Hadley

Hadley Presents: Handwriting

Presented by Ricky Enger, Jennifer Ottowitz and Sue Dalton

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Ricky: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax and enjoy a conversation with the experts. This episode centers around handwriting with vision loss and our experts are certified vision rehabilitation therapist Sue Dalton, interviewed by Hadley Learning Expert Jennifer Ottowitz. Welcome to the show, both of you.

Sue: Hi. Thank you.

Jennifer: Thank you.

Ricky: So glad you are able to join Hadley Presents. It's wonderful when we are able to have people from within Hadley joining us and of course it's great that we have so many outside experts ready to share their wonderful knowledge. It's incredible. So Jennifer, for those who don't know who you are, tell us a little about yourself.

Jennifer: Sure. I am a senior learning expert at Hadley. I've been with Hadley for about six years now and teaching a variety of our classic Hadley courses and now working on discussion groups, podcasts, new workshops. I'm a certified vision rehabilitation therapist as well, which means I work with adults who are losing or have lost their vision.

Ricky: Excellent. And Sue, how about you? Tell us a little about you.

Sue: Currently I'm an instructor at Northern Illinois University. I teach courses in the rehabilitation therapy division of their programs for visual disabilities. I've been there about 20 years and prior to that I worked as a teacher of visually impaired and also a transition specialist working with teens from throughout the state getting ready for adult life.

Ricky: Good deal. So this particular topic, which happens to be handwriting with vision loss, this is something that I actually know very little about. So I'm looking forward to sitting back and relaxing and learning from the experts. So with that, why don't we go ahead and get started. I'll hand it over to Jennifer who has some awesome questions, I think.

Jennifer: All right, great. Thank you, Ricky. And so before we get into the first question, I just wanted to maybe have you add just a little bit more, because I know you have a connection to visual impairment and to the topic of handwriting too, related to the new textbook. So could you share just a little bit about that?

Sue: Oh yes. Well I'm just very happy that I was invited to write a textbook chapter for the new *Foundations of Rehabilitation Teaching*. One of my projects is to do the chapter on handwriting.

Jennifer: Great. And you have a personal connection to visual impairment as well, right?

Sue: Yes, I do. I, I have three adult children and two of my children are legally blind due to albinism. So, our life's kind of been surrounded around low vision for a long time.

Jennifer: Great. Well, again, thanks for joining us. Before we get started, the burning question is, in today's electronic age, is handwriting still even important?

Sue: You know, that is a big question. Even in my courses that I teach, when I come up with the subject, I look around the room and wonder, you know, how many of my students even, do you still use handwriting? Is that something that is a valuable tool? In my opinion, yes, it definitely is. Handwriting is just really a fundamental component of literacy. In spite of all the electronics and keyboarding and voice input, really people are always going to find circumstances where they're going to need to write something or jot something down by hand.

Jennifer: I would completely agree. And I know in my experience, both as a vision rehab therapist, and personally as someone who is blind, I really think that even just writing your signature gives you a sense of pride and a sense of control when you're the one signing your name to the forms and signing your name to the receipt to pay for dinner. It just means a lot and it really helps not just show your independence, but again I think just give you that sense of control and empowerment.

Sue: Definitely. Really, having a signature just really implies that someone is literate. And then you have control over your activities too because once you put your name on something, you're really indicating your personal approval.

Jennifer: And even though I'm not able to see my handwriting anymore, I'm still the one that signs all the greeting cards in our families. So, so I think you can find ways to have relevance for handwriting and even if you're not able to see what you're writing yourself.

Sue: Yes. And okay, I'm just going to add one other thing about handwriting. First of all it's unique to each individual, unlike typeface. So it's a permanent statement about the individual, but also, many psychologists believe that hand writing notes or even repeatedly writing down important information by hand is one of the best tools to improve memory retention. Handwriting engages more physical and mental activities in our brains. Long story short, if you want to remember what you're writing down, skip the computer and write it down by hand.

