students with disabilities.



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Swinburne Romine, R., Karvonen, M., & Thatcher, E. (2023). *Meaningful writing instruction for Students with Intellectual Disabilities* (SWIM Project Brief #1). University of Kansas, Accessible Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Systems.

## Limits of current writing instruction

Historically, writing instruction for students with ID has not received as much attention as reading, especially for students with extensive support needs who are eligible for statewide alternate assessments. Additionally, instruction focused on standard English conventions more so than audience and purpose, organizing ideas, or revising.<sup>6</sup> Current textbooks emphasize reading within English language arts standards<sup>7</sup> and view writing mechanics as a prerequisite for more complex writing and emphasize correctness of written text rather than the communicative intent of the writer.<sup>8</sup> These methods may not go far enough to help students with ID learn to communicate their ideas through writing. A pre-pandemic, large-scale data set based on teacher surveys about students with significant cognitive disabilities indicated that more than half of students demonstrated writing skills no higher than scribbling, copying letters, or writing using picture symbols or word banks; students with dual sensory loss in addition to significant cognitive disabilities primarily scribbled or randomly wrote or selected letters.<sup>9</sup>



A writing curriculum that prioritizes copying or tracing letters, writing familiar words, or choosing correct words to complete a sentence:

- > treats writing as a mechanic activity rather than a means to communicate about ideas and information.
- > may require fine motor activities (which can be inaccessible for some students) at the expense of understanding how written text conveys meaning through alphabetic symbols.
- > may presume that students already make meaning of symbolic text; presymbolic communicators are excluded.
- > does not support comprehensive literacy learning by reinforcing reading comprehension skills or encourage students to interact with text in increasingly complex ways.

The goal of writing instruction for students with ID should be to provide opportunities for students to use writing to communicate.<sup>10</sup> Adhering only to the form of writing by emphasizing copying or tracing words limits the opportunity for student voice. Similarly, writing instruction that consists of communicating using limited symbol systems or selecting from word banks limits students' ability to convey complex ideas and information. The goal of writing instruction should be for the student to convey meaning. To achieve this, instruction needs to focus on the **writing process** and the **writing product**.

# How do students develop as writers?

Just as no one is born knowing how to read, no one is born knowing how to write. As all students receive meaningful literacy instruction, they move from pre-emergent writing to emergent writing, to transitional writing, and finally to conventional writing. As students become more proficient at conveying their ideas using the alphabet and become more conventional writers, they can then learn how to follow writing conventions that make their written products understandable to a wider audience. This approach to writing instruction better prepares students with ID to pursue a wide range of postsecondary opportunities.

Students with ID have a wide range of communication skills and access needs during writing instruction. The table below describes levels of writing and gives examples of writing process components and the types of writing products associated with each level.

Pre-Emergent	Emergent	Transitional	Conventional
<b>Description</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Does not yet have symbolic understanding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Emerging symbolic understanding</li> <li>&gt; May recognize print</li> <li>&gt; May understand that print has meaning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Understands that letters comprise words</li> <li>&gt; Understands the purpose of writing as a communication tool</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Reads texts</li> <li>&gt; Can compose texts using writing tool</li> <li>&gt; Understands basic conventions of printed language.</li> </ul>
<b>Process</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Communication with a skilled partner</li> <li>&gt; Making choices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Learning to choose topics</li> <li>&gt; Learning to describe with words</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Chooses topics for writing</li> <li>&gt; Elaborates on topic with ideas and information</li> <li>&gt; Understands that texts have a purpose</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Chooses topics and organizes relevant ideas and information</li> <li>&gt; Plans for text purpose</li> <li>&gt; Plans for audience</li> </ul>
<b>Products</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Not yet producing writing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Idiosyncratic products that may include scribbles or marks</li> <li>&gt; Likely not understandable by others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Identifiable words which may include invented spelling</li> <li>&gt; Writing may be meaningful to a skilled reader such as teacher or parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Writing products adhere to standard conventions</li> <li>&gt; Texts are meaningful to others and communicate about ideas and information</li> </ul>

Additional descriptions of each writing level, and strategies for instruction are found in *BRIEF 3: USING SWIM TO SUPPORT EFFECTIVE DIFFERENTIATION OF WRITING INSTRUCTION*.

## What is critical for effective writing instruction?

SWIM writing instruction combines student-focused instructional planning with research-based support for teachers. SWIM creates authentic experiences for students to write about what they think and know. The student-centered approach shifts instruction from how teachers teach to how students learn.

Teachers begin the writing process by setting goals for the instructional cycle that can be accomplished by shared writing. Teachers facilitate both the process and production of written text by the student. Because writing is expressive communication, teachers should focus on interactive, engaging communication that leads to translating student ideas and information into written texts. The SWIM Sequence Steps provide a flexible writing instructional routine for all students.

See SWIM Brief #2: SHARED WRITING: A STRATEGY FOR TEACHING STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES for more information on the five SWIM Sequence Steps.

### Characteristics of Meaningful Writing Instruction Using SWIM

1. Plan for the student's writing level.
2. Make writing instruction engaging and relevant.
3. Provide access to an appropriate writing tool and a robust language system.
4. Use think-alouds to model and instruct all five SWIM Sequence Steps with students over multiple lessons or instructional cycles.
5. Integrate writing into daily comprehensive literacy instruction.
6. Use formative assessment approaches.





