

# "I Can't *See* It!"

A Visual-Spatial Approach to Language Arts



Differentiation Strategies for Teaching  
Reading, Writing & Spelling

(Excerpts from *The Visual-Spatial Classroom: Differentiation  
Strategies that Engage Every Learner!*)

Alexandra Shires Golon

## **Dedication**

To every student who has wanted to learn to read, write and spell, but wasn't taught how to visually...until now!

"I Can't *See* It!"

A Visual-Spatial Approach to Language Arts

Alexandra Shires Golon

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## A Note About Learning Styles

Visual-spatial learners, or VSLs, are people (kids and adults) who think in images. Auditory-sequential learners, or ASLs, think in words. If you're an auditory-sequential learner, as most of the teachers I've met and worked with are, I'll bet you can't even imagine thinking in pictures, right? The same is true for visual learners: they can't imagine being able to think in words! A few people can think in both pictures and words, or switch between the two, but that is rare.

Can you guess which student below is visual-spatial and which is auditory-sequential?



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Neither of the kids above is happier than the other, nor is either one doing anything more efficiently or accurately than the other. Certainly, neither is doing anything wrong. Each child is thinking and assembling in the manner that works best for him or her. One is putting the model together in a step-by-step, follow the directions style, the other is completing the project from a mental picture. There's no right or wrong way to complete the project just as there's no right or wrong way to think and learn. There is only what works best for each of your students.

School is geared to left-hemispheric learning. We teach in a step-by-step manner and require mastery of one area before progressing to a higher level. We also tend to teach, particularly in the higher grades, in a strictly auditory fashion, leaving manipulatives and hands-on learning for younger students only. Those who favor their right hemisphere are at a distinct disadvantage. Because they are presented with new material in a sequential fashion, they are required to use their weaker hemisphere, rather than their stronger.

This is analogous to an individual breaking the arm of a dominant hand and being forced to handwrite with the weaker hand. Eventually, and with much practice, the individual will be able to produce legible writing, but it will never be the most efficient means, nor the most beautiful writing that he or she is capable of. Only when the ability of the dominant hand is returned, can the individual produce his or her best work. Only when we create classrooms that allow visual-spatial students to access the right hemisphere will we afford them the opportunity to produce their best work and learn in the most efficient manner for their learning style.

Here's the best news: Engaging the right hemisphere is good for *every* student, regardless of their preferred learning style. That's right! By teaching to the visual-spatial students in the room, in ways that activate and engage the right hemisphere, you can more effectively reach **every single student**. Dr. Jerre Levy, a brain researcher from the University of Chicago, who is credited (along with Dr. Roger Sperry) with discovering the specific functions of each hemisphere of the brain, is quoted:

The right hemisphere is especially important in regulating attentional functions of both sides of the brain. Unless the right hemisphere is activated and engaged, attention is low and learning is poor. (Levy, in Silverman, 2002, p. 15)

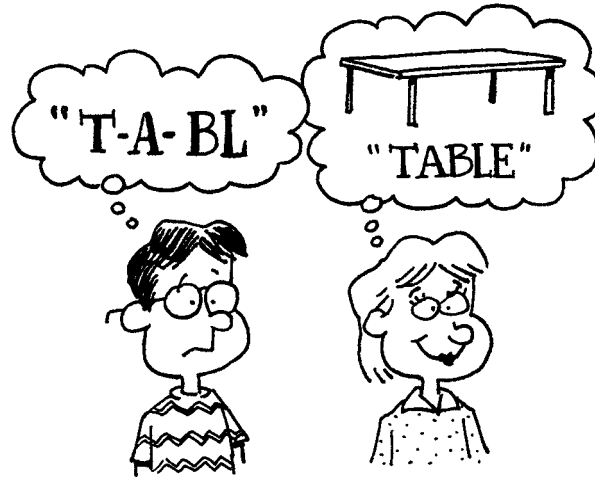
Dr. Levy is referring to all students, not just those who prefer a visual-spatial learning style.

So, how can we teach language arts in a way that honors visual-spatial abilities, or “activates the right hemisphere”? That’s just what I hope you’ll discover in this book. If you’d like more information about identifying the preferred learning style of your students, please visit the **Visual-Spatial Resource** at [www.VisualSpatial.org](http://www.VisualSpatial.org) where you’ll find our VSL Quiz (for Teachers, Parents and Kids), the Visual-Spatial Identifier, articles for teaching a variety of subjects, and more!



# Chapter One

## Reading



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Being taught to read is often a visual-spatial learner's first exposure to true left-hemispheric instruction. Most schools and teachers use a phonetic approach to reading. However, many visual-spatials can only learn to read using a whole word, or sight word, method. VSLs have a hard time with phonics because it breaks down words into the smallest sounds, like: ra, ta, ga, and fa. Then, the beginning reader is supposed to build on those small sounds to form whole words. Visual-spatials understand big picture information first, not the smallest details! Because VSLs think in pictures, they need to read in pictures. What is the picture of "ga"? Or of "the?" *Can you create a mental picture of "the"?* When VSLs are taught to read by looking at whole words first, not the smallest sounds, they can make pictures for those words and learn them more easily. "Disneyland," and, "xylophone," are easier to read (and spell) than, "the," or, "and." There is shape and distinction to them, but not to the smaller, simpler words.

Some words just naturally make you think of a picture because of the shape the letters make (like the letters "M" and

“N” do in the word MouNtaiN) or because of the meaning of the word.



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Or rain when you add a raindrop to dot the “i”:



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Your students can probably think of many more ways to draw words that include pictures. They can even use different fonts that correspond with the word as described in the spelling techniques in Chapter 4. There are many words for which they cannot create a picture to represent: “an,” or “the,” for example). Your students can still make a picture of the word by shaping it out of string, Wikki Stix, or clay. Some schools use letters made out of sandpaper so you can trace over the shape of the letter with your finger.

Whole words can be placed on cards and hung from a key chain or stored in a special word box. Then, the beginning reader can practice sorting all the words with similar starting

sounds, similar ending sounds or other categories they think up. This is called analytic phonics and will help any reader become even better. There isn't always a single right answer to learning something and phonics certainly doesn't work for every student. For more on this, please see Betty Maxwell's article, *Wholes and Patterns: Reading Help for Struggling Gifted Visual-Spatial Learners*, which can be found on the Visual-Spatial Resource website at [www.visualspatial.org/Articles/wholes.pdf](http://www.visualspatial.org/Articles/wholes.pdf).

