

Dyslexia at School & College

Dyslexia can affect learning in ways that are easy to misinterpret. A learner may understand a subject well in discussion yet struggle to show the same knowledge through reading, spelling, note-taking or extended writing. They may take much longer to complete work, forget instructions, lose their place on a page or become exhausted by tasks classmates complete quickly. This does not mean the learner is less able. It means the route through written language may require more conscious effort and different support.

What dyslexia can look like in the classroom

A learner may read slowly, avoid reading aloud, guess unfamiliar words, spell inconsistently, copy inaccurately from the board, lose their place, struggle to take notes while listening or need instructions repeated. Written work may be much shorter or less sophisticated than their spoken ideas. Some pupils become quiet and avoidant; others use humour, distraction or behaviour to escape situations where they fear being exposed. Looking beyond the behaviour can reveal a literacy or processing barrier.

Reading and learning

Reading for learning is more demanding than simply recognising words. The learner has to decode the text, understand vocabulary, hold earlier information in mind and connect ideas across paragraphs. If decoding requires significant effort, comprehension can suffer even when the learner has the intellectual ability to understand the topic. Audio, text-to-speech, pre-teaching vocabulary and shorter reading sections can free mental capacity for learning the content.

Spelling and written expression

Spelling difficulty can interfere with the flow of ideas. A learner may choose simpler words because they know how to spell them, stop repeatedly to check spelling or lose the sentence they wanted to write while concentrating on individual words. Speech-to-text, predictive text, word banks and allowing a first draft to focus on ideas can help. When the purpose of a task is subject knowledge, marking every spelling error can obscure what the learner actually understands.

Copying from the board

Copying requires repeated shifts of visual attention while remembering small amounts of text. A dyslexic learner may lose their place, omit words or spend so much time copying that they miss the teacher's explanation. Providing printed or digital notes, allowing photographs where appropriate, or sharing slides can remove this unnecessary barrier. The learner can then use lesson time to listen, understand and participate.

Note-taking

Listening, selecting important information, spelling, writing and organising ideas simultaneously can overload working memory. A learner may end a lesson with incomplete notes despite concentrating intensely. Structured note templates, key headings in advance, teacher slides, audio recording where permitted and assistive technology can help. Note-taking should support learning rather than become a test of how quickly someone can write.

Homework

Homework can take disproportionately long because the learner is continuing to compensate after a full day of literacy-heavy demands. A task expected to take thirty minutes may take much longer when reading, planning, spelling and checking are effortful. Schools and colleges should consider the purpose of homework and whether the amount set is producing useful learning or simply repeated exhaustion. Families can feed back honestly when workload is becoming unmanageable.

Reading aloud

Unexpected reading aloud can create significant anxiety. A learner may understand the material privately but struggle to decode accurately while classmates listen. Unless reading aloud is itself the skill being taught or assessed, consider whether it is necessary. Offering choice, advance notice or time to prepare protects dignity without removing opportunities to participate.

Processing time

Some learners need longer to read a question, organise an answer or move between spoken and written information. Rapid questioning can make them appear not to know something they understand. Allowing a few additional seconds, providing questions in writing and avoiding unnecessary time pressure can improve access. Processing speed should not be used as a proxy for intelligence.

Memory and instructions

Multi-step verbal instructions may disappear before the learner reaches the final stage. Give short instructions, provide them in writing and encourage the learner to check off completed steps. Asking the learner to repeat the plan in their own words can confirm understanding without turning the interaction into a memory test. Consistent routines also reduce the amount of new information that has to be processed.

Classroom materials

Accessible formatting benefits many learners. Use clear headings, reasonable font size, sufficient spacing and uncluttered pages. Avoid unnecessary blocks of dense text. Do not assume one special font or background colour is universally best for dyslexia; individual preferences vary. Digital materials can be particularly useful because learners can adjust zoom, spacing or use text-to-speech.

Assistive technology

Technology can reduce the mechanical load of literacy. Text-to-speech can support access to reading; speech-to-text can help capture ideas; predictive text and spellcheck can support writing; digital planners can support organisation. The learner needs time to learn the technology and should be able to use it routinely, not only during high-pressure assessments. A tool becomes useful when it is familiar enough to reduce effort.

Exams and assessments

Assessment arrangements depend on the learner's needs, normal way of working and the rules of the relevant awarding organisation. Possible arrangements can include additional time, use of a computer or other permitted support, but they are not automatic simply

because a learner has dyslexia. Schools and colleges should identify needs early, gather appropriate evidence and follow current awarding-body guidance. The learner should practise with any agreed arrangement before formal assessment.

Reasonable adjustments and support

In the UK, disabled learners may be entitled to reasonable adjustments under equality law where they would otherwise face substantial disadvantage. The appropriate adjustment depends on the individual and the setting. Examples can include accessible materials, assistive technology, additional processing time, alternative ways of accessing text or changes to how instructions are presented. Support should respond to functional need rather than assuming every dyslexic learner requires the same package.

College and further education

Moving into college can bring new challenges: larger campuses, independent study, online learning platforms, longer assignments, unfamiliar terminology and greater responsibility for deadlines. Learning-support teams can help identify strategies and technology. Breaking assignments into stages, using digital calendars, obtaining reading lists early and planning how to access long texts can reduce last-minute overload.

Confidence and self-esteem

Repeated correction can change how a learner sees themselves. A child who is articulate and curious may begin to believe they are 'stupid' because reading and spelling are difficult. A teenager may avoid courses they would enjoy because they fear written work. Adults in college may carry memories of earlier school experiences. Support should make strengths visible and separate literacy difficulty from intelligence, effort and potential.

Bullying and embarrassment

Mispronouncing a word, reading slowly or spelling differently can attract unwanted attention from peers. Adults should take teasing seriously rather than treating it as harmless. Learners should not be required to disclose dyslexia publicly in order to justify support. Privacy, respectful correction and a classroom culture where different ways of learning are normal can reduce shame.

Working with parents and carers

Families may see exhaustion, frustration or distress that is hidden during the school day. Listen when they report that homework takes hours or that a learner is increasingly reluctant to attend. Share successful strategies between home and education where appropriate, but do not place responsibility for specialist teaching onto parents. A collaborative conversation should focus on what the learner is experiencing and what changes reduce the barrier.

A learner support map

What is difficult? Reading long text, spelling, copying, note-taking, remembering instructions or organising written work. **What happens?** Identify the exact barrier. **What helps?** Record technology, extra time, audio, templates or written instructions. **What makes it harder?** Include noise, rushing, dense pages or reading aloud if relevant. **How can I show what I know?** Agree methods that allow the learner's understanding to be visible.

Preparing for the future

Dyslexia should inform planning without shrinking ambition. Learners benefit from understanding their own profile, knowing which tools work and learning how to explain their needs. These skills become increasingly important in further education, university, apprenticeships and employment. Independence does not mean abandoning support; it means knowing how to access the support that allows you to participate.

A message for the learner

You are not your spelling score, reading speed or handwriting. Needing text read aloud, using speech-to-text, asking for extra processing time or checking a word does not reduce the value of your ideas. Learning becomes easier when you understand what your brain finds difficult and which tools help. The goal is not to hide dyslexia successfully. It is to have enough access and confidence to show what you know.

Further support

Families and learners can speak with the school's SENCO, college learning-support team or an appropriately qualified dyslexia assessor about persistent difficulties. Current examination-access rules should be checked through the educational setting and relevant awarding body. Specialist dyslexia organisations can provide additional information about assessment, assistive technology and learning strategies.

Space to Breathe Therapy