

Lauren 00:06

Welcome to the LDA podcast, a series by The Learning Disabilities Association of America. Our podcast is dedicated to exploring topics of interest to educators, individuals with learning disabilities, parents and professionals to work towards our goal of creating a more equitable world. Hi, everyone. Welcome to the LDA Podcast. I'm here with Dr. Toby Tomlinson Baker. She is an adjunct professor at California State University, Los Angeles, and a special education coordinator for Los Angeles Unified School District. So Toby, thanks so much for being here.

Dr. Toby Baker 00:37

Thank you so much for having me today, Lauren.

Lauren 00:41

So to kick off, could you tell us a little bit about yourself and your experience with learning disabilities and writing?

Dr. Toby Baker 00:48

Yes, so this is such an interesting topic. As a teacher, or former teacher, professor, now I'm kind of the coordinator for more than 1,200 IEPs with Los Angeles Unified School District. But this is such an interesting topic, because there's so many teachers who struggle with teaching students with disabilities how to write. And so that's, you know, one of the areas that I teach, I actually teach at California State University, Los Angeles, and I teach a couple different classes. I teach in the curriculum and development, I teach a speech and language class that's geared toward communication for students with disabilities. And then I also teach the writing component of that for the curriculum and development, how to teach teacher candidates, future teachers, how to teach writing to students with disabilities, and to general educated students in the general education curriculum as well. So it's for everybody, but I do teach a specific writing area. And what I found is that a lot of the teacher candidates, it's, it's hard for them to figure out...they know how to write themselves, but they don't always know how to incorporate the pedagogy, the teaching aspect of it. So and then, as I taught with LAUSD in a special education, special day class setting in the primary and elementary, second and third grade, for 10 years. And before that, in Philadelphia, I taught for three years. So I have 13 years teaching experience, but now I'm moving that more into the administrative area of overseeing all the IEPs and the compliance. So I'm the person on campus who goes to all the teachers and says, Why isn't this IEP done? You didn't do it correctly, let me help you. So that's kind of what I'm doing right now. And I'm training teachers. So. But that's just a little bit about what I'm doing right now. And so, yeah.

Lauren 03:19

A lot of great experience. Dysgraphia it's probably the most popular to be talked about when we're talking about learning disabilities that affect writing. But is dysgraphia the only learning disability that can impact writing?

Dr. Toby Baker 03:33

There's a number there. It does, that's one of the strongest that impacts. Dysgraphia there are, I actually have a learning disability myself, I actually have dyscalculia, which is math. So what the thing about learning disabilities is you have...there's a huge discrepancy, and I've seen this as a teacher,