### Speed reading

I have one huge tip for visual-spatial students about reading: speed read! Just like beginning readers have no need for the words "the," "and," "or," and so on, older readers aren't creating pictures for these words, either. So, they should just skip them! Teach them to practice running a finger, very quickly, over one line of words, then the next. They should jump right over the words that their minds don't make a picture for. Most speed readers use their index finger to race under the lines of text as they read.

Here's an example of how to skip picture-less words. First, read this sentence:

Then, on the following morning, Jody ran to the nearby  
grocery store  
to fetch a gallon of fresh milk for his mother.

Now, watch how much easier it is to read this sentence by skipping over the words that have no mental picture, reading only the words that create an image in your mind:

Morning, Jody ran store milk mother.

Can you do it? Can you skip the picture-less words? Was it easier? Are you missing any facts from the first sentence? Does the sentence with much fewer words still create a picture in your mind of what the character is doing, when and for

whom? You don't even need the adjective "fresh" because you know he's buying the milk that morning, right? If you are a picture thinker it's easier to make a mental picture when you don't have to stop and read the picture-less words. This technique won't affect comprehension because the reader is only eliminating the words for which there is no picture to represent, and were not going to recall, anyway. It actually serves to increase comprehension because now, the student can focus exclusively on creating pictures for what is being read, mental pictures that can later be recalled with increased accuracy because they are no longer spending frustrating study time with picture-less words.

Students, especially visual-spatial students, need to be encouraged to create mental images of what they are reading in order for recall and comprehension. Many of them have such difficulty decoding the words that they forget to simultaneously create mental pictures.

...training students to generate mental images as they read can substantially improve reading comprehension. Teachers or aides show students how to identify key words which will help make a mental image and encourage the children to use those words to generate images. Gains in reading comprehension from this nine-week program almost tripled prior yearly average gains. Recall was twelve times greater than previous yearly gains, and while improvements in speed and accuracy were less dramatic, those scores doubled over the previous year's. (Williams, 1983, p. 109 citing Marjorie Pressley, et. al., *The Mind's Eye*, Escondido, CA: Escondido Union School District Board of Education, 1979.)

If your students need help remembering the pictures they are creating in their minds, they should be encouraged to keep "notes," actually drawings, of what they are reading. They can do this in the margins, if the book is their own, or in a separate notebook, if it is not. Critical information, such as the plot of the story or dates of information or names of characters they are studying, should be included in the drawings. I'll show you more in Chapter 5.

Picture at Punctuation is the best technique I have seen for improving comprehension skill... When they come to a comma, period, exclamation mark, question mark, dash, colon, or semi-colon the stop reading and tell me what they are picturing in their minds about what is happening in the story...

What makes this comprehension technique so good is it uses their strength of making mental pictures. I'm not drilling them with questions they might not be able to correctly process, I'm simply saying, "Tell me your picture." (From J. Ringle on the techniques of Ron Davis, *The Gift of Dyslexia*, pp. 13-14, from Silverman, 2002, p. 292.)

## Reading for important information

There are plenty of hints in our textbooks to indicate that the reader has stumbled upon important information. New words they are expected to recall later are often in bold print, important information is often represented in a graph, diagram or other visual as well as provided in the text, and subheadings often guide the reader for a good overview of the material.

One fun and effective technique for demonstrating to students how to be aware of important information within their reading is to do a "Textbook Scavenger Hunt" at the beginning of the school year. In a Textbook Scavenger Hunt, you ask students to seek general and specific information from various chapters, the glossary, the index and other areas. The hunt through various chapters and other sections gives the student an overview of what the text covers and what they will be exposed to during the course of the school year. I've found it an excellent introduction to the material, particularly for visual-spatial learners who can then make connections when new material is being presented. They'll remember, for example, that the class is going to cover certain aspects of the timeline in history because they visited that chapter, however briefly, at the first of the school year. Making connections helps VSLs retain what they are hearing and reading.

When I was in school, I used to fold the corners of any pages that had names, dates and other important information. Today, there are so many great products available at office supply stores that students don't need to damage their books. Post-It tabs in a variety of colors fill this need far better than corner folding! Teach your students to use different colored tabs for different information: maybe green tabs are for dates they must remember, blue tabs are important names and red tabs are new words. Don't dictate what the colors mean, rather, let each student determine what color-coding system works best. The tabs can be stuck right on the specific line of text that contains the information. Show your students how to have just the colored tab area sticking off the page for easy reference.

### **One more note about reading**

For students who have difficulty reading, or who read slowly, consider incorporating comic books or fantasy books with lots of visuals. Perhaps books on something the child is really interested in, a favorite animal or another country, or something appealing enough to keep trying to hone reading skills. You might also consider having them check out recorded books from a library. Being read to enables the student to learn the vocabulary and allows the visual-spatial student to create the mental images necessary to be able to recall the story in accurate detail.

Many visual-spatial children are late readers. Some have difficulty tracking a line of print. My own son surprised his teachers and parents when he was randomly selected to demonstrate a vision-tracking instrument for his school. His comprehension was significantly above grade-level and no adult in his life suspected he had a tracking issue, but it turned out that each of his eyes was reading a different line of text—simultaneously! Six months of vision therapy corrected this issue and usually does for kids with this problem. Providing books with a larger print size may be a consideration as well. This is often easier on a student's eyes. Some kids find reading easier when they use a colored transparency, like

yellow or green, and place that over the page. Finally, there are high interest books available from Barrington Stoke Publications that are printed on special paper using a font with an extra half space between letters that has been proven easier to read for dyslexics. You can find these at [www.BarringtonStoke.co.uk](http://www.BarringtonStoke.co.uk).

Other VSLs are delayed in their reading skills because they receive only phonetic instruction. But nearly every visual-spatial learner has a strong desire to read, particularly in his or her quest to learn how things work. You have the opportunity to help your beginning readers crack the code by providing visual instruction in the form of a whole word/sight word approach.



## Chapter Two

### Creative Writing

The ability to do creative writing is one of the many gifts of being visual-spatial. These children have a wild imagination coupled with a great sense of humor! They often come up with wonderfully elaborate, detailed stories. But, when it comes to getting them on paper, what they produce often employs vocabulary several grade levels below what you know they're capable of writing. 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.)

I tell parents and teachers who are not visual-spatial learners to do this exercise: Imagine you are watching a movie that incorporates large doses of color, images and emotion. Numerous pictures are flashing quickly before you. Now, stop and write down, in words, all that you see, feel and sense in a logical, sequential report. Most people, even sequential thinkers, can't do it. Students are often asked to write all that they see in their mind's eye. If a "picture is worth a thousand words," and they think in thousands of pictures, how are they to find just the words needed for any story or report? For many visual-spatial students, it is an impossible task. Writing becomes an assignment they dread. And so, we see assignments submitted that don't even begin to include all of

the details that were in these student's mental pictures, or what they were able to tell us verbally.

