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## Visual-Spatial Learners and the Art of Writing

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Visual-spatial learners (VSLs) are those among us with powerful gifts of the right hemisphere. They are our artists, inventors, builders, creators, musicians, computer gurus, visionaries and healers. They are empathic and, often, very spiritually aware, even when very young. These children (and adults!) learn best when they are allowed to wallow in the right hemisphere, the source of creative thinking, humor, and imagery. They think and learn in multi-dimensional images. Most schools, most teachers and most curricula are a haven for left-hemispheric thinking, or auditory-sequential learners; children who think and learn in words, rather than images, and in a step-by-step fashion.

Those who favor their right hemisphere, kids I refer to as “topsy-turvy,” are at a distinct disadvantage in traditional classrooms. For some, the challenge is in the organization of their numerous mental images. For others, the difficulty is in translating mental images into words and then handwriting them neatly. For others, it’s knowing they will fail at the spelling, grammar or punctuation that causes them to freeze or under perform.

When a student writes, she or he has to synchronize letter formation (or keyboarding), spelling, punctuation, grammar, capitalization, prior knowledge, and vocabulary. All of these output tributaries have to flow into the main river at about the same rate. A budding writer can’t have the punctuation arriving eleven seconds after the capitalization. Difficulty achieving the required degree of synchronization is one reason many students...find writing to be a form of cruel and unusual punishment. (Levine, 2002, p. 80.)

One of the additional challenges they face is the ability to organize their thoughts (pictures) sequentially, translate them into words, and then handwrite those ideas, legibly. If you are not a visual-spatial learner, imagine performing this task: You are watching a movie rich in color, visual imagery and emotion. The pictures are numerous and streaming before you. Now, write down, in words, all that you see, feel and sense in a logical, sequential report. Can you do it? This is the challenge for children who prefer to learn with their right hemisphere. To capture, in words, all that they see in their mind’s eye and feel within their soul, is a nearly impossible task.

Here are some tips to help your visual-spatial students succeed in creating written reports that capture all that his imaginative, colorful thoughts hold:

First, let’s suppose you’ve asked your students to write a book report on a selected reading of their choice. A topsy-turvy kid, or visual-spatial learner, naturally thinks outside the box, so, encourage fresh ideas for this “book report.” Will the student be allowed a creative response to the reading such as a videotaped “interview with the author” where the student takes on the role of news reporter or author? In so doing, all the important aspects of any well-written book report could be covered in an entertaining format that would be fun to create and, at the same time, demonstrate the student’s

knowledge of the material: author's biography, information on the main character, inspiration for the story, etc.

I expected Mr. Williams [English teacher at an all-boys' school] to assign (an essay) to his boys. After all, that's the way *Lord of the Flies* is usually taught, according to the many study guides available for this book. But that's not what Mr. Williams did. "Let's see your maps," he said. Mr. Williams had given the boys a very different assignment: prepare a three-dimensional map of the island.

Making a map of the island is not an easy assignment. There's no map in the book. The island does have many unique features, but how to make a map?

As these boys learned firsthand, you can use the book to construct an accurate map, but only if you read the text with care. For instance, in the closing chapter you'll find the sentence, "The sunlight was slanting now into the palms by the wrecked shelter." You know that the wrecked shelter is near the beach. It's late in the evening. Knowing that the sun sets in the west, you deduce that if the beach were on the east side of the island, it wouldn't be possible for sunlight to be slanting into the palms late in the evening because the forest would block the sunlight. The beach can't be on the south side of the island; if it were, the mountain would block the sunlight. Nor can it be on the north side of the island, or the forest would block the sunlight. The beach has to be on the west side of the island. (Leonard Sax, *Why Gender Matters*, p. 109.)

Can the student construct a diorama depicting the conflict or climax of the story? What about making a mini-film of the key events? Or, perhaps a storyboard or cartoon book? Can they be allowed to write and play a piece of music based on the book? If the book was a period piece, could the student be granted permission to design costumed paper dolls to recreate the key scenes? There are countless ways that a visual-spatial learner can demonstrate that the material has been read, the principal concepts understood, the critical information researched and the student is prepared to report on the subject. Any format which affords a VSL the opportunity to rely on the right hemisphere, using visuals, color, humor, etc., will allow that student to succeed.



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Imagine you have asked your students to research a famous person in history. John Martin, a popular Middle School teacher at Rocky Mountain School for the Gifted and Creative in Boulder, Colorado, once asked his students to select a famous scientist from the 1600s. Along with writing a short report, the students were asked to:

- Draw a headstone for their famous scientist's grave. (This required researching the scientist's birth date, date of death, and writing an interesting, appropriate epitaph. It also included art!)
- Create a birth certificate. (This required researching the parents' names, place of birth and date of birth.)
- Create a timeline of events, including the scientist's contributions, as well as other important political events, inventions, music and art of the era, etc. (This allowed the student to see what was happening in the world at the same time the scientist lived.)
- Create a business card for the scientist. (This required an understanding of the profession, the scientist's education and accomplishments, and finding out where the scientist lived or studied. It also included an art component.)
- Write a letter to a head of state (king, queen, president, etc.) requesting funding to continue research.
- Write a newspaper article interviewing the scientist about his or her work.

