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Introduction: *JWA* Special Issue on Disability, Neurodivergence, and Writing Assessment

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Abstract: This essay provides an introduction to the *JWA* special issue on alternative writing assessment and disability/neurodivergence. The editors argue that anti-ableist theories of writing assessment are rooted in disciplinary efforts to address prior discrimination in writing assessment and subsequent work seeking to cultivate fairer, student-centered practices in both classroom and institutional spaces. Building on the work of scholars in disability studies and writing assessment, as well as the contributors to this special issue, the editors further contend that the diversity of experiences with disability/neurodivergence means that frameworks for anti-ableist writing assessment must be multivocal and plural, integrating values from disability studies, including the importance of foregrounding disabled experiences and acknowledging varied timeframes and methods for work and writing. The essay provides an overview of the contributors' essays and concludes with an encouragement to readers to incorporate these articles into their research, teaching, and programmatic activities.

Keywords: disability, neurodivergence, writing assessment, alternative assessment, grading, placement, fairness, equity, equitable

When the world changed in 2020, writing assessment changed too. While, by the mid-2000s, there was a steady uptake among writing teachers of alternative assessments as a way to center students' agency and learning (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; Shor, 2009), the turn to emergency remote learning put interest in alternative forms of assessment into overdrive.

Amid the social upheaval of 2020, conventional writing assessment, with its presumption of objective, neutral standards for determining writing quality, seemed to many educators incommensurate with the volatile circumstances in which students lived and wrote. The widespread Black Lives Matter protests following the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the COVID-19 pandemic together exposed the reality already known to many disabled and neurodivergent students and scholars, that writing assessment privileges white, "logocentric" forms of knowledge and an able bodymind (Cedillo, 2018; see also Price, 2011). These challenges also underscored the importance of inclusive approaches to assessment that aim to embrace multiple, culturally influenced ways of writing.

One response offered up to the concerns sparked by the exigencies of the pandemic and ongoing racial injustices was labor-based contract grading, already a popular method of alternative assessment for minimizing linguistic bias and supporting multiracial student populations (Inoue, 2022). Many educators eagerly adopted labor-based assessment in 2020 and the years following as a more equitable approach.

A similar shift occurred in institutional assessment, especially standardized testing and placement practices. Many universities, including high-profile ones like Dartmouth (Dartmouth, 2024) and the University of California system (Watanabe, 2020), paused the use of standardized assessments in admissions and placement. Writing scholars argued that the pandemic highlighted the "discursive harms of" the prominent role of "standardized testing" in higher education (Pantelides & Whittig, 2024) and called for placement practices that reconsider assumptions about students' writing abilities and engage students in conversation about the goals of first-year writing courses. Despite the renewed use of standardized testing in evaluating prospective students at many institutions, interest in institutional assessment practices that minimize harm and center students' varied, individual needs remains high.

Yet rising interest in alternative assessment practices was also matched by the critique of these same practices, including the critique of these practices as ableist. Kathleen Kryger and Griffin X. Zimmerman (2020) argue that changing the method of assessment may interfere with the crip time, or the ebb and flow of working energy, that many neurodivergent (ND)/disabled students inhabit (see Wood, 2017), and urge an intersectional, flexible approach that attends to students' dis/ability as intertwined with race and language. Ellen Carillo (2021) likewise notes that students with any divergent experience of time in their learning, whether that experience is rooted in their levels of preparedness, physical or mental health, racial identity, and/or other components of a complex life, all stand to lose from a time-based grading scheme, and proposes engagement-based grading, a "flexible and interactive" (p. 57) approach which invites educators to "offer a range of ways that students might engage with the course" (p. 56). Finally, Zimmerman (2024) urges a values-oriented approach that puts student learning and wellbeing ahead of the assessment apparatus by inviting writing teachers to strive for forms of access that hold space for change, adaptation, and discomfort (pp. 350–351). Together, these scholars establish that in trying to resolve injustices embedded in conventional assessment, labor-based contract grading

potentially raises new ones and that more flexible forms of writing assessment might better serve students' diverse needs and identities.