I have some tips to help your visual-spatial students successfully put on paper all their creative ideas. So often, the visual-spatial student has a fabulous idea for a creative story, but shortly after putting pencil to paper, the student gets lost or halts completely, not sure how to proceed because they've lost their mental picture. For many students, if they draw out their mental pictures then return later to writing the words that correspond to those pictures, they don't lose their stories. When the pictures are down first, it's easier to remember where the story was headed.

Allow 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 3, because typing, once they are proficient, will be a much faster means of getting their stories on paper than handwriting.

Consider giving 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 chapter. 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>.

## Other types of written assignments

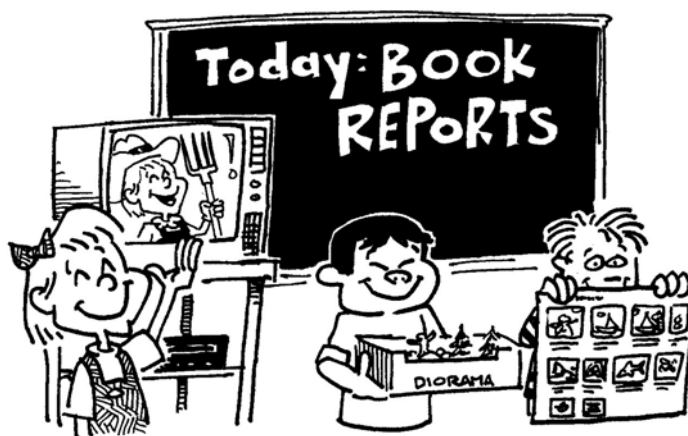
Many visual-spatial students have difficulty with written assignments, especially reports. But there are a number of alternative assignments you can offer that allow your students to demonstrate what they've read and learned. I've included a list of some possibilities for you to consider at the end of this chapter.

For starters, let's suppose the assignment is to write a book report. What other ways can students exhibit they have read and understood the book besides writing a two-page report? Thinking outside the box comes naturally for these kids; ask them to come up with projects that display their knowledge. What about a videotaped Interview With the Author? The student could act as a news reporter and include the important aspects of any well-written book report (the plot, the main characters, the climax of the story, even some information about the author, or the inspiration for the story) in an entertaining format. It would be interesting to create and it would certainly demonstrate knowledge of the book.

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.)



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How about a diorama that shows the conflict or the climax of the story? What about making a mini-film of the main events? Or, perhaps a storyboard or a cartoon book? Can your students write a musical based on the book? How about designing a board game around certain events in the book? If the story took place during a specific time in history, can the student design costumed paper dolls to recreate the main scenes?

Now, let's suppose the assignment is to research a famous person in history. John Martin, a popular Middle School teacher at Rocky Mountain School for the Gifted &

Creative in Boulder, Colorado, asked his students to select a famous scientist from the 1600s. 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 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. (The student had to research who was in power at the time and produce a creative plea!)
- Write a newspaper article interviewing the scientist about his or her work.

There were other parts of the assignment, but my point is that this teacher understood the importance of including activities that used both hemispheres of the brain to demonstrate what his students had learned. The research and writing he asked for meant his students had to rely on their left hemisphere to take notes, keep them organized and write logically. The art and timeline and creative thinking he

solicited had his students using their right hemisphere to see the big picture and add fun and interest to the complete report.

By making the project interesting for his students, Mr. Martin was successful in turning what might have been a dreaded research paper into a fun project. It was probably also more enjoyable for him to review than old-fashioned reports would have been!

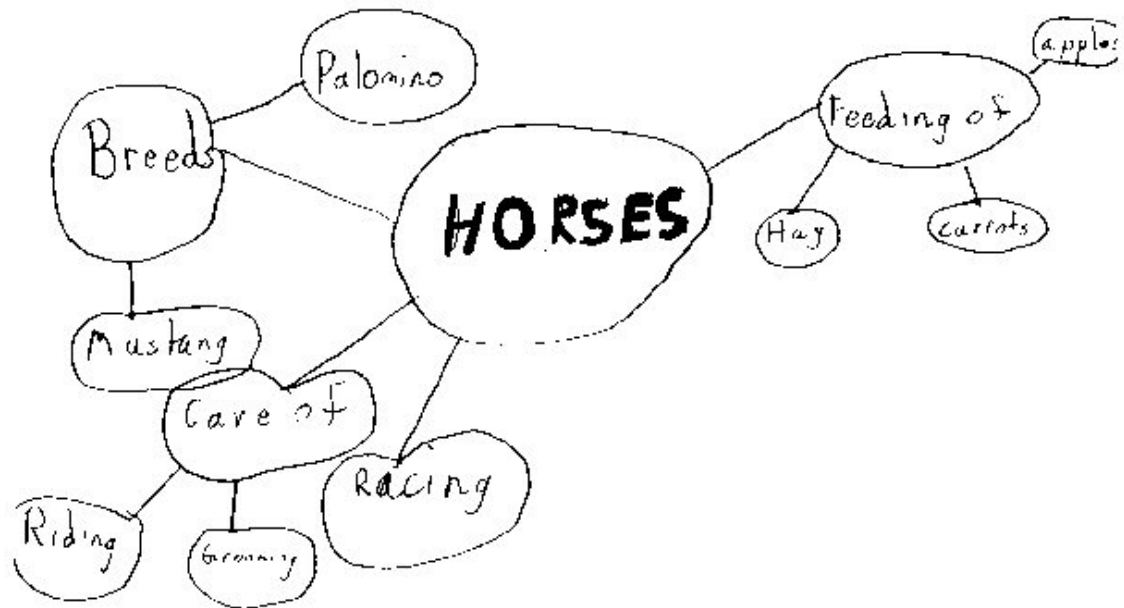
There are countless ways that visual-spatial learners can show that they have read the material, understood the main ideas and are prepared to report on their learning. It doesn't always have to be a written report. Any project that allows them to incorporate visuals, music, color and/or humor engages the right hemisphere and calls upon their strongest suit. Making students winners in a win/win for everyone! I hope you'll check out the list of "Alternative Assignments" that follows this chapter. Allowing alternative assignments may mean some flexibility in evaluation on your part. Some of your students may be happy to produce a standard written book report or research paper, so you will not be comparing apples to apples if other students select a more creative approach to demonstrating their knowledge. I would encourage you to employ a contract with each of your students that includes what format they have selected, either written book report or creative alternative or a mix of each, what you expect them to accomplish in producing their report or project, and the grade they can earn based on what they submit.

