

Disability Office

Dyslexia and Specific Learning Difficulties

A Document on Good Practice, including Marking Guidelines

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1. Introduction

The University positively welcomes applications from students with disabilities including Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) and strives to support and facilitate them in their studies. There are a number of SpLDs such as:

- **Dyslexia** – a syndrome which mainly affects reading, writing and spelling.¹
- **Dyspraxia** - a disorder which affects balance and fine motor control.^{2, 3}
- **Dyscalculia** - a difficulty in understanding mathematical concepts and manipulating numbers.⁴
- **Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)** a difficulty in maintaining attention on any task and paying undue attention to external stimuli.⁵
- **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)** a difficulty in physically remaining still as well as not being able to keep focused on tasks.⁶

The university wishes to support students with such SpLDs to achieve their academic goals whilst maintaining academic standards. Although how an individual's specific difficulty affects them will vary, these guidelines provide generalised advice for all students with SpLDs. While this document is concerned mainly with dyslexia, from this point forward any recommendations apply to all SpLDs.

This document seeks to outline:

- The legislative background: the University's obligations
- The nature of dyslexia
- The signs that may lead to its identification
- How members of academic staff can facilitate the learning of students with dyslexia
- How a student may be referred to the Disability Office
- The role of the Disability Office: the support provisions available for students with dyslexia

2. The Legislative Background

2.1. Context

The University is required by law to effectively support disabled students. This is legislated by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (2004 revisions are now law), commonly referred to as SENDA.⁷ Specifically, SENDA places three obligations on the University which are relevant when working with dyslexic students.

- a) Not to unreasonably discriminate against disabled students;
- b) To make reasonable adjustments to facilitate their learning (however, not at the expense of academic standards);
- c) To be anticipatory; requiring departments to plan ahead for the needs of future students.

In addition, the Quality Assurance Agency provides specific expectations on institutions to provide disabled students with the same opportunities as their

peers through its Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards.⁸

2.2. Reasonable Adjustment

The term 'reasonable adjustment' is used in SENDA⁷ as the measure by which provision for disabled students is set. The term reasonable adjustment is open to interpretation but it may be considered as: "A necessary accommodation or alteration to existing academic programmes, offering individuals the opportunity to demonstrate their ability" (Association of Dyslexia Specialists in Higher Education, ADSHE).⁹

An example of reasonable adjustment is given in the SENDA Code of Practice⁷

Example 5.6E

A university encourages its lecturers to put lecture notes on the institution intranet. It introduces new procedures to ensure that all notes put on the intranet meet established guidelines to ensure there is no conflict with specialist software or features that students with dyslexia may be using. It therefore anticipates reasonable adjustments that it might need to make for certain disabled students.

Nb. Some departments may use software that is incompatible with assistive software but this should not prevent such software being used in e-learning.

Whilst reasonable adjustments are recommended, it should be noted that good teaching practice as outlined in this document creates an inclusive environment which benefits all students regardless of disability.

3. What is Dyslexia?

It is generally accepted that dyslexia is the most common SpLD. It is estimated that 11% of the population has mild/moderate dyslexia and 4% has severe dyslexia.¹⁰

Dyslexia is often termed a hidden disability and it is usually linked, in practical terms, to a difficulty in associating sounds with pictures.¹¹⁻¹³ In addition, people with dyslexia will often have relatively inefficient rapid information processing capabilities and short-term-memory.^{10, 14} Consequently, dyslexic people experience difficulties when reading, writing and spelling. All of these factors have practical implications for dyslexic students.