Jennifer: Well that's good to know. I've always looked at ways to improve my memory. So for people who have trouble seeing, what are some of the specific challenges that they may have with handwriting?

Sue: The things that I've encountered, first of all, it can really be frustrating, aggravating for someone if they're recently experiencing low vision. Some things that happen are difficulty finding the line or the space of a document that needs your signature or a spot for writing. Sometimes people tend to write uphill or downhill, just keeping their writing straight. Another thing that happens is writing on top of something else. Someone might jot a note down, and then as they write the second item, they'll write it on top of the first one. And that includes, too, some issues with spacing, overlapping letters. Another challenge is, when think about it dotting the I's and crossing the T's, because you have to lift up your pen to do that. So that can be problematic. And I guess the last thing too is just closing the letters, making the letters look like they're supposed to. For example, instead of making a six instead of a zero. So that would be a problem someone might encounter.

Jennifer: Yeah. And in terms of legibility, I know I've heard it said that handwriting doesn't have to be legible to be legal. That's an issue outside of vision, right? The legibility of somebody's handwriting, sometimes. I've known people and have experienced some of these myself too. A professor that didn't realize that not all the information was erased off the board in the classroom. When he went to write new information for the students, or myself just having problems closing, making a zero look like a six and that can lead to a wrong telephone number, which isn't always fun.

Sue: I guess, too, on that note, it's important to keep the handwriting as accurate and readable as possible because if someone a few days later tries to look at the notes they made and are unable to read what they've written, then that note isn't as valuable as it should be. So sometimes it just takes a little work to practice on keeping the handwriting more readable and accurate.

Jennifer: I know when I was able to use low vision devices, I think my handwriting was much better. I think a lot of people naturally start to write larger whenever they start to lose vision too, and then it doesn't always fit in the space, but now I have to concentrate more and just kind of visualize it in my mind what I'm writing. That kind of goes along with what you're saying. I think just take that extra time and effort, the concentration, when before maybe it was more of a visual thing, right?

Sue: Yes too, and if it is a problem, practicing a little bit, you know, trying to write and then asking someone else to maybe analyze it for you and point out a couple spots that might need some help. And then I think with practice it can get much more accurate too.

Jennifer: So for someone who has remaining vision, what are some of the ways that they can make the most of that vision to see what they're writing a little bit better?

Sue: If someone has low vision, I think the first thing I always like to recommend is making sure you have a good working area and that you are able to use your vision to the maximum. Making sure you have good lighting for whatever you're going to be writing on or with. Maybe using magnification if you use a hand magnifier or even a video magnifier. Various other devices like that to have those handy. The ones that probably would be the best to have are ones that are hands free. So if you have something that mounts on a stand or something that doesn't require using one hand to hold it makes it a little easier.

Jennifer: And I know from using a closed-circuit TV for many years... closed-circuit TV was the old term for video magnifier. But using those types of devices, the key to that was to look at the screen to see what you were writing instead of down at your hand when you were writing too. And I thought it was so cool when you can reverse the polarity on the screen. So it looked like I was writing in white ink on a black background. It was so much easier to see, but it was just something really cool. Are there any special pens or papers that a person can use to meet their handwriting easy to see?

Sue: Pencils are probably the least easy to see. So if someone is using that, sometimes these softer pencils, I think there's a 4B, tend to have a better image. Rather than using that, starting out with maybe a fine line marker, black ink on a white paper, even sometimes using like a yellow or a soft pink paper provides better viewing. Using that type of marker is better because it has a bolder line to it. And my recommendation too is to start out with the thinnest or the most average writing implement that you have first. If that becomes difficult then start gradually adding thickness to it. So that has more dimension for someone to read.

Jennifer: Yeah. Sometimes when you use a really thick marker, the letters kind of all blob together, don't they?

Sue: I know, recently I had a friend with low vision and uses that and we were signing people in and it had a checkbox and the checkbox was just way too small for a very thick marker. So you have to adjust it depending on what you need to write on.

