

Understanding Dyslexia 1

Welcome to Module 9 of your SEN toolkit!

In this module we look specifically at Dyslexia, what it is, how to recognise it, how it affects people and what that might mean in your classroom.

Aims

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

- recognise the basic signs of dyslexia in a series of case studies
- adapt my practice to accommodate the basic needs of dyslexic learners
- understand that dyslexia is not a single disorder but a spectrum of differences



What do you know already?

Overlooking and under-serving individual needs is not always an active choice. But let's look at some of the **impacts of us not choosing to accommodate the basic needs of dyslexic learners**. Match the sentences halves together to create statistics.

Match these sentence parts (number to letter) to find out what you either know already, or can guess.

1. 52% of dyslexic children...

a) ...drop out of high school

2. Up to 2 million people in the UK...

b) ...400% times more likely to drop out of school without graduating

3. Children with poor reading skills by third grade are...

c) ...of the prison population have dyslexia

4. Between 45% and 60%...

d) ...do not know they are dyslexic

1. What significance can you take from these statistics?

2. What would not dealing with dyslexia have as real world consequences?

3. What challenges experienced by your students may be due to dyslexia that you haven't spotted?

4. In what way can adapting your practice to students' with dyslexia have a significant impact?

The difference a little understanding can make

In this section, you are going to read two real-world stories from two different people with dyslexia.

Read the two stories and think about the similarities and the differences between these two people's stories.

Story 1:

He used the bus every week to get to the job center, where he would vividly update his job centre representative on his progress and pretend not to hear the impatient tapping of her fingers on the table, mainly because of his lack of job-hunting success, but also because of his disorganisation in presenting the evidence of his jobsearch. He was long-term unemployed. But this week the journey to the job centre was different. This week the bus took a detour, a road closure ushering it off its usual course. Preferring the view from the top-deck, Ken had climbed to the upper floor of the double-decker bus and taken his seat. From the window he could see children playing in the playground of the local primary school. He watched them as the bus stopped at a traffic light. They looked happy, care-free, and innocent. A chill of sadness began to make its way down his spine. The feeling overcame him. He thought about his own school years and he wondered, 'how do some people make it through? These poor children, do they even know what humiliation and embarrassment they have ahead of them?'. As the bus drove off once again, Ken sat there, quite melancholy, reflecting on his journey to the job centre - not from his home that morning, but from his own childhood: that downhill journey from being a happy child starting out in Primary School, through the alienation and feelings of failure as he grew up, all the way to being unemployed.

Eight years later, still without a job he could hold down, Ken had been sent to attend yet another unpaid work training course. And it was on this particular programme, after so many years of not understanding why he hadn't been as successful at life as his friends, that Ken met a mentor who could see past his lack of qualifications, who took him for a test, and who helped him discover... he was dyslexic.

Story 2:

Chris is 25 years old. He is standing in front of his box of important documents – bank statements, wage slips, health insurance letters – some crumpled, creased, some opened, some untouched in their original envelopes. His phone rings – it's his mother. An old family friend, Flavia, is getting married. Why is the name familiar? Chris wonders. Then he remembers. Flavia was his tutor at primary school. She ran the extra-curricular lessons he did with the two other boys who always finished copying from the board last. 'She's a special educational needs expert', his mother says. 'Just a second, did I have special educational needs support at school?' His mother tells him, "of course you did, you have dyslexia, just like your father". The news was a total revelation to Chris. Like a part of his life he'd forgotten. He had finished school with top grades, graduated from university and studied a postgraduate qualification. Later that evening he remembered, "of course, that's where I put the bank statement", and he dived back into his box of important documents.

Reflexive questions

1. Imagine these stories form part of a fable. If you were to give a moral to this pair of stories, what would it be?

2. In which ways can accommodating to the needs of dyslexic students have real-world consequences?

3. How could a child go through life not knowing they were dyslexic and what factors would be in play for this to happen?

4. Would a dyslexic student in one of your mainstream classes relate more to the first story or the second? Why?

5. From reading the story, how do you think receiving the right support at the right time can actually make a significant difference?