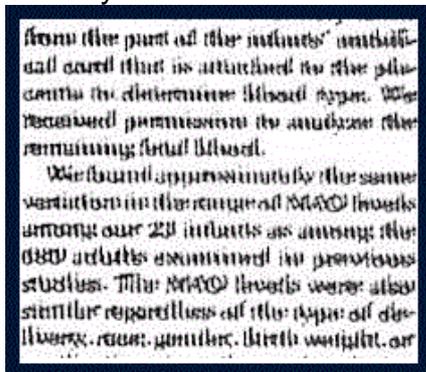
Dyslexia was first described in 1896 as 'congenital word blindness' in a Lancet article by Morgan.¹⁵ More recent research has shown that Developmental Dyslexia, a SpLD, is a neuro-developmental syndrome¹⁶⁻¹⁸, genetic in origin^{19,20} which may result in difficulties in auditory,²¹ visual^{22, 23} and temporal processing.²⁴

Recent research using brain imaging²⁵ indicates that students with dyslexia use their brains differently from other people.²⁶ Other studies show that there are certain differences in brain structure in people with dyslexia.^{16, 27} This may explain why students with dyslexia learn in a different way from other students. Indeed, some researchers view dyslexia not so much as a disability but simply as a learning difference.²⁸ However, the National Working Party on Dyslexia in Higher Education (1999)²⁹ states that the proportion of students with dyslexia at University level is 1-2%.

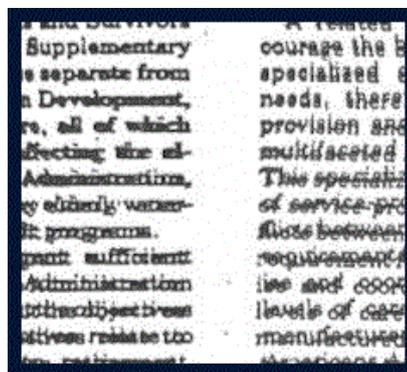
Dyslexia presents as an unusual balance of skills.³⁰ People with dyslexia can be very gifted in certain areas but perform less well in others. They may have strengths in verbal ability but be unable to effectively communicate in writing. They may be able to understand an advanced mathematical concept but be unable to remember the multiplication tables or perform simple arithmetic. It is important to note that dyslexia is not linked to the intelligence measure 'IQ';²⁸ indeed Mensa has a number of dyslexic members.

In addition, some students with dyslexia also have **Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome (SSS)** or **Meares Irlen Syndrome**.^{31, 32} This is a visual-perceptual problem resulting in letters and words seeming to blur and/or move about on the page making the black print on white paper difficult to read, (see samples below).³³ This difficulty can be overcome largely by use of an appropriate coloured overlay and/or tinted glasses. The Disability Office can undertake preliminary testing for SSS, supply overlays at a small cost and can refer students to be tested for tinted glasses.

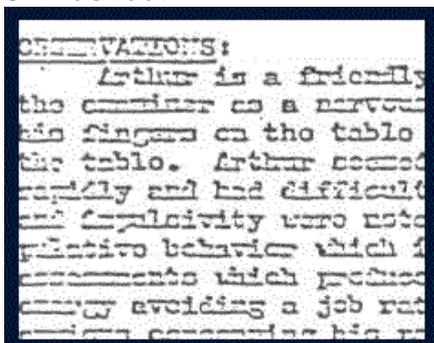
1. Blurry



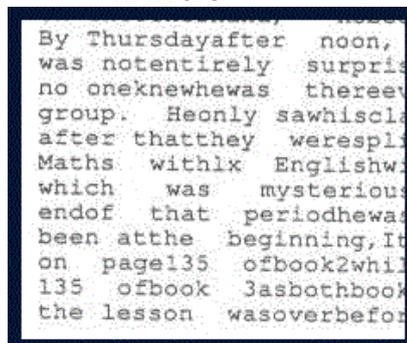
2. Swirl



3. Washout



4. Rivers



Irlen Syndrome/ Scotopic sensitivity, http://www.irlen.com/index_sss.html
 Images reproduced with permission.

