

DYSLEXIA & HOW TO HELP THE DYSLEXIC STUDENT

Dyslexia is a spectrum disorder meaning that it is possible to be diagnosed with dyslexia to very different extents. Bearing this in mind the following is really a general guide to the condition, and how to deal with it in its different forms.

1 – Potential Indicators

Not all dyslexic students will have been formally diagnosed as such by an Educational Psychologist

or specialist teacher. Be aware of the following possible signs:

- High level of spelling error – correct letters used but in the wrong order, spells correctly orally, spelling making sense using a phonic approach ('w-o-z' for 'was')
- Difficulty in sequencing – incorrect syntax in a sentence, instructions carried out in the wrong order, the shape of letters back to front, patterns of numbers in ascending/descending order
- Problems remembering what has been said to them – a dyslexic student may have greater difficulty recalling what you have just said, but may be good at recalling what has just been seen (the reverse could also be an indicator)
- Problems in either fine or gross motor skills – such as in keeping within borders when writing, or failure to judge distances well
- Problems with maintaining rhyme and rhythm – problems with recognising similar sounds
- A preference for left dominance in one or more of the sensory areas – difficulties in distinguishing right from left, left hand for writing, but right dominance elsewhere
- Lower performance than expected – easier to detect discrepancies in the obviously able student
- A lack of concentration, restlessness, and hyperactivity – they may also find it hard to plan an essay or piece of writing, or to apply a pattern of organisation to their notes or activities
- A family history of similar difficulties
- Unable to write in depth – lots of ideas orally, but unable to develop them in written work
- Problems with organisation – homework, equipment

2 - The Educational Psychologist's Report

The educational psychologist (or suitably qualified specialist teacher) will combine background information (obtained from student, teachers and parents) with assessment test scores appropriate to the student's age.

Key areas addressed within the report will include:

- **Auditory memory** (memory of information delivered verbally)
- **Visual memory** (memory of information delivered visually – usually in the form of written words, pictures or symbols)
- **Auditory processing** (speed and accuracy of processing information delivered verbally)
- **Visual processing** (speed and accuracy of processing information delivered visually)
- **Auditory discrimination** (hearing differences between sounds)
- **Visuomotor skills** (hand-eye coordination)
- **Sequencing** (alphabet, days of the week, months of the year. May involve asking the student to 'find' a letter at random)
- **Phonological awareness and processing** (ability to identify, retrieve, and manipulate the sounds of language)

Attainment is judged in terms of **reading** (word recognition, text reading, comprehension, reading speed), **spelling** (single word spelling, dictation of spelling), **free writing** (speed, legibility, grammar, sentence structure, coherence of writing, vocabulary used) and **numeracy** (accuracy, speed, formative assessment of how a problem is tackled)
Reports should give a clear profile of the student's strengths and weaknesses, and include recommendations for teaching and study

3 - A Note on Meares-Irlen Syndrome (Scotopic Sensitivity)

Some students will experience ocular symptoms linked to dyslexia (Visiting the Irlen institute website

(www.irlen.com) will give you useful examples of word distortion):

- Text blurring
- Text moving or wobbling on the page
- Shadowing or doubling of letters
- No spaces between the words – see how hard it is to read without gaps in the words
- Words disappear
- Letters get thicker or thinner
- Difficulty with tracking
- 'Busy' patterns/shapes causing discomfort
- The contrast between black print on white paper causing discomfort leading to headaches, tiredness and lack of concentration

Strategies:

- Coloured overlays, photocopied notes on different coloured papers
- Coloured file paper
- Changing the background colour when using the computer
- Using blue, red or green rather than black marker pens on the whiteboard (though it would be useful to remember that pupils who suffer from colour blindness may be affected)
- Tinted reading rulers are extremely effective in helping students who struggle with word and number tracking

4 - Enhance Self-esteem

- Set realistic targets for the student
- Understand that 'error-free' work might be beyond their grasp – "We do not learn by failure, only by success." (Glasser 1969)
- Essay skills may remain weak – when marking dyslexic scripts it is important to look for signs of creativity, knowledge and reasoning powers which are not apparent at first glance
- Unintentionally caustic remarks can sap the motivation of a student – allowances have to be made for constitutional handicaps
- If self-esteem is poor then they may continue to perform inadequately
- Avoid potentially destructive comments in reports – intentional or unintentional
- Even gifted students can suffer from dyslexia

5 - Multi-Sensory Learning Styles

Sometimes it is necessary to change the way that you teach a dyslexic student to accommodate the way that they learn and to recognise their strengths ('If you can't learn

the way I teach, can I teach the way you learn?'). In learning in everyday life information is processed through three sensory channels – sight, hearing, and touch/movement. **To learn to use a new DVD player would you read the instructions (visual learner), ask someone else to tell you what to do (auditory learner), or experiment by pressing different buttons (kinaesthetic learner)?**

