

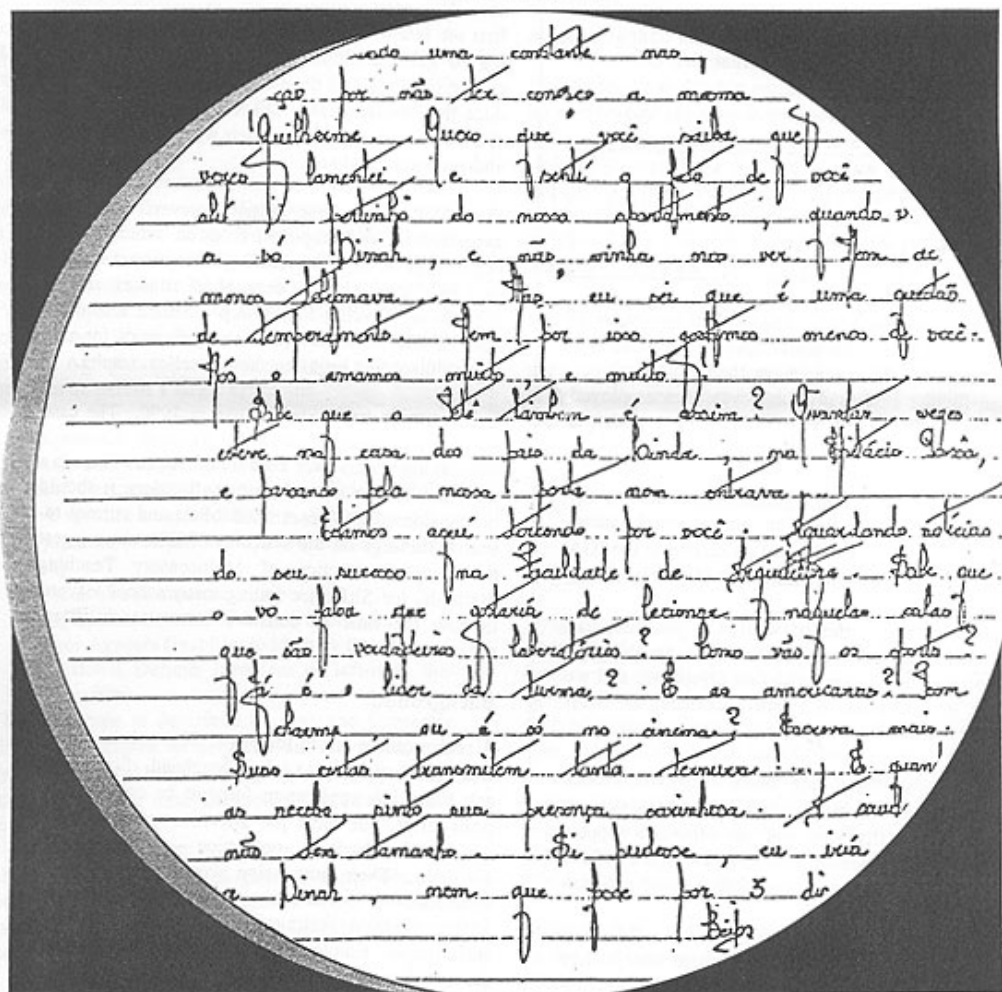


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*'He shows, as he removes the mask,
A face that's anything but gay'*

Thackeray (The End of the Play)

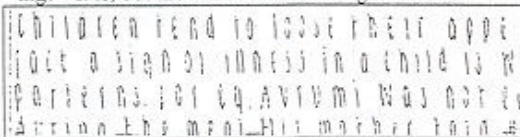
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Treating Writing Disorders: A Case Study of Developmental Gerstmann's Syndrome

Part 1
by Pamela Heather

Introduction

In the Spring/98 issue of the *International Graphologist* (No.16) an article on the last page showed skeletal writing. The question posed was, 'Is this writing?' It is, but the writer has a writing disorder.



The purpose of this article is to gain an awareness of writing disorders. An understanding of them is a prime need for those who have them. The subject¹ chosen for the case study has never been employed and has a writing disorder (*Dysgraphia*) allied to a rare condition called Gerstmann's Syndrome.

Many school leavers, like Aidan, are unable to develop basic literacy skills to pursue employment. His writing style rivals the one published in the IGA magazine and both writers have a writing disorder.