4. How is a Student Officially Assessed as Dyslexic?

Over the past thirty years many tests have been developed to identify children and adults with dyslexia³⁴. An Educational Psychologist or other appropriately qualified person conducts a detailed assessment. These tests generally measure how well a candidate performs in both verbal and non-verbal tasks and assesses their achievement in reading, writing and spelling relative to general ability. These tests give a measure of the performance of the individual relative to the average for that age group in, for example, the UK population.

The Disability Office requires high minimum standards of 'proof' in order to ensure that only students who genuinely have dyslexia are provided with support. Further information on these standards is available on request.

5. Problems encountered by Students with Dyslexia: key traits that can help identify if a student has dyslexia

Any combination of the following traits may suggest that a student is dyslexic. However, it is important to distinguish between dyslexia and poor literacy skills: it is for this reason that a professional assessment using standard tests is sought to differentiate the two.

Students with dyslexia may have difficulty in some or all of the following areas:

5.1. Reading

Students may have problems keeping up with course reading as reading text accurately is difficult and texts have to be re-read to gain comprehension. Reading aloud may also be particularly difficult. Pronouncing words, reading symbols, reading at speed, proof reading, reading timetables and filling in forms can all be problematic.

5.2. Writing

Students with dyslexia find it hard to put down on paper what they can express verbally. This is particularly true when working under pressure. For example, in examinations a student with dyslexia will often not perform to the standard previously demonstrated in coursework assignments. Staying focused on a line of argument within an assignment may be difficult, as students with dyslexia tend to see the whole pattern of a topic rather than keeping to one single argument. Thus structuring an essay can be extremely challenging, although with appropriate tuition, strategies can be developed to help students in this area. The use of correct spelling, grammar and punctuation may also prove difficult as may copying text accurately from a white board, OHP or PowerPoint presentation. Listening and writing simultaneously is a difficult task for students with dyslexia, and therefore note-taking can be difficult or impossible. In presentations students may mispronounce words.

5.3. Organisation

Managing complex tasks or performing a number of simple tasks simultaneously can be problematic. Examples of common difficulties in organising academic life include filing of lecture notes, meeting deadlines, remembering days, dates and times of events, etcetera.

It is possible for students with dyslexia to arrive at a lecture theatre or laboratory class late because they have remembered the time, date or room number incorrectly.

5.4. Mathematics

Research indicates that people with dyslexia can have difficulty in performing simple calculations even though they may grasp complex concepts and progress to high levels of academic achievement.^{35, 36}

5.5. Confidence and Self-esteem

Many students have had negative experiences during their education and it may be hard for them to admit a difficulty or to ask for help.

It is also important to note that students with dyslexia can suffer more from the effects of stress than students without dyslexia. Stress has the effect of increasing dyslexic traits and, in certain circumstances, may result in a student with mild dyslexia exhibiting the symptoms of severe dyslexia.³⁷ As some days may be more stressful than others, their academic performance and general functioning can vary.

6. How an Academic Tutor can help Students with Dyslexia

Generally, students with dyslexia do not wish to have an advantage academically over other students, but simply desire a 'level playing field'. To address this the multi-sensory method of teaching was developed which uses

visual, auditory and kinaesthetic memory (learning which involves the sense of touch, as in touching, feeling, moving, and manipulating objects) simultaneously. Using multi-sensory teaching methods not only supports students with SpLDs but improves the learning experience of all students and creates an inclusive teaching environment.

Dyslexia is a syndrome: not all students with dyslexia will show the same pattern of difficulties. Unless they have only recently been assessed, most students with dyslexia have developed some coping strategies in order to achieve in an academic setting. However, multi-sensory teaching methods and presenting material in a variety of ways are particularly successful and indeed can help all students to learn more effectively.

The following suggestions involve teaching in a multi-sensory way.

6.1. Teaching a Class

Several approaches may be used, some of which may already be employed.