To recognise the learning style of your student:

- Ask the student how they are tackling the task – was it what they saw, heard, or did that is influencing their method of working?
- Watch behaviour in class – look at the types of activity that are carried out with greatest enthusiasm or focus and success. Note the student who is particularly demotivated when learning through a particular medium – particularly important if they do not already have a diagnosis

Suggested multi-sensory activities

Visual:

- Use visual displays in the classroom – posters, wall displays
- Introduce mind-mapping or spider diagrams
- Use or encourage the student to use colour – pens, pencils, coloured whiteboard markers, colour-coded dividers for different topics
- Include pictures, diagrams, symbols on worksheets, whiteboard demonstrations
- Use video or DVD teaching to demonstrate
- Give visual demonstration of concepts
- Encourage the student to visualise information as an aid to memory

Auditory:

- Give verbal explanations
- Reinforce visually presented information verbally
- Use discussion, either in pairs or as a whole class activity
- Encourage the student to give explanations to others – verbalising thoughts will help memory
- Use the media of poetry, music and drama
- Use audio tapes – the student could listen to recorded versions of texts
- Get the student to record their thoughts or notes onto a Dictaphone and use the recordings for revision

Kinaesthetic:

- Set up practical activities where possible
- Allow the student to give a practical demonstration rather than a verbal explanation
- Allow the student to present work that involves practical activity – modelling, making posters or displays, craft work
- Use 3-D models and encourage explanation
- Use tactile materials to aid memory
- Where possible allow the student to move around in class – a kinaesthetic learner may find difficulty in sitting still, listening, and looking without doing anything physical
- During group work the kinaesthetic learner could take on the task of writing down the group's findings, opinions, ideas
- Use games such as card games, jigsaw puzzles – the kinaesthetic learner may like to create

games for him or the class to use

6 - Memory

- Deliver information in 'chunks' – interspersed with a question and answer or practical session
- Chunk verbal instructions
- Give repetition where necessary – encourage students to ask for repetition or clarification, and encourage tolerance in peers
- Use multi-sensory techniques to facilitate retention of information by the student's stronger skills
- Back up verbal information with notes on the whiteboard – subject specific vocabulary can cause a problem as the student may forget the word and substitute it with a similar sounding word which will render the information inaccurate or unintelligible
- Check that the student has written down any instructions correctly as they may misinterpret or mishear or miscopy
- Avoid giving lengthy written instructions to students with weak visual memory skills – chunk or bullet point
- Have patience with a student who has word retrieval problems and discourage any adverse comments or body language from other students – foster a tolerant atmosphere in the classroom
- Encourage the use of mnemonics as this can be a really effective memory aid – encourage them to devise their own, personal ones

7 - Reading

- Be aware that reading skills may still be poor – avoid asking them to read aloud in class if they are reluctant
- Allow the use of abridged versions of set texts, or cassettes/videos
- Encourage students to ask for help from teachers or fellow students
- Don't expect them to remember the words on the page just because it was read at the start of the lesson
- Keep silent reading to a minimum – only the visual channel is stimulated, and the time required for a dyslexic student may not be worth the small amount of learning that results
- The student may read a passage correctly but may not understand or remember what he has read because the comprehension of content is impaired by the mechanical aspect of decoding words

8 - Spelling

- Poor spelling will dog the dyslexic pupil almost every day of their life
- Spelling tests put the student under great pressure – particularly if the words are randomised without pattern or structure. Try asking for a more limited list from the dyslexic student (subject specific which it is reasonable to expect them to work on if they have the list beforehand) or divide the words up into syllables – highlighting tricky letters
- Don't underline every single mistake – this can lead to a pupil becoming fixated on spelling accuracy, which means that they write less, or write in a inhibited and restricted way using more monosyllabic vocabulary
- Don't correct every spelling mistake – look primarily for subject specific vocabulary
- Never put 'sp' beside an error – put the correct spelling. A dyslexic speller does not learn

from his own spelling errors, and long lists of spelling corrections are generally a waste of time - many dyslexic students even copy out the correction incorrectly

- Mark essays for content and information
- Consider a flexible grading/marking policy – just as golfers have handicaps
- Try to offer praise when appropriate – give credit for effort and not just attainment

9 - Study Skills

Note-taking

- Help the student to practise sorting information - via bullet-pointing, highlighting or underlining in different colours
- Where it is not detrimental to your teaching and the learning of others adapt a pace of delivery to allow the student time to make notes
- Possibly allow the use of a Dictaphone so that the student can playback and make notes later at his own pace
- It may help if the student is given a mind map, close sheets, or key topic templates
- Give an outline of key points of the lesson or details of a textbook containing relevant information beforehand (to read in advance and to gain the gist of the lesson)
- It may be necessary in some cases to give the notes for the lesson to the individual student so that they can concentrate their energies on the teacher's delivery
- Key words could be highlighted on the board in different colours to help with bullet-pointing notes
- A 'study-buddy' could be used to help with note-taking (possibly with weaknesses in the areas where the dyslexic student is strong to create a working symbiotic partnership rather than one 'draining' another)
- A student could compile a personal dictionary of subject specific vocabulary and words that he will misspell, which could be kept close at hand and constantly added to

