

Practical tools for Dyslexia

Welcome to Module 18 of your SEN toolkit!

In this module we look at specific tools and resources to use with learners with Dyslexia.

Aims

By the end of this module, I will be able to:

- select and prioritise a series of tools and activities to use with dyslexic learners
- use and sensitively adapt a series of tools and activities with dyslexic learners in my context
- understand that these tools and activities are keys to unlocking the potential of dyslexic learners



Test Yourself on your Knowledge of Dyslexia Tools and Resources

In this short section, we are going to explore the relationship we already have with “tools for dyslexia”.

When we say “tools and resources”, we don’t mean “intellectual resources” (i.e. what you know about dyslexic students), we mean the sort of thing you can buy, bring into a classroom, give to a dyslexic student, or lend to other teachers.

As a very clumsy analogy, if somebody asked you whether you have anything to help students with migraines, you could say “yes, I have these pain killers”, or “yes, I have a friend who specialises in acupuncture”, or “yes, I have books on migraines, breathing techniques, and mindfulness”, or “yes, I have a specially prepared room with blacked out windows, soft pillows, and noise reduction technology”. These would count as “tools and resources” for helping people suffering from migraines (even if they might not always help a lot).

Answer these questions without thinking about them too much. It’s not about finding how good or bad things are, but it is important to have an idea, before we go deeper into the topic, of what we already know about resources and tools for dyslexic students.

1. If somebody asked you what resources you have at hand to help your dyslexic students, would you:

- a) Know without having to think too much about it
- b) Have to think about it, but be able to come up with some
- c) Not know, but know where to find out
- d) Not know

2. If someone asked you for advice on teaching resources for dyslexic students, you would:

- a) Be able to talk confidently about resources you have used
- b) Be able to talk about resources you know about
- c) Be able to talk about where you can find out about resources
- d) Not be able to help immediately

3. If someone asked you which tools and resources your dyslexic students already use, would you:

- a) Be able to list them, and explain their benefits
- b) Be able to list them, but without fully understanding their benefits
- c) Be able to think of maybe one or two
- d) Not know

Reflexive questions

Based on the answers you have given, reflect for a moment on how your own teaching practices could be improved - if possible in this context - by learning more about resources for dyslexic students.

“My Story... or at least the bits that relate to dyslexia”

You are about to read a personal story, related by a dyslexic. You will learn about some of the struggles she went through, but also, you’ll learn that she became a qualified teacher.

Read through the story. Note down the parts of the story where you think she could have been helped, as a girl, by properly understood resources - even if, at the moment, you don’t know what kind of resources are available. Then note down the parts of the story where you think resources and tools were used.

You can find the full story online, here: <https://www.dyslexiclogic.com/my-story>

Extracts:

‘So by the time I went to Uni I had learnt to touch-type and had figured out how to use all the technology my ‘Access’ report had given me. I went to a ‘study skills support session’ that the university provided for dyslexic students. But **the woman spoke slowly and softly and told me that every essay needed a beginning, middle and an end. The level of guidance was extremely basic and simply didn't recognise that dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty.** I realised we were on different pages.

I survived Uni by taping every lecture, and then listening to it many times over while turning it into a mind-map. I used mnemonics to remember names for citations. I photocopied and highlighted all the articles we had to read. I never took notes. I typed my essays in exams.’

‘Life unfolded and I ended up teaching. It wasn’t what I intended, but I found I really enjoyed it. I particularly enjoyed teaching children with additional

needs. This is partly because I seriously empathise with sitting in the class and having no idea what is going on. **And partly because I find the puzzle of how to support these children a real challenge, understanding what is going on for them at a cognitive and psychological level. There is something magical about watching a child learn, seeing those ‘ahha’ moments, and it is even more magical when you know they are hard fought for.**

I soon specialised in SEN, working in SEN units, and then specialised in literacy development, and then in dyslexia specifically...

...The more I taught these children the clearer it became that a completely different approach was needed. No amount of ‘extra lessons’ was going to get them there if it was just the same stuff delivered again...slower. I studied literacy development, learning and memory and became particularly interested in how we encode what we learn and how we can improve the accessibility of what we teach.

I also began supporting and training other teachers and teaching assistants. I realised how difficult it is to understand what it is like to have additional learning needs if you have never experienced them yourself. **The approach to teaching children with dyslexia needs to be fundamentally different to suit how they learn best. It was also clear that a lot of children weren’t getting the support they needed and that identification was happening way too late.** Many children had struggled for years before getting support and had been really crushed by their failure. Dyslexic Logic, my fledgling company, was born out of a wish to change that.’

Reflexive questions

What tools and resources did you detect in the story?

What tools and resources do you think could have helped her that were not in the story?

