

## Dyslexia: Implications for Study in Higher Education

### Going Beyond the Label

The word dyslexia comes from the Greek meaning 'difficulty with words', which can lead us to consider dyslexia purely in terms of reading and writing. However, it is useful to look beyond this immediate association with words and consider the underpinning cognitive skills which are required in literacy related tasks.

Dyslexia is often linked to difficulty with working memory and visual processing. Therefore, it can be more helpful to recognise that literacy difficulties are the manifestation/presentation of dyslexia and that a student who may have had difficulty *learning to read* at school, will not automatically struggle with *reading to learn* at University (Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin, 1990). The process is simply more exhausting because of the associated difficulties with the organisation, assimilation and recall of information.

Dyslexia is often accompanied by emotional stress linked to trying to conceal difficulties because of fear of embarrassment. Unfortunately, increased stress and anxiety can often make the effects of dyslexia more pronounced and this can create a negative cycle which undermines self-esteem and confidence linked to academic performance.



### Practical Strategies for Supporting Students with dyslexia

Assimilation and memory recall	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students with dyslexia are often 'quick forgetters' rather than 'slow learners' (Hammond and Hercules, 2000). <b>Visual prompts, diagrams and the use of colour to emphasise patterns and links</b> between information can help students to assimilate information more effectively.</li> </ul>
Reading difficulties linked to working memory and visual processing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many students find that they need to read something over and over again in order to make sense of it and assimilate it. Therefore, <b>providing reading lists in advance</b> can help students to better prepare for lectures and seminars.</li> <li>Some students with dyslexia may also struggle with visual disturbances which can make the task of reading visually uncomfortable (see image). <b>Prioritised reading lists</b> can help a student focus on the most important content and focus on their depth of reading rather than breadth. Certain <b>colours of paper</b> and <b>types of font</b> can reduce this visual disturbance for students (a sans serif font such as Arial or Comic Sans with a font size of 12-14 points is considered to be accessible for most students).</li> </ul>
Needing to see the whole picture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Academia often requires students to focus on the fine detail. Many students with dyslexia are skilled in this area, but feel they need to be able to see the whole picture in order to do this effectively; <b>context or reminders relating to the wider point of reference</b> can be really useful as this provides students with a framework to link and thread together different pieces of information.</li> <li>In the same way, <b>lectures which are divided into discernible 'chunks'</b> can allow the student to compartmentalise and organise the information they are processing.</li> </ul>
Note-taking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The multi-tasking skills of listening, processing information and writing in lectures can be difficult. <b>Seeing materials in advance or being able to return to lecture slides or content at a later time</b> can help reduce anxiety.</li> </ul>
Spelling errors: Fear of Imposter Syndrome!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students with dyslexia can be highly articulate and yet spelling can be problematic. Fear of spelling words incorrectly can inhibit the ability to write fluently, as students may choose to limit their vocabulary to words they know they can spell correctly. Heightened anxiety can create a negative cycle for the student.</li> </ul>
Unpicking assignment briefs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information overload can cause difficulty when trying to unpick and process assignment briefs. Students can focus on <b>what</b> (topic) they need to write about rather than <b>how</b> (evaluation, analysis) they should approach or explore the topic.</li> <li>Making assignment briefs concise and clear through the use of <b>headings, bulleted points and bold or highlighted text</b> can help to ensure the student identifies and utilises the most important information.</li> </ul>
Assignment development/feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students with dyslexia rarely experience difficulty in terms of generating content for assignments; instead difficulties tend to emerge linked to structuring and sequencing information (particularly in longer assignments!). <b>Clear and precise feedback through the use of colour coded formulas</b> for paragraph building (e.g. <b>PEA - Point, Evidence, Analysis</b>) can really help as this can provide the student with a memorable, visual aid to ensure greater control over the process of organising and sequencing their ideas and developing their academic writing style.</li> </ul>