Revision

- Mind maps can be effective, but do not suit all student learning styles or tasks
- Use record cards for many subject areas and types of revision – e.g. write a subject specific term on one side of a card and the definition on the other, or set questions on one side and the answers on the other
- Note-taking from a text book should contain essential information to reduce the amount of reading and the need for the brain to process unnecessary information
- Students have to realise that revision needs to be done in chunks to avoid overload with breaks in between
- A revision timetable should be constructed that is realistic and builds in time for relaxation
- Constant reviewing is essential - this helps retention
- Where possible the student should revise from his own notes – more likely to remember vocabulary and phrases that he uses
- Use strategies that are suited to the student's learning style
- For a weak visual memory and strong auditory memory find a willing volunteer to record revision notes (e.g. parent)
- Help the student to organise materials into a logical order of revision
- Dyslexic students will find it useful to familiarise themselves with past papers, the style of questions, and the vocabulary used (including instructional words like discuss, explain, give examples of, estimate). Stress the need to decode the question carefully - or 'RTFQ' (read the flipping question)

Planning and structuring work

- Spidergrams and mind maps (though some find them visually confusing, and they do not always help with sequential ordering)
- Flowcharts and time lines
- Digital recorders and Dictaphones (useful for those whose speed with ideas does not match their ability to write them down)
- Model answers (though realisable models are more useful than 'perfect' answers)
- Building and streamlining

ICT – some advantages and disadvantages

- Using a computer with a spell-check facility helps the student with poor spelling or handwriting to concentrate on the content of work (though students with poor motor skills may struggle with typing, they will have to be able to write in an exam room, and the teacher may miss persistent errors)
- Students will find it easier to draft and edit work
- ICT can support independent learning
- Presentation can be improved
- A lot of software is multi-sensory which helps with different learning styles
- It is easier to organise numerous files and documents (though stressing the backing up of information is necessary)
- The use of calendar or diary facilities can be helpful in personal organisation
- Specialist software can be used (to change fonts, background colours, and allow the verbal inputting of information via speech-recognition) – but do be aware that some educational software has instructions in language that is complicated
- Computers are non-judgemental (but that also means that they do not give out praise for work done well, and do not provide interaction that would help self-esteem)

Personal Organisation

- Encourage the student in structuring their life as well as their work
- Check that instructions are written in the right place in the homework diary – poor organisational skills often mean that a student will put information in random locations
- Introduce new topics gradually and review them at the end of a lesson
- Encourage the student by giving them note and review sheets when it comes to revision for tests and exams
- Older students may find that recording work on computer helps – though encourage them to organise their work in folders to prevent time being wasted searching through a multitude of files
- Try to ensure that parents have a copy of relevant dates
- Parents could ensure that bags and equipment are checked and packed correctly in the evening which prevents lost time and frayed tempers in the mornings

Writing in Textbooks

- Consider the possibility of letting students highlight and underline key words, and to number the facts to be memorised in their textbooks – this cuts down on the workload at the revision stage

Homework

- Students may copy down the work/instructions incorrectly – such as the numbers of questions or pages (e.g. '28' rather than '82')
- Check the homework diaries of younger students

- Give photocopied instructions if possible
- Remember that dyslexic students often work very slowly – some allowances may need to be made
- Ask the pupils you know have difficulty in grasping exactly what they are supposed to do to repeat the homework task to you – this will ensure they fully understand

Examinations

- The dyslexic student's learning disabilities may penalise them heavily in an exam - they may find it hard to read the question paper
- They may misread or misinterpret the questions
- If difficulties are sufficient to warrant extra time a reader, tape recorder, word processor, or amanuensis may be necessary – practice with these would also be useful – and they should be encouraged to use extra time for planning and proof reading
- Candidates may be allowed to take exams orally – check the regulations with the relevant exam board

11 - Sources:

- Ott – ***How to Detect and Manage Dyslexia*** (Heinemann 1997)
- Vahid, Harwood, & Brown - ***500 Tips for Working with Children with Special Needs*** (RoutledgeFalmer 1998)
- O'Regan – ***Surviving and Succeeding in SEN*** (Continuum 2005)
- Reid – ***Dyslexia*** (2nd Edition – Continuum)
- Reid & Green – ***100 Ideas for Supporting Pupils with Dyslexia*** (Continuum)
- Massey - ***Meeting the Needs of Students with Dyslexia*** (Continuum 2008)

Websites

www.brightstarlearning.com
www.dyslexic.com
www.literacytrust.org.uk