when I taught students with disabilities in the classroom, the students had a huge discrepancy. They were either really, really, really strong in math, and terrible at reading and writing. Or vice versa. So I'm really strong in linguistics, reading and writing, were always my strong points. So I'd have like an A in English and a D in math. And and, you know, people would say, Well, how come she's so good at you know, this area and gets hundreds on our spelling tests and is able to has a huge vocabulary and, you know, but then I it was really hard for me to do algebra and calculus, and it was just hard to do all of those. I actually did okay in geometry because it was visual. And so the same thing goes for students who struggle with writing. I know somebody who, it wasn't me, but I know somebody with a learning disability who had mirror writing. So she would write the letters backwards. As far as dysgraphia, the thing is..when I teach in my course, at Cal State is that students who are writing if they are not able to decode words, it goes hand in hand with reading, when you have a reading assignment, and they read a passage, and then they have to write about it, for example, if they're doing the Animal Unit, and they read a passage about animals, about the tundra, and they have to write about the snowshoe hare. And then they have to write about that going from hearing a story to writing three sentences is a huge problem when they have to talk about what they know, their digraphs, blends, diphthongs, you know, they're short vowels, long vowels. These are things that first graders learned. But what we're finding is that sixth graders still don't have all of those skills, they haven't learned them. And there's one of my, you know, teachers from 20 years ago who said, You never...don't memorize something, learn something. So, you know, you need to have...and that goes back to the foundation. So they have that saying, reading to learn, learning to read, learning to read. You're learning to read K through three. And then after third grade, essentially, you're reading textbooks and, you know, the other content areas in order to learn the curriculum to learn and pass your grades and get to graduation. But if you don't have that foundation, like I said, you know, things you were supposed to learn as a preschooler and a kindergartener and a first grader, second grader, sixth, and seventh, and eighth, and 10th graders still are lacking those skills. And they're passing their courses, their teachers are passing them, they're going on to other areas, they may have developed some coping strategies and skills. But that doesn't mean that they have the foundation, they may not actually have the concept of reading, and that translates to writing and how they spell words and how they communicate and their vocabulary. I actually did a lesson on Wednesday, yesterday, just two days ago, to my students, about you know, if they have...what's the difference between a diphthong and a digraph? And even they were like, wait, I have to remember this. And these are adults who are like, Well, wait a minute, how do I define that? If you don't have that concrete example? Or you're not quite sure? How do you pick up a pencil and just start writing it? And, you know, how do you what's the difference between, you know, an oi and an oy?And what are those? You know, what does that mean? What is that in the language? They haven't learned that second part of sentence writing, even with reading, but then with writing to translate that, okay, I sit down, I have to write a paragraph. I asked an adult the other day, what are discourse markers? They had no idea. They have no idea. Okay, so if I was teaching writing and I said discourse, additionally, furthermore, you know, what does that mean? When you say something, and then you take a breath, and you add a discourse marker, therefore, you know, so they, they, they may use these in everyday language, but they don't know the writing concept of the actual description. And, you know, so that's one thing that I found is lacking with students with disabilities, is that they don't have that foundation. They don't have those skills with sentence writing, and therefore paragraph writing, and so, and I know I'm running into other things, but that goes into IEP rating because that's my area. When I write a writing goal for a student with a disability, that's actually what I write is, "Lauren will learn three

sounds, be able to write three diphthongs in a paragraph out of four or five trials observed by a teacher measurable by teacher observation." So, you know, that goes into, you know, what do we actually want students to learn? So I know I trailed off a little bit, but I hope I answered some of your questions about writing. And just to go back to students with this, that's what you see with dysgraphia. A lot of it is that they can't translate when I pick up the pencil or sit at the keyboard to write, it just doesn't come right out. So how do we attack that?

Lauren 10:45

With all of your years of teaching experience, are there any myths or misconceptions that you've come across about learning disabilities that impact writing?

Dr. Toby Baker 10:54

Oh, I think a huge myth is that, that students with dysgraphia, or with a disability in writing is that they just can't do it, they can do it, they absolutely can. They have to do things a different way. And so I actually have found...now thankfully, with technology, you can use voice to text. That's one of the accommodations that would be a tech accommodation. They, in the olden days, you would use a recorder or something. But if there's difficulty with actual writing, I have many students click the voice to text on their iPads or their computers and just start recording and just start talking. And then they can go back and edit what they have, and formulate that and then you know, a lot of it is proofreading. I have tons of students, students in the K through 12 setting who will write a couple sentences and then that's it. And I say oh, no, no, no, there's a whole process of proofreading and drafts and how many drafts are you sending? In my college setting I have many college students who also need to use proofreading. There's Grammarly now, use Grammarly, I use it. So you know, just having another set of eyes, you don't have to pay somebody to have your friends, your cousins, your brothers, your mom, your dad, whoever, read it, because they will say 'Oh, this really really doesn't make sense.' Or 'oh, you have what they call omissions. You left off, you have some fragment sentences.' I add some fragment sentences sometimes in my drafts, because I'm trying to get the idea out so fast that I literally just left off half the sentence. So and a lot of that goes back to, again, the writing process of rough draft editing, proofreading, having somebody else proofread. Using online, I know everything's digital. Now in the olden days, you had a book that said thesaurus or a dictionary. That's how you learn the words like I was talking about discourse markers, how do you learn what those are if nobody teaches you, you google them, you look them up, there's all kinds of online, videos now and I'm sure you go to TikTok and YouTube and whatever else, there's all kinds of stuff on there. But truly practice, practice, practice, practice, practice, I don't want students even in second and third grade, and then moving on, they shouldn't be afraid to write, that's one of the biggest things is there are other ways to write than just sitting at a computer and cranking out the best thing you've ever written. It's gonna be terrible, then you go back and fix it and make it less terrible. And then you go back again and read it again and read it again. And after 10 times, you may think, 'Oh, I only have to do this one or two times,' no, you may have to go back 10 times, and then it will get better. And then you'll have a nice paragraph and then you'll have another paragraph and then you'll have another and that's how you build paragraph writing. I taught paragraph writing in the second grade for years. Just knowing, you know, the main idea and detail that's how you know you need to connect that with, you know, what am I truly trying to say because I think a lot of times people with disabilities, myself included, put things in different orders when they're writing. They may put the main idea at the end by accident because they think that's the

