

The Reluctant Writer

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Many adults who have language-based learning problems are reluctant writers. They do not write much, if at all, because when they write, they expose weaknesses, such as poor spelling or grammar, awkward sentence structure, and/or illegible handwriting. Many individuals who have a racing mind (attention problems) rarely communicate in writing because it takes too long and when they do write, they often skip words and/or ideas. When these individuals proofread, if they take the time to do so, they often will not find the words or ideas missing, inserting them orally as they read what they wrote.

When individuals who have poor writing skills try to write, they usually write using spoken language rather than written language. Spoken language differs from written language in one very fundamental way; it uses the environment to convey much of the meaning. When a speaker refers to *this room*, there is no need to describe the room the person is referring to because the listener sees the room as the speaker is referring to it. When one writes about *this room*, the writer needs to describe the room so that the reader can form a mental picture of the room. The reluctant writer who writes using speech usually communicates in vague generalities, resulting in ambiguous text.

If you have difficulty hearing the subtle sounds in words, it is difficult to use those sounds as a spelling technique. For example: if the person hears and pronounces the word *immediately* as *emediately*, he or she will probably spell it as *emediately*. I call this auditory perception problem *blurred hearing* because my students can understand the latter more easily than the former.

The following techniques I have found helpful for both motivating the reluctant writer and helping the person to increase his or her skills in the use of written language. These writing exercises should be used every day. They are simple and therefore manageable. The person should set concrete goals so that the writing is measurable.

1. The first exercise is writing sentence parts. The person writes sets of noun phrases, and verb phrases. These sentence parts help the learner understand sentence structure by focusing attention on the structure of language rather than on the trying to communicate ideas in what are often awkward sentences. These sentence parts can then be combined to form sentences concretely demonstrating complete thoughts.
2. The three five-word sentences exercise involves the daily writing of sets of three sentences that contain exactly five words. By restricting each sentence to five words, the learner must craft the sentence rather than just write, as one would speak.
3. These two exercises provide the basis for the next exercise, which I call expanding drafts. The person expands the sentence parts and/or the three-five word sentences by adding modifiers, adjectives, adverbs, propositional phrases and clauses. This exercise emphasizes the addition of detail to written language and provides the reluctant writer with specific tasks that develop skill. By practicing writing with these exercises daily, the adult learner will write more and eventually be better able to express his or her thoughts in writing.

Individuals who miss a lot of errors when they proofread can try these techniques.

- The first is to proofread for the same one item at a time through the whole document before checking the next item. Using this method, the writer would check each sentence for the first word to begin with a capital letter. Next the person would go back and check that each sentence ends with a period. The next step might be to check for agreement of subject and verb or for spelling. It is fine for the person to mark or correct a missing period while checking for capital letters.
- Some people find it helpful to proofread starting at the end of the document and work back to the beginning.
- Another technique for proofreading is to break the sentences into segments, checking each segment, such as groups of two or three words, then checking two segments together, and then larger segments until the sentence and then the paragraph is checked as a whole.
- Students who add missing words as they proofread can sharpen their proofreading skills by proofreading the writing of others since they do not have the words they are proofreading already in their thoughts.

Individuals who have weak spelling skills need to change their self-image from being a poor speller to being an improving speller. This change of attitude helps the person to focus on the spelling of the words rather than just writing letters to spell words. **There are many alternative spelling techniques that learners can use to help them remember how to spell words.**

- The most direct way to improve spelling is to collect the correct spelling of the words that the person frequently misspells. The person can use a WordNet (any tool for collecting words) and collect these words, referring to this repository until they can spell the words correctly.
- For those words that just don't stick, the person can learn memory tools. You can find samples of such spelling memory tools on my website, www.learningdifferences.com and go to the section on mnemonic clues.