## **Report writing**

There will be times, however, when a standard written report must be assigned. Given the current status of the SAT with its timed essay requirement, it would behoove your students to be able to successfully organize their thoughts and create written output commensurate with their vivid mental images. To do so requires the visual-spatial student to begin with a lesson in organization. Visual-spatial students can discover successful strategies for creating written stories and

reports. By using a tape recorder or jotting their ideas in a “web,” or designating colored note cards or employing specialized software to get their mental pictures down on paper. Some of the kids I work with have no trouble telling someone everything that would be included in a report. It’s the act of writing that causes them to freeze. So why not let them dictate a report into a tape recorder, then write down what they’ve said? They can play back the tape and add more as they write, but at least they’ll have a starting point.

Webbing is a strategy of getting all the ideas for a particular subject on paper, then building from those ideas. For example, suppose the assignment is to research and write a report about a favorite animal. Teach your kids to start the process by creating a web. Because VSLs naturally think about big picture ideas first, a web should be easier to create than a standard outline, which starts with small details and builds to a big picture. When they start creating a web, they should be allowed to brainstorm all the related ideas they can think up. No idea is silly or should be thrown out at this stage. A typical web might look something like this:



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It is standard procedure to request an outline prior to the writing of a full report. As teachers, many of us were taught that the first part of writing a report is to put down all of the ideas in an organized format. But visual-spatial learners don't think like that! They see the big picture first and then the small details, so writing an outline *first* is torture!

In the web above, an outline would be created with the largest circle, "Horses," as our main subject. The sub-headings would include "breeds," "care of" and, "feeding of" with sub-sub-headings as "hay," "carrots," "mustang," "palomino," etc. The finished outline might look like this:

- I. Horses
  - A. Feeding of
    - 1. apples
    - 2. hay
    - 3. carrots
  - B. Breeds
    - 1. mustang
    - 2. palomino
  - C. Care of
    - 1. riding
    - 2. grooming
  - D. Racing

If creating an outline from their web doesn't work, VSLs can try software including, Inspiration® or Kidspiration®, that allows students to visually create an outline and let the program generate a standard outline from their information. Or, students should be allowed to write the report first and then generate an outline from the finished report. This may require some flexibility on your part, as students choosing this route should not be expected to complete the report in the same time others are drafting only an outline.

The next step in creating their finished reports is to encourage your students to watch videos, visit related sites on the Internet, talk to a specialist (perhaps a veterinarian in this case), and read books to gather information on each of the

areas necessary for the final report. They should take notes on everything they learn. The notes might be more useful to them if they write them on color-coded index cards. For example, in our pretend example of a report on horses, they might use green index cards for any information learned about feeding horses. They might choose yellow cards for the information researched about various breeds of horses. Keep in mind that “notes” don’t have to be written words. If your students think in pictures, it will be more meaningful for them to take their notes in pictures. These could be actual drawings of what they have learned. For example, they could draw pictures of what horses eat, rather than writing the words, “hay,” “carrots,” and “apples.” Hand-drawn images of what horses eat may be easier for them to recall than written words.

The final step is to show your students how to gather all of their completed note cards. They should be in order by color so that all the information about how to care for horses is together and all the information about breeds of horses is together, and so on. The grouped cards should be in order according to the outline created from the web. The report can then be written directly from the note cards with all the facts organized together, by color.

## Proofreading

Another thing that makes my daughter different, I think from her audio-sequential counterparts is that girls are supposed to be good at language arts. They are good spellers and writers. They tend to be good readers and quick talkers. My daughter isn't. Her spelling, handwriting and grammar (in written work) is terrible. (*K. C., parent*)

When students begin actually constructing their written assignments, they should not worry about grammar, spelling or punctuation. Those can each be addressed once the rough draft is written. The first priority is to get the students’ pictures into words and onto paper. After creating the rough draft, students should go through their reports looking only for spelling errors. If the report was typed on a computer, they should use spell-check to help, but they must be taught to

beware of homonyms! Once they've corrected any spelling mistakes, have them go through the draft again looking only for punctuation errors. Then, they should review the report again, looking only for any grammatical corrections. Don't ask your students to try to catch everything the first time they read through a rough draft—there's too much to look for and potentially have to change. Finally, have your students ask someone to help proofread for homonyms, missed words, etc. Even the finest writers have editors because we *all* need a second pair of eyes to review our work.

## **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.

## Chapter Three

### The Art of Handwriting vs. the Act of Keyboarding



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It seems her thoughts are there but her brain moves too fast and her slow writing makes the exercise of recording her thoughts unbearable. (*G. T., parent*)

Now for the actual act of writing. Nearly every visual-spatial learner I've worked with has had trouble handwriting. For some, their mental images come to them so quickly that their hands cannot keep up. For others, letters are multi-dimensional objects that rotate and roll around. It's tough to remember the proper direction of a multi-dimensional letter on a flat piece of paper. Still other students cannot form letters because they must begin in some random place in space, as in manuscript writing. This proves just too daunting a task. (I often recommend such students just jump into cursive and forget printing altogether.)

One day, computers will be a part of every classroom. Then, visual-spatial students with strong right hemispheres

will be able to put to paper all of their thoughts, stories, poems and notes to lectures without the frustration of handwriting. Why is the computer so important to their success? Because typing requires both hands to work together. This means both hemispheres of the brain are working together. If “two heads are better than one,” wouldn’t you agree that using both hemispheres, particularly the stronger right hemisphere for your visual-spatial students, is better than one? (Swimming, martial arts and any type of physical activity that requires the student to “cross over” to the other side of the body are other great ways to use both hemispheres of the brain.)

The speed of typing, over writing by hand, allows mental images to flow faster and the student doesn’t have to stop and think about forming the letters. If you are able to flip and rotate letters in your mind, as many visual-spatials do, the letters p, b, d and q are all the exact same shape in different positions. But on a keyboard, the letters are in their capital form so a Q looks nothing like a P, or a B, or a D, no matter how you twist and rotate that letter. Also, the keyboard doesn’t care if you are left- or right-handed—you need both hands, equally.