These discussions expand and develop on longstanding arguments within writing assessment that define fairness in terms of social impact and embodiment. Within ethical frameworks for writing assessment, fairness is expansive and systemic, rooted in a commitment to the writing construct—the mental model for "good" writing that the assessment measures—as broadly defined (Elliot, 2016). Fair writing assessment also considers the "social consequences" of its results and takes steps to correct unequal or biased impacts (Slomp, 2016). Much as Inoue (2015), Carillo (2024), and other scholars stress the danger of a singular standard, writing assessment writ large foregrounds acknowledging rhetorical and social variation in writing as a core component of equity across both classroom and institutional forms of assessment. This emphasis on variation aligns with commitments shared among disability studies scholars working in composition: the importance of acknowledging how a writer's bodymind, in conjunction with their gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality, shapes writing in ways that, despite falling outside normative expectations, make the text more compelling for its audience and its writer.

Yet historically, singular, normative standards for "good" writing have been widespread in higher education, deployed to punish deviance and exclude certain populations from access to learning. Analyzing the racism underpinning writing assessment practices in the 1920s and 30s, J.W. Hammond (2018) argues that at both the classroom and systemic or standardized levels, assessment was rooted in eugenicist efforts to "cure" (p. 58) variation among students and student writing practices, so that the only students permitted to continue and succeed were those whose bodies and minds reflected desirable population traits. Far from being left in the past, this history persists in response, evaluation, and grading patterns that emphasize "punish[ing]" students' perceived "error[s or] linguistic variance" (Faison, 2024, p. 45), especially variance rooted in race and ethnicity. Yet these analyses cannot be disentangled from disabled discrimination. Disability was targeted by eugenicist educational theorists as well, and disability justice and racial justice needs converge (Schalk, 2022).

In addition to focusing on "state-sanctioned individual rights" (Schalk, 2022, p. 7), Hammond (2018) argues that responses to racial injustice in assessment require system-level corrections and a model of inclusion that does not collapse individuals into a single melting pot but acknowledges the legitimacy of multiple ways of being and writing, aligned with students' cultural backgrounds and rhetorical exigencies.

Scholars have proposed models for anti-ableist classroom assessment that broadly align with the (now federally contested) values of diversity and inclusion across university systems, such as Inoue's (2023) proposed "cripped" (p. 115) version of labor-based grading. This work is important but, given its focus on one particular model, it represents a preliminary step forward: the work of theorizing anti-ableist alternative assessment requires a holistic reimagining of our practices from the ground up, across both our classrooms and institutional and standardized approaches to assessment. A univocal method of envisioning anti-ableist assessment is insufficient to capture the inherent variance and multiplicity of neurodivergent (ND) and/or disabled student and faculty experiences. The needs of ND/disabled students—and ND/disabled educators—are individual and varied, both person-to-person and, often, day-to-day (see Yergeau, 2018). Assessment is also highly local, shaped by the nested contexts of the writing classroom, program, and institution (Huot, 2002). By definition, then, anti-ableist writing assessment should be context-specific, fluid,

and multivocal—arising out of frameworks that can be changed, adapted, and refigured across contexts, rather than following a singular set of practices.

As editors of this special issue, we, and our contributors, "write alongside" (Hubrig, 2022, p. 195) these scholars in recognizing that these values are also necessary to theorize anti-ableist forms of (alternative) writing assessment—still widely untheorized. Disability studies scholars working within composition have urged the reconsideration of teaching practices which touch on assessment, for instance syllabus policies around attendance and technology, which often bar disabled participation (Birdwell & Bayley, 2022), or expectations for rough drafts as an essential part of the writing process, given that ADHD students don't always pass through normative stages in their work (Barritt & Hubrig, 2024). These practices reinforce the reality that "disability is the norm" (Cecil-Lemkin, 2022) in much of higher education and also point the way towards a more holistic reconsideration of both institutional structures and our classroom participation in—or resistance to—these structures as a necessary part of equitable writing pedagogy and assessment.

Yet work on anti-ableist writing assessment remains relatively slim. Alternative writing assessment aims at a rethinking of conventional assessment practices staked on a single, normative standard—an ongoing, iterative rethinking, that adapts to the changing needs of students, faculty, and the larger institution and community (Von Bergen, 2023). What does it look like to do this rethinking along disability justice lines? To be more specific, what do the various forms of writing assessment we engage on a regular basis, from response and grading to placement processes and institutional assessment, look like when they are adapted for disabled students and faculty? How can inclusively minded instructors and writing program administrators ensure that their approaches to assessment account for the variable goals and needs of disabled and neurodiverse students in their classes? And, as the COVID-19 pandemic recedes from public memory—and is actively repressed—how can writing educators follow the practices taken up during that time in their classrooms and at their institutions, including in the writing modalities they accept, the completion timeframes they allow, the student agency they honor, and their attention to disabled community needs?

