

Emergent writing activities for dynamic display AAC systems

By Jill E. Senner

Providing successful creative writing experiences for individuals with limited spelling skills can be challenging, particularly for individuals unable to use standard or adapted keyboards. Structured, word-based, on-screen writing activities can allow augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) users with limited spelling skills to actively and successfully participate in creating unique written communication. This experience provides an important opportunity, as creativity is a process critical in establishing “the foundations for beginning literacy skills” (Musslewhite, C. & King-DeBaun, P., 1997, p.123). Ready-made structured writing activities are now available for use with DynaVox System Software and Speaking Dynamically Pro, allowing teachers, therapists and parents an easy way to help their students or children use the same system for both spoken and written communication.

Write With Me, available from DynaVox Systems, Inc. and Writing Activities for Use With Speaking Dynamically Pro, available from Mayer-Johnson, Co., are board set add-ons. They provide students with a framework for writing and activities are organized to provide a high level of success. These board sets provide on-screen, word-based, structured writing activities, which can be accessed by scanning or direct selection. The page sets include boards for writing slot-

filler stories, making lists, creating cards, writing poems, and writing letters. In addition, Write With Me includes word-building activities, which allow students to errorlessly explore rhyming words. Four keyboards are also provided in Write With Me, including Frequency of Use Keyboard, AEIOU Keyboard, QWERTY Keyboard, and Initial Letter Search Keyboard. Keyboards can be used in combination with other activities. For example, during a fill-in story, if the vocabulary item the individual wants is not an available choice, he or she can link to a keyboard to spell the word. Written works can be composed in words with pictures or in words only, providing different levels

of each activity to accommodate individuals of all ages with skills ranging from no reading or spelling skills to basic sight-word vocabulary and beginning spelling skills. Boards can be easily modified, making the activities fully customizable.

Reasons to consider AAC for writing

There are many reasons to consider using dynamic display AAC systems for writing:

- Writing is a form of expressive communication.
- Many dynamic display systems allow user to write and speak within the same application.



Figure 1: Screen shot of “Grocery List” (words and pictures) from Writing Activities.

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- The user can quickly link to a board to talk and then return to writing.
- The user can become more familiar with operating the system for both speaking and writing.
- Using one system reduces the expense of purchasing multiple software packages.
- Many dynamic display systems have on-screen keyboards and word prediction capabilities.
- Dynamic display systems have features which allow on-screen word-bank writing.
- Custom activities can allow an AAC user to use newly introduced vocabulary or review older vocabulary (sight words and/or symbols) in word-bank writing activities.
- Activities can be customized to provide the exact amount of structure that the user needs.

Activity ideas

Write with Me and Writing Activities have a number of practical applications. The following ideas have been successfully implemented both at home and at school. Planning a cooking activity? First have the user read the recipe. What ingredients will he or she need? Have the user write a list of things to buy at the grocery store. (Figure 1) Will the user be planning a vacation? What will the weather be like where he or she is going? What will he or she need to pack? Make a list so nothing is forgotten!

Read theme-related stories before beginning the writing process. A wonderful story about having a bad day is Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day by Judith Viorst. Read the story and then have the user either re-tell the story or write his or her own story about "The Worst Day of My Life." (Figure 2)

Writing letters can be fun. Looking for a new friend to write to? Try the internet. There are many kid-friendly Web sites where users can find new friends of similar ages with similar interests. ContAACt is a listserv designed for kids who use AAC. Follow the directions in the references and resources at the end of this article to sign up to be part of the ContAACt listserv.