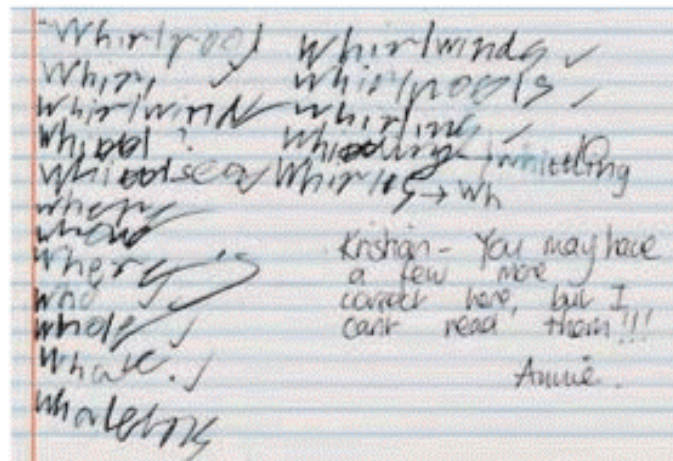
There are plenty of keyboarding programs available for students, including Mavis Beacon®, Mario Teaches Typing®, Disney Interactive®, JumpStart®, Type 2 Learn®, and Typing Tutor® (Platinum and Gold editions). I’ve even seen keyboards made for young students with smaller hands. Your students will be using computers throughout their lives, so why not teach them how to use them now? Learning to type on a keyboard may be the best way of completing homework assignments quickly and getting all their thoughts down on paper. In my experience, once a student is able to type 30 words a minute, the jump to much faster typing speeds comes very quickly.

Until your students become proficient at keyboarding, please remember to evaluate the content of their ideas separate from the quality of their penmanship. The creative part of the entire writing process is the single area in which

they have a natural ability to excel and so, should be graded separately from all the mechanics as well as the penmanship.


## Handwriting as art

If keyboarding is not an option for your students, then they should be taught handwriting as an art form. I would encourage you to purchase a set of calligraphy pens for your class and teach your students how to write beautiful letters. When they see the art in writing by hand, it may become a joy to create rather than a chore. Calligraphy should be taught slowly and with purpose, the way handwriting was taught over a century ago, before the invention of the ballpoint pen. Take the time to enjoy this newfound art with your class. Take a look at the following examples sent to me by a mom in Australia. This is her son's spelling test:



Note his teacher's comment, "You may have a few more correct here, but I can't read them!!!" Then, after just two weeks of instruction in calligraphy, look at what this seven year old produced:

Hi my name is Kristian. I am 7 years old.  
This is a fantasy picture of the Hokusai Wave.  
I have added a few extras~ a volcano and  
4 dragons. I call it the "Fantasy Wave." The dragons  
names are Ling~fi, Ranshi, Lung~roll and  
Ti~lung. There is coming out of the wave.  
His name is Fin. He is hunting for fish  
like the dragons.

By Kristian 

The ability to write beautiful flowing text will increase your students' confidence and legibility. Tip: Enlist parents' help when teaching your students calligraphy. Perhaps there are party invitations, place cards at the holiday table, birth announcements or wedding notes, even labels for boxes of toys, pictures, favorite things, CDs, DVDs—anything that could be created at home that would reinforce learning their new art form.

## Chapter Four

### Helping Students Ace Their Spelling Tests

When I present to audiences, I have a Peanuts© cartoon I use that shows Charlie Brown in bed thinking, “Sometimes I lie awake at night and wonder, ‘What is the meaning of life?’ Then a voice comes to me that says, ‘I before E, except after C.’” I’m sure you’ve heard and probably used this spelling rule. Who makes up these crazy spelling rules? There are often so many exceptions to the rules; it seems silly to have the rule in the first place!

Most visual-spatial learners struggle with spelling. Their gift is in creating fantastic stories using the vivid imaginations they were born with, but not necessarily in getting those stories to paper with spelling the rest of us can recognize. This chapter will help your students stay excited about creating stories **and** being able to spell correctly!

Like everything else these students learn, in order to remember the proper spelling of words, they must be taught to create permanent mental images of them. Without those pictures to see in their minds’ eyes, they’ll be trying to memorize spelling rules and all the times they are broken. And, they’ll likely fail. So, how are you going to help your students create pictures of their spelling words?

First, have them draw a picture that includes all the letters of the word. They can make up a story to go with it, if they like. Here’s that illustration for the word, “Mountain,” again. (This is in Chapter 1 on Reading.) You can actually see mountains in the letters “M” and “N.”



The characters in this student's tale are climbing and skiing the mountain and the student made up a story about why the "a" had to come before the "i" because that was something he kept forgetting to do when he spelled it. His story went that the character must first slide down the mountain, and then use an "I-ce" pick (which he turned the I into) to climb back up. Now, this approach of having a character on each letter may be a bit excessive and it's unlikely your students would need to follow this precise example.

Whichever part of a spelling word is giving your students trouble, have them take a blank, white piece of paper and write the word on it. They should use a colored marker and write the part that they keep forgetting, (in our word, the "ai") really large:

Mountain

In order for the right hemisphere of the brain to remember an image, your students should add color, size or humor to everything they learn. When they truly have a mental image of the spelling word, they'll be able to see it well enough to spell the word forward and backward. As you prep your kids for their next spelling test, try having them spell the words backward to test whether or not they are ready. Or ask that they prepare for the next spelling test at home by accurately spelling their words forward and backward.

Sometimes writing the letters of the word on stairs will help visual-spatials to see each letter of a word. They can then climb up the stairs, mentally, to spell the word backward and climb down the stairs to spell it forward! You'll find some reproducible staircases for spelling words that are from five to ten letters long at the end of this chapter.

M  
O  
U  
N  
T  
A  
I  
N

Another technique that a mum in New Zealand recommended to me is to have your students type each of their spelling words on a computer using a different font for each word. They should select a font that matches the feeling or mood of the word. So, "serendipitous," which sounds like a fun and interesting word, might look like this: *serendipitous*. Or, they might choose these fonts for these types of words: *frightening* -- *Elegance* -- they just need to be sure to use a font they can read!

Many students have difficulty remembering how to spell "friend." Here's a silly story one student made up and he has since never forgotten the correct spelling:

**FRIEND**

"These FRiEs from FRIday's sure taste good at the day's end!"

"You're right, FRlend!"

By using a rhyme and a double meaning on the letter combination “FRI,” he used a trick that got his right hemisphere involved in remembering how to spell this word. Metaphors and multiple meanings of words are stored in the right hemisphere.

One teacher taught her students to actually put “rule-breaking” spelling words in jail, behind bars. The word was thrown in prison for breaking the rules and the image of the word behind bars would stick in the students’ memories. Here’s one a student did for the word “reign” because the “ei” combination makes a long “a” sound. It breaks another rule by having a silent “g” in it.