- Students with dyslexia benefit from repetition and reinforcement, so it is helpful to give an overview of the course at the beginning, as well as the contents of each lecture when working through the unit of study.
- Allow students to record lectures (audio only). This is commonly recommended by study skills assessors. Students are often provided with discreet, compact equipment that works best when placed on a desk, lectern or bench at the front of the lecture theatre.
- Provide reading lists and lecture handouts in advance or have lecture materials available on the web. This is considered a reasonable adjustment as it is often difficult for students with dyslexia to listen and write simultaneously, whereas annotating handouts is an effective way to take in information.
- Use systematic colours in OHPs and PowerPoint. Do not make slides too crowded. Use clearly contrasting colours, for example dark text on a cream background on an OHP or off-white text on a dark background when projecting PowerPoint slides. (Clarity in presentation of materials also helps visually impaired students.)
- Use diagrams, flow charts and mind-maps³⁸ where possible.
- Break up text and use bullet points and sub-headings where possible.
- There has been much debate about the most appropriate font to use in printed documents. It is commonly found that an 'uncomplicated' font which has plenty of space around individual characters such as Arial (as used in this document) or Comic Sans helps. However, there are occasions where these fonts are inappropriate. A good example is the convention of using roman characters in Science and Mathematics. However, it is important to be aware of any ambiguity that may be

caused by the similarities between symbols, for example that of the number 1 and the lower case letter l.

- When reading, some students may have difficulty correctly reading line after line of text (referred to as 'tracking'), and may therefore inadvertently miss out one or more lines of a paragraph. This is due to involuntary eye movement. To aid students, it is recommended that printed materials be formatted as left justified [as this document is] giving an unevenness to the 'right edge', thus allowing students to find their place more easily.
- Write new technical terms or jargon words on the board. Where possible use 3D models, movement (possible in PowerPoint presentations), hands-on activities, mnemonics and audio-visual aids.

In addition to the above measures ADSHE³⁹ recommends:

- Use of off-white or cream paper for handouts to reduce glare when reading.
- Including library catalogue references for books on reading lists.
- Prioritised reading lists.
- All reading for tutorials to be given beforehand, especially if a student has to read aloud.

6.2. Practical Sessions/ Laboratory Work

- Be aware that students with dyslexia may take more time to read any instructions than the rest of the cohort. Densely packed text will slow their reading. Breaking instructions down into individual steps, duly numbered, is often helpful.
- Sometimes students will need to repeat or go back over processes that have been demonstrated in order to achieve fluency. Some flexibility in giving these students extra time will help them to consolidate their learning.
- If practical sessions have involved taped notes or interviews, for example counselling or language courses, students with dyslexia may need more time to transcribe the recording.

6.3. Good Practice

- If you know there are students with dyslexia in your lectures or tutorial groups be sensitive towards them by not paying attention to the fact publicly, unless they have given you permission to do so.

- Be aware that to question the genuineness of the disability can demoralise and humiliate the student. The Educational Psychologist's Report should be proof enough. The Dyslexia Tutor can advise on methods of broaching the subject with a student.
- Most students with dyslexia are reluctant to ask for special consideration and only do so when it is really necessary.
- A student with dyslexia will often have worked much harder than other students in order to reach university. A poorly presented piece of work may have taken them a long time and significant effort to produce.
- Do not make jokes about an individual's spelling, however light-hearted, as a student may be very sensitive to such comments.
- Students who have been assessed as having dyslexia later in life may have bad memories of school. They can be traumatised by such an assessment, trying to accommodate the information they have received and feeling they now have a 'label'.
- Be aware of the possibility that an individual may be experiencing stress outside of their studies which may compound and exacerbate their dyslexia.

6.4. Assessment and Examination Provision

When assessing a student with dyslexia it is important to be aware of the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the module. Indeed this is an important aspect of providing Accessible Curricula^{40, 41} For example, if knowledge is being assessed, then spelling, grammar and punctuation should be disregarded. However, if spelling is crucial, for example in a foreign language module, then errors should be penalised. If English language is being assessed, again, errors should be penalised. In terms of mathematical calculations, numbers may be written incorrectly especially when a calculation spans more than one page and allowances could be made for this. However, if the aim of the assessment is to present correct calculations in addition to the correct overall answer then marking should reflect this.

