

Introduction

This is a book about the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for writing. But perhaps more importantly, it's a book about how to make the Common Core writing standards work for all students, including those with special learning needs. Why do we need this book? Let's face it—we all recognize that the new standards are in many ways more challenging than the old ones, and lots of teachers and school districts are anxious about how to make these demanding academic standards accessible to kids who aren't on the high end of the curve. For many of us, the question of how to teach the new standards to struggling learners, students with disabilities, and second language learners is a critical one and, honestly, a bit overwhelming. We know that to do the standards justice it can't just be the “same old same old” type of teaching we've been doing for decades.

In addition, although many school districts haven't yet begun to figure out how to make the new standards accessible for students with special needs, classroom teachers can't afford to wait! From day one, your classrooms will be filled with kids with a wide range of learning strengths and challenges, and you need to be equipped to make the CCSS comprehensible and meaningful to all of them. This book is designed to help classroom teachers painlessly meet the needs of the wide range of abilities in their classrooms through the application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

Why UDL? I believe passionately that UDL is the best, easiest, and most practical way to make curriculum accessible to the wide range of learners that teachers face in contemporary classrooms. I also love the inclusive and proactive nature of UDL. It leads us away from the retroactive differentiation that makes some kids different from the norm. “This is what I want to teach, but how can I make it work for Yolanda or Alex? What do they need that's different from the rest of the class?” Instead, we adjust our thinking up front so that everything we plan and teach is more broadly available to all of our learners (Center for Applied Special Technology [CAST], 2014). As a classroom teacher for many years, I believe that if we make UDL part of our thinking from the beginning, our classrooms will

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become more effective for all our learners *with the least amount of effort*. Thumbs up for that.

I have unbounded enthusiasm for UDL and for its potential to unlock the CCSS for all learners; and frankly, I'm excited about where the CCSS can take our students with special needs and how they can grow from the opportunity to learn in this new and different way. It's my belief that students with disabilities have been mired way too long in basic skills, and the previous academic standards in many states encouraged teachers to continue that focus on remediation over higher-level thinking. With the CCSS, the expectations have changed for everyone, not just for typical learners. You can see it right there in the introduction to the Common Core—right off the bat they address the unique requirements of kids with special needs. Here is a quote from the introduction to the CCSS English Language Arts Standards section on Key Design Considerations: “The Standards should also be read as allowing for the widest possible range of students to participate fully from the outset and as permitting appropriate accommodations to ensure maximum participation of students with special education needs. For example, for students with disabilities *reading* should allow for the use of Braille, screen-reader technology, or other assistive devices, while *writing* should include the use of a scribe, computer, or speech-to-text technology. In a similar vein, *speaking* and *listening* should be interpreted broadly to include sign language” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

This is a momentous change and a significant acknowledgment of kids whose needs lie outside those we consider typical. It is also a substantial step forward for the teaching field as a whole. Even today it's not uncommon to find teachers who believe that if a child can't take a pen in hand and write an essay on a piece of paper, then he or she is not really a writer. What the CCSS is telling us is that *this isn't true*. If a student can organize her thoughts in a meaningful way and dictate them into a machine or to another human being, *she is a writer* and should officially be recognized as such. This doesn't, of course, mean that students with special needs should not receive remediation where they need it, but it does mean that we need to begin thinking about academic standards in a different way. A student may need remediation in spelling skills, for example, but still be able to organize and compose thoughts on a high level when spelling is supported. The CCSS is asking us to use technology as a tool to help students work on the higher-level skills of composition, which can then free us to spend time on the remediation of basic reading, spelling, or other foundational skills our students may need. This is a progressive way of thinking and one that acknowledges the potential of technology to change the way we teach as well as the way students express their

learning. It is also completely aligned with the principle of UDL, as you will see when you delve further into this book.

I believe the focus on writing is one of the most intriguing aspects of the CCSS. To that purpose, this book covers both the CCSS writing standards and the CCSS language standards, where critical foundational skills in writing such as grammar, syntax, and punctuation are found. All of these skills are important parts of writing proficiency for students, including students with special needs, and I am eager to offer teachers a myriad of hands-on strategies and activities that can help make these proficiencies meaningful and accessible to all the kids in their classrooms. It seems to me that the time is just right to shine a light on the teaching of writing to kids with special needs through the lens of the CCSS and UDL.

So I'm excited!! I'm excited about the potential, I'm excited about the direction, I'm excited about the new considerations for kids with special needs, and I'm excited that our classrooms are taking a new direction. I'm thrilled that the new standards really do look forward instead of backward—that they are asking us to change what “school” looks like and shaking us out of that old 1950s model. I think special educator Rick Lavoie says it best: “We’ve been doing closed-book teaching in an open-book world.” It’s time to take a critical look at what we’re teaching, how it meets the needs of kids, and whether it prepares them for life in the twenty-first century (Lavoie, 2007). I believe the Common Core Standards are a positive step in that direction.

This book is designed to help you accomplish that step into the twenty-first century by making your writing instruction in the CCSS accessible for your students with special educational needs. That means all different kinds of special needs, including low-incidence disabilities like blindness and deafness, students with autism, and also students whose needs aren’t a disability, for example second language learners, who do need special consideration in the classroom but who are in no sense disabled. I will also put a strong focus on children with learning disabilities, since they constitute the vast majority of children with disabilities in our schools today.

In addition, this book will provide you with strategies to use across the range of Grades K–12. Because the CCSS are so well designed, it’s often possible to take a strategy from a primary grade and adapt it up to middle school and even into high school in many cases. That’s a testament to the clever spiralling of the CCSS writing and language standards.

There is a lot of special content in this book to help make the CCSS and UDL come alive for you as you read. In each chapter, you will find Insider Tips, which give you a little bit more detail about how to “make it work” in your classroom. Every chapter also has Teacher Tales and Student Sketches, which bring you actual classroom examples of the principles

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discussed, featuring real teachers and real kids. There are lots of Web Treasures scattered throughout the book, providing you with links to find resources, applications, and information on line. And finally, you'll find lots of reproducible pages that you can copy and use in your classroom.

UDL is sometimes spoken about as a “special education thing,” but in fact, UDL is designed to make content more accessible and engaging for everyone, including students all along the spectrum of ability. However, this book is for teachers, and the truth is that teachers are worried about how to make the Common Core work for students with special needs. UDL is designed to help relieve the stigma of labels, but in the real world, schools still use labels, and teachers still get students who are identified with disabilities. Since I want this book to be practical for teachers, I am committed to making it real. I'm not going to ignore the fact that we have students with disabilities in our classes; I will talk about their specific learning needs and provide strategies to address them. Sometimes I'll talk about students with disabilities, sometimes students with special needs, and sometimes struggling learners, but in essence, what I'm giving you are strategies that will help you reach all your students, no matter their learning profile.

So without further ado, let's jump in. I hope as you read you will be engaged, entertained, and most importantly, *prepared* to make all your students better, more proficient writers through the CCSS and UDL. I salute you, the classroom teacher, who is committed to making your instruction work for all your kids. You are the future of education in America, and it is to you that this book is respectfully and humbly dedicated.