6. In what way will understanding the spectrum of differences our dyslexic pupils have help in choosing the right pedagogical strategies?

Dyslexia Differences

Dyslexia is a difference in how the brain processes information. Sometimes, this processing difference brings great benefits, such as being able to see “the big picture” rather than focus on details; but it can also present challenges when the world is structured in ways that are unsuitable to the dyslexic mind.

In this section, you will look at just some of the differences there are between dyslexic students and non-dyslexic students.

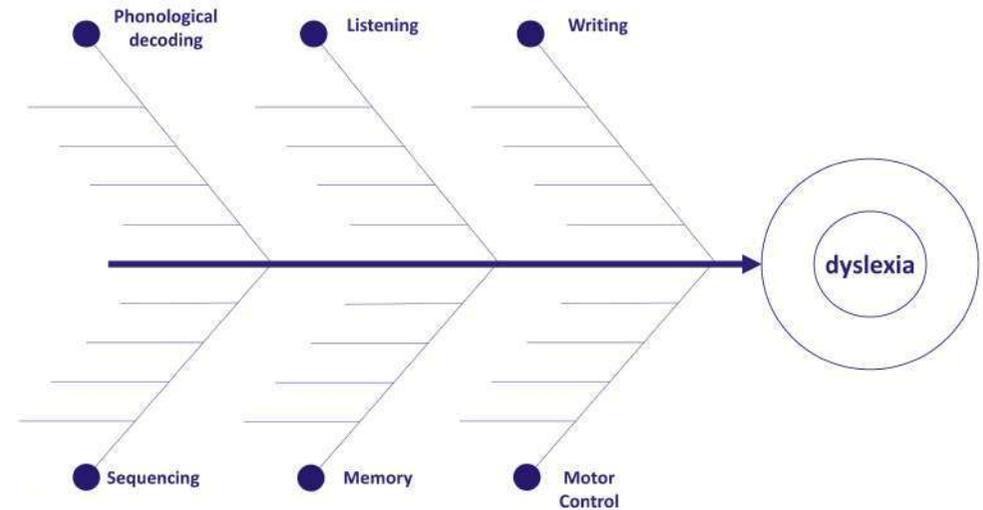
Part 1

Dyslexia is a difference in how the brain processes information. Sometimes, this processing difference brings great benefits, but it can also present challenges when the world is structured in ways that are unsuitable to the dyslexic mind.

Dyslexia Differences:

Needs to re-read text	Difficulties in note taking
Difficulty finding the right words	Organisational problems
Trouble putting tasks in order	Difficulties remembering what a word looks like
Forgets un-contextualised facts	Gets dates mixed up
Messy desk	Lateness
Difficulty copying	Difficulty recalling words
Difficulties discerning words	Confusion with similar sounds
Confusion with dates	Poor at drawing
Easily distracted	Difficulty expressing ideas
Difficulties ‘hearing’written words	Uncoordinated

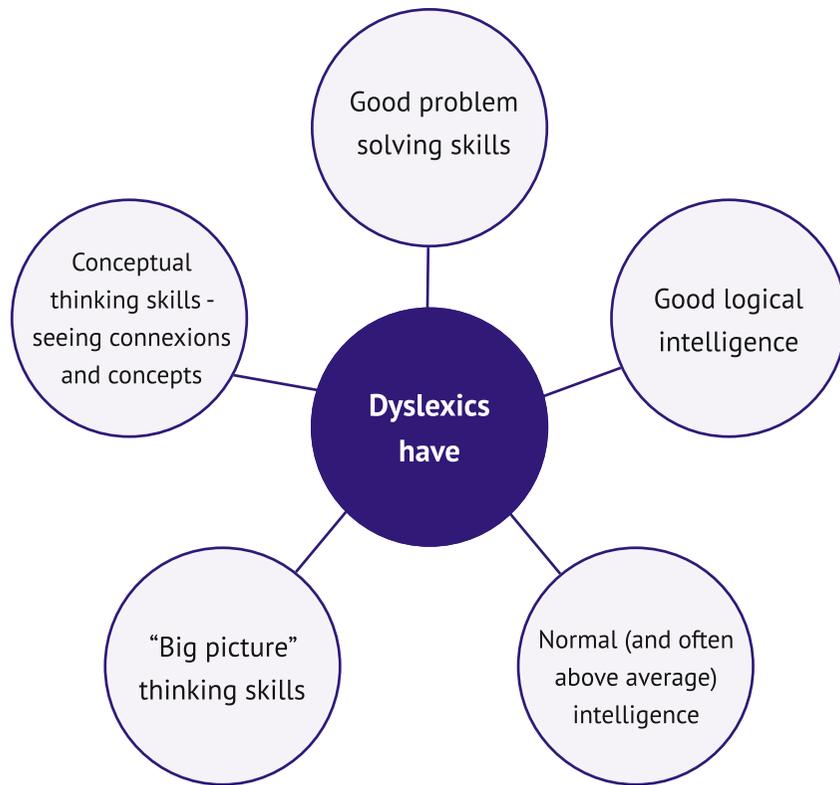
Fishbone Diagram:



