

NO MORE IEP GOBBLEDYGOOK:

Write It Right With Language That Lifts



1. FOCUS ON WHAT MATTERS MOST —NOT EVERYTHING NEEDS TO BE A GOAL

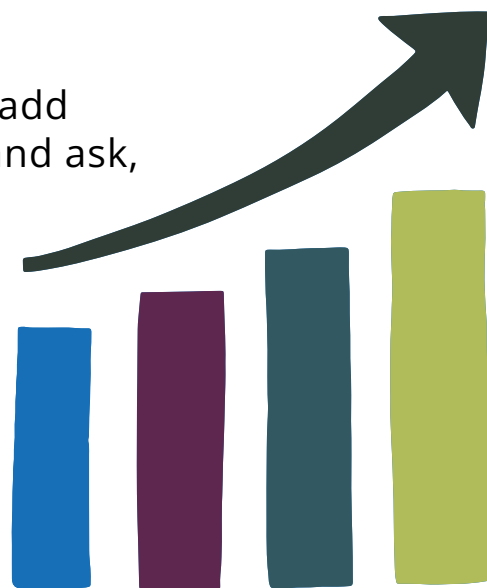
ACTION STEP:

Shift your mindset from “list all the needs” to “target the needs that require focused support.” Avoid turning the IEP into a to-do list that mirrors general education expectations.

Instead:

- **Identify** just a few high-impact goals that are essential for access, participation, and progress.
- **Recognize** that students will learn many things outside of the IEP through everyday instruction, interactions, and experiences.
- **Remind** teams that general education activities (not the IEP) are where most growth will happen, and the IEP should complement, not duplicate that learning.

Use the kitchen sink test: If you're tempted to add “everything the student needs to learn,” stop and ask, “*Is this actually the job of the IEP?*”



2. AVOID THE “GOAL DUMP” – FOCUS ON RELEVANCE AND FUNCTIONALITY

ACTION STEP:

Instead of copying from goal banks (e.g., “place 5 objects in 5 labeled cups with 80% accuracy”), write goals that reflect **real-world function and instructional relevance**.

For example:

“During a variety of daily activities, the child will pair five labels, symbols, or actions each day for two consecutive weeks.”

This version reflects meaningful learning embedded in routines, supports symbolic development, and avoids reducing the goal to compliance with testable behaviors.

Ask: What are we really trying to teach? And Why does it matter for access, participation, and inclusion?

ACTION STEP:

Don’t simplify goals just to make them measurable (e.g., reducing objects from 10 to 3 for counting). Instead, reframe the goal to reflect meaningful, embedded skills.

For example:

“During a variety of daily activities, the child will pair five labels, symbols, or actions each day for two consecutive weeks.”

This goal is developmentally appropriate, universally designed, and maintains real-world function

3. USE A CLEAR, FOUR-FILTER TEST TO DETERMINE IF IT'S IEP-WORTHY

ACTION STEP:

Apply the Four Filters to determine whether a need belongs in the IEP:

1. Does the need stem from the child's disability?
2. Does it adversely impact access to daily activities or curriculum?
3. Does it require specially designed instruction (SDI)?
4. Can it reasonably be addressed within a year?

Only goals that pass all four are truly IEP-worthy

4. REPLACE DEFICIT-BASED LANGUAGE WITH STRENGTH-BASED FRAMING

ACTION STEP:

Use the Language That Lifts approach to restory how children are described:

- From: "Non-verbal and off-task"
- To: "Communicates using gestures and benefits from visual supports"

Always center the child's gifts, voice, culture, and identity

5. ANCHOR GOALS IN DAILY ACTIVITIES

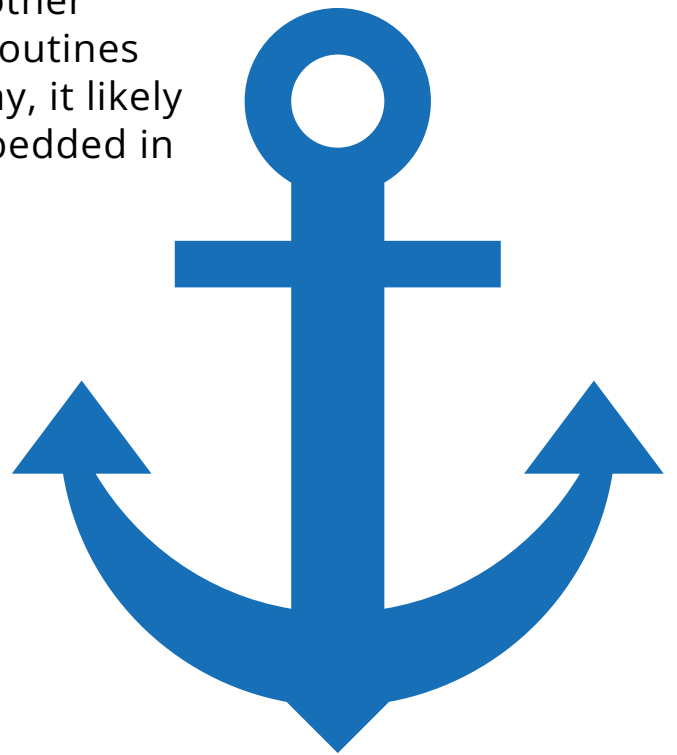
ACTION STEP:

Ask teams: “When and where will this skill naturally occur?”