What different sorts of things count as tools and resources? Are they all the same, or is there a broad range of things?

Would dyslexia-focused tools and resources have helped the teachers, as well as the girl?

If someone is good at - for example - maths, but she isn't good at mental arithmetic, is it cheating to allow them to use a calculator when other students are not allowed this tool?

What could be the benefits and the drawbacks of allowing this?

Best practice through tools and resources

Adopting best practice for dyslexic readers has the advantage of making all written communication easier on the eye for everyone. In this section, you will be presented with some tips, tools, and resources that can help your dyslexic students.

You are about to see some ideas that can help your dyslexic students. We have divided these ideas into three sections: “Fonts”, “Writing Style”, and “Mind Mapping”. Your job is to put the suggestions into the four categories we have given you (in the table).

Part 1

1. Fonts and writing:

Use “humanist” fonts, such as Leelawadee and Comic Sans. It’s not just a choice between “serif” and “sans serif” fonts, you need to choose fonts whose letters are not constructed out of strokes, curves and circles of the same size and extension (such as gothic-type fonts).

This short video on “mirroring” should help explain why some fonts are generally friendlier than others: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gflvidf3ZWY>

- Font size should be 12-14 points or equivalent.
- Increase inter-letter / character spacing - ideally around 35% of the average letter width. Inter-word spacing should be at least 3.5 times the inter-letter spacing.
- Increase the spacing between lines
- Avoid underlining and italics as this can make the text appear to run together and cause crowding. Use bold for emphasis.
- Decrease the width of the margins

- Make sure students can all use text-speech and speech-text apps (often these come free with most Apple, Microsoft, or Freeware packages)
- Slightly soften the contrast between words and page
- Reduce your reliance on written text / literacy input and output

2. Writing style:

- Use active rather than passive voice.
- Be concise; avoid using long, dense paragraphs.
- Use images to support text. Flow charts (Mind map) are ideal for explaining procedures.
- Pictograms and graphics can help to locate and support information in the text.
- Avoid abbreviations where possible.
- Make sure that grammar is unambiguous.
 - “Bright and contrasted texts are harder to read for those with visual tracking problems than those that aren’t so bright” is more ambiguous than
 - “Bright and contrasted texts are harder to read than those that aren’t so bright for those with visual processing problems”.
- Keep parentheses to a minimum (avoid too many brackets).

3. Mind mapping:

- When mind mapping, which of the following will be easiest, and which will make a positive impact?
- Keep mind maps as visual as possible
- Use colours and imagery
- Use clear keywords
- Use mind maps for planning
- Use mind maps for lists and organisation

- Use mind maps for lecture notes and capturing big ideas
- Use mind maps for revising and studying
- Keep mind maps simple - too many “junctions” can be confusing
- Use mind maps instead of essays
- Use mind maps to help with presentations
- Use mind maps to simplify, and find connections between, complex ideas

Easy to do but with little impact	Easy to do and with positive impact
Hard to do and with little impact	Hard to do but with positive impact

Answers: all of the answers may fit into “easy and positively impactful”

Part 2

We are about to give you some ideas for tools and resources to use with dyslexic students. It’s your job to explore these as deeply as you can, and write a short paragraph on each of them which explains the benefits of the resources *to other teachers*.

Find other teachers who might be interested in discussing these resources with you, and ask them to choose which they’d be comfortable using in their classes, or giving students for homework.

Then, compile a list of these resources, and see whether you can get them for your school, or share them with others who already have them. Create a “resources bank” so that other teachers can use them too!

[Letter Blend Bingo](#): This activity helps dyslexic students learn and remember letters and letter combination sounds by pairing [repetition with auditory and visual aids](#).

[Spelling Stations](#): This lesson plan helps students with their spelling skills by using various visual, auditory, writing, and verbal repetition stations . E.g: (Puzzle time: This station is made up of spelling worksheets (such as crossword puzzles and word searches) to facilitate word recognition.

[CoolMathGames.com](#) is an excellent, interactive website that allows students to engage with logic, maths, and geometry problems while having fun.

[Brilliant.org](#) is an excellent resource on the internet that brings maths to life by visualising mathematical concepts.

“Reading rulers” are excellent tools to help keep a student’s focus where it needs to be. They are used to help a student read without distractions from other parts of the page.

Speech-to-text software (and text-to-speech software) can take away the stresses of having to read or write, leaving the student to concentrate on what’s really important in a lesson. There are also many scanning pens available, and apps that can do a good job of scanning and reading text on a mobile phone (but bear in mind - headphones might help prevent speech software from distracting other students).

Programs such as Grammarly, which help students create grammatically correct and elegant work, can help the students get their ideas down without the distractions of broken or grammatically incorrect sentences.