Dysgraphia, a disorder of written expression, can exist alone, but is usually allied to a neurological dysfunction such as Dyslexia and Dyspraxia and we apply a general term of Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD²).

Some SLD students gain extra help when their school arranges an early psychological assessment. Progress is usually slow via the remedial support provided. SLD students, who have average or above average IQ's³, have to accept their rate of progress fails to meet expectations.

Many SLD school leavers are loath to accept they have very poor literacy levels and that the completion of a job application form is beyond them. Other

school leavers are barely literate and finding their first job is a worrying period of their life. After failing to gain employment, many take up a further course of study and drop out when they cannot produce their assignments. Others rely totally on modern technology to improve their writing performance and abandon longhand.

From 1970, the author undertook several periods of experimental and empirical research, which set the beginnings of an understanding of writing disorders. In 1987, after several decades of running special schools, a 'Teacher Fellowship' enabled a continuance of this work. Some teaching methods for alleviating disorders began to show excellent results.

The Learn-Write Centre opened in 1990. The case study writing samples show that a change of levels in basic skills occurs over a matter of weeks. There is a way of working around writing disorders, it should be considered and researched. Past and current research findings on the statistics of illiteracy suggest the adopted practice of Multisensory Teaching Methods, for SLD, are failing many school leavers. Is now the time to consider a new teaching approach?

Background

A real problem arises for bright SLD school leavers when they apply for a job in longhand. Some firms ask for a job application form to be completed in print-script, but most job advertisements request a creative, handwritten application – a daunting task for them. Their submission gives an impression of someone with low intellect, and a stream of rejection letters generate feelings of hopelessness and low self-esteem. Employers expect an applicant to have the qualities and skills to match their needs in business.

Five years ago, the press reported: *Every year, four out of ten leave English schools with no academic passes. The total yearly is 262,400 – the worst performance of any industrial country.*

¹ A pseudonym is used in the case study (name and address held by the editor.)

² SLD = specific learning difficulties – a broad term used for students who have a proven neurological dysfunction. A psychological assessment is the diagnostic tool for establishing one, or, more overlapping learning disorders.

³ IQ = intelligence quotient.

Recent statistics show that we have grossly underestimated the problem of illiterate children and adults in this country. Those who cannot gain employment may turn to crime as an occupation. A recent survey confirmed that 60% of prisoners had learning difficulties and had failed at school. It has taken several decades to accept that an illiteracy problem exists in this country.

Writing Disorders

Many authors in the field of writing disorders say it is often futile to attempt to remediate writing disorders because, like attention deficits, they have neurological origins (Cavey 1993, Brown, Ayleward & Keogh 1996). Therefore, it is not surprising that current teaching practice and teacher training neglects the physical and neurological dysfunctions allied to writing disorders.

There are three degrees of disorders of written expression. The first two, *Dysgraphia* and *Spatial Agraphia* are forms of the third – *Agraphia*. Cavey (1987) diagnoses *Agraphia* as, specifically, inability to recall kinaesthetic patterns that go into writing. *Pure Agraphia* is rare, but some students who come to the Learn-Write Centre do experience the milder form of *Agraphia* (*Spatial*). *Dysgraphia* exists alone or it can be part of a larger syndrome.

Developmental Gerstmann's Syndrome is a wider syndrome and was identified over sixty years ago by Dr Josef Gerstmann, a neurologist. This condition has five specific areas of difficulty. They are:

- Dyspraxia (delayed or impaired motor coordination)
- Dyscalculia (numerical manipulation)
- Dysgraphia (disorder of written expression)
- Finger Agnosia (inability to identify fingers)
- Directional Deficits (problem of left-right discrimination)

This syndrome is described by Just and Carpenter (1987) but classed as acquired and developmental dyslexia, under *Alexia with Agraphia*. Luria (1975) acknowledges the term Gerstmann's but casts doubt about its roots.

All the following neurological dysfunctions are found to have allied *Dysgraphia*. They all come under the broad term of Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD). They are:

- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia
- Developmental Gerstmann's Syndrome
- Asperger's Syndrome
- Deficit of Attention Motor Control and Perception Disorder (DAMP)
- Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

▪ Sensory Aphasia

Some students have only a writing disorder, but many have one or more overlapping dysfunctions.

Past research findings suggest those who have writing disorders, will write around the 'cut-off point' for slow handwriting – sixteen words per minute. Slow writers produce between 13 and 16 wpm, during a five-minute creative writing exercise.

