

## **Making Assessment Inclusive for Our Students and Ourselves: Neurodivergence & Disability in Alternative Approaches to Writing Assessment**

We invite contributions to this special issue on neurodivergence, disability, and alternative writing assessment. Using disability studies as a method (Schalk, 2022), contributors may critique common practices in (alternative) writing assessments, theorize anti-ableist writing assessment, and/or describe the methods needed to construct alternative assessment paradigms that help neurodivergent (ND) and/or disabled students and educators thrive. By alternative assessment, we refer to any approach to writing assessment that departs from ranking writing against a singular, qualitative standard (Inoue, 2017) in favor of inclusive practices that acknowledge a multiplicity of rhetorical traditions — especially, in this special issue, ways of doing rhetoric linked to neurodivergence/disability. Alternative assessment includes labor-based contract grading and similar classroom grading practices but also alternatives to assessment in other contexts: programmatic or institutional assessment, graduate student assessment, placement, standardized testing, and more.

Disability Studies is a generative resource for alternative writing assessment in its focus on advocating for writerly agency and the validity of multiple rhetorics. Scholars have questioned writerly norms of clarity and completion (McRuer, 2006), troubled standards of rationality and productivity (Price, 2011), reconceptualized standards of time in the composition classroom (Wood, 2017), and called for disability justice in academia and society (Jackson & Cedillo, 2020; Hubrig, 2020). These scholars share a commitment to accessible and inclusive pedagogy as well as the conviction that that Disability Studies cannot be incorporated into writing instruction following an “add-and-stir policy” (Ervelles, 2011) but rather needs to be integrated with attention to all phases of instruction, including writing assessment.

Much disability studies work thus far on writing assessment has focused on critiquing labor-based contract grading. As Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) and Carillo (2021) explain, the emphasis on time/labor as graded components of the class may burden neurodivergent (ND)/disabled students by asking them to complete labor in potentially inaccessible spans of time, by evaluating them against restrictive definitions of effective writing processes, and by ignoring the difficulties they may experience adapting to new assessment schemas. Responding to these critiques (2023), Inoue suggests revisions such as adopting an A-default course contract and emphasizing the importance of flexibility and negotiation. Yet the book focuses on retrofitting Inoue’s own labor-based contract grading approach, even as alternative assessment models have expanded to include a wide range of approaches, including a few geared for ND/disabled students (Aull, 2022; Gomes et al, 2020). His response leaves open the larger question of how alternative forms of classroom writing assessment may be designed from the ground up to center the capacities of ND/disabled students and faculty. Nor does it address how writing assessment in non-classroom or programmatic/institutional contexts may be critiqued and reconceptualized in ways that allow ND/disabled students and faculty to flourish.

This call aims to put work by scholars of Disability Studies in conversation with ongoing scholarship on alternative, inclusive writing assessment in our classrooms, institutions and writing programs, and discipline. We invite work that holistically (re)theorizes writing

assessment in ways grounded in disability studies and/or that (re)imagines its practices to center ND/disabled writers and writing educators.

Acknowledging that valid assessment is attuned to the multiple, overlapping identities that both students and faculty inhabit (Mckinney, 2018), we envision work committed to anti-ableist writing assessment as emerging out of and working in tandem with existing justice work and oriented to “collective liberation” (Schalk p. 33, 2022). We (relatedly) envision multivocal work — realized here, at least in part, through a special issue format. To paraphrase a saying about autism, if you know one disabled or neurodivergent person, you know one disabled or neurodivergent person (Yergeau, 2017); disability/neurodivergence is a highly varied experience and its intersections with writing assessment deserve multifaceted, complex representation.

Constructing new, anti-ableist alternative writing assessment models requires a collective effort that pulls together the experiences of ND/disabled (graduate) students, faculty, and administrators, along with allies, to reimagine how to assess efficacious writing and writing processes. By “acknowledging the inevitability of harm” implicit in assessment and “working through forms of repair” (Price, 2024, p. 39) while also fostering critical, imaginative, and multivocal conversations among writing scholars, teachers, students, and administrators, we hope to arrive at a complex, many-faceted understanding of inclusive, anti-ableist assessment practices.