There were other aspects to the completed report, but the point is that this teacher, a visual-spatial learner himself, understood the importance of including multiple activities that utilize the gifts of both hemispheres to create final reports that demonstrated all the information the students had researched in an engaging and meaningful way. By making the project fun and interesting for his students, Mr. Martin was successful in turning a dreaded research paper into an appealing exploration into the life and times of their subject. (No doubt the finished reports were far more interesting for him to grade than standard written biographies would have been!)

Consider allowing dictation. Because images often flow faster and more vividly than visual-spatial students can write or type, allow them to dictate all or part of a story to someone else. First, they dictate the ideas. Then, they review their unedited ideas and edit as much as they can (with the help of spell check and grammar check). Visual-spatial students should be encouraged to learn keyboarding skills early on, as discussed in Chapter 5, because typing, once they are proficient, will be a much faster means of getting their stories on paper than handwriting.

Give weight to other aspects of a creative writing project. For example, allow your students to create costumes, a storyboard, or a model to go with their stories and give credit to them for these efforts. Or try any one of the other ideas you'll find listed in

“Alternative Assignments” at the end of this article. This will allow visual-spatial students a chance to show off their talents in creating wonderful accompaniments to their stories. Credit for their extra time and effort can offset the fact that they are often unable to produce a written story free of spelling and grammatical errors. Please also consider grading the content of your students’ ideas separate from the penmanship and mechanics.

I want to let you know about another strategy you can try in the classroom, particularly for reluctant writers. Miriam Darnell, a talented language arts teacher in Lafayette, Colorado, created a fantasy game that has successfully lured even the most reluctant writers into creating fabulous tales, even poetry, and put them to paper. The game, Legends of Druidawn®, appeals to children and teens of all ages and is fun and easy to incorporate in the classroom. You can learn more by visiting Miriam’s website at <http://www.creative-writing-solutions.com/kid-writings-druidawn.html>.

There will be times when a written report must be generated. You can help make such an assignment less drudgery by teaching your students to organize mental images into written ideas using webbing, note cards or specialized software, such as Inspiration® or Kidspiration®. Webbing is a process of getting all the related ideas for a particular topic onto paper, then building from those ideas. For example, suppose the assignment is to write a report about a favorite animal. The request is to research the subject and write a detailed two-page report. To create a web, the student should start by brainstorming all the ideas that come to mind when thinking of a favorite animal. Because a topsy-turvy kid will naturally think of the big picture ideas first, then the details, a web should be easier to create than a standard outline which works from details toward a big picture. When you start creating the web, let your student do the brainstorming. No idea is silly or should be thrown out at this stage, although it is likely that not every idea will be included in the final report. Once the student sees, from the organization of the web, how specific ideas are related, they can build a standard, sequential outline from their ideas.

Then, students should be encouraged to read books, watch related videos, talk to a veterinarian, visit related websites on the Internet, etc., to gather information on each of the areas determined necessary for the final report. Notes should be taken and are likely more meaningful and useful if written on color-coded index cards. For example, in our research on horses, green index cards might be used for any information learned about the feeding of horses, yellow cards might indicate all information learned about various breeds, and so on. Keep in mind that “notes” don’t have to be written words. If your students prefer to think in pictures, it may be more meaningful to take notes in pictures, actual drawings of what they have learned. Whatever method allows the student to gather and retain new information is what should be used. Hand-drawn images of what horses eat are just as relevant as written words to the child who thinks in pictures.

Finally, help your students organize what has been researched so that this information can be conveyed in the final report. The report can be written directly from the note cards with all pertinent facts organized together, by color.

Now, for the actual act of writing. Nearly every VSL I've worked with has had difficulty with the physical act of writing legibly. Images come to this type of learner so rapidly that the hands cannot keep up. Letters are mentally viewed as 3-D objects and it is difficult to remember the correct direction or even positioning on a flat, one-dimensional piece of paper.

One day, the prevalence of the computer will infiltrate every classroom and those children with right-hemispheric gifts will experience the joy of being able to successfully put to paper all of their thoughts, stories, poems, notes to lectures, etc. Why is the computer so critical to success for VSLs to get their ideas down on paper? Because the very act of typing requires both hands to work harmoniously, integrating both hemispheres of the brain. Because the speed of typing over writing by hand offers freedom for the images to continue to flow without interruption due to poor fine motor skills, confusion over letter direction, and other issues that delay the process. And, because when you can manipulate images in your mind, the letters p, b, d and q are all the exact same shape! But on a keyboard, the letters are seen in their capital form so that a Q looks nothing like a P, or a B, or a D, no matter how you are able to twist and maneuver that shape.