The goal of this special issue is not to provide a single answer to the question of how anti-ableist assessment should be structured or implemented but instead to provide many answers: multivocal, partial, rooted in the ethos of ND/disabled people and allies committed to more equitable forms of writing assessment. The manuscripts that follow approach the question of anti-ableist writing assessment using a variety of methods, from interrogating their personal experiences (Hawkins, 2026; Mitchell, 2026) to drawing on theoretical frameworks (Hizer, 2026; Wood, 2026); and they offer a diversity of anti-ableist approaches.

As editors, we value—and have learned from—each of these interventions. The contributions to this special issue have also inspired us to develop assessment approaches that attend with even more care to the diversity of our ND/disabled students and colleagues. The writing and rhetorical aims of disabled/ND rhetors are as diverse and variable as disabilities themselves. Informed by the articles assembled here and Stephanie Kerschbaum's (2014) attention to the complexities of difference in writing classrooms, we argue that inclusive anti-ableist writing assessment ecologies must accommodate at least three distinct aspects of the disabled/ND writing experience: *disabled bodies*, or *bodyminds* (Price, 2015; Schalk, 2018), which require distinct forms of access and support within the assessment ecology; *disabled writing*, texts which may enact embodied differences, or

not; and *disabled rhetorical aims*, which may wish to repudiate "normate templates" (Zimmerman, 2024) or conform to them.

As several of our contributors note (see Hawkins, 2026; Hizer, 2026), disabled writing may be presented in uniquely crip modes and genres. Such work *might* enact the vision of Robert McRuer (2006), who argues, in his pathbreaking work on "de-composition," that queer and disabled forms, sensibilities, and cadences can be expressed in language and writing, resulting in work that defies normative standards of "that which is proper, orderly, and harmonious" (p. 48) and that may remain "permanently partial" (p. 60). McRuer's analysis, along with scholarship on "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1974) and its antecedents (Banks, 1968; Kelly, 1972; Lloyd, 1952; Woodson, 1933) and Inoue's (2015) attention to the racism of single, qualitative standards of assessment, has helped those invested in inclusive writing assessment (a) move away from singular standards that privilege white mainstream English and (b) interrogate the feedback they offer to ensure that it does not perpetuate racism, ableism, or other forms of violence. And Megan has connected disability to assessment (Von Bergen, 2025), pointing out that strategies like labor-based grading can help writing instructors "surrender control of what good writing turns out looking like" (p. 8) when measured against single standards embedded with racist and ableist assumptions, inviting them to consider "good writing as situated in students' own embodied and enminded experiences" (p. 9). These moves serve as necessary rejoinders to traditionalist assumptions that "good" writing is that which rigorously conforms to Standard Edited American English, however dull or derivative its ideas or formal constructions, creating space for assessments to accept and affirm writing that enacts "de-composition."

Yet, as scholars of writing and disability point out, anti-ableist approaches to writing assessment should encourage students to help form their own evaluation criteria (Hawkins, 2026; Neal, 2026, p. 11; Zimmerman, 2024). This means not "assuming in advance"—to borrow McRuer's (2006) construction (p. 159) —that all disabled/ND students will wish to produce "de-composed" or anti-normative writing or adopt "disability consciousnesses" (Waggoner, 2016), a point that echoes Kerschbaum's (2014) observation that writing classrooms are full of difference, which functions as a "dynamic," "relational," and "emergent" property (p. 7). According to Kershbaum (2014), students and instructors "mark" their differences, and those of others, by attending to, displaying, and disguising aspects of their identities and histories (p. 82; p. 89; pp. 93–94). Through this process, difference is revealed and interpreted, solidifying in some contexts (p. 109) and receding in others, though never fully escaping the strictures of its embodied forms.