[IDL Literacy](#) is widely used in secondary schools, and is particularly effective for aiding transition between the last year of primary and the first year of secondary school. If both schools have our software, we can simply transfer a pupil’s ‘learning account’ from one to the other, removing the need to assess for an IDL entry point in Year 7 - pupils will just pick up where they left off in Year 6, providing stability and familiarity for them.

Colorful words: Students write out assigned spelling words using different colors for each letter to create associations between colors and letters, facilitating the retention of correct letter sequencing.

Multisensory activities help dyslexic children absorb and process information in a retainable manner and involve using senses like touch and movement alongside sight and hearing.

Examples of multi sensory activities:

- Writing words and sentences with tactile materials, e.g. glitter glue, sand or LEGO.
- [Multisensory literacy skills](#) are an important aspect of a student’s learning that you can help develop. It’s a way of teaching that engages more than one sense at a time, and has been used successfully with dyslexic students since the pioneering days of [Orton and Gillingham](#).
- Scavenger hunts for letters and words – split students into teams and give them a word. Next, write letters onto notes and hide them around the classroom. The teams must find the letters to construct the assigned word and then glue them together on a poster by cutting out the letters.
- Practise handwriting sheets using cursive letters with dots. Encourage correct posture and letter formation.
- Make up sentences using a word. Write each word on a piece of paper and jumble them up. Make up the sentence again. Remove a word and get them to read the sentence and work out the missing word

Examples of educational Games and apps:

- [Nessy.com](#): Nessy offers a range of PC games that help learners understand the sounds that make up words – an area where dyslexics particularly struggle.
- [Dyslexiagames.com](#): The workbooks available here are full of puzzles, 3D drawings, and reading activities, tailored to dyslexic learners’ strength: visual thinking.
- Learning Ally is a fantastic resource for audiobooks. This is an app that houses hundreds of books for both children and teenagers. It’s perfect for those who struggle with reading in general and reading speeds. Children can use this app to follow along with their favorite stories at a pace that’s perfect for them. They

can also adjust the type of font and size of text to make it easier to read.

- Chicktionary: Try to spell as many words as you can from the letters on the chickens and solve the puzzle as fast as possible. Once you guess enough words, you will fill up the empty egg rack and advance to the next round. Guessing enough words, scoring points are a part of the play course. But, on a deeper tone, it emphasizes quicker recognition and the formation of words that enhance the verbal skills of the child.
- DISL3XIA: The blog is dedicated to working on teachers' attitudes towards pupils with dyslexia, including protocols for detecting dyslexia in children from four years of age and websites of interest. It is also possible to consult tools that include learning problems to solve, exercises, online tests, games for children and applied technology.
- Lixta: A Spanish app developed by Encódigo (Bilbao) in 2014 to make it easier to memorise vocabulary or correct frequent spelling mistakes.

Finally, “work to do” diagrams, where you map, in graphic, linear forms, what work students have to do, when they have to do it by, and how it fits in with other work, can be really useful for contextualising and guiding a student through work that might otherwise be confusing. If you turn your homework instructions into a visual format, they will be easier to follow - for all your students!

Part 3

Now reflect on your findings.

- What have you found out, can see you see yourself using any of these in your lessons / with students, etc?
- Would you / How would you use this tool ...?
- Which is your favourite tool and why?

Finally, decide on one of the resources you have looked at in this section, and use it in class. Then, in your log book / diary, write up some reflections on how it went, whether you think you could improve on it, etc.

Then ask any dyslexic students you know you have what they thought about it, and whether they would be interested in using it more.



Helpful Arrangements

You are about to be given a set of clear and simple guidelines for how to become a resource yourself for your dyslexic students. All you have to do is follow the instructions.

Read the instructions below and follow them. But at all points, keep a log of what happens, how you feel about what happens, and what you think could be developed in the future. You are about to act as a role model.

Then ask a colleague for help. Ask this colleague to observe you - from a distance if necessary, they don't need to be there with you in class - as you go through the steps we're going to outline.

This colleague will then feed back to you with observations, and listen to your own observations about how you felt, how you think your students felt, and how worthwhile the practice was.

Choose at least one student you believe is dyslexic. Choose a lesson you think may be challenging for this student (or these students).

- 1 Give this dyslexic student (or these dyslexic students) a sheet containing key information that you'll be covering throughout the lesson and blank out key words. The student can then take notes just like others without the stress of trying to copy everything before it's wiped off the board. This helps them focus and commit key information to memory.
- 2 Use the Fonts, Writing Style, and Mind Maps techniques you looked at earlier in this module. Make sure that you stick to these principles throughout your teaching. Also, try not to give some teaching materials to your dyslexic

students but different materials to your other students. Where possible, use the same materials, with the same fonts and writing styles, to all students.