Have IEP teams describe exactly where and when a goal will show up:

- At snack? At lunch? On the playground?
- During arrival? During an ELA block?
- In play with peers? During transitions?

If they can’t visualize it in context, it may not be meaningful enough to write down. In other words, if it doesn’t align with familiar routines like snack time, transitions, or peer play, it likely needs reworking. Goals should be embedded in context—not abstract drills.



6. CENTER FAMILY VOICE IN THE IEP PROCESS

ACTION STEP:

Treat families as central partners, not side participants. Their insights, priorities, and lived experiences should inform every part of the IEP.

To do this:

- Invite families to share “what matters most” or share reflections before the meeting. Ask:
 - What brings your child joy?
 - What works well at home?
 - What is one hope you have for this year?
- Include direct quotes in Present Levels to capture their voice authentically.
- Respect and reflect each family’s cultural, linguistic, and personal values in how goals are framed and how support is described.
- Use the name the child and family prefer, not just the official or legal one, to reinforce dignity and connection.
- Build trust by circling back to what families shared when drafting goals, choosing supports, and describing progress.
- Ensure the IEP doesn't just reflect the school’s perspective—but tells a whole, nuanced story of the child across home, school, and community.

When families feel seen, heard, and understood, the IEP becomes not just a plan—but a partnership.

Free sharable resource with families: [Achieving Inclusion: 5 Strategies to Ensure an Inclusive Placement for Your Child](#) (enter name and email to download)

7. SPEAK PLAINLY AND WITH PURPOSE

ACTION STEP:

Do a “jargon audit.” Replace unclear terms with plain language:

- Avoid: “utilizes a visual prompt contingent on antecedent stimuli.”
- Try: “follows a direction like line up, clean up, let’s go, when an adult points to a picture.”

Make every IEP readable by parents, paraprofessionals, and teammates

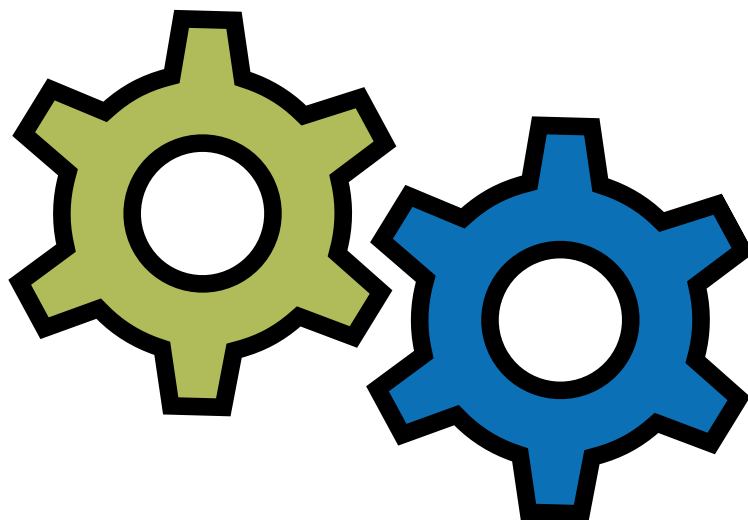
8. PRIORITIZE FUNCTIONAL, INCLUSIVE SKILLS

ACTION STEP:

Choose goals that improve the child’s ability to participate meaningfully. For example:

- Instead of: “Identify 10 letters with 80% accuracy.”
- Try: “Name or point to familiar signs and labels during classroom routines.”

Functionality fosters dignity, connection, and inclusion



9. MAKE PROGRESS MONITORING DOABLE, MEANINGFUL, AND HUMAN

ACTION STEP:

Use naturalistic observations, photos/videos, or simple checklists embedded in routines. Define success as:

- Greater independence (or even interdependence),
- Increased participation, or
- More ease in navigating the day.

Always ask: Can this be tracked without disrupting the child's experience or chasing down a clipboard? Let data reflect a story of growth, not a record of deficits.

10. DEEPEN IEP EXPERTISE THROUGH REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

ACTION STEP:

Support teams in building fluency in inclusive IEP writing. Use this 10-part learning checklist to guide professional growth:

1. **Describe** what the child is saying, doing, and being.
2. **Reflect** across multiple settings and time points.
3. **Look** for patterns and trends.
4. **Balance** independence with interdependence.
5. **Differentiate** delay from neurodiversity or stress behavior.
6. **Embed** SDI in the natural flow of the day.
7. **Write** across domains (language, play, sensory, social).
8. **Use** affirming, family-informed language.
9. **Set** goals that are reachable within a year.
10. **Restory** each child as a whole, valued human.

IEPs are living documents—and writing them well is an act of inclusion in itself