Jennifer: So the pens, I know they have felt tip gel pens. Is there a preference? It is a personal preference, right? There's not one particular pen that's the best one to use for everybody. Right?

Sue: That's definitely true. And I think too, you want to be careful of getting some that are like a permanent marker that have fumes and things like that. That can be, you know, difficult too, especially if you're in a closed-in room writing with things like that. Jennifer, do you know the name of that? I know it used to be the 2020 pen, but I'm trying to... oh, the pro-line felt tip pen. I think that's one of the new ones. And that tends to be a really nice one that makes a somewhat bolder line, but it's not overwhelming, to take over the page.

Jennifer: Yeah. And the other thing with those types of pens too is you want to make sure it doesn't bleed through the other side of the paper too. And I think that one, if I'm right, Sue, that's one of the ones that does not tend to bleed through to the other side.

Sue: Okay. So then on that note too, some of the markers, they can be messy, especially if you're using your other hand to kind of tactilely find your place on the page, but some things that have happened in the past, people using these inky markers, if they're getting very close to the page to just be careful, you don't get your, first of all your hands full of ink, but also your nose if you're getting that close. You want to make sure not to get ink on your face.

Jennifer: I've done both of those, so thank you for that suggestion for sure. Then you have to figure out how to get a permanent marker off you. I know you mentioned the color of paper, but I remember when I was in school always having to find the notebook paper with like the darkest lines. And I think they do make a special paper that has darker lines than usual, correct?

Sue: Yes, you definitely can get paper that way. There's white paper that has bold black lines in various line spacing. They also, they have, I mentioned too, the yellow or pink paper as well with the bolder lines. If the printed line is still difficult to see, they have paper with raised lines. Some is just a white paper with a raised line on it that you could feel. And then some has the raised line mark in black so that you can see it as well as feel it. You know those papers are available. They're available commercially. But you know, if someone even has a computer at home, they could make bold lines on a, on a sheet and be able to print that off, you know, on their own at their home.

Jennifer: Oh that's great to know. You can make it at home on your own as well if you need to. Okay. So this was always a big problem for me and still is. You mentioned like writing uphill, downhill, things like that. What are some ways for me to keep my handwriting in a straight line and to make sure it fits in an available space? That I'm not writing too big and outside the area.

Sue: Well for that type of challenge, they have handwriting guides that can be very helpful. It helps you locate the area where to write. And once again as Jennifer mentioned, just keeping your writing straight on the line. So their variety of these, some of the basic types you know are just kind of a rigid guide and they're a template so they have an area cutout to indicate the space where someone should write. Then you can have someone place the template on an area to be signed. So then the cutouts space can be felt tactilely. The handwriting guides may come in different sizes, there'll be a small one, kind of like a credit card size that can be used just for signatures and it's very handy and you can just keep it in wherever you keep your credit cards.

Sue: But then they'll make also templates available for a full page that you can place on top of a blank sheet of paper that will keep your handwriting in straight line in an order, and even some that have different adaptations on them to hold your space. They'll have a marker that you can move up and down on the page that kind of gives you an indication of where you last wrote your... if you're making a list where your last wrote your last item and then you can know where exactly to go to continue on if you come back to it at another time.

Jennifer: That's really helpful because yeah, losing your place if you get interrupted with the telephone or some other distraction. Finding where to go back to, sometimes she needs some help with that. I know I keep up a signature guide in about every purse I own, in the desk drawer. Yeah. It's good to have multiples of these and just take them with you wherever you go because you're never going to know always when you need to sign things. And then too, another thing. These writing guides can be even helpful, like in my last- first and last name, I have letters that loop below the line, but a person can still use these even if they have letters that loop below the line, right?