Dyslexia has many advantages as well as disadvantages. There are many studies that show how dyslexic people are highly creative, holistic thinkers who are able to solve problems in unique and innovative ways.

Study the spider diagram. Pick one of the “branches”, and find three to five internet sites that back up what it says.

See for instance: <http://www.dyslexiabytes.org/dyslexia-and-creativity/>



Now ask yourself: How can I incorporate this skill into how I teach my dyslexic students?

Part 2

Now, research the internet to come up with more ideas for each heading. There are so many resources on the internet to choose from. Some sources may be better researched than others, though. To help you complete your diagram research, we would suggest using the following tips:

- Consult local education authorities or local councils / authorities
- Be careful not to associate Dyslexia with words moving on a page. This is Irlen syndrome - a common misconception
- Dyslexia foundations and other national associations provide trustworthy sources of info
- Some groups of people with an interest in the topic on Facebook, for example the Dyslexia Bytes group, could prove useful.
- The European Dyslexia Association or any websites they link to is an excellent resource

Part 3

It's important to realise that dyslexia is not a 'negative'. However, many of the challenges experienced by dyslexic pupils may appear 'negatives' when placed in the context of the classroom.

Once you have filled out the "differences / fishbone" infographic, try rephrasing words like 'difficulty' to reflect on what's really going on. How can you rephrase this word in a more inclusive manner?

Does the dyslexic child simply have 'problems' and 'difficulties', or are we presenting problems and difficulties to the child? Are the "difficulties" inherent in the dyslexic pupil, or are they something to do with the way we structure education?



Understanding “Phonological Decoding” / “Phonological Processing”

During your research, you may have come across the term ‘phonological decoding’. If you didn’t, there is a definition of it below:

Definition

Phonological decoding is the skill where a person can look at a set of letters, a word, or a set of words, and translate the written text into sounds in their head. In other words, they can see the word “look” and know that it sounds like the word “crook”, and not the word “lock”. And that is the basic reason it’s difficult for many dyslexic people to read, even “silently in their own heads”, but also out loud. The lack of an ability to phonologically decode can lead to a lack of comprehension, because without knowing what the word sounds like, it’s difficult to really *know* the word.

You are about to learn some of the basics - and more! - regarding phonological processing. Read the information and complete the tasks as best you can. If you want, do this with a colleague, and ask him or her to read the questions out loud, so you don’t have to read them.

Now it’s time to think about your classroom and start making some small changes that have a big impact. Pick a piece of material - such as an activity, a text, a project, etc - you use for one of your classes. Which of the six areas below do you think may cause difficulties for dyslexic pupils?

1. Phonological decoding
2. Listening
3. Writing
4. Sequencing
5. Memory
6. Motor control

Now, how could you adapt this activity to accommodate a dyslexic student?

Phonological decoding is not a challenge to all dyslexic pupils, but it is a common challenge to the majority of them. The purpose of the next activity is to give you an idea of what reading and writing can feel like for people with non-standard phonological decoding processes.

Phonological Decoding Game – Cracking the Code! –

On the following four pages you will see lists of geometric symbols. These geometric symbols each correspond to a sound.