conclusion when really it's the introductory sentence. You know this, they say all these details, and then put the main idea at the bottom when really it should be at the top. Graphic organizers, I love graphic organizers, Google graphic organizers, Venn diagrams, those are also really great for comparing and contrasting ideas. If you're writing about, you know, two things, or three things, you can use a Venn diagram. And so there's all kinds of, there's all kinds of tools that should be used in writing. And an effective teacher knows what the tools are, knows how to use them, knows when to introduce things and knows throughout the year which units to be teaching so that by the end, there's a whole picture of what the student has learned. And that will, that's something again, you know, all if the teacher is effective, that goes back to their IEP goal. Well, where are they supposed to learn this? Did we meet that? And then what would be a good goal to write for the future? If they mastered one paragraph? Okay, well, now can they write two or three paragraphs. When I get a student with an IEP that says: Lauren, who has just learned to write one sentence will now write three paragraphs? And I'm like, no, sorry, that goal actually needs to be rewritten. And you can do an amendment to rewrite that. That's what I do now is, when I'm looking at compliance and effectiveness, if the students aren't meeting their goals, how are they going to graduate? How are they going to get, you know, the schoolwork done, the class done, and that will get the credits done toward their 200, they have to have 210 credits to graduate if they're not passing their classes, because their goals are written incorrectly. That impacts again, how successful they are graduating. So that's either it does all go back to I mean, it goes to the student, we have to put some, but it is, you know, the teacher needs to really look at, how are they teaching? And what are they teaching? And are they meeting the goals? And not to be afraid to, you know, break things down and teach in a different way.

Lauren 17:37

And to branch off on that a little bit, what are some things that all educators not as special educators, but any educator that's teaching writing, what should they know about students with LD?

Dr. Toby Baker 17:50

That students learn a different way. When I was in school, we sat in rows, and the teacher lectured at the front end, we took notes, I had to take notes. That was a lot of times, it was hard to take notes, because I had trouble. I'm not an auditory listener, I need visuals. So when people are talking to me, I probably got about 10% of whatever they were saying. And I was trying to and I needed, you know, I needed somebody else to take the notes, but I had to take the notes. So if I wanted to look like everybody else. Now. With, again, advanced technology, we have PowerPoints, professors, or teachers, often as an accommodation. I mean, I know we're talking about general ed students in general ed, also, but the professor for general ed to why can't they? Why can't the teacher or the professor provide the copies for the students anyway, so they don't have to take notes, they can actually engage. I'm a very hands-on learner. I would rather do a diorama with students. And I actually did that with my second and third grade students, they had to write, but they had their activity, they had to write about their activity, or if they were doing the solar system. I had them do hands-on activity with the solar system, but then they had to write about it. Tell us about the Red Planet, so you know that, but the point is I always had something that was tangible for kinesthetic learners. You know, do they know how to teach all different ways to reach all learners? That is the key because like I said back in the 80s when I was in school, my teachers just stood at the front, and we had those little composition books and a pencil. And we were supposed to take notes. And I had no idea what I was supposed to be

writing. I just didn't...do I write everything down? And there are people who don't know what's the main idea? So they write everything down, and they highlight everything because they have no idea. It shouldn't be that way. Because you're so worried about getting it right that you're not actually listening to the content. Meanwhile, where's the visual that goes with this content? Where's the activity that goes with it? You know, where are the other types of learning that go with, you know, just the auditory talking, talking, talking? There needs to be doing, I learned by doing. And so you know, recently I've started a new position. I can look at PowerPoints, I get these PowerPoints with, like, 57 slides, until I just leave the slides and just have to go do it. And then oh, you know what, I messed up, oh, go fix it. Okay, so I made a mistake. Okay, next time, I'll know not to push that button, push this button instead. So. But I learned by doing. Again, everybody learns differently. And there have to be different ways. The teachers, for all students, students with disabilities, and students in the general education population, we call them non disabled peers. All students learn differently, even if they don't have a disability. They all learn differently. So the teacher needs to know that in order to reach all students, we have to use all different modalities.