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Here are even more strategies you can try to help your students create mental pictures of their spelling words:

### **A Visualization Approach to Spelling\***

\*Borrowed from Neurolinguistic Programming

1. Have students write each spelling word in large print with bright-colored ink on a separate white piece of paper with the difficult part of the word written in a different color.
2. They should hold the card in front of them as far as their arm can reach, a little bit above the eyes.
3. Ask them to study the word carefully, then close their eyes and see if they can picture the word in their imaginations.
4. Now, have them do something wild and crazy to the word in their imaginations—the sillier the better. (They could make the word colorful, have the letters act as people or animals—anything that will help them remember how the word is spelled.)
5. They then place the word somewhere in space, in front of or above their heads. There is an infinite amount of space around a person that can hold an equally infinite number of words. When your students are later asked to spell the word, they will likely look to the very place they “put” it.
6. Individually, ask each student to spell their word backward with their eyes closed. Was there an even rhythm between the letters? Good! That means they are really looking at a mental picture.
7. Next, have them spell their word forward with their eyes closed.
8. Have all the students open their eyes and write the spelling word **once**.
9. They should close their eyes again and see if the word is still where they placed it in space. It should stay there forever!

Here's part of an e-mail I received from a parent in Australia who tried this strategy with her teenage son:

So I drew up flash cards of 5 difficult words; inherent in their difficulty was they were not phonic, contained silent letters, or contained sounds that were not spelled phonically. I used:  
Obscene, Schematic, Marmalade, Machine, Traditional.

I sat with A & told him NOT to sound these out but to just put them straight into his "TV screen ". He looked at the cards - spelt them forwards/backwards and closed his eyes and told me it was done.

I asked him to spell the 5 words. My first shock was he spelt the 5 words correctly. My second shock was when he asked nonchalantly "Do you need me to spell them backwards to you too?" I hadn't expected that and told him OK - where he proceeded to spell all 5 words to me correctly... backwards!

From a boy who could barely read and was unable to spell, I started to cry. He was spelling and spelling correctly forwards and backwards. He could SEE these words. (*J. M., parent from Australia.*)

As I mentioned earlier, it is not unusual for visual-spatial learners to have difficulty with spelling, so I want you to consider this. Read the following paragraph. Don't try very hard, just quickly read the words:

Aoccdrnig to rscheearch at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deson't mtttaer  
waht oredr ltteers in a wrod apear, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is taht  
the frist and lsat ltter be in the rghit pclae. The oethr ltteers can be a  
cmolpeet mses and you can sitll raed the wrod!

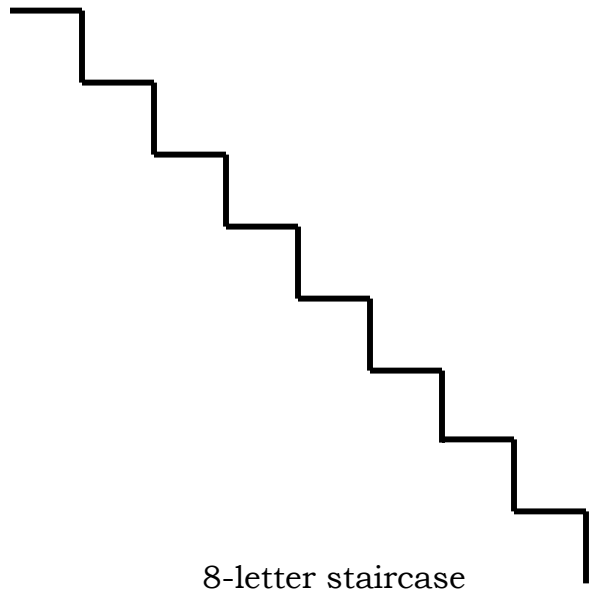
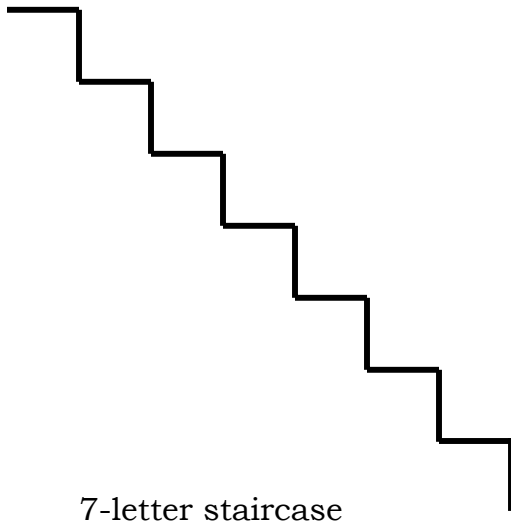
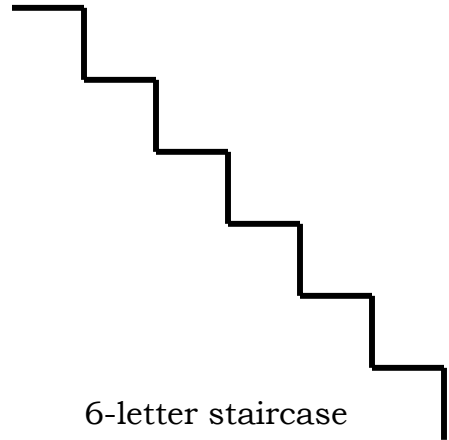
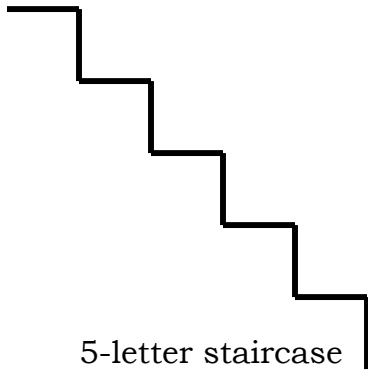
Apaprnelty, the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter, but raeds  
the wrod as a wlohe. Ins't taht amzanig? So mcuh for the  
ipmorante of spleling!

Now, I know that you were able to read this because you already know how to read and I'm not trying to suggest that an illiterate child would be able to read this. I just want you to

consider that with computers and other tools available to your students, perhaps we are placing a bit too much emphasis on a proficiency that is not necessarily a life-skill for their time. The paragraph above is at least something to consider the next time you administer a spelling test!