- 3 Be a role model by reading aloud to your students and showing your love of reading and books.
- 4 Unless the student volunteers, never call on a dyslexic student to read aloud in front of classmates. Making them read aloud won't help lessen the impact of their learning disability and will only serve to shame and embarrass them. You can, if you wish, give private encouragement, but this must never feel like pressure, only "an open door".
- 5 Give them plenty of time to complete homework. If a piece of homework takes a day to complete, distribute it on a Friday so that the dyslexic child has the whole weekend to work on it.
- 6 Mark based on effort and ideas, not simply on whether they "get the answer right".
- 7 Be positive about mistakes. Mistakes are an opportunity, because they show you where students can improve. They are never to be used as reasons for negativity.
- 8 Highlight any major spelling errors, if you ever do, using a green pen – nothing screams "WRONG" more than a teacher's demotivating red pen! But if you do choose to mark the errors, what are you then going to do with this new information? How will you actively help your dyslexic student(s)? If you simply point out errors, this won't help, so you will need to turn this into a positive, by providing individual help, or setting a task for the student to come





up with a fun and clever way of remembering how the words should be spelt, etc. Please remember: highlighting errors can be a cruel thing to do to someone whose neurology may make these errors natural. You need to focus on why highlighting spelling errors can become a positive thing

- 9 Social - Emotional: Hearing something positive from their teachers always has a powerfully uplifting effect for students.
- 10 Using at least one of the tools and resources you have explored, measure how this has helped / these have helped your selected student(s) to engage with lessons more positively.
- 11 Call home to let their parents know about the great progress they've made in your classroom. Even if it's only one thing, make a point of telling their family. Positive reinforcement is key to engendering a love of - or at least a reduced fear of - learning.



Five Thoughts on Tools and Resources

These thoughts are intended as reflective, and designed to make you think. They are not a definitive list, and we encourage you to keep reflecting on them.

- 1 It's easy and effective to simply work sensitively with literacy input. You don't need to over-fill your teaching with text, and you can make whatever text you do use far friendlier by adjusting the font and the formatting.
- 2 It's easy and effective to use charts, graphs, pictograms / infographics and mind maps in teaching. The object of teaching is to increase a student's cognitive engagement with subjects, and their cognitive development in engaging with the subjects. Many dyslexic students prefer to do this through "thinking visually".
- 3 There are many tools and resources easily available on the internet. Most of these are free, and those that aren't can be bought for little cost by a school and shared around by all the teachers, so making the cost minimal.
- 4 Multisensory learning can come in all shapes and sizes, from drawing letters in sand to painting them; from using online apps and games to expressing literacy content in artwork, drama, and dance. If the goal is to engage the students and achieve cognitive development, then this will stand them in excellent stead.
- 5 Listen to your dyslexic students. They might not be experts in dyslexia, but they are experts in themselves. If they enjoy doing something, there's little harm in exploring that and integrating it into their learning.

Check your understanding

Take a short quiz to check you've understood the main points of the module.

1. Tools and resources are:

- a) The same as “ideas and inspirations”
- b) New and innovative techniques to use with dyslexic students
- c) The basic techniques for teaching any students
- d) Specific programs, apps, objects and methodologies that can help dyslexic students

2. Tools and resources are:

- a) Hard to find
- b) Easy to find and access
- c) Everywhere
- d) Anything you want them to be

3. Tools and resources:

- a) Will help dyslexic students do better than other students
- b) Are essentially cheating techniques that give an unfair advantage
- c) Can enable dyslexic students to have an engaging time with schoolwork
- d) Can stop students from being dyslexic

4. Tools and resources:

- a) Should be easy to use - for teachers and students
- b) Only have value when they are difficult to use
- c) Tend to be expensive
- d) Cannot work unless they are very easy to use

5. Dyslexic students:

- a) All benefit from the same tools and resources
- b) Never benefit from the same tools and resources
- c) Sometimes benefit from some tools and resources, but it is not likely
- d) Are individuals, and may find that some tools and resources are more appropriate for them than others

Can you think of any specific dyslexic students who would benefit from some tools and resources, where other dyslexic students wouldn't?

Answers

1.d, 2.b, 3.c, 4.a, 5.d

Reflect on the module

In this final section, think about what you've learned this module and how you can use this in your day-to-day working life.

1. What tools and resources would you now like to use in your classes?

2. Which specific students do you think will benefit most from these tools and resources?

3. Which tools and resources have you thought about during the course of this module that have been new to you?

4. Regardless of whether you are dyslexic yourself: which tools and resources do you wish you had had access to when you were a student at school, and how do you think they would have helped you?