Lauren 21:36

Well, in addition to some of those different modalities of teaching, are there other classroom strategies that either you've used or you've seen be successful, that can benefit all writers?

Dr. Toby Baker 21:46

Yes, I have used it like every morning, and when I was a teacher. And I've recently, like I said, I was in the classroom for 10 years with students because I actually had K through 1, 2, 3, and sometimes a fourth grader. But I had a range. And then I had second and third grade for the last five years. I always started, first of all, all students with disabilities seem to believe, which I think is not true, that writing is the hardest thing. It's easier to have a story read to you than it is to actually write. I knew as a teacher that my students came in early in the morning, and the first thing I did was writing. The reason why is because I wanted to get the hardest thing over with first. And maybe you can say, oh, that's so negative. No, it's not. Because it's realistic in the sense that we're going to get the hardest thing. And then after that everything is a little bit easier to do. You know, we did, and that goes with your schedule. We did social studies and science in the afternoon, because that was a lot of kinesthetic hands on. We did a lot of...but the writing, do that first thing from eight to between 8:38, 8:39 o'clock. Get that done. Why? Because the students are fresh in the morning, they can focus and then when I'm teaching about, you know, I go back to language arts, the lens that digraphs diphthongs and our control vowels or whatever I'm teaching that connects with 'okay, well, what are you writing, let's do this. Alright, now we have the rest of the day if you if it takes you longer. That's okay.' So I had students who would start at eight o'clock in the morning, and then take a break and come back to it at, you know, 11:30 or 12 o'clock or something. Or maybe one o'clock in the afternoon, the afternoon before they went to something else. You can break up activities, the thing about writing is, and I would always start it on, if I wanted something done by Friday, I would start it on Wednesday. Wednesday, writing W, W. So we'd start on Wednesday. That way, if they started it, they just did their rough draft because there's so many parts to writing if they just started their rough draft at eight o'clock in the morning, and they were like I'm done. I'm having the worst day or whatever it is, even for students who don't have disabilities, have a specific time, have it be the same. Every morning, eight to nine, that's when we do our writing. And they knew that. So I actually had one student who would chronically come in late because he thought he

would miss writing and I'm like, 'oh no, you can start it whenever you come in.' But have it be the same time so that they are in a routine and have the expectations okay, you're just gonna do a rough draft. So if it's all messy and sloppy copy, that's fine. And then by Friday afternoon, it should be done. Because then Friday afternoon when we do fun Friday stuff, for doing library or some kind of a fun reading activity or arts and crafts or something, get your writing done first, because the last thing you want to do is do the fun stuff first, oh, my goodness, no, that's classroom management. No, no, no, no, get the hardest stuff done first, and then they can sort of earn the fun stuff later. And so that's why, you know, if they, across the board, I found that students with disabilities, they've never been attracted to writing. They'll do it. And some of them are really great writers. I had a young woman who...she was a second grader, cute young girl, pigtails and so forth. Wrote a wonderful Halloween story. Her mother couldn't believe that she was such a great writer. I said, Yes, she is. And then, you know, she would get her writing. And then she drew a little picture with it. But we got it done early, so that in the afternoon, when we did arts, or music or library or something else, it was done. Consistency, but flexibility. And even in general ed, you want to make sure teachers who are general education teachers know that they're going to learn differently, not everybody is going to learn the same, I have a word wall, so that when that supports independence in the sense that they don't always end with the sight words. So if they struggle with remembering that a lot of them had memory, they didn't have the impact of the disability was that they couldn't remember the words as frequently. So if I had them posted, it wasn't a test. So they're able to use that while they're writing. So have a writing board with just: Am, The, you know, the sight words, that then they can just, you know, write. And then also I would always have for writing, particularly, I had a visual of the actual steps. So that there were six steps, rough draft, sloppy copy, then editing, proofreading, and, you know, have publishing, I think publishing also at the very last step was publishing, publishing can be putting it on your writing wall, put it on a wall and display it, or put it on your bulletin board, even in high school, I would say or publish it in like your, you know, monthly, weekly, whatever the teachers can put that up on the wall, though, have a writing wall, so that it adds value to 'ooh I want to get my writing on the wall.' That makes you want to do it more. And that makes you want to publish the best thing you can. So that motivates students. So I think anybody can be a great writer, they need the support, they need the encouragement, and you need a positive attitude about it. It's not scary. You know, students would say I hate writing. No, no, no, this is how you get your voice out. So you want to get this published. So it allows them to have time. I allowed them to three, four days, if it takes them a week, it takes them a week. So but that would be the goal.