Looking for additional classroom ideas? Free writing templates can be downloaded that will allow multiple choice quizzes and simple book reports to be easily created. Visit the DynaVox Page Exchange at members.aol.com/dds4kids/

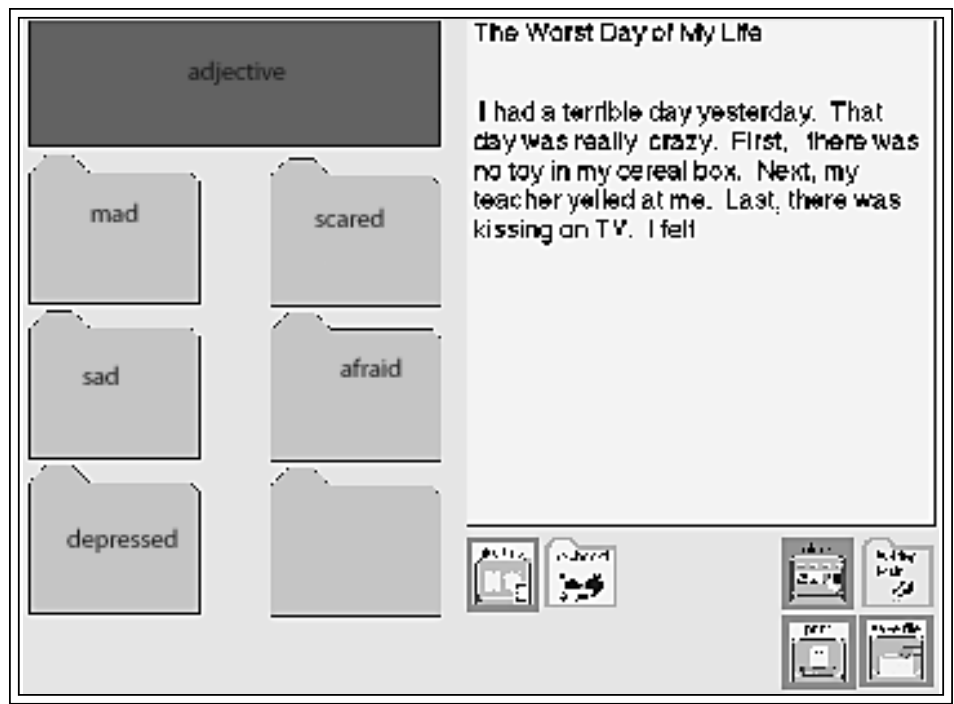


Figure 2: Screen shot of "Worst Day Story" (word only) from Write With Me. Choices are available to fill in the blank and continue the story.

dynamovox.html> for the DynaVox version and www.mayer-johnson.com> for the Speaking Dynamically version.

Although there are many benefits of using AAC for writing, caution should be exercised when using a system for quizzing, homework completion, or other difficult or otherwise potentially unsuccessful activities. Links to communication boards should be provided from writing activities and the AAC system should primarily remain a communication system. Discontinue use of the AAC device for writing if any frustration or avoidance behaviors are observed.

Product information

Writing Activities for Use with Speaking Dynamically Pro

\$49.00; Author: Jill E. Senner; Mayer-Johnson Company, P.O. Box 1579, Solana Beach, CA 92075; Phone: 800-588-4548; Fax: 858-550-0449; Web site www.mayer-johnson.com>

Write With Me

\$50.00; Author: Jill E. Senner; DynaVox Systems, Inc., 2100 Wharton St., Ste 400, Pittsburgh, PA 15203; Phone: 888-697-7332; Fax: 412-381-5241; Web site www.dynavoxsys.com>

Resources

ContAACt

Follow these directions to sign up to be part of the ContAACt listserv:

1. Send an e-mail to listproc@nmsu.edu
2. Leave the subject blank
3. In the message type: subscribe contact yourfirstname yourlastname (For example: subscribe contact john smith)
4. Send your message. You will immediately receive a message letting you know that you have been listed.

DynaVox Page Exchange

dds4kids@aol.com
members.aol.com/dds4kids/dynavox.html>

References

Musslewhite, C. & King-DeBaun, Pati (1997). Emergent Literacy Success: Merging Technology and Whole Language for Students with Disabilities. Park City, UT: Creative Communicating.

Viorst, Judith. Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.