Kerschbaum's attention to the dynamism of difference within writing classrooms suggests that some students will be energized by disclosure, by the foregrounding of disability in writing instruction and assessment. Others may not be—perhaps because they are inhibited by the marking of norms within a given classroom, or because they are troubled by how difference is marked. They may wish to pass, at least on the page, as Brueggemann (2001) has observed (p. 796). Other students may engage eagerly with disability theory, and may write about it, yet might not wish to enact their impairments or disability consciousness in the form or shape of their writing. They may find it difficult to concentrate or focus—as we (Megan and Andrew) do, frequently enough to interfere with our writing, including this writing—and they may search for strategies that can help them become more generative or productive. They may struggle to write; they may find it painful, confounding, and physically and emotionally draining, and yet they may still aim

for rhetorically compelling prose—a dynamic that several of the contributors to this special issue describe vividly. We're thinking, in particular, of Hawkins's (2026) account of her own struggles to focus and manage her pain while producing work that conforms to quite rigorous academic standards. We're thinking, too, of Hizer's (2026) thoughtful citation of the Greek god Hephaestus's cunning and flexibility as the exemplification of *metis*.

Hephaestus is an especially useful illustration of the distinctions that can emerge between disabled bodies, disabled writing, and disabled rhetorical aims. He was a disabled craftsman who made glittering, artfully constructed weapons for kings and the gods (Dolmage, 2014, pp. 167–192). As Dolmage explains, his body was constrained—in some depictions, he is shown in a chariot, suggesting he might not have been able to walk (p. 154); in others, he is described as having a limp or a club foot. Yet he produced magnificent, and highly usable, metalwork: the arrows of Apollon and Artemis, the knife of Perseus, used to slay Medusa, the breastplate of Zeus, the armor and shield of Herakles and Achilles, among others (Atsma, n.d.). His goal was artisanal excellence.

Like Hephaestus, many disabled/ND students and scholars are constrained in specific ways by their impairments, yet they may still wish to compose as effectively as they are able (with the understanding that the ultimate utility of a given text is bound up in a complex negotiation between the goals of the author, the needs of the audience, and the expectations of the genre). They may want to strive in their writing for order and harmony and completion in "normate" terms. Alternatively, they may want their rhetorical efforts to be as legible, accessible, and meaningful as possible, even if they compose them *outside* of normative time sequences or in non-standard modes or languages, and even if the final products remain somewhat "de-composed" or partial. And consciously or not, some of these writers may resist arguments and theories that essentialize disability as necessarily antinormative or activist, confirming the feminist scholar Biddy Martin's (1994) warning that identitarian movements need to be careful not to let the "enormous fear of ordinariness or normalcy" distract attention from the workaday "dilemmas of the average people" that variously marginalized people also experience (p. 123).

Inclusive assessment ecologies must be mindful of the dynamism of difference that Kerschbaum describes and the diversity of disabled bodyminds, disabled writing, and disabled rhetorical aims. The approaches to assessment outlined in this special issue will help responsive instructors and writing program administrators better meet the needs of their disabled students by granting them agency, by acknowledging their goals and needs—whether they are disabled/ND or not, whether they wish to produce normative or anti-normative writing products, and regardless of their rhetorical intentions. The removal of grades from the assessment ecology can capacitate all students, not just those who are disabled or otherwise historically minoritized. Likewise, de-emphasizing "singular, qualitative standards for good writing" (Von Bergen, 2025, p. 9) can help all students thrive. The co-creation with students of assessment standards—a crucial part of many forms of contract grading—can accommodate those who desire normative and non-normative products. The acceptance of late work—the rejection of normative standards of academic time—can help students whose bodies need additional rest or support. Openness to multimodal and "de-composed" writing products can provide additional ramps or pathways to access within the assessment ecology.

And, to return to Hephaestus and his magnificent metalworks, writing instructors and administrators can use their assessments to encourage students to strive for rhetorical excellence

in whatever forms, modes, genres, and languaging styles seem appropriate to them. As this special issue seeks to show, there is no single or rigidly standardizable means of supporting and empowering disabled/ND students through assessment. Instead, what counts as a generative intervention depends on the instructor, the needs and wishes of the student, and exigencies of the institution. To put this another way, the anti-ableist assessment approach that works for students and faculty is never going to be singular— "just one thing." It's going to take different forms depending on the teacher and the students and the institution.