We encourage contributors to consider questions such as:

- Working from a perspective that acknowledges identity as intersectional, how should we as scholars and teachers define anti-ableist writing assessment? What choices should educators seeking to center ND/disabled students consider in their own classroom practices?
- In light of the intersections between ableist discrimination and other forms of discrimination, including racial discrimination (Schalk, 2022), how can writing educators and writing program administrators build on existing commitments to justice and equal rights in pursuing anti-ableist assessment practices in first-year composition courses, writing programs, and across the university?
- How can we make specific aspects of (alternative) assessment — rubrics, grading conferences, peer review, grading contracts/negotiation of grading contracts, etc — work for ND/disabled students and/or faculty? Alternatively, which aspects should we give up on as irredeemably ableist?
- How do models of writing assessment — labor-based contract grading or related models, as well as conventional grading — uphold “compulsory able-bodiedness” (McRuer, 2006) or able-mindedness? How do they uphold the notion that rhetorical power or skill in writing belongs to the “rational ... man speaking well” (Price, 2011, pg 37) common in academic discourse? How can alternative writing assessment be designed to challenge notions of speaking well, or logical intelligence and coherence, as the hallmark of effective writing?
- A robust, expansive understanding of “cripping” alternative writing assessment asks us to (re)consider commonplaces about effective writing, writing processes, and writing assessment, from a belief in the importance of rough drafts to the writing process to the “‘no assignment sheet’ model of advanced academic writing” ([Simpkins & Swift, 2020](#)).

Pick a commonplace and discuss how we can redesign our assessment practice(s) to construct anti-ableist landscapes of writing instruction.

- As we plan, enact, and revise the institutional changes necessary to support more inclusive forms of assessment, not only at the classroom but at the programmatic levels, how can concepts such as “collective accountability” (Price, 2024), help us approach institutional leadership and change in sustainable, ethical, and effective ways?
- How can approaches to alternative writing assessment help to mediate between competing access needs in a classroom — between students and students, students and instructors, or instructors and the institution — to create an inclusive learning environment?
- Most work on ableism and writing assessment has considered disability/neurodivergence together. How can focusing on physical or mental disability help us as educators, administrators, and scholars make more inclusive choices in our assessment design and practice?
- While conventional writing assessment is often difficult and draining, some instructors who use alternative assessment find it affirming to their professional values and ways of being (Von Bergen, 2023). How can alternative writing assessment cultivate values consistent with anti-ableist practices and/or be (re)designed in ways that support ND/disabled faculty?
- What should WPAs and other staff/faculty administrators take into consideration in designing programmatic assessment that centers ND/disabled students and faculty? How can administrators support the use of anti-ableist assessment practices among writing faculty?

Proposals should be grounded in current scholarship on alternative writing assessment, as the special issue aims to engage ongoing conversations about alternative assessment and inclusivity/accessibility. We welcome projects that focus on any one of the many models of alternative writing assessment — labor-based contract grading, engagement-based grading, or another model. We are open to a wide variety of genres, from traditional research articles and critical review essays on existing literature to proposals for new anti-ableist assessment models to autoethnographic reflections on your experiences as an ND/disabled (graduate) student and/ or faculty member. Short or multimodal submissions grounded in the lived experience of disability are especially welcome.

Please submit 300-500 word proposals (about one page).

In co-editing this special issue, we commit to Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices, [as outlined in this document](#). Any human-subjects research must conform with IRB approval and submit documentation as requested by the *Journal of Writing Assessment*.

If you have an idea that you don't see represented here, please feel free to pitch us! Submissions and questions should be sent to [mvonbergen@murraystate.edu](mailto:mvonbergen@murraystate.edu) or [andrewjharnish@gmail.com](mailto:andrewjharnish@gmail.com).

### **Est. Timeline**

- 3 Sept 2024 — Review of/response to submissions begins on a rolling basis
- 30 Sept 2024 — Last day to submit a proposal

- October 2024 — Invitations to submit a full article sent
- 15 Jan 2025 — Initial drafts of full articles due
- April 2025 — Reviewers'/editors' feedback returned to contributors
- August 2025 — Contributors' responses to feedback / revisions due
- Spring 2026 — Publication