

Dyslexia in Everyday Life

Dyslexia does not only appear when someone is reading a book or completing a spelling test. Written language is built into almost every part of modern life: messages, forms, appointments, online accounts, directions, labels, instructions, bills and workplace information. For a dyslexic person, ordinary tasks can therefore involve a hidden layer of decoding, remembering, checking and organising. The task may eventually be completed correctly, but the amount of effort needed is often invisible to everyone else.

The hidden literacy load

A short everyday task can require several skills at once. Booking an appointment may mean reading available dates, processing a message, spelling a name, remembering instructions and adding the information to a calendar. Completing a form can require reading unfamiliar language, locating the correct information, spelling accurately and keeping place across several boxes. When these demands happen together, a task that appears simple from the outside can become mentally exhausting.

Forms and paperwork

Forms are a common source of difficulty because they combine dense text, unfamiliar vocabulary, small boxes and the pressure to be accurate. A person may understand the question but misread one word, lose their place or worry about spelling. Helpful strategies include reading one section at a time, highlighting what is being asked, using digital forms with zoom or text-to-speech, preparing commonly requested information in advance and asking for clarification rather than guessing. Needing help accessing a form does not mean someone cannot make the decisions the form contains.

Emails and messages

Reading and writing messages can take much longer than other people realise. A dyslexic person may reread an email several times, worry that they have misunderstood the tone, spend a long time checking spelling or postpone replying because composing the response feels demanding. Speech-to-text can help get ideas down, while text-to-speech can make proofreading easier. Templates are useful for messages that are sent repeatedly. For important communication, separating 'write the message' from 'check the message' can reduce cognitive load.

Appointments and letters

Appointment letters often contain several pieces of important information surrounded by administrative text. Dates, times, locations, reference numbers and preparation instructions can be missed even when the letter has been read. It can help to extract the key information immediately and place it into a calendar in plain language. Photographing or saving the original letter keeps the source available. Text-to-speech can also reduce the effort of repeatedly rereading a dense document.

Instructions

Long written instructions can be difficult to hold in sequence. A person may understand every sentence but forget an earlier step while completing a later one. Breaking instructions into numbered stages, using checkboxes and keeping the instructions visible can help. Where possible, combine written instructions with demonstration. In workplaces and education, asking someone to 'just remember' several verbal instructions may create an unnecessary barrier if working memory is also affected.

Directions and finding places

Directions can involve street names, signs, left and right, sequences and written information. Unfamiliar names can be difficult to read or remember, and anxiety can make processing harder. Navigation apps, saved locations, screenshots and visual landmarks can reduce the literacy and memory load. When giving directions, short stages are often easier than a long sequence delivered all at once.

Shopping

Shopping involves labels, prices, lists, signs, product names, offers and sometimes unfamiliar words. A person may recognise packaging more easily than a written product name or spend extra time comparing similar labels. Digital shopping lists, photographs of products, barcode or search functions and grouping a list by area of the shop can help. The difficulty may be reading and organisation rather than knowing what the person wants to buy.

Money and bills

Dyslexia is different from dyscalculia, but written financial information can still be difficult to access. Bills, bank letters and contracts may contain dense language, abbreviations and long reference numbers. Reading information aloud, using accessible digital statements, highlighting the action required and separating important figures from surrounding text can make the document clearer. If numerical processing is also difficult, dyscalculia or another overlapping difficulty may need to be considered separately.

Online life

Websites and apps can create barriers through crowded pages, long menus, verification codes, password requirements and large amounts of text. Browser reader modes, text-to-speech, password managers, zoom, simplified display settings and bookmarks can reduce repeated effort. Keeping frequently used links in one accessible place can prevent the need to search and reread results every time.

Organisation and planning

Dyslexia can be associated with difficulties organising written information, sequencing tasks or remembering details that were only presented verbally. Calendars, reminders, visual task boards, checklists and templates can make plans external rather than relying on memory. The best system is usually simple enough to maintain. An elaborate planner that requires extensive writing may create more work than it removes.

Names, words and word finding

Some people know exactly who or what they mean but cannot retrieve the word quickly. Names can be particularly difficult because there is often little context to help recall them. This can be embarrassing in social or professional situations. Allowing a moment to retrieve the word, keeping contact names stored clearly and avoiding pressure can help. Word-finding difficulty should not automatically be interpreted as lack of knowledge.

Reading aloud

Unexpected requests to read aloud can create significant anxiety. Reading privately and understanding the content is different from decoding accurately while being watched. In social, educational or workplace settings, there is rarely a good reason to use surprise reading aloud as a test of competence. Where reading aloud is genuinely required, advance access to the text and time to prepare can make a substantial difference.

Telephone calls

Calls can be demanding when names, addresses, reference numbers or instructions have to be processed and recorded quickly. Keep a note-taking method ready before calling. Ask the other person to slow down or repeat information. Read important numbers back to confirm them. Where available, follow-up information by email or message provides a written record that can be revisited at the person's own pace.

Reading for pleasure

Dyslexia does not mean someone cannot enjoy stories, information or learning. Audiobooks are reading access, not a lesser substitute. Some people combine audio with print; others prefer e-readers that allow font size, spacing and background settings to be adjusted. The goal of leisure reading is engagement and enjoyment, not proving an ability to decode every word without support.

Fatigue and overload

Constantly compensating can be tiring. A person who has spent a day reading emails, checking spelling, following written instructions and navigating paperwork may have much less capacity for another form or long message in the evening. Fatigue can increase mistakes and make processing slower. Recognising this pattern allows important literacy-heavy tasks to be planned for times when the person has more capacity.

When dyslexia and anxiety meet

Repeated embarrassment can create anxiety around written tasks. Someone may avoid opening letters, delay replying to emails or become distressed when asked to complete paperwork in front of another person. Anxiety then makes concentration and working memory less efficient. A calmer environment, privacy, enough time and permission to use support can interrupt this cycle. The aim is not to remove dyslexia but to remove unnecessary threat from the task.

Practical everyday toolkit

Read: use text-to-speech or audio when it reduces effort. **Write:** use speech-to-text, predictive text and templates. **Remember:** put information into calendars, reminders and checklists rather than holding it mentally. **Organise:** keep repeated information and useful links in predictable places. **Check:** proofread important information separately from writing it. **Ask:** request written, verbal or simplified information in the format that works best for you.

Supporting someone without taking over

Ask what would help rather than assuming. Someone may want a letter read aloud but still want to decide how to respond. They may want spelling checked without having their wording rewritten. Support should increase access while preserving ownership. Avoid teasing about spelling, correcting casually in front of others or treating reading speed as a measure of intelligence. Small acts of respect can remove a large amount of shame.

A message to take away

Everyday life contains far more reading and writing than most people notice. Dyslexia can make that invisible workload heavier, but practical tools can reduce it. You are allowed to listen instead of read, dictate instead of type, use reminders instead of remembering, ask for a form to be explained and take longer to process a message. Accessibility is not about doing less; it is about having a fairer route to the same information, decisions and opportunities.

Further support

If dyslexia is significantly affecting everyday life, education or employment, specialist dyslexia organisations and appropriately qualified assessors can provide further information. Schools, colleges and workplaces may also be able to offer learning support or reasonable adjustments depending on the person's circumstances. The most useful starting point is often to identify the specific everyday situations that create difficulty and the strategies that already make them easier.

Space to Breathe Therapy