For some disabled/ND writers, the avant-garde formal properties of "de-composition" are goals to strive for. For others, they are not final rhetorical aims, but necessary steps along the way—perhaps over a number of terms—toward improved clarity, deeper meaning, more compelling persuasion. These goals can be accomplished in a range of languages and modalities, including formal structures that might seem crip or disabled and in languaging that deviates sharply from Standard Edited American English while still retaining rhetorical power. And the encouragement—the inspiration—of writers within alternative assessment ecologies is a crucial task for writing instructors, one that can further empower disabled/ND students. In this way, and informed by all of the "enabling" articles in this special issue, assessment ecologies can fully accommodate and encourage the glittering diversity of disabled bodyminds, disabled writing, and disabled rhetorical aims.

Positionality Statement

Much disability scholarship draws strength from its embodied and enminded nature, its rootedness in the lived experiences of the scholars who produce it. Many of the authors in this special issue draw on their differences as resources, describing how their own disabilities and/or neurodivergence brought them to the conclusions in their manuscripts. In this spirit, we want to share how our own experiences with disability and complex embodiment (Siebers, 2017, pp. 324–325) brought us to the work included in this special issue and shape the texts you are reading now.

Megan's Narrative

I came to disability studies through my interest in alternative assessment, as the process of researching, writing, and defending my dissertation amid a global pandemic exposed hidden fault lines in the systems I relied on to complete my work efficiently and interact with the world. Even as the pandemic, a mass disabling event, was exposing the ableist nature of singular or universal writing standards, it was also clarifying for me the gaps between normative, even recommended, patterns for writing and research, and my own research habits.

With the exception of the spring I needed three root canals—the same spring, relevantly, this special issue was born—I am mostly an able-bodied woman who runs long trail races for a hobby. Even "neurodivergent" is an uneasy fit, since I don't share some of the commonplace experiences that often coalesce around that label. But I found during my dissertation, and I find now, that the rhythms of my work are interrupted, derailed, and shaped by deep-seated "brain gremlins," as a mentor put it—and the form my writing takes often reflects these interruptions. My dissertation argues for the importance of dismantling historical, racist standards for grading and pursuing more expansive forms of writing assessment, ones that acknowledge diverse language practices and changing circumstances. As I grappled with my brain gremlins alongside working

out this argument, I found my interest sparked in how anti-ableist practices also shape questions such as how writing gets done and what good writing looks like.

Alternative assessment and disability studies conversations agree that standards for what good writing looks like and how it gets done are socially constructed, artificial, and potentially harmful. Citing Judith Butler, Robert McRuer (2006) argues that normative identities, the "ideal able-bodied identity," are a standard we are meant to strive for, despite the fact that "can never, once for all, be achieved" (p. 9), forever out of our reach, however hard we try. Alternative assessment practices, and disability studies, offer an escape from this Sisyphean circuit: the clear affirmation that multiple ways of being and writing are valid and meaningful, and that the individual, as much as social standards, has a say in what counts as success. This does not mean that any one assessment practice can permanently solve questions of discrimination in writing assessment; but the recognition both that grading functions as an unreachable, and therefore harmful, standard and the commitment to push towards more inclusive forms of writing assessment benefit both our students and ourselves as faculty.

Andrew's Narrative

I came to the work of alternative assessment through my investment in writing and disability studies. This engagement, in turn, was prompted by my experience with impairment and disability, what Tobin Siebers (2017) would call my "complex embodiment" (pp. 324–325), the result of a surgery I underwent in my late teens which left me with severe nerve damage, including the inability to sweat from large parts of my body or properly regulate my temperature in the heat or cold. Siebers's account of disability as a "complex" phenomenon has always resonated with me, in particular its acknowledgement that some aspects of disability and access are socially constructed, responsive to changes in policy and community formations, while others are rooted in the body, and are not always amenable to accommodation.

For me, writing has always exemplified this complexity. When my temperature and equilibrium are regulated properly, I can focus. Language flows with some facility from my mind through my fingers and onto the page. Yet in high heat—which functions for me as anything over the mid-70s Fahrenheit—my concentration begins to erode. My body starts to clench, struggling to cool itself. My musculoskeletal issues—which I labor to hold at bay through yoga, Pilates, and physical therapy—start to flare. My focus falters. The words slip away from me. My thoughts and prose often register as disjointed, illogical, partial. And when my sleep is interrupted, as it often is by thermoregulatory complications, my focus is often upended for most of the following day.