Lauren 28:34

Those are great strategies. So moving a little bit outside of the classroom, we have talked a little bit about accommodations. We talked about Grammarly, we talked about speech-to-text. So are there...what are some accommodations that are available to employees that have learning disabilities that impact writing? Or just adults in day to day life?

Dr. Toby Baker 28:54

Um, I think well, first of all, it depends on the work setting more and more people are working at home now. But like we said, there is Grammarly. But aside from what a writer can find, right online, somebody who's writing an email or writing something for work if they do work for, like, a company, or if they're talking about if they work for, they're writing some sort of, you know, five to 10 page proposal or something. First of all, that goes back to: what were their writing skills? If they accepted the position

they have to have some sort of concrete knowledge and ability of writing. However, what we're finding now, or is there a lot of high school graduates that are very good in math and science and computer science, that may not actually be really great solid writers. Again that goes back to where am I now? What do I need? Even applying for, going back to applying to college, if you went to MIT, some high school graduates are not going to college now. So they're not having to do writing samples and filling out applications and so forth. Plain old, get a study buddy, get some help. If you need help with right, like I said, have your mom read something, have your dad read something, have your cousin read something, if you have something that you have to do if it's for a job, and most often, if you're a college graduate, you've had to write something during college, whether it be a two page paper and you went to the writing center, there's writing centers, there's assistance at college, if you have a disability, you can go to the Office of Accessibility or Disability and get support that way. But you can also use your computer, you know, use the tools that are on the computer like Grammarly or there's other assistance for that. But I would, there's nothing better than just having somebody actually read what you've written. Now, if it's a 10 page paper, somebody might not want to read a 10 page paper, you can always get an editor. But you don't always have to do that. If you work in a group of people or somebody's in your class, it may be you buy them a cup of coffee and say, can you read this for me, I just want to make sure that I didn't miss something. You never have to self disclose. If you have a disability, you can always, you know, be very creative. And just say, You know what, I want to make sure it's right. I'm a perfectionist. And people understand that. So you know, if you're writing something, you know, you're working for a company, you do have you should you know, they'll probably ask you this when they interview you do you have the ability it'll say do you have the ability to do the the assignments, if it's a lot of writing, they're going to expect that you're able to do that. There is nothing wrong with asking a buddy at work for help. Even going to your supervisor and saying like, here's a draft of my of this and just say you know, these the expectations? Do you have a model for the expectations? They're gonna have a model, if they are hiring, you know, they're gonna have models. When I wrote my dissertation at Pepperdine, the first thing you know, it was a you know, it was a four year program. When we were all starting. We said, Oh, how do we write a dissertation? The first thing they said is like, duh, head slap, go read some dissertations, and see how they did it, you know, go Google them. And we all kind of went Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah. So obviously, that's how we, you know, you learned by doing it, okay, go write a chapter and see if you can do it. So that's, you know, again, if you're in college, and they say, you know, you have a professor who says, you have a two page paper, my students at Cal State, I have them write a 10, eight to 10 page paper, for their final paper. And that seems like a lot. But once they break down...once they start handing it in, I always give them a model. And I always, I always give them a template, you know, take out the names and specifics and so forth. But I always given them a template, because I needed that. And I know how it feels when you don't have what you need. So I always give them a model, if the professor or the teacher or your boss doesn't give you a model, you can literally go: "is there a template that I can model so that I can make sure that I'm presenting the work that I need to?" And just ask, you know, ask them, you know, and you can even just, it's always hard when you're new, but tell them you know, I know I want to learn from you, you're my mentor. Sometimes if you butter somebody up..they sound what they want to be just like me, so here's what I did. And you can ask them, What did you do when you were first new? And that will you know, where did you learn to write? People love talking about themselves. So, you know, that's another way to if you have a boss and you're in that position and you're not in school, you still have to have a mentor. So you have to have somebody that's gonna help you or if it's a buddy, so that's what I would do. But like I said,