Writers who have an average or above average IQ, who write below 13 wpm, may need an amanuensis in examinations. *Dysgraphia* greatly disadvantages those in employment, and especially the school leavers seeking their first position.

Illegible writing (30-35 wpm) is the work of speedy writers who apply very little short-term memory to the mechanics of writing; they have a fast mind and a slow pen! A writing disorder is quite different. It impairs or delays a production of creative and continuous writing. The longhand style of writing may be any of the following; illegible, slow, inaccurate, immature, or the style changes frequently.

Dysgraphic writers will rarely insert paragraphs or punctuation when writing. Irregularities and variations occur in word spacing, and in their production of letter size or letter height. Errors of grammar, capitalisation and spelling may occur when they write creatively, at length.

A Case Study of Gerstmann's Syndrome

Dysgraphia and SLD are treated daily at the Learn-Write Centre, but only five cases of Gerstmann's Syndrome have sought help. Aidan left school at the age of fifteen, and only casual work came his way, such as washing glasses in a bar or cleaning building sites. He could not use public transport because of severe directional difficulties and walked everywhere. Other functional problems occurred when he tried to work out bus or train timetables, the white page and specific type fonts caused discomfort and a total loss of concentration.

Unemployment and depression became a way of life for him and his social life was nonexistent. In March 1998, at the age of twenty-seven, he undertook a psychological assessment and the diagnosis was *Dyspraxia*, *Dysgraphia*, *Dyslexia* and *Dyscalculia* – not Gerstmann's Syndrome.

Aidan went through schooling without recognition of his severe learning difficulties. It appeared that teachers believed his social class and his behaviour

were the cause of his poor performance in school. A greater part of school life was spent sitting on the other side of the classroom door in the corridor. Unable to endure the act of writing, Aidan turned to 'avoidance behaviour' to cope with the daily rigours of school life. He tells of his experiences in education and how it failed him:-

The 'Before' Writing Sample – at the age of twenty-seven

I have always
considered myself
to be a very com-
petent person
people which is
what I have
called self esteem
in many different
including the way
I talk with other
people and generally
having a low opin-
ion of myself that
I hope to gain now

Infant School

I knew I had a problem right from the start of infant schooling. At the age of five years, I realised I was different. Not just because I was from a mixed race relationship, which could be a problem, but because I seemed to do things differently in comparison to other children.

Other children could tell their left hand from their right. They could dress and undress themselves, tie shoelaces, hold a pen and write. They were learning to read, to tell the time, and to add up numbers. I could do nothing. Most skills were never easy to understand or to carry out at the infant level of schooling.

Primary School

At the primary stages of education, other children and even my teachers began to notice my many difficulties. Their reaction was to ridicule and taunt me whenever they saw me failing to achieve the simplest of tasks. This kind of attention started to have an adverse reaction on my life. I did not want to go to school.

My mother often went to see the teachers concerned, but they insisted I was the problem with my bad attitude and behaviour. The teachers never took any responsibility

for what was happening to me and never offered any extra help.

Junior School

By now, I was preparing to enter Junior School barely able to read or write. When things got bad, I worked on getting thrown out of the classroom. It seemed a better option than staying in class and being subjected to ridicule from teachers and pupils.

I was now nearing secondary school age. The thought of older and bigger children picking on my weaknesses filled me with dread. By the age of eleven years, I had succeeded in tying my shoelaces but nothing else. A report was sent to my next school, blaming me for all my failings.

My mother had paid frequent visits to all the schools I attended. At this stage, I realised she was frustrated and had begun to believe the teachers. My only supporter was lost. She was a single parent, bringing up two young boys in a tough inner city area and I believe my teachers saw her as part of my problem.

Secondary School

By the end of my second year in secondary education, I was bottom of the class in all subjects and in the bottom stream. The taunts about being of mixed race and my lack of ability, was too much to bear. Many teachers told me it was pointless attending school and my only options were menial work, unemployment or prison. I totally lost faith in school and my absences increased, but no action was forthcoming.

On the last day at school the headmaster summoned me to his office. He told me that he expected to see my name in the headlines of the local newspaper, being sentenced to a long term of imprisonment. I left school at sixteen, barely literate, with no qualifications. My confidence and social skills were sadly lacking, and the proposition of a life of unemployment faced me.

In Part 2 (the next issue) Aidan continues his story into 'Seeking Employment' and 'Looking for Answers' - we see the 'After' specimen of his writing for comparison.

