

Understanding Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a specific learning difference that mainly affects the development of accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. It can also be associated with difficulties in phonological processing, verbal memory and the speed at which written or spoken information is processed. Dyslexia is not caused by low intelligence, laziness, poor motivation or lack of education. People with dyslexia can understand complex ideas, communicate effectively and develop considerable expertise while still finding particular literacy tasks unusually effortful.

It is more than letters moving around

Dyslexia is sometimes reduced to the idea that letters move, reverse or become jumbled on a page. Some people do report visual discomfort or confusion when reading, but this is not what defines dyslexia. The core difficulty is usually related to processing the sounds in language and connecting those sounds reliably with written symbols, alongside differences in reading fluency and spelling. Reducing dyslexia to letter reversal can mean that people whose difficulties look different are missed.

Reading can be accurate but exhausting

Not every dyslexic person reads obviously incorrectly. Some adults and older children have developed enough strategies to read accurately, but the process remains slow and effortful. They may reread sentences, lose their place, skip small words, struggle with unfamiliar vocabulary or reach the end of a page without retaining what they have read because so much attention was used simply decoding the text. This hidden effort is important. Reading ability should not be judged only by whether the words were eventually read correctly.

Spelling

Spelling can remain inconsistent even when a person knows what they want to write. The same word may be spelled differently within one document. Sounds may be represented in plausible but non-standard ways, letters may be omitted or reordered, and remembering irregular spellings can require repeated checking. Spellcheck helps, but it may not identify a word when the attempted spelling is very different from the target. Predictive text, dictionaries, speech-to-text and personal word banks can therefore be useful accessibility tools.

Phonological processing

Phonological processing involves recognising and working with the sound structure of language. A person may find it difficult to break a word into sounds, blend sounds together, identify rhyming patterns or manipulate sounds mentally. These skills support the development of reading and spelling. Difficulties can be particularly noticeable when learning unfamiliar words, names, technical vocabulary or another language.

Working memory

Working memory allows information to be held temporarily while something is done with it. A dyslexic person may understand an instruction but lose part of it while completing the first step. They may struggle to hold a sentence in mind while writing it, remember a telephone message long enough to record it, or follow several spoken instructions in sequence. Writing information down, giving one instruction at a time and keeping reference material visible can reduce this load.

Processing speed

Some people need additional time to process written or spoken information. They may know the answer but require longer to organise it, particularly when reading, writing and listening are happening simultaneously. Being hurried can increase errors and anxiety. Processing time is not the same as intelligence. A slower route to an answer can still produce thoughtful, accurate and sophisticated work.

Sequencing and organisation

Dyslexia can affect the organisation and sequencing of information. A person may find alphabetical order, multi-stage instructions, note organisation or planning written work difficult. They may know many relevant ideas but struggle to arrange them into a logical written sequence. Templates, visual planning, mind maps, headings and checklists can make the structure visible rather than requiring it to be held mentally.

Children may show dyslexia differently

Early signs can include difficulty learning letter-sound relationships, recognising rhymes, blending sounds, remembering common words, spelling consistently or developing reading fluency. A child may avoid reading aloud, guess words from context or become distressed around literacy activities. Some children have strong spoken language and general knowledge, which can mask the difficulty. A discrepancy between what a child can explain verbally and what they can demonstrate through reading or writing can be particularly noticeable.

Adults and masking

Adults may have spent decades hiding their dyslexia. They may avoid reading aloud, choose jobs that minimise paperwork, memorise frequently used words, ask another person to proofread, dictate messages, or spend far longer than colleagues preparing written work. Some adults first recognise their own dyslexia when their child is assessed. Coping successfully does not mean the difficulty was insignificant; it may mean the person has built extensive compensatory strategies.

Everyday life

Literacy is embedded in daily life: forms, medication instructions, menus, signs, contracts, emails, online accounts, appointment letters and written directions. A person may be completely capable of making a decision yet need information read aloud or presented differently before they can access it. Difficulty accessing written information should not be mistaken for difficulty understanding the underlying issue.

