

Help with Handwriting, Taking Notes and Using Writing Guides

If you are working with someone who has vision loss and is having difficulty with writing and reading notes, try these steps.

1. Questions for assessment:

- Can they read large print, with or without magnification?
- Are they writing information down and unable to read it back later?
- Is their writing overlapping previously written words?
- Are they having trouble staying on the line?
- What kind of pen are they using? What type of paper?
- Ask the person to write something for you. Can they read it? If you suspect it is read more by memory, write something yourself and ask if they can read that. Use familiar words such as "happy birthday."

2. Familiarization:

- If a person can read large print, then writing larger will often help.
- Printing is more easily read than cursive writing. Use lower case to create recognizable word shapes rather than all capitals which tend to make all words look like rectangles.

- More space between letters, words and lines also increases legibility.
- Bold black ink from gel ink pens or markers is often preferred. Just make sure the marker does not bleed through the paper.
- Some people may prefer yellow paper to white.
- Creasing the paper can create a line to follow although it will only be tactual.
- Writing guides are available for signatures, envelopes, checks and other tasks.
- Writing guides might only be used when writing for others if a person's everyday writing for personal purposes needs to be larger than what the guide allows.
- Writing guides work best attached with clipboard or paper clips to paper. They help keep writing where it needs to be (e.g. a signature) and in straight lines. Fingers of free hand should be used to help keep place as writing may be too small for the person to see. If writing is interrupted, leave a small object on the guide to mark the place where writing ended.
- For envelope guides that do not fit the envelope size, simply match the top left corner of the guide and envelope for the return address and the bottom right corners for the mailing address.

- A person who cannot read their own handwriting or write with accuracy should consider switching to a voice recorder to gather and retrieve information for personal use (appointments, grocery lists, and other notes to self). A smart speaker or smart phone using voice assistant would be other options.

3. Help:

- If during the assessment, the person said large print is legible, print a large sample of a familiar word. Ask if they can read it. If the person can see it, ask them to copy it. Frequently you will notice that people will say they cannot read their own writing but do not think to alter their writing to a size they can see.
- If necessary, demonstrate how to attach paper to writing guide to prevent slippage.
- When using writing guides, words must be written in the middle of the space provided as otherwise there is no room for “y” and other letters that normally fall below the line. It is also possible simply to write those letters as if they were capitals if it seems easier (ex. “eGG”). Legibility is the goal, not perfect penmanship.
- Encourage use of other hand to place a finger at the start of each line to keep track of line in use.
- Practice writing a grocery list or other everyday writing tasks. Try different pens and colors of paper to determine which seems easiest to see.

4. Check for understanding:

- Ask which pen they liked. Can they tell you why? Usually it will be the one that writes the bolder line.
- If using writing guides, make sure the person is able to demonstrate positioning the paper under the guide with edges matched and attaching guide to paper (or writing without slippage).
- After you have tried this steps, ask them to write random words or numbers. Then do another task. After a few minutes, ask them to read the random works or numbers back to you. If they can't read it then more practice with perhaps larger printing is needed. It is very difficult for some people to accept the need to write differently if they wish to read back the information later. But it is important for keeping track of phone messages, appointments, etc. to manage life independently.
- Refer to vision rehabilitation professional if these quick suggestions do not get results.