Guidelines for Correcting the Work of a Student with a Specific Learning Difficulty[1]

The aim of this document is to provide guidance to examiners on how to correct the work of a student with a specific learning difficulty (SLD). It asks examiners who are having difficulty correcting the work of a student with SLD, to consider that even though the student may have received additional supports, they still may not be able to express themselves in a written format to their full potential. The aim in not to ask examiners to compensate students by awarding additional marks because the student has a disability, but to take into consideration the impact their disability may have had on their written work.

For these guidelines, written work includes any examination or in-class test papers written under timed conditions.

Difficulties Faced by Students with a Specific Learning Difficulty

It is important to keep in mind the nature of the difficulties that student's with SLD experience. SLD present as a difficulty with language and for the majority of students this manifests itself in a difficulty with the written word. Students written work may contain:

1. **Surface errors** in spelling and grammar such as inaccuracies in the use of tense, grammatical agreement, plurals, spelling and punctuation.

2. **Structural flaws** including weak sequencing of ideas, paragraphs, and sentences; unclear expression of cause and effect; lack of competence in using abstract language or lack of awareness of writing genre.

---

[1] Adapted from *DAWN: The Policy, Guidelines and Procedures for the Granting of Reasonable Accommodations in Examinations* (2013)

Notification of Specific Learning Difficulty Sticker

Students who provide medical verification for their SLD can register with the Disability Support Service (DSS) to use the Notification of Dyslexia/SLD Sticker in written timed examinations, except for Irish/foreign language written examinations. It is the student's responsibility to call to the DSS to collect these stickers for examinations. The sticker alerts the examiner to the fact that the student is registered with the DSS and that it is recommended that certain guidelines be applied when correcting their work. Where stickers are left off a submission, for whatever reason, it cannot be guaranteed that the examiner will apply the guidelines.

If a core component of assessment is that of competence in spelling, grammar and written expression, it is not possible to disregard these elements (for example, languages, journalism).

Marking Guidelines

It can be difficult for an examiner to ascertain if the student understands the topic being discussed or if they are just having difficulties expressing this knowledge in a written format. The best marking strategy is to read through the script quickly in order to assess ideas, understanding and knowledge. The examiner needs to ignore grammar, spelling and punctuation errors and not mark in comments as they are reading through quickly. This should allow examiners to focus on the argument being made rather than on details of expression. However, it is important to note that the communication itself must be effective. In order for academic standards to be maintained in the University, examiners should not ignore written expression that is so poor that coherence and intelligibility are an issue. The general rule is not to penalize errors that a good copy editor could put right.

A summary of the difficulties faced by students with SLD can be found on the DSS website www.ucc.ie/dss

Adding Comments to Examination Scripts

Be very clear about the marking criteria you are using. If you are marking for ideas, understanding and knowledge and disregarding spelling and grammar, then inform the student that you have done so. Otherwise, the absence of a lot of corrections may give

the student a false sense of improvement. Or, if you do mark in spelling and grammar mistakes the student may think the guidelines were not applied.

When marking in comments try to mention the positives by commenting on where a student has done well, as well as being critical. This works well as students with dyslexia often find it hard to read between the lines. Instead they need direct but positive comments e.g. "this was good because…"

Use one colour pen to comment on ideas and understanding, a different colour pen for structure. Avoid using red pens. If you do mark in spelling and grammar errors, do not mark in all of them.

Error analysis marking is a powerful tool to help students aim towards independent learning and will help them develop their writing skills e.g.

Sp=spelling Gr=grammar Ss=sentence structure P=punctuation V=vocabulary O=word omitted R=repetition T=tense

Typed Examination Scripts

Some students type their exam scripts due to handwriting and written expression difficulties. In such cases students will have been allowed access to a spellchecker. However, if a core component of assessment is that of competence in spelling, grammar and written expression, it is not possible to allow students access to a spellchecker (for example, languages, journalism).

Written Work other than Timed Examinations

Although the guidelines do not apply to assignments, the examiner should be aware that students with SLD take far longer to complete written assignments. This is due mainly to slower readings skills, poor organizational skills, problems using the library and a difficulty getting their ideas down on paper. Therefore, despite the assignment taking longer, the end product may still not accurately reflect the students overall ability or knowledge of the subject. The work of a student with SLD often includes the following errors:

1. Spelling errors (despite using a spellchecker)

2. Sentences may be rambling and take a while to get to the point

3. Word endings may be omitted

4. Words like the, and, or may be omitted

5. Repetition of words and ideas

6. Lack a clear structure

7. Using the incorrect tense

8. Excessive or misplaced punctuation

9. Simplified vocabulary (in order to avoid spelling mistakes)

10. Unsophisticated language structures (to avoid grammar mistakes, this does not denote unsophisticated thinking)

Although assignments are likely to have been word-processed and spellchecked, spellcheckers do have limitations when used by a student with SLD.

Conclusion

All students with SLD present with different individual needs, therefore it is difficult to provide a definitive set of rules that are applicable in every situation. However, the guidance in this document should provide some direction to examiners for correcting the work of a student with SLD.

Additional Resources

DAWN: The Policy, Guidelines and Procedures for the Granting of Reasonable Accommodations in Examinations (2103) http://www.ucc.ie/en/dss/publications/

Clear Print Guidelines and direction on how best to layout examination papers and PowerPoint slides is available at http://www.ucc.ie/en/dss/publications/

The Disability Act 2005 http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/2005/en/act/pub/0014/