



Organizational Skills for Students with Learning Disabilities: The Master Filing System for Paper

By: Patricia W. Newhall (2008)

Think of it: Electricians arrive at a customer's home to do work and ask if they can borrow tools. A lacrosse team runs onto the field for the big game without their helmets or chest pads. Paramedics respond to a 911 call but leave the first-aid kit at the fire station. Unacceptable? Of course. The electricians would go out of business. The lacrosse players would be benched. The paramedics would be suspended. To do their jobs, these people need instant access to specialized equipment and tools. So do students. Yet we often hear: "I forgot my book." "I lost my binder." "I didn't print out my homework." "Can I borrow a pen?"

Students who have learning disabilities and weaknesses in executive function frequently struggle to keep track of the tools they need for schoolwork. Notebooks, handouts, homework—even pencils and pens—seem to vanish inexplicably. Why is it so essential that students learn to manage their materials? First, efficient access to needed materials allows more time-on-task for learning. Second, good organizational skills contribute to students' feelings that they are in control of their learning.

The Master Filing System for paper is one effective strategy that helps students with learning disabilities manage their materials. Though the research on the effectiveness of teaching materials management skills is slim, the work that has been done indicates that these skills are essential for academic and career success.

The success of an organizational system depends on its usefulness to students in relation to their specific learning challenges. The point of keeping materials organized is to help students with learning disabilities keep all their classwork and homework papers in one place that provides easy, logical access. Thus making their learning more efficient and effective. If materials are accessible, students can learn how to manage time and assimilate information more effectively. Classroom activities should reinforce these connections. For instance, teachers might allow students with learning disabilities (or the entire class) to refer to their materials during a pop quiz. Students who use the system to stay organized will do well.

Once a system that works for most students is consistently implemented, educators can make changes to suit individual needs, because no single system works for every student. Teachers need to help students create a system that works for them and help them use it consistently.

Getting started: Materials

The first step is to assemble necessary materials. The master filing system requires a master student binder or a master student folder plus a master student file.

- *The master student binder* is a full-size, sturdy, three-ring binder, preferably with a zipper around the edges. It includes dividers for each class, plastic page protectors, looseleaf paper, and a three-hole punch designed to fit into the three-ring binder.
- An alternative approach is *the master student folder*. For each class, students have one plastic report folder with storage flaps, page protectors, and looseleaf paper. Ideally, each class folder is a different color. The practice of color coding materials is particularly helpful for visual learners. To engage students in the organizational process, a good project is to have them purchase or make book covers that match their folders. Students should keep a three-hole punch in their desks or backpacks.
- The master student file is a sturdy accordian file or a container for hanging files, such as a file cabinet or crate. It should have enough sections or hanging files to hold a full year's schoolwork and be at least 12 inches deep. This file may be kept at home (a bit risky) or in the classroom.

Steps to creating a master filing system

Teachers begin by explaining the master filing system to students, and showing them a sample system.

Teachers reinforce that the master student binder or folder goes back and forth to school on a daily basis. The binder or folder is required for all schoolwork and homework, from referring to notes or reference information in class to filing completed homework so it is ready to turn in.

Once students have their materials, they label their binder dividers or folders for each class. They place note-taking paper in each binder section or folder as well as a few page protectors for important reference information (e.g., periodic table, multiplication facts, frequently misspelled words, and homework buddy lists).

In class, teachers remind students to take notes on paper from the appropriate binder section or folder. Teachers also remind students to write down the class and date for easy filing should papers go astray. Students file handouts, returned quizzes, and the like in the section of the binder or folder that corresponds to the class.

Once a unit test or project has been scheduled, teachers can guide students to start using the materials in their master binder or folder to create a study guide (e.g., summarizing main ideas, listing vocabulary, generating questions, etc.). By the day of the test or project deadline, students should have a complete study guide in the appropriate section of their master student files. When teachers return the unit tests or projects, students attach them to their study guides. This process gives students with learning disabilities a comprehensive reference to review for midterms and finals, conveniently stored in their master files. It also empties students' folders, leaving them ready to be refilled with the next unit's papers.

Mastering the routine

As with any routine, consistent use and guided practice are the keys to success. Students need to develop good habits, including promptly three-hole punching and filing their handouts. Teaching students routines to manage their materials empowers them to develop the organizational skills critical to academic success.

The key is for students to clean out their binders or folders regularly. Ideally, the clean-out becomes part of preparing for a unit test or project. If teachers assign projects that require students to use all of the information from a unit, students begin to see how the system benefits them.

While organizational routines develop intuitively for some students, students with learning disabilities need explicit instruction in how to initiate a system, and guided practice using it. Encourage students to use the system, and acknowledge their successes. The sense of control that these students feel when they are organized contributes to their confidence that they can succeed in school.

Managing materials is one of the three key categories of study skills that contribute to students' ability to organize, remember and apply their knowledge. The other categories are **managing time** and **managing information**. To do well in school, students with learning disabilities must develop strategies that make them efficient, effective managers in each of these areas.. Unfortunately, many students do not develop these strategies intuitively. They need educators who are willing and able to provide them with explicit instruction, guided practice, and ongoing opportunities (and motivation) to hone the strategies they've learned.

About the article

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