If your students struggle to complete assignments because of poor fine motor coordination, try teaching keyboarding skills and allowing the reports and other homework to be typed. Many topsy-turvy kids are quite proficient on the computer and at an early age, so enjoy teaching your students how to increase speed by developing proper keyboarding skills. If we could look into the future, we would no doubt see that the skills of handwriting and perfect penmanship will become obsolete but the skills of typing will continue to be prized.

There are a number of keyboarding programs available for young kids. In fact, I've even seen modified keyboards designed for smaller fingers and hands. These children will be using computers all of their lives, why not teach them early on and let them use this technology to their advantage when they need it most? It may very well put an end to the battles over handwriting and help to speed the process of completing homework assignments and getting their thoughts on paper.

If keyboarding is simply not an option, teach the art of handwriting as precisely that: an art form. Buy calligraphy pens for your classroom and offer ample time to learn the art of creating beautiful letters in a slow and purposeful fashion. When your students see the art in writing by hand, it may become a joy to create rather than a chore. Gradually shift from special, calligraphy pens to standard pens and pencils but don't rush the process! The visual-spatial learner must have time to create the written words in a true art form. Borrowing an analogy from my dear friend, Dr. Linda Silverman, pioneer of the concept of the visual-spatial learner, if you have ever watched your grandmother or great-grandmother write, you know that the process was a slow and deliberate flow of forming letters from a writing utensil. People of that generation were encouraged to pursue beautiful penmanship as an expression of their soul, not rush through and produce illegible chicken scratches. Writing should not be a rushed event. In fact, prior to the

advent of the ballpoint pen, writing had to be a slow process or the writer would have ink all over the page!

Lastly, make sure the process of creating written documents is fun. Humor engages the right hemisphere so use it liberally. Praise acts as a powerful reward to the student who sees herself as deficient relative to auditory-sequential peers who can write organized ideas with seeming ease. The rewards of producing a written piece that captures the essence of your student's thoughts, or creating a document that incorporates all he has learned on a particular topic will be a joy to watch unfold.

For more tips on teaching visual-spatial learners, please visit [www.visualspatial.org](http://www.visualspatial.org).

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## **Alternative Assignments to Book Reports**

- Videotape an Interview with the Author or act as a movie/book critic. Be sure to include a discussion of the book's plot, main characters, setting, conflict and resolution.
- Build a diorama of the characters depicting the conflict or climax of the story.
- Create a mini-film of the story.
- Draw a storyboard including the main highlights of the story.
- Create a cartoon or comic strip version of the story.
- Compose a song or entire musical that includes a discussion of the book's plot, main characters, setting, conflict and resolution.
- Create a board game based on events in the story.
- Design and create costumed paper dolls and retell the story.
- Create a PowerPoint or overhead presentation that includes a discussion of the book's plot, main characters, setting, conflict and resolution.
- Design and present a puppet show based on the book.
- Create a journal or diary that the main character might have kept. This can be in either words or pictures.
- Design and produce a map that details where key events in the story took place.
- Design and produce a quilt of paper or fabric that includes key events and other highlights from the story.
- Create a Venn diagram that illustrates a comparison between the book you've read and another story, either fictional or non-fictional.
- Create a mural or timeline for the story. Be sure to include the story's plot, main characters, setting, conflict and resolution.
- Create a game show (perhaps in the style of Jeopardy?) and act as the show's emcee.
- Prepare and present a mock trial where one or more of the main characters are defendants. Be sure the trial includes the story's plot, main characters, setting, conflict and resolution.

## **Additional Alternative Ideas for Research Reports**

Famous people:

- Draw a headstone for their famous person's grave.
- Create a birth certificate including where the person was born and to whom.
- Create a timeline of events, including the famous person's contributions, as well as other important political events, inventions, music and art of the era, etc.
- Create a business card for the famous person.
- Write a letter to a head of state (king, queen, president, etc.) requesting funding to continue research, exploration, or whatever activity your famous person was known for.
- Write a newspaper article interviewing the scientist about his or her work.

Animals, cities or countries:

- Create an alphabet book that covers, A to Z everything about your topic.
- Design and produce a travel guide that highlights key historical events as well as places.
- Build a topographical map.
- Host a feast for your class featuring foods from the country you've studied. Dress in traditional costume and create a guessing game of facts from your country.

Or,

- Ask your students to think of their own creative ideas. They must be prepared to present the idea and defend how the project will demonstrate that they have read and understood the book.