Dyslexia and spoken communication

Dyslexia primarily concerns literacy, but some people also experience word-finding difficulties, lose track during long verbal explanations or need extra time to organise spoken responses. Names and unfamiliar terms can be particularly difficult to retrieve. This can create the impression that someone does not know something they actually understand well. Giving time, avoiding interruption and providing key information in writing can support communication.

Dyslexia and other neurodivergence

Dyslexia can occur on its own or alongside other neurodevelopmental differences such as ADHD, autism, dyscalculia or developmental coordination difficulties. When several differences overlap, the person's experience may not fit a simple dyslexia description. For example, reading may be affected by dyslexia while organisation is additionally affected by ADHD. Support is most useful when it responds to the person's actual profile rather than assuming every difficulty belongs to one label.

Strengths without stereotypes

Dyslexic people are often described as creative, visual or big-picture thinkers. Many individuals do identify with strengths such as problem-solving, verbal communication, practical reasoning or seeing connections, but there is no single 'dyslexic gift' shared by everyone. It is more respectful to explore an individual's genuine strengths than to replace a negative stereotype with a positive one they may not recognise in themselves. Dyslexia describes a pattern of difficulty; it does not prescribe a personality.

Assessment

A formal dyslexia assessment looks at a pattern of strengths and difficulties rather than relying on one reading score. Depending on context, assessment may consider reading accuracy and fluency, spelling, phonological processing, memory and other cognitive or attainment measures. The purpose is not simply to obtain a label. A useful assessment should help explain how the person processes information and inform practical support in education, employment or daily life.

Support that can make a difference

Helpful strategies can include text-to-speech, speech-to-text, audiobooks, electronic dictionaries, predictive text, clear document formatting, extra processing time, written and verbal instructions together, mind maps, templates, proofreading support and breaking long reading tasks into manageable sections. The best strategy depends on the barrier. Technology should reduce effort and increase access rather than become another complicated task to manage.

What not to assume

Do not assume a person is careless because spelling varies, inattentive because they ask for information again, or less intelligent because reading is slow. Do not insist on reading aloud as proof of understanding. Avoid correcting every spelling error when the purpose of a task is to communicate ideas. Separate the skill being assessed from the literacy barrier wherever possible. Someone can understand a subject deeply while needing support to access or express that understanding in written form.

A simple support conversation

What is difficult? Identify the actual task: reading dense text, spelling, note-taking, remembering instructions or organising writing. **What happens?** Describe the functional barrier. **What already helps?** Include technology, additional time, audio, templates or another format. **What could change?** Choose one practical adjustment. **Review:** check whether it reduced effort or improved access. Support is more effective when it is built around the person rather than a generic dyslexia checklist.

Confidence and emotional impact

Repeated correction can affect confidence. A person may know that spelling is difficult but still experience embarrassment every time an error is noticed. Children can begin to believe they are less intelligent than classmates; adults may fear being exposed at work. Support should therefore protect dignity as well as improve literacy access. Correct what genuinely needs correcting, provide useful tools and make sure the person's ideas are not lost behind the mechanics of writing.

A message to take away

Dyslexia is a different pattern of processing written language, not a measure of intelligence or potential. Someone may need text read aloud, additional time, a spellchecker, speech-to-text or a different way to organise information. These supports do not diminish achievement. When unnecessary barriers are reduced, the person has more mental space to understand, contribute, create and show what they know.

Further support and reading

In the UK, specialist dyslexia organisations, appropriately qualified assessors, school or college learning-support teams and workplace services can provide further information. When choosing resources, look for evidence-based explanations that recognise individual variation and avoid claims that one visual treatment, font or coloured overlay will address dyslexia for everyone. Where visual discomfort is present, it deserves appropriate assessment in its own right rather than being assumed to explain dyslexia.

Space to Breathe Therapy