I can't measure the cumulative effect of these outcomes on my cognition and languaging, but I can feel them: even on good days, words fail to appear when I want them; my recall falters. My writing is often "de-composed" (McRuer, 2006, p. 48); still, through revision and the feedback of others, I seek to push it toward the standards of academic journals and popular publications, which are, generally speaking, standards that I endorse and want to meet as a rhetor, because they will, I hope, lead me to readers, and help me put my ideas in conversation with others.

I can't always do it, of course—can't always meet those demanding formal and generic requirements. Like most scholars, I have a stack of rejected manuscripts in various stages of neglect and revision, and I suspect my pile is larger than most. And I hasten to add that there is value in those incomplete projects, just as there is value in "de-composed" texts of all kind, including lifewriting, journaling and personal and avant-garde writing practices that, as Susannah

B. Mintz (2007) explains, are often dismissed as merely "therapeutic" but in fact display deep craft, intention, and "disability consciousness." Assessment ecologies need to help students see the value in this writing and pursue it, when they wish to. And I'm grateful that the field of writing studies and its journals—including this one—are increasingly open to genres like autoethnography and counterstory that allow the examination of accessible approaches to embodied writing, criticism, and pedagogy, in ways that empower students and acknowledge their diversity, their range of physical and mental needs, and their capacity for excellence—for achievement not *in spite of* but *with* and *through* their differences, even when those differences are not fully evident in their final drafts or presentations.

Overview of the Articles in the Special Issue

The manuscripts that follow engage how anti-ableist assessment practices impact disabled faculty, as well as disabled students. Especially as teachers and staff members juggle increasing institutional burdens, alongside the difficulties of higher education, any solution to the questions of inclusive, accessible forms of classroom and institutional assessment cannot land by shifting what should be a systemic burden onto faculty shoulders. The authors in this special issue address the experiences of disabled faculty, in some cases drawing on their direct experiences with disability, offering a pathway for managing the labor involved in reimagining inclusive, collective forms of assessment.

Every author in the special issue acknowledges the value of disability, building on Rosmarie Garland-Thomson's (2012) essential reminder that it can function as a "generative resource" (p. 339) and Brenda Brueggemann's (2001) observation that it can function as a source of "enabling insight" (p. 794) for writing studies. The contributors critique the limitations of the current accommodation regime, which asks instructors to "retrofit" their courses (Dolmage, 2017, p. 70) to meet the needs of disabled students by bolting accessible assignments, lessons, and approaches to assessment onto otherwise inaccessible pedagogical structures. In response, they offer accessible forms of alternative assessment, in the process answering the vital question that Angela Mitchell (2026) poses in her article: "How can neurodivergent [and disabled] students express the gifts their bodies and minds have given them in ways that are valued by their academic institutions?" (p. 4).

Ellen Carillo (2026) complicates the argument that the existing accommodation infrastructure increasingly advantages wealthy students, acknowledging that privileged disabled students can more readily obtain assistance while also pointing out that many poor disabled students cannot afford the costly independent evaluations that would provide them with access to vitally needed accommodations. The primary problem with higher education's current retrofit regime is therefore not the "gaming" of accommodations by undeserving students, as some critics charge, but its lack of support for the large numbers of underprivileged students whose access needs go unaddressed. To help instructors address this challenge, Carillo surveys a suite of tested and actionable strategies for inclusive assessment—including labor-based contract grading, engagement-based grading, specifications grading, student self- and peer assessment, and e-portfolio grading—that have the potential to "support as many students as possible" (p. 2). By drawing from these approaches, instructors should be able to re-imagine assessment to meet the needs of a wide range of students in their classes without undertaking a comprehensive re-structuring of their institutions.

Like Carillo, Michael Neal (2026) is concerned with the importance of identifying practical and manageable inclusive assessment practices. Building on the work of Dolmage (2008), Neal suggests that universal writing assessment can function as a "north star"—a "direction" to aim for, rather than a "destination point," encouraging instructors to strive for the inclusion and equitable assessment of disabled students while recognizing that the diversity of disabled students can make this challenging. He argues that "a universal writing assessment model can respond to individual students through a negotiated process in which all students articulate their goals, strengths and weaknesses, linguistic backgrounds, personal identities, and abilities" (p. 10). Under this model, students convey their writerly aims through guided reflections and are assessed based on the criteria they define. Anticipating the critique that this method might frustrate students who aren't sure of their goals, he notes that it is necessary to provide "opportunities for student choice and self-advocacy" and "clear, structured guidance for those who want it" (p. 14). He acknowledges, too, that instructors who aren't granted autonomy—whether due to internal bureaucracy or surveillance from state-level regulators—will struggle to implement assessments grounded in universal design.