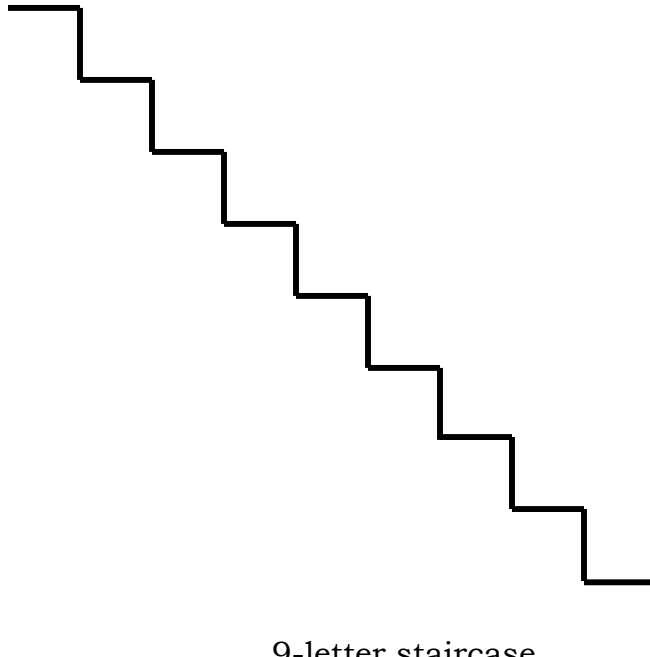
## Spelling Staircases

The following staircases are for your spelling words. To prepare for your spelling test, be sure you can spell each word forward and backward!

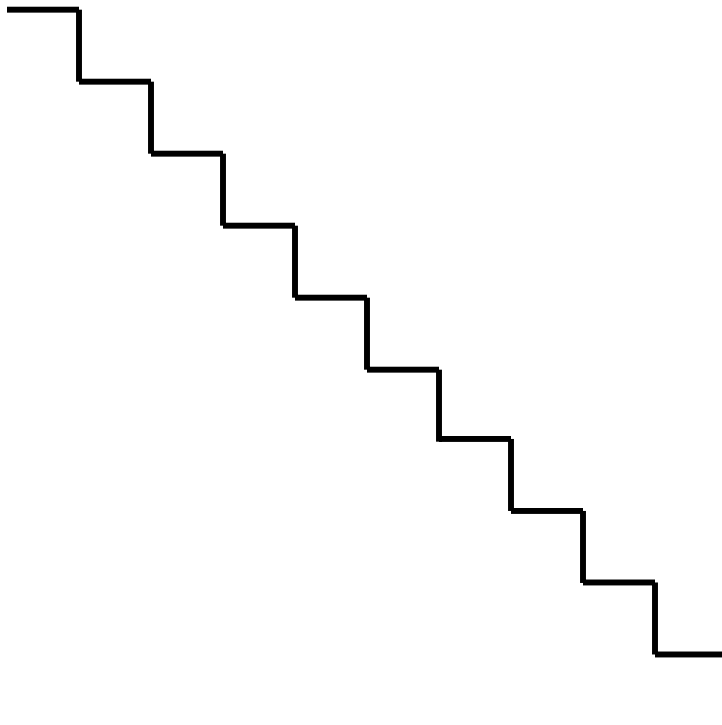


## Spelling Staircases

The following staircases are for your spelling words. To prepare for your spelling test, be sure you can spell each word forward and backward!



9-letter staircase



10-letter staircase



## Chapter Five

### Taking Notes in Pictures

The most obvious way of representing what someone has said is to draw a picture of it. (Robert Ornstein, *The Right Mind: Making Sense of the Hemispheres*, 1997, p. 36.)

I mentioned earlier that visual-spatial students should be allowed to take their notes in pictures. Here's a story from a student in a fifth grade World History class that elaborates just why this technique works best for VSLs: One day the class was treated to a guest who had been in World War II. As the gentleman was giving his lecture (an oral presentation only, with no maps, pictures or other images), he stood over one of the students who had dutifully chosen a seat, front and center. The lecturer noticed that the student was doodling in his notebook. He held the notebook up for the entire class to see and said, "I hope the rest of you are paying more attention than this young man." The student was, of course, horribly embarrassed.

After class, the visual-spatial doodler approached the guest teacher and explained that his "doodles" were how he took notes. He asked the gentleman to quiz him on any of the material. The guest teacher did and the student was able to answer each question correctly. The student had drawn the outlines of countries the gentleman had visited; he had drawn weapons the man had used from the descriptions given and he had engraved them with the years the man had visited there. The doodler remembered all of the new material because he had created pictures of the details, both in his notebook and in his mind. Pictures are permanent. The guest teacher apologized to the class the next day, saying he did not realize that students could effectively take notes in pictures.

The best way to remember something is to change it, to transform the information in some manner...if it's verbal create a diagram or picture of it. (Levine, 2002, p. 119)

Your visual-spatial students should be encouraged to use this technique, of taking notes in picture form or creating diagrams, while they are listening to a lecture or if they need notes on research material from a book, a TV show or the Internet. Whatever source they are using to learn from, that material can be remembered and more easily recalled by drawing pictures. Drawing will help that material become permanent in their minds because they can later “download” those images whenever they need them.

*When you draw something, you own it.*

Picture thinkers must be allowed to call upon this strength, of storing and recalling images, if we are to truly honor their learning style.

In another study... students recalled vocabulary words better when they read the definitions and drew their own pictures to represent them than when they read and wrote the words and the definitions. Tracing a picture of the definition produced better recall than writing the definition, but *creating one's own visual image* was more effective than tracing. (Williams, 1983, p. 31. emphasis added)

My 9<sup>th</sup> grade vocabulary teacher...had us learn 500 words in 9 weeks by using index cards. On the front of the index card, we wrote the vocabulary word. On the back of the card, we drew any picture that reminded us of the word...To this day, more than 20 years later (!) I still remember almost all of those words. (As quoted in Silverman, 2002, p. 277.)

If your students find that they can't draw fast enough while in class, you might consider allowing them to tape record the lecture. That way, they can complete their drawings later, when they can replay the tape and stop it as needed. It must be understood, however that recording for later listening is certainly not an excuse to zone out during class! I've included a contract for taping lectures at the end of this chapter that you can use with your students. Some visual-spatial learners remember the teachers' facial expressions and precisely where they were standing when they discussed

certain topics. So watching the teacher can sometimes work better than taking notes, when the student's head must be down, looking at a notebook. This may be particularly true for students with auditory issues. And if a student has slow processing speed or a motor coordination deficit, he has to THINK about how to make the letters, which distracts him from focusing on the lecture.