## How can my student write if they can't hold a pencil?

Regardless of a student's instructional level, the shared writing model requires students to have access to a writing tool that can use all 26 letters of the alphabet. Students can write with any writing tool that allows them to select from all letters and combine those letters to form words. The table below shows a variety of tools that students can use for writing in SWIM instruction.

Writing Tool	What makes the tool useful?	How do students use the tool?
<b>Keyboards</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Letter arrangement is standard across devices</li> <li>&gt; Allow for students to easily edit their writing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Students can use traditional computer keyboards to compose text using word processing software</li> </ul>
<b>Alternate Keyboards</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Larger displays and additional space between letters</li> <li>&gt; Still provide all letters and punctuation available in a traditional keyboard</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Students with visual or mobility impairments may benefit from the use of an alternate keyboard</li> </ul>
<b>Pencil/Pen/Markers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Some students may be most comfortable writing with pens, pencils, or markers on paper or whiteboards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Drawing letter shapes is not the main focus of writing instruction</li> <li>&gt; Many students become excellent writers only using keyboards or other electronic devices</li> </ul>
<b>Alternative pencils</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; A student can use these systems, which might include eye-gaze frames or alphabet flip charts, to select letters with a skilled partner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; These technological systems that are designed for students who cannot physically use a keyboard or hold a pencil</li> </ul>
<b>Speech-to-Text</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Some students may find it easiest to use speech-to-text programs to be able to verbally dictate words and sentences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; It is important that students understand that the displayed transcription shares the meaning of the words spoken</li> <li>&gt; Students should be able to re-read and edit their writing</li> </ul>

# Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Browder, D. M., Ahlgrim-Delzell, L., Courtade, G., Gibbs, S. L., & Flowers, C. (2008). Evaluation of the effectiveness of an early literacy program for students with significant developmental disabilities. *Exceptional Children, 75*(1), 33–52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290807500102>
- <sup>2</sup> Graham, S., & Herbert, M. (2011). Writing-to-read: A meta-analysis of the impact of writing and writing instruction on reading. *Harvard Educational Review, 81*(4), 710–744. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.81.4.t2k0m13756113566>
- <sup>3</sup> Abbott, R. D., Berninger, V. W., & Fayol, M. (2010). Longitudinal relationships of levels of language in writing and between writing and reading in grades 1 to 7. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 102*(2), 281–298. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019318>; Koppenhaver, D., & Williams, A. (2010). A conceptual review of writing research in augmentative and alternative communication. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication, 26*(3), 158–176. <https://doi.org/10.3109/07434618.2010.505608>
- <sup>4</sup> Bangert-Drowns, R. L., Hurley, M. M., & Wilkinson, B. (2004). The effects of school-based writing-to-learn interventions on academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research, 74*(1), 29–58. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074001029>;
- <sup>5</sup> Wollak, B. A., & Koppenhaver, D. A. (2011). Developing technology-supported, evidence-based writing instruction for adolescents with significant disabilities. *Assistive Technology Outcomes and Benefits, 7*(1), 1–23.
- <sup>6</sup> Karvonen, M., Wakeman, S. Y., Browder, D. M., Rogers, M. A. S., & Flowers, C. (2011). *Academic curriculum for students with significant cognitive disabilities: Special education teacher perspectives a decade after IDEA 1997*. Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina at Charlotte, National Alternate Assessment Center.
- <sup>7</sup> e.g., Hudson, M. (2020). Teaching English Language Arts Standards across the Grades. In D. M. Browder, F. Spooner, & G. R. Courtade (Eds.), *Teaching students with moderate and severe disabilities* (2nd ed., pp. 160-190). Guilford Press.
- <sup>8</sup> Pennington, R. (2020). Promoting Writing: Creation of Permanent Product Communications. In D. M. Browder, F. Spooner, & G. R. Courtade (Eds.), *Teaching students with moderate and severe disabilities* (2nd ed., pp. 191-208). Guilford Press.
- <sup>9</sup> Karvonen, M., Beitling, B., Erickson, K., Morgan, S., & Bull, R. (2021). *Students with significant cognitive disabilities and dual sensory loss*. Co-published by Accessible Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Systems and the National Center on Deaf-Blindness. University of Kansas, Accessible Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Systems (ATLAS). National Center on Deaf-Blindness (NCDB)
- <sup>10</sup> Erickson, K. A., & Koppenhaver, D. (2020). *Comprehensive literacy for all: Teaching students with significant disabilities to read and write*. Brookes Publishing.

# Notes

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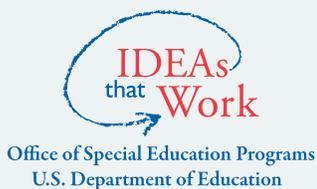
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*For more information, please contact SWIM at:*

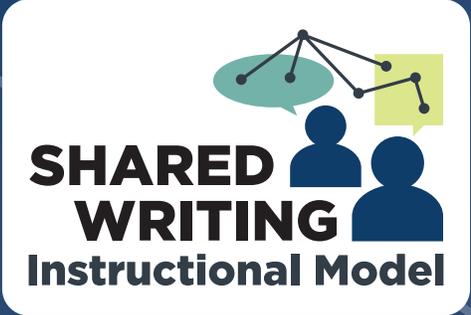


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This publication was developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (H326M180010). However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.



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