

Editors' Introduction: Focusing Attention on Disability and Neurodivergence

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Abstract: This editors' introduction to the *JWA* special issue on neurodivergence and disability in writing assessment (19.1) identifies the urgency of attention to intersections between writing assessment research and neurodivergence, disability, and embodiment. The editors situate the special issue within a longer tradition at *JWA*.

Keywords: disability, neurodivergence, writing assessment, embodiment, assessment, special issue

In this special issue of the *Journal of Writing Assessment* (JWA), we are pleased to present a volume of scholarship that centers exclusively on neurodivergence and disability in writing assessment. The questions addressed in this issue are of urgent importance. A recent article in *The New York Times* by Mark Arsenault and Steven Rich (2026) reports on the dramatic increases in students reporting disabilities in U.S. universities, noting that these numbers have grown “more than 50 percent over the last decade” (para. 1). While disabled and neurodivergent students have long been enrolled in colleges—and affected by writing assessments—Arsenault and Rich (2026) cite experts who attribute the rise to a destigmatization of mental illness; increased diagnoses of autism, ADHD, and severe anxiety; and greater ability for those seeking accommodations to navigate university processes. College writing instructors, writing program administrators, and writing assessment scholars are likely already seeing these general patterns on their own campuses and cannot wait longer for research to guide classroom assessment practices, writing placement processes, programmatic assessments, training and policy development for writing faculty, GTAs, and more.

To this end, we see this special issue as a step forward in addressing a critical gap in the literature in writing assessment—indeed, the field has long needed research about the intersections among writing assessment, disability, and neurodivergence. As Tara Wood (2026) reports in her contribution to this issue, previous attention to disability in both *JWA* and *Assessing Writing* has been infrequent, with much of that scholarship coming in the last several years. This issue builds on growing recognition of the limits of our scholarship, as well as periodic attention to the effects that assessments have on differently embodied students and differently embodied writing processes. Carl Whithaus, Scott B. Harrison, and Jeb Midyette (2008) studied the effects of keyboarding compared to handwriting in a high-stakes writing assessment, arguing that the physical differences between these two modes of production mean that “high-stakes writing assessments should aim to accommodate students by providing methods of textual production with which students are most comfortable” (p. 4). Edward White, Norbert Elliot, and Irv Peckham (2015) also urged writing program administrators to map out models of writing constructs with attention to writers’ neurological, attention, and vision capacities (pp. 75–76). Stephen J. Corbett (2017) has argued peer-to-peer and portfolio pedagogies can enact principles of universal design for learning (UDL) and called for “more inclusive assessment mechanisms” for students with learning disabilities. Similarly, in the conclusion to Mya Poe, Asao B. Inoue, and Norbert Elliot’s *Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity*, all the contributors co-authored a set of assertions about writing assessment, calling in these assertions for greater attention to intersections between writing assessment and disability studies (Banks et al., 2018, pp. 402–405). Ruth Osorio (2020) has argued for a disability-as-insight approach to multimodal assessment, which positions “disability as source for rhetorical invention” (p. 29). Thus, we see in writing assessment scholarship a deep need for thorough, substantive, and sustained attention to questions of disability and neurodivergence.

We are very excited that Megan Von Bergen and Andrew Harnish have addressed this need, guest editing a first-of-its-kind assemblage of scholarship to publication with this issue of *JWA*. As they write, this special issue is “rooted in the ethos of ND/disabled people and allies committed to more equitable forms of writing assessment” (Von Bergen & Harnish, 2026, p. 4). In their introduction, Von Bergen and Harnish (2026) outline some of the more immediate exigences that have prompted writing educators to seek out equitable and anti-ableist forms of assessment,

noting an increased interest in equity-centered pedagogies and program assessments. The authors featured in this issue also draw from their own individual exigences, approaching disability, neurodivergence, and writing assessment from a number of different angles and positionalities, and ultimately contributing a spectrum of scholarship that we hope will provide scholars, writing instructors, WPAs, and other practitioners with much to think about and act on in their own practice.

Additionally, Von Bergen and Harnish (2026) have introduced a genre that is new to *JWA*—the interlude. Often featured in music or theatre productions as brief pieces positioned between larger compositions that are simultaneously unique *and* complementary to the production as a whole, the interlude genre as imagined by our guest editors is especially fitting for a special issue focused on a group of people whose lives are often elided or erased and whose rights to an accessible education have historically been ignored. The CFP for this special issue invited “. . . submissions grounded in the lived experience of disability” and “autoethnographic reflections on [the authors] experiences as an ND/disabled (graduate) student[s] and/or faculty member[s].” Thus, in the spirit of James Charlton’s (2000) oft-quoted adage “nothing about us without us,” the interlude genre centers the voices and experiences of disabled authors in this issue through pieces that contextualize and complement the more traditional scholarship they sit between and ultimately enhance the special issue as a whole.

The *Journal of Writing Assessment* has long used the genre of the special issue to cast particular attention on topics pertinent to social justice in writing education and writing assessment. For example,

- In 2016, *JWA* published a special issue (9.1) on a theory of ethics for writing assessment, a volume that asked readers to consider issues of fairness and ethics in writing assessments (Elliot, 2016; Slomp, 2016), while also arguing for “burden-shifting heuristics” to consider fairness (Poe & Cogan, 2016, p. 1), addressing tensions between fairness and ethics (Broad, 2016), and critiquing validity (Cushman, 2016).
- In 2019, a special issue on two-year college writing placement (12.1) addressed the need for justice in writing placement for students in two-year colleges. As guest editors Toth, Nastal, Hassel, and Giordano (2019) argued in their introduction, “the underrepresentation of two-year colleges in the writing assessment literature is an urgent ethical issue given the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of two-year college students” (p. 1). The publication of that special issue sparked new discussions related to this area of scholarship and practice, with more publications and presentations in the years following.
- In 2020, a special issue on contract grading (13.2) guest edited by Asao B. Inoue brought some of *JWA*’s most frequently cited scholarship, including Kryger and Zimmerman’s (2020) “Neurodivergence and Intersectionality in Labor-Based Grading Contracts” and Michelle Cowan’s (2020) “A Legacy of Grading Contracts for Composition.” The issue also featured participatory research articles co-written by *JWA*’s editors Lizbett Tinoco and Matt Gomes centered on the perspectives on labor-based grading contracts of six faculty in a Hispanic-Serving Institution (Tinoco et al., 2020) and the experiences of undergraduate students with contract grading (Gomes et al., 2020).

Other *JWA* special issues have engaged with social justice in writing assessment and education in various ways, including in the Common Core State Standards (Kelly-Riley &

Whithaus, 2015) and in the practice of student self-placement in writing courses (Pantelides & Whittig, 2024, 2025). We see this special issue on disability and neurodivergence as continuing in this tradition, generating new conversations and renewed commitment to social justice in the work of writing assessment.

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