If taking notes in pictures is too time consuming, your students should try a modified version of picture-note taking by combining a mix of drawing and words. Teach your students to use various symbols and abbreviations in their note taking. Here are some more samples to get your students started:

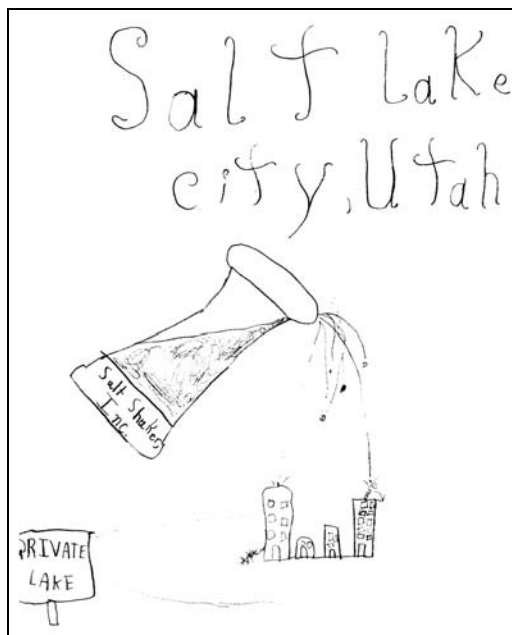
<u>Word</u>	<u>Shortcut</u>
with	w/
between	b/w
double	2x
triple	3x
On the other hand	OTOH
By the way	BTW
In the first place	1 <sup>st</sup> pl

Here are some more ideas: the symbol  $\Delta$  means, "change," and, of course, the symbol  $<$  means "less than," and  $>$  means "more than." This symbol @ is quicker to write than "at" but just as meaningful. The Greek Letter Sigma, shown as  $\Sigma$ , means "sum." These are commonly used symbols, but your students can make up their own. I used  $\Uparrow$  to mean something was increasing or growing, and  $\Downarrow$  to mean something was being taken away or becoming smaller. This symbol,  $\Omega$ , Omega, is the last letter in the Greek alphabet. It could be used whenever something was ending or if a character died. The capital "A" is the Greek symbol for Alpha, or the beginning, and could be used to write about the start of something new, or a birth, or the introduction of a new character. Students could use "B4" for the word, "before," or "oppty" for "opportunity." I'll bet your class can think of lots of

abbreviations and then start including them in their note taking.

I've used "VSLs" throughout this book to stand for visual-spatial learners. Many people say "TV" for television. If your students use Instant Messaging, they already know lots of acronyms that are used to type secret messages their parents don't know about (or so they think!). Acronyms are also used to keep the sender from having to type every word. Some of these include, "PLOS" for Parents Looking Over Shoulder and "LOL" for Laughing Out Loud. Encourage your students to create their own acronyms in their note taking. Depending on the subject they are taking notes for, there are probably lots of repeated phrases that they could substitute with an acronym.

Taking notes in pictures also works well for information your students have to research or memorize. For example, let's suppose you are studying the capitals of each state in the U.S. and your students learn that Salt Lake City is the capital of Utah, or that Springfield is the capital Illinois. Ok, these are easy ones to create pictures for, but you get the point! Here's what one student drew for me:



Because he created his own drawing and he used humor, he is more likely to remember this capital than trying to just memorize it. Your students can do the same thing!

Another trick that works for many visual-spatial students is to create images of the words they are studying by boxing, circling or underlining them. The simple act of having a particular word stand out from the others, by being enclosed or differentiated somehow should help to create an image of the word.

## Tape Recording Log

Use this log to record those students under contract for Classroom Tape Recording and to monitor the effectiveness of this strategy.

[illegible]

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## Creating a Visual-Spatial Classroom

If you've found the tips in this mini-book helpful in teaching language arts to your students, I invite you to look into *The Visual-Spatial Classroom: Differentiation Strategies that Engage Every Learner* for visual-spatial teaching strategies on other subjects. Or, visit **Visual-Spatial Resource** at [www.visualspatial.org](http://www.visualspatial.org) for more tips and techniques.

School will probably be the only time visual-spatial students feel they are not as bright or capable as their auditory-sequential friends. Beyond this time, in college and in the careers they choose, these children will grow to feel the strengths of their right hemispheres are truly a gift. In creating a visual-spatial classroom, you can help them understand their gifts earlier and enjoy success in so many areas beyond the Three R's of 'ritin', readin' and 'rithmetic. Be their cheerleader, their mentor, and the adult in their lives, other than their parents, that truly cares about them. The strong emotional bond many visual-spatial students feel about the one teacher that truly understood them lasts their entire lifetime.

Be that teacher.



# About the Author



**Alexandra "Allie" Golon** is Director of the **Visual-Spatial Resource**, a subsidiary of the Institute for the Study of Advanced Development, in Denver, Colorado. As a founding member of the Visual-Spatial Resource Access Team, a former G/T teacher and homeschooling parent to two visual-spatial learners, Allie brings a wealth of experience to her books, *Raising Topsy-Turvy Kids: Successfully Parenting Your Visual-Spatial Child*; *If You Could See the Way I Think: A Handbook for Visual-Spatial Kids* and *The Visual-Spatial Classroom: Differentiation Strategies that Engage Every Learner*. Allie has been invited to present on parenting and teaching visual-spatial learners at state, national and international venues. She has counseled dozens of families regarding various homeschooling issues and harmoniously parenting visual-spatial learners and has appeared on talk radio programs and in print media. Allie can be reached at [alex@visualspatial.org](mailto:alex@visualspatial.org).

## What people are saying about Allie's work with visual-spatial learners:

***From a participant in the If You Could See the Way I Think children's workshop in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia:***

Dear Allie,

The things I learnt at your presentation I did not know before. It helped me understand why I'm bad at maths. It made me feel special. Thank you for helping me realize who I truly am.

***From a parent who attended a Raising Topsy-Turvy Kids seminar in Christchurch, New Zealand:***

First time in a long while that I have sat totally mesmerized...thank you so much.

***From a consultation client in St. Louis, Missouri:***

I just wanted to say thanks for all your help and suggestions! It's amazing to me that I have been to multiple doctors... Psychiatrists, Psychologists, Neurologists and Pediatricians for 6 years now to try and get some help for J, not to mention the thousands of dollars we have spent trying to get some answers and after a 1 hour phone conversation with you I feel like I FINALLY have some answers! THANKS SO MUCH!

***From a public school district in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada***

Your sensitivity and perceptiveness are so evident. You are so in tune with people. Thanks for sharing your wisdom and warmth with us.

"I Can't *See* it!"  
A Visual-Spatial Approach to Language Arts

*I Can't See It!* was originally published as several chapters within  
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