In addition:

- Do not make the grammar of coursework questions too convoluted. Clarity of questions means that students have a better chance of giving clear answers. The same applies to the rubric on an exam paper, helping to avoid students answering the wrong/insufficient number of questions where they have options.
- Spell checkers are not necessarily the perfect solution to spelling difficulties. They require the user to have a broadly accurate idea of how to spell the word in question. Therefore, marks should be

awarded for core information and not deducted for spelling, grammar and punctuation errors where possible.

- When marking, comments should always aim to be constructive and give sufficient detail for the student to make changes in the future. Academic criticism, however constructive, may be a new concept and comments should be written so that the essay rather than the writer is being criticised. Negative comments which touch upon a student's disability should not be made.

- Extensions to deadlines may be necessary because a student is a slow reader or has taken longer to process or write his/her thoughts, or they may have misread the deadline date. However, repeatedly requiring extensions is rarely helpful as it can result in conflicting deadlines, particularly for joint honours programmes. If this situation appears, the Dyslexia Tutor can advise departments on developing a revised assessment schedule covering a longer period of time, e.g. a semester or complete academic year.

- If a student is assessed as having dyslexia during the course of an academic year, course work completed in that year should be considered for re-marking where practically possible. The academic performance of the student before her/his assessment should be considered at the end of year examinations board.

- It is commonly considered that students are awarded extra time in examinations to correct their spelling, grammar and punctuation. However, extra time is more commonly recommended because of students' slower processing speed and/or writing skills. Examiners should not penalise spelling, grammar or punctuation errors when marking scripts unless such precision forms an essential part of the assessment for the module.

- It is recommended that students use an appropriate method to identify their examinations and coursework as that of a student with dyslexia. The ADSHE guidelines based on the Report of the National Working Party on Dyslexia in Higher Education, 1999 suggest: "that examiners marking the work of a dyslexic candidate should be alerted to those difficulties and take them into consideration when marking. This will, to some extent, contravene the principle of anonymity. However, it may be argued that without this the dyslexic candidate will be unfairly discriminated against and this in itself would contravene the principle of equality of opportunity. Students should therefore be given the option of whether or not to flag their work for markers". The script can then be marked without attention to spelling, grammar and punctuation, as appropriate. See also 6.5. below. As this compromises anonymity, such disclosure should be voluntary.

6.5. Marking

It is recommended that Departments adopt the (ADSHE) policy towards marking.

- When marking coursework mark for content and do not penalise spelling, grammar or punctuation unless this forms an integral part of the assessment (e.g. certain types of foreign language work).
- It is suggested that a different colour ink (other than red) is used when marking written work as red ink is often associated with negative experiences at school and college.
- Be constructive when giving feedback noting both the positive and the negative aspects of a student's work. The focus should be to encourage the learner to progress and develop their skills so as to help them maintain self-esteem.
- If a piece of work is not well presented, it should be marked for content only, unless the layout of the work is being assessed.

6.6. Alternative Forms of Assessment

In certain circumstances students may need additional support other than extra time such as access to a PC, scribe, a *viva voce*, or a structured presentation. A *viva voce* may be considered if for example fact based knowledge is being examined. In the case of professional examinations or where accuracy in written language is essential this may not be an option.

Whilst ensuring that a reasonable adjustment is made, academic standards must not be compromised. Where possible, the student should be involved in discussions concerned with an alternative assessment format. If no adjustment can be made, the grounds on which this decision has been reached must be clearly stated. Reviewing the assessment methods of a complete academic year by means of a module review ensures that any appropriate reasonable adjustments for students with SpLDs are considered and put in place.