Sue: Yes. That's the important thing to always mention when people are using the signature guides or any kind of writing guide that the opening in these templates is meant to be the entire opening for the lines. So I think people when they first start using them want to use the bottom line as a guide to start their writing. But really the opening, you should start more in the center to allow for letters that loop down below the line or the ones that loop above the line. You know, getting used to that and practicing using the template. It takes a little time, but they can be very useful that way.

Jennifer: The nice thing about them too, it kind of forces you to write smaller. So you do fit in that designated space too. And I love the envelope guides because I could never find envelopes that had lines on them already to follow and I would always run out of room and end up having to squeeze the zip code in and the tiny little space so they can be really, really helpful. And Sue is going to put together some information that we're going to share along with the recording of this podcast. Places that where are these writing guides would be available. So thanks for doing that as well, Sue.

Sue: Just to add one additional item, there are check writing guides. If people are still writing checks, they do have the guides for checks, and it came to mind because of the nature of a check. It's a very small area. So that's one where someone really needs to work at keeping their handwriting small to fit in that particular space.

Jennifer: And that's another one of those things where it's really nice to be able to write as much of that information for yourself as you can. You could just turn that task over to someone else and that would be fine. But this just gives you that sense of control and awareness of everything that's going on. You're the one writing the numbers and the information. So...

Sue: Just one last thing. When we're talking about writing and paper, I have to share this tip that was provided to several of us at conferences by one of our former vision rehabilitation therapists. We mentioned about purchasing paper with tactile lines, with raised lines and things like that. But if you don't have that available, you can make your own by just taking a sheet of paper, regular paper, rolling it up from top to bottom into a tube, maybe about the thickness of your thumb. And once it's in the tube, you flatten it out, you know, maybe on it on a hard surface. And when you unroll the paper, the folds turn into lines that can be felt tactilely. So that's a very inexpensive, quick way of getting paper that will help you stay on the line.

Jennifer: That is a really nice trick and it works. It works well. Some great resources for different options for paper and writing guides, ways to help keep that writing straight and that's going to help you whenever it's time for you to read your handwriting. But it also helps others that are having to read your writing as well too. And I just wanted to go back. You mentioned lighting for a second. I know that a lot of times people will use not just the overhead lights, but maybe a lamp, a desk lamp or additional lighting. Is there a special place they should put that lighting to make their handwriting easy to see so they're not shadows or anything?

Sue: It makes me think about that because in general we talk about having the lighting come from the back to reflect on something they're reading. But sometimes if you're writing that could create shadows. So I guess I would recommend that the source of the lighting be placed maybe around the non-dominant side, so if you're right-handed, maybe coming over on the left side and then that would avoid casting any shadows as you're writing.

Jennifer: That's a great tip because that was always a tricky thing and having to... you're not just using the magnifier, you've got the light. It's not shining in your eyes, but then you have shadows and you're trying to deal with that too.

Sue: I guess that makes me think of just the general writing area. If someone is going to sit down and spend some time writing for a little bit of a period of time, making sure that they're in a comfortable setting, they need to get closer to the paper. Maybe consider using a slant board or reading stand or even just putting a stack of books under the paper to get it closer to your face. Think of using contrast on the area that you're writing so that you're not searching for the paper that you're using and then too, the lighting as well. Having the best lighting available, making sure you're not getting excess glare. If someone's near a window, you want to make sure that the lighting coming in from the window isn't going to be a problem. So sometimes too much lighting can be problematic with glare, but then if you need more lighting, once again, finding a really good lamp that you can adjust to the setting is also helpful.

Jennifer: Are there any suggestions that you have to help form letters and numbers that are easier to read?

Sue: Well, it was brought up earlier that sometimes the letters aren't formed accurately if they're not totally closed, like a circular letter isn't closed. My suggestion on that is sometimes to even use the finger on your nondominant hand to kind of hold the place on a paper. If you're having issue with spacing, to maybe use the finger. It's almost like beginning handwriting when you learned as a child to hold a space in between words so you're not overlapping.

