

When reading and writing are both a struggle:

Understanding dyslexia and dysgraphia together

Many children diagnosed with dyslexia are also fighting a second, often unrecognized battle: the physical and cognitive act of writing itself. Here's what parents and teachers need to know.

1 in 5

children have dyslexia or a related language-based learning difference

~7–15%

of school-age children have significant dysgraphia, many unidentified

~50%+

of children with dyslexia show meaningful dysgraphia co-occurrence

Two different disabilities — and a very common pairing

Dyslexia is a language-based learning disability rooted in how the brain processes the sounds of spoken language — making it hard to decode written words, spell accurately, and read fluently. Dysgraphia is a learning disability rooted in how the brain processes and executes the physical and cognitive demands of writing — making handwriting labored, spelling unreliable, and the expression of ideas on paper exhausting.

They are distinct conditions. A child can have one without the other. But they share neurological territory, and research consistently shows they appear together far more often than chance would predict — with some studies suggesting co-occurrence in half or more of children with dyslexia.

Dyslexia affects

- Phonological processing
- Reading decoding and fluency
- Spelling (encoding) of words
- Rapid naming of letters and words

Dysgraphia affects

- Fine motor control for handwriting
- Orthographic coding (letter formation memory)
- Written spelling automaticity

• Reading comprehension (secondary)	• Organizing and expressing ideas in writing • Writing fluency and stamina
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Why do they so often travel together?

Both dyslexia and dysgraphia place heavy demands on orthographic processing — the brain’s ability to store and retrieve the precise visual-letter patterns of words. A child with dyslexia already struggles to encode spelling; dysgraphia compounds this by also disrupting the motor memory needed to form those same letters automatically on paper. When both are present, writing can feel nearly impossible — not because the child lacks ideas, but because the pipeline from thought to written word is obstructed at multiple points.

Three types of dysgraphia — and why it matters

Not all dysgraphia looks the same. Understanding the type helps IEP teams select the right interventions and accommodations.

Dyslexic dysgraphia Spelling is severely impaired; handwriting may be legible when copying but spontaneous writing is very poor. Directly tied to phonological processing deficits.	Motor dysgraphia Handwriting is poorly formed and labored due to fine motor deficits. Spelling may be adequate. Drawing is also difficult.	Spatial dysgraphia Difficulty with spatial aspects of writing — spacing, sizing, staying on lines. Affects both handwriting and drawing. Spelling typically intact.
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In practice, many children — especially those with co-occurring dyslexia — show elements of more than one type. A comprehensive psychoeducational evaluation should distinguish which profile best fits the child so that instruction can be precisely targeted.

Why dysgraphia gets missed — especially alongside dyslexia

Dysgraphia is among the most underidentified learning disabilities in schools. Several common misconceptions allow it to go unaddressed, sometimes for a child’s entire elementary career.

Common misattributions to watch for:

- *“He’s just being lazy — he doesn’t try.”*

Slow, messy, or incomplete written work is often the output of a child working twice as hard just to hold a pencil and form letters. Effort is not the issue.

- *“It’s just bad handwriting — they’ll grow out of it.”*

Dysgraphia does not resolve with maturity or more practice. Without targeted intervention, the gap between a child’s spoken language ability and written output typically widens over time.

- *“It’s just because of the dyslexia.”*

When a child has dyslexia, writing difficulties are frequently attributed entirely to that diagnosis. But if a child forms letters slowly and painfully even when copying — not reading or spelling independently — a separate motor or spatial processing deficit may be at work.

The clearest signal: a wide gap between what a child can express verbally and what appears on paper. A child who tells a rich, complex story aloud but produces three stilted sentences in writing is not demonstrating a lack of ideas. They are demonstrating a disability.

Signs of dysgraphia in elementary-age children

These patterns, especially when persistent and inconsistent with the child’s overall ability, warrant a closer look.

Early signs (grades K–2)

- Unusual, inconsistent, or mixed pencil grip that does not respond to correction
- Letter formation that is effortful, irregular, or frequently reversed beyond typical developmental age
- Avoids or resists writing tasks while enjoying or succeeding at verbal activities
- Fatigue or hand cramping during short writing tasks
- Mixes uppercase and lowercase letters unpredictably
- Cannot copy simple words or sentences accurately from the board

Elementary signs (grades 3–5)

- Written work is significantly shorter and less developed than what the child can produce verbally
- Inconsistent spacing between words and letters; lines run together or wander off baseline
- Spelling is inconsistent even for words recently studied — may spell the same word differently within one paragraph
- Loses their train of thought while writing because the physical act consumes cognitive resources
- Visible frustration, physical tension, or emotional distress during writing assignments

- Handwriting is difficult or impossible to read even for the child themselves shortly after writing

What parents can do: flagging and advocacy

If you recognize these patterns in your child, you do not need to wait for the school to act. Here is how to move forward.

