Students with Disabilities and the Writing Center

Writing fellows are not expected to be experts in disabilities, but increasing awareness of a few things will make fellows more comfortable and effective when working with students with disabilities.

Language is powerful. We can use language, knowingly or unknowingly, to oppress people. It is important that we know the correct language to use in regards to disabilities so that we can point out oppressive language during consultations. Not using oppressive language ourselves will help make the writing center more welcoming and inclusive.

Some language recommendations include:

- Using “non-disabled” or “persons without disabilities” instead of “normal”
- Knowing that the words “disability” and “handicap” are not interchangeable; a disability causes a handicap
- Using “people with disabilities” instead of “the disabled” and “person who uses a wheelchair” instead of “wheelchair-bound person” in order to avoid defining people by their disabilities
- Avoiding patronizing terms such as “differently abled” and “special”
- Using emotionally neutral language by avoiding phrases like “victim of” and “suffers from”

It is not always obvious that someone has a learning disability. For this reason, it is helpful that some of the tips for working with writers with learning disabilities can apply to many consultations. Research shows that people with disabilities will rise to expectations. Maintain the same expectations of success for everyone. Support and encourage all writers. Modeling can work well for people with learning disabilities, as well as non-disabled people struggling with writing. Also, emphasizing prewriting and careful planning of ideas before writing can be helpful for everyone, but especially for those with learning disabilities.

When working with writers who are deaf, it is important to understand that American Sign Language (ASL) is its own language that is very different from English. ASL sometimes is their first language, and English is a second language. Do not assume that grammatical errors are from carelessness. There are many areas where the structures of ASL and English are dramatically different. For example, ASL does not have pronouns. This can lead to problems connecting sentences in written English. Also, ASL does not require restating the subject, which can lead to sentences without subjects in written English.

We should also be aware of situations where audist bias will occur. We often connect reading and writing with hearing. We talk about the speaker in a poem or say that the author says something that they wrote. To a deaf person with a different frame of reference, this does not make sense. We need to be aware of audist bias and encourage other ways of acknowledging the origin of ideas that do not rely on hearing.

If using an interpreter to communicate with people who are deaf, be sure to still focus on the person. The conversation needs to occur between the fellow and the tutee, not between the fellow and the interpreter. Try to connect to the writer even though the conversation requires using an interpreter.
When working with people who are blind, make sure that you are in a quiet enough environment that they can hear and understand you. The conversation will obviously be the dominant aspect of these consultations. Since they cannot see what exactly in the paper you are talking about, make sure you contextualize all comments. Tape-recording the entire consultation or a summary of topics discussed at the end can be helpful.

The writing center is supposed to be a personal, student-centered place. If you have questions about what would be the best way to help specific students with disabilities, just ask them.

Works Consulted