The relationship between institutional power and anti-ableist assessment practices is illustrated in an interlude by Daniel Raines (2026) which describes the "paradox" of trust that confronts precarious, inclusively minded instructors. Even as they are trusted by their professors and supervisors when they request accommodations, they are counseled by those same mentors not to trust their students, on the assumption that they might be seeking to take advantage of inclusive assessment structures. By illustrating how the accommodations he obtained in graduate school enabled him to continue in his degree program, Raines underscores the importance of accepting students' stated access needs, rather than requiring costly forms of documentation, and of continuing to advocate for and implement inclusive approaches to assessment.

Kelsey Hawkins (2026) and Millie Hizer (2026) offer anti-ableist assessment frameworks informed by their disabled/ND experiences. Hawkins's approach, which draws on her embodied insights and the principles of disability justice and "cripistemology," invites instructors to "cultivat[e] access intimacy, enact[..] strategic disclosure, redefin[e] crip engagement, and embrac[e] radical flexibility" (p. 11) by centering the needs of disabled people and learning from their knowledge and experience. Through these practices, disabled instructors can create cultures of access by disclosing their own disabilities, which *might* enable students to disclose their own needs, and thereby receive assessments targeted to them. For this to work, students—who Hawkins suggests are generally quite aware of their rhetorical aims—name the ways they wish to engage with assignments and the terms by which they wish to be assessed. Instructors, in turn, flexibly respond to students' needs, tailoring approaches to assessment to help students achieve their aims, with the goal of providing maximal access and support for disabled students.

Building on Dolmage's (2014) account of *metis* as a "sideways" (p. 13), unstable, "rhetorical art of cunning" (p. 5) and Selznick's (2020) "*metis* pedagogy," which invites students to write in multiple modes and engage in reflective writing, Hizer (2026) offers an account of "a *metis* infused pedagogical framework for alternative assessment," one that enables instructors to account for "the embodied, sometimes chaotic, nature of writing that can be heightened for neurodivergent writers" (pp. 10–11). Informed by the demands of her bodymind, Hizer argues that such assessment approaches must be adaptable and offer flexibility and multimodal options, with the aim of providing "students ample opportunities to draw from their innate cognitive abilities and

to be cognizant of their thoughts and feelings throughout the writing process" (pp. 15–16), while providing instructors with pathways to equitably evaluate the writing they produce.

Tara Wood (2026), Angela Mitchell (2026), and Amy Vidali (2026) reflect upon and theorize anti-ableist writing placement practices. After reviewing existing scholarship on disability and directed self-placement (DSP), Wood (2026) provides a heuristic that evaluates a given DSP regime's assumptions about the normativity of its students and the fixity of their differences, while interrogating any ableist influences on the program, which she terms "ableist creep" (p. 15). She also asks WPAs and placement committee members to attend to time constraints that afflict student conversations about placement and the ways the interfaces of DSP systems impose specific demands, opening up options for some disabled students, while restricting them for others.

Drawing on the ableist barriers she encounters and further informed by the writing placement experiences of her differently abled child, Mitchell (2026) presents an interlude that invites WPAs and placement committees to reflect on the diversity of disabilities their students will experience, with the aim of creating approaches to placement that are collectively empowering. She calls particular attention to the ways placement platforms and assignments may not be accessible to all users, noting that placement exams may not include criteria that allows disabled students to exercise agency over what they are trying to accomplish with their writing or how they are assessed. She concludes with an invitation to "crip[..] placement" (p. 7), which may help all students experience what Mia Mingus (2011) calls "access intimacy" (para. 4), the sense that their needs have been acknowledged and—hopefully—met.

Vidali (2026) advocates for a re-examination of "the inclusivity and accessibility of our placement systems" (p. 2), which she models for readers by analyzing data from disability disclosures in the DSP process at her university. Her findings reveal the anxiety and "negative emotional reactions" (pp. 6–7) many students feel as they contemplate the writing they'll need to undertake in college: she suggests that the placement process might do a better job anticipating and addressing those concerns, to help to allay them. Given the unavailability of funding at most institutions for interactive placement conversations, she offers recommendations for making incremental improvements to the DSP survey model, including improved survey accessibility, more comprehensive demographic data, direct inquiries about disability's impact on students' reading and writing experiences, the solicitation of feedback on placement procedures from disabled students and faculty members, and the assessment of how disability is represented in placement materials.