from my students, I give them so they don't have to ask me. I already give it to them. You know when you're at a job when somebody says, Okay, here's 20 proposals, we need you to write number 21. The first thing you should do is instead of, quote, "bothering your boss," look at the other proposals and see how they did it, then you can model that or you can say, you know, what, can you email this to me? I would like to look at this, this is great, you know. So, yeah. I hope I hope that answered some of your questions.

Lauren 35:28

That's a lot of great advice. Thank you. Well, speaking of advice, what advice would you give to individuals with LD who are currently struggling with writing?

Dr. Toby Baker 35:39

Anyone in particular, adults or young students? I will say, for adults, like I just said, first, you know, more than you think, you know, then you've written more than you think you've written, don't be afraid to ask for help. And just like I said, you know, when you're starting something new, or you're starting a new program, look at what's already there, and you can make a better work and have a mentor or a helper, you know, see what they're doing for young students. And I will even say, I know, we didn't talk about this yet. I'm gonna throw in. I live in California. And we have a lot of English language learners who don't know how to write and struggle with writing. So young students when they first come here, and if they're learning two languages, I actually published a paper about assessing students and writing and reading and writing and linguistics for students who are English learners. It's a whole different skill set for a teacher. And the student I've worked with, actually, a couple months ago, we call them newcomers, she was from Mexico...had a whole different...you have to remember they have a whole different background, she had never gone to school. So did not even at age nine, you know, we're assuming that they know stories, like Cinderella, and Jack in the Beanstalk She had never had anything prior to that, and had no concept of American stories, or of English language stories. And so that's a challenge. That's the challenge. I'm throwing it out there. When teachers expect students to just start writing, they need to keep that in mind that there's students with disabilities, English language learners, and then the combination of the student with a disability and an English learner with a disability. And how do you teach to that? How do you create a curriculum that will meet that student's needs for writing and anything else? And then how are they going to access the curriculum, especially if they're older? If they're...you think a cute little kindergartner, oh she's gonna learn English this year, it's not going to just take one year. They're balancing two languages, and they will probably be in fifth grade with still two languages and not one complete language. And that's just something that all educators now have to be mindful of that, since we are including all of those students, you can't just say, oh, I don't teach those students, you know, you have to, so how are you going to change the curriculum and add to the curriculum and develop. And, again, go to your co-workers, ask what's already been done? How can I build on that? So that's one thing educators need to be mindful of, but adults and writing, you know, it's, I think, adults in writing, when they get older, if they started and they're, let's say, they're not an English language learner. Again, build on what you already know, ask for help. If your parents aren't strong writers, as somebody who is a strong writer, you can always...there's tons of resources for writers. There's, you can also, Google, you can also go to...well, first of all, if you're at a college campus, there are resources there. But you can also Google resources in your neighborhood. You can also Google "disability." There's, you know, the National Organization on Disability, there are groups and

neighborhood groups and organizations that support writing, there's an English national organization. It's a National English Writing Organization, NTCE. And so there's different organizations that will also support people with disabilities who have disabilities and writing. But when it comes down to it, just don't be afraid to ask and don't be afraid to get it wrong, too. If you write something, if you go through the steps of drafting, proofreading, I always have my students send me drafts, because then I can send it back and say, fix this. But with my dissertation, I had an editor and a publisher and asked for help. So they need to, and just getting over your pride, too. That's the hardest thing I think for people to say, I'm not a great writer, I need help. That's the first step in having successful writing.

Lauren 41:17

Absolutely. Well, Toby, thank you so much for sharing all of your expertise and experience with us. We had a great conversation. So glad to have you on again.

Dr. Toby Baker 41:25

Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate this. And yeah, thank you. I look forward to seeing you again and speaking with you.

Lauren 41:41

Thank you for listening to the LDA podcast. To learn more about LDA and to get valuable resources and support, visit ldaamerica.org