Possibly another thing would be to practice the lettering, the O's and the A's, the lowercase A's and things like that. To get them where they meet more accurately or possibly even going around the letter more than once to making sure it's closed. On that note too, for I's and T's for crossing them, as you're writing a lowercase letter I in cursive writing or printing, to dot the I immediately after forming that letter or keep the finger of the non-dominant hand close by and make the dot there to hold your place. And the same with the T to do it immediately rather than until you're finished with the word and try to go back.

And another thing too is just instead of cursive writing, maybe printing, using all uppercase letters to make it clearer if you want to make it more accurate. I know printing seems to be more... I always think of my engineer friends and family, using the printing because they want all their letters to be more accurate and clearer. So that might be another option.

Jennifer: And then printing is a little more challenging because you pick up your pen more often, but it can be a lot clearer to read. And you gave great tips about the I's and T's. Because when I got married I now have two, three T's to cross and an I to dot. So not an easy task.

This is the big question, the hard question too. What if reading my handwriting has just gotten to be too hard? Having to make that decision or come to terms with that, it can be rather sensitive. Little tricky. Something we may not always want to admit to ourselves, but what suggestions should you have for somebody who is having trouble reading back their handwriting maybe two days later, like you said?

Sue: Well there are a variety of things that can be done. Of course if someone has keyboarding skills that would be something they could use or if they don't have the skills, to learn how to keyboard or use a computer. Something simpler though and kind of handier is just to get sometimes a small digital recorder. Those can be really handy. Simple to use. Just for quick notes. So putting things on a recorded device can be helpful.

Jennifer: I think too, it depends on the purpose of the writing, right? If you're writing for yourself, if you're writing for someone else, you may still need to hand write for someone else. So it's important to maintain writing depending on the information. If you're just taking down information that you're going to need to access later on, that's when you can use all those wonderful suggestions. Sue, like you mentioned with recording, maybe typing it into a computer. Now with phones and tablets and voice assistants like Amazon Echo and Google Home, you can ask it to take a note for you and it can record that note and play it back for you. So it really kind of depends, right, on the purpose of why are you taking down this information and what it's going to be used for, right?

Sue: That's correct. And those are all excellent tips as well. And I guess I don't want to eliminate also if, if someone is indeed going to be using more writing in the future and needed to consider using braille, they may want to just learn some basic braille for labeling. But also if the need is there, to go into learning literary braille.

Jennifer: Well this has been…You presented some really wonderful tips, shared some great information. I don't know if you have any other final thoughts about handwriting and how to make it easier for people to see?

Sue: Well, I want to encourage people not to give up on it, to take a little time to practice, maybe using some of these tips and devices that are available. If they have vision to definitely use it to their best ability, but not to feel frustrated if it comes to the point where they can't because there are other options as well.

Jennifer: That's absolutely right. Handwriting is one of the tools, the many tools in your communication toolbox and whether you have remaining vision or not, it's something you can definitely use. And so thanks for joining us to help encourage people and support their efforts to maintain that. Great. Ricky, we'll turn it back to you.

Ricky: Yeah, I have absolutely learned a lot and I was thinking as I was listening to all this, oh yeah, I do that. I use my finger as a placeholder as I'm signing or writing something very laboriously, but still it was good to know I was on the right track and also good to know that there are so many different ways to make handwriting more visible or a little more comfortable and certainly more readable. So this has been great. For each of you, any way that people can either contact you or keep up with what's going on in your world should they wish to find out more after the episode?

Sue: Definitely. If anyone wants to contact me, my email address is Dalton, D-A-L-T-O-N, dot Transvision. It's T-R-A-N-S-V-I-S-I-O-N @gmail.com.

Ricky: Excellent. And Jennifer, how about you?

Jennifer: Sure. And my email address is just Jennifer, J-E-N-N-I-F-E-R @hadley.edu.

Ricky: Fantastic. Well thank you both so much for joining and discussing this really important topic. I know there's been a lot of great information that will be of use to those of you listening. And of course, to those of you who are listening, thank you very much for doing so.

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