As editors, it is our hope that the range of approaches to anti-ableist assessment offered in this issue will help writing instructors and administrators evaluate the work of disabled/ND students more inclusively and accessibly. Showcasing the strength of the special issue as a genre, the articles here address the inherently multivocal, contextual, and flexible nature of both dis/ability and writing assessment, providing a many-sided answer that, we hope, other scholars and educators will continue to grapple with in their classrooms, their institutions, and their scholarship.

Conclusion

We have outlined, above, the scholarly exchanges which led to this special issue, underscoring the importance of multivocal conversations in crafting an anti-ableist assessment practice. We have also outlined the contributions of authors in this manuscript, thinking with us about how both classroom and institutional forms of assessment may be reimagined in anti-ableist ways—and

often, reimagined again, recursively, as we encounter new contexts, new students, and the changing demands of our own bodyminds. We have also traced our own connections to both alternative assessment and disability studies: we find this project exciting precisely because, like some of the authors who contribute to this special issue, we have felt the challenge of being assessed within frameworks unsuited to our own ways of writing and thinking, and we know from experience the importance of cultivating alternative forms of assessment, staked in an appreciation for the many ways that we, and our students along with us, engage in writing, languaging, and rhetoric.

As you turn towards the contributions in this special issue, we invite you to engage with the projects in ways that reflect your professional practices and your own embodied needs. As you read scholars' accounts of reimagining their own assessment practices (Carillo, 2026; Hawkins, 2026; Hizer, 2026; Neal, 2026), you may reflect on your own assessment practices or share these ideas with colleagues or among your teaching-and-learning groups for discussion. How do you want to change your own classroom assessment practices to center the needs of disabled/ND people, whether your students or yourself? These projects don't represent an anti-ableist ideal for alternative assessment—such an ideal does not exist—but they offer up valuable theoretical frames and strategies for crafting alternative assessment practices.

As you read narratives of reconsidering programmatic assessment, or placement choices, through a disability justice lens (Mitchell, 2026; Vidali, 2026; Wood, 2026), you might share the articles with fellow administrators or stakeholders in the assessment process. Or you may use these articles as a cornerstone to guide professional development workshops and ongoing administrative change. Even at universities where placement processes are constrained by state law, these texts play an important role in reframing how we understand and evaluate students' experiences in pre-and co-requisite courses. How can we revisit and expand our placement processes, along with our teaching/assessment choices for co-and pre-requisite courses, to validate forms of writing grounded in ND/disabled experiences? A singular, ideal form of academic writing is by nature exclusionary and drives students to the margins of higher education, sometimes forcing them to drop out (Powell, 2014)—including neurodivergent and disabled students. Programmatic assessment attuned to the diversity of students' embodied needs, writing products, and rhetorical aims can play a vital role in helping our students succeed.

Finally, however you engage with these texts, we hope that the entries in this special issue may encourage disabled/ND scholars in particular—in your own writing practices, and in your teaching and assessment. As our narratives indicate, we (Megan and Andrew) know from experience how disability can convince us that our own scholarly and pedagogical practices fall short of an imagined ideal—perhaps it is *our fault* that we struggle with writing, with classroom assessment, or with placement and other forms of programmatic or standardized assessment. We take heart from reading scholarship from authors who share this struggle, and we hope that you will too, finding value in the arguments that our work, like our students', is shaped in meaningful ways by our embodiment.

The contributions to this special issue offer up a wide variety of approaches to "cripping" assessment—the many ways to critique and move away from narrow writing constructs that privilege normative thinking and writing patterns, often interconnected with white, upper-middle class forms of writing—and to move instead towards inclusive, flexible forms of assessment that enter into conversations with our students and colleagues to better understand their rhetorical choices and their writing. Anti-ableist forms of writing assessment are not one thing, static and

transferable across contexts, from one classroom to the next, or one institution to the next, as though we and our students were interchangeable. As you consider your own context, and your own embodied and enminded approach to your work, we hope that the contributions will serve you as they did us, charting possible paths forward, in research and teaching, towards an ongoing commitment to inclusive assessment.

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