Ask the right diagnostic question

Most dyslexia evaluations assess reading, phonological processing, and spelling — but may not thoroughly evaluate the motor and orthographic processing components specific to dysgraphia. Ask directly: “Has my child been evaluated for dysgraphia as a separate or co-occurring disability?”

Request a written evaluation

Under IDEA, you have the right to request a comprehensive evaluation at no cost. Put it in writing and specifically request assessment of:

- ✓ Fine motor skills and handwriting fluency
- ✓ Orthographic processing and visual-motor integration
- ✓ Written expression — separately from reading and spelling
- ✓ Occupational therapy evaluation if motor deficits are suspected

At the IEP meeting, ask these questions

“Has my child been evaluated for dysgraphia separately from their dyslexia diagnosis?”

Ensures the team has assessed writing as its own area, not assumed it is fully explained by the reading disability.

“What is the plan for written expression — not just spelling, but the physical act of writing and expressing ideas on paper?”

Written expression is a distinct IDEA category. SDI must address it explicitly, not assume reading intervention will resolve it.

“Has an occupational therapist evaluated my child’s fine motor skills and pencil grip?”

OT evaluation is often warranted for dysgraphia, particularly motor dysgraphia. It can be requested as part of a special education evaluation at no cost.

“What assistive technology accommodations is my child receiving — specifically for writing?”

Keyboarding, speech-to-text, and word prediction tools are evidence-based dysgraphia supports. They should be in the IEP, not left to individual teacher discretion.

“Are writing assignments and assessments being modified so that my child’s knowledge isn’t masked by their writing disability?”

A child with dysgraphia who knows the content but cannot get it on paper quickly is being measured on disability, not knowledge. Oral responses, dictation, and reduced writing quantity are legitimate accommodations.

Know your rights.

If the school declines to evaluate for dysgraphia or written expression disability, they must issue Prior Written Notice (PWN) explaining why. If you disagree with the school’s evaluation findings, you can request an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) at district expense. “We’re already addressing it through the dyslexia IEP” is not sufficient if written expression has not been independently assessed and specifically targeted.

What good instruction and support look like

Dysgraphia requires both targeted remediation and meaningful accommodations — and the two are not in conflict. Teaching writing skills directly while also removing barriers to demonstrating knowledge is the appropriate two-track approach.

Remediation (building the skill)	Accommodations (removing barriers)
• Explicit handwriting instruction (Handwriting Without Tears, Loops & Other Groups) • Multisensory letter formation practice (sky writing, tactile tracing) • Keyboarding instruction beginning in early elementary • Structured writing process instruction (planning, drafting, revising taught explicitly)	• Speech-to-text software (Google Docs voice typing, Dragon Naturally Speaking) • Word prediction tools (Co:Writer, Ginger) • Extended time for all written tasks • Oral responses accepted in place of written ones • Reduced writing quantity — assess knowledge, not handwriting volume

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wilson or OG-aligned spelling programs to address orthographic coding | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Graphic organizers and writing templates provided |
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An important distinction:

Providing a keyboard or speech-to-text tool is not “giving up” on handwriting. It is ensuring that while handwriting skills are being built, the child’s ability to demonstrate knowledge, participate in class, and develop as a writer is not being held hostage to a motor or processing deficit. Both tracks must run simultaneously.

The bottom line for Wyoming families

Wyoming’s SF0059 established clear obligations for structured literacy instruction for students with reading disabilities — a landmark win. But dysgraphia, like dyscalculia, falls outside the statute’s specific reading focus. The obligation to address it lives in IDEA: if writing is an area of disability, it must be evaluated, documented, and served with Specially Designed Instruction.

A child who can tell you exactly what happened in the book, exactly what they think, exactly what they want to say — but stares at a blank page in frustration — is not being heard by their school if writing has not been addressed in their IEP. That child deserves better. And you have every right to push for it.

WYO Right to Read is here to help.

If you have questions about requesting evaluations, understanding your child’s IEP rights, or finding dysgraphia resources in Wyoming, reach out to us. No family should have to navigate this alone.