Establishing alternative forms of assessment is often a time-consuming process. Reviewing the assessment methods of a complete academic year in advance is often a useful way of examining the issue^{40, 41}.

7. Support Available for Students with Dyslexia

There is a wide variety of support available for students with dyslexia. It is recommended that students are referred to the Disability Office so their needs can be assessed.

7.1. Assessment of Dyslexia

In many cases students with dyslexia declare their disability on their UCAS application. In the University's handling of applications, students are asked to provide a copy of their Educational Psychologist's report and a copy of a Needs Assessment if one has been carried out. These reports recommend the type of support needed by the student. However, many students are assessed for the first time whilst studying at University. The different learning, teaching and assessment methods used in Higher Education can often highlight longstanding difficulties that had previously not been formally assessed.

If you suspect that a student may have dyslexia you should tactfully bring this to their attention and suggest that they contact the Disability Office to make an appointment to see a Disability Caseworker. After discussing their difficulties, they may be referred to an Educational Psychologist for a formal assessment.

The Disability Office cannot fund Educational Psychologist assessments. Students who require financial assistance to meet the cost of an assessment should contact colleagues in the Money Advice - Student Financial Aid Office, where funding may be available through the Financial Contingency Fund. The process is relatively straightforward but it is recommended that students are referred to the Disability Office who will guide the student through the necessary steps.

If a student is confirmed as having dyslexia, this may enable them to access a variety of support provisions. These may include, extra time during examinations or alternative assessment, consideration for spelling, grammar and punctuation. External funding (in the majority, but not all cases) can provide computer equipment including specialist software, recording devices for use in lectures and seminars, and specialist dyslexia-specific study skills tuition.

7.2. The University Disability Office

The University Disability Office provides a wide range of support services for those with disabilities. The main office is based in the Student Support Services Department, Ground Floor, Keir Hardie Building. The Office also has an Assessment and Training Centre for Students with Disabilities which is located in the Grove extension, directly opposite Union House.

The team consist of:

- **Disability Office Manager** – service management and development
- **Caseworkers** - a comprehensive advice and information service for students from initial enquiries prior to application and throughout their chosen course of study.

- **Dyslexia Tutor** – one to one tutorials and group presentations & workshops for students with dyslexia.
- **IT Support Officer** – a help desk service to resolve problems with specialist technology and advice and training for students on the use of general and specialist software
- **Mental Health Coordinator** – advice and information for staff and students, individual student support and coordination with NHS Mental Health Services
- **Assessment Officer** - an assessment that considers the effects of disability on study, makes recommendations for support (equipment, personal and consumable) and the associated costs. The assessment forms part of the process of securing external funding (see also 7.1).
- **Support Coordinator** – organises note-taking and human support.

8. Referral

Should you consider that a student has dyslexia, please feel free to contact the Disability Office to discuss this in more detail. Arrangements can be made for a student to have an assessment by an Educational Psychologist. Should the student have dyslexia, this can unlock funding to pay for a variety of support measures. These can include equipment and specialist tuition. Examination concessions, such as extra time or the option to type answers, can also be arranged.

9. Contact Details

The Disability Office is situated in the Student Support Services Department in Keir Hardie Building and can be contacted on 01792 602000 (x2000) or email disability@swan.ac.uk.

10. Further Information

British Dyslexia Association: www.bda.org.uk

The Dyslexia Institute: <http://www.dyslexia-inst.org.uk>

The National Attention Deficit Disorder Information and Support Service (ADDISS): <http://www.addiss.co.uk>

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Association of Dyslexia Specialists in Higher Education Documents:
<http://www.adshe.org.uk>

Reasonable Adjustments in Academic Departments :
<http://www.adshe.org.uk/docs/Reasonable%20Adjustments%20in%20Academic%20Departments.doc>

Guidance for Good Practice: Institutional Marking Practices for Dyslexic Students: <http://www.adshe.org.uk/docs/Marking%20Guidelines.doc>

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