1. Familiarise yourself with the shape-sound correspondences given to you on those pages
2. Complete Decoding Task 1 (“simple decoding from reading”) on page 2
 - Check your answers
 - Go to the next page
3. Complete Decoding Task 2 (“decoding from reading”) on page 4
 - Check your answers
 - Go on to Page 6 – the longer game. Read the instructions and complete the tasks

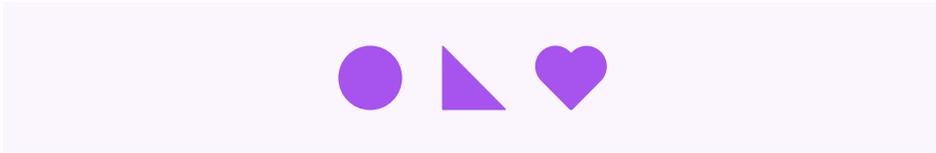




Decoding Task 1: Simple Decoding from Reading

What word does the following sequence of shapes spell?

- a) Man
- b) Fan
- c) Men
- d) Fin



Key:

-  æ – “cat”, “flap”, “bat”, etc
-  e – “went”, “bent”, “friend”, etc
-  l – “ship”, “pitch”, “synonym”, etc
-  f – “fun”, “feet”, “morphed”, etc
-  m – “man”, “mean”, “room”, etc
-  n – “man”, “mean”, “none”, etc

Decoding Task 2: Simple Decoding from Reading

What word does the following sequence of shapes spell?



Key:

-  e – “went”, “bent”, “friend”, etc
-  j – “yellow”, “yes”, “flying”, etc
-  u – “zoom”, “mushroom”, “pantaloon”, etc
-  i – “feed”, “weed”, “indeed”, etc
-  m – “man”, “mean”, “room”, etc
-  n – “man”, “mean”, “none”, etc
-  s – “sit”, “says”, “sister”, etc
-  z – “zoom”, “zygote”, “these”, etc



Answers

1.c (Men), 2. Menus

Task 3: Reflexion

Reflect upon the two tasks you have just completed. Ask yourself:

What do you think is the connection between the tasks you have just completed, and dyslexia?

Were they easy? Were they frustrating? Were they fun?

How did you feel approaching the tasks? Did you feel confident? Did you feel apprehensive? Did you feel like it would be difficult ?

How would you feel if literacy tasks were always like that for you?

Can you imagine how dyslexic children feel when having to “decode” words? Can you empathise?

What do you think you can do to alleviate some of the stresses of “decoding” words in lessons? What strategies could you use instead to avoid triggering these feelings in the future?

At this point, you're probably already thinking about ways you can start to change your teaching practice to be more comfortable to students with Dyslexia. The next section will focus on strategies to accommodate the variety of differences our dyslexic pupils have.



10 strategies to accommodate dyslexic students

You are about to see some strategies that can help dyslexic students. Read the checklist we've prepared below and pick the strategies that may be relevant for adapting your material. When you've finished, add your own strategies to the checklist.

- 1 Reduce the amount of text you give pupils
- 2 Offer help – or a pupil mentoring system to provide such help – in creating easy-to-follow timetables and schedules
- 3 Speak clearly. Enunciate your words at all times.
- 4 On the “font settings” in Word (or equivalent), increase the spacing between letters to 0.5
- 5 Make sure that any writing you use is presented in short, at-most paragraph-sized, segments
- 6 Provide simple structures to the lesson, and stick to those structures
- 7 Make sure all font is unfussy, and between 12 and 14 point in size
- 8 Use lots of colour-coding techniques
- 9 Allow children to present ideas using pictures, graphs and infographics
- 10 Provide simple step-by-step guides to completing tasks

Given this information, how can you adapt your practise in the classroom tomorrow to accommodate dyslexic students?

Check your understanding

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

Answer these seven questions, based on the work you have just done, to see how much you now know about dyslexia.

1. Students with dyslexia are often very good at...

- a) maths and science
- b) seeing the bigger picture
- c) reading comics

2. The challenges Dyslexic students face are due to...

- a) intellectual, motor and sensory disabilities
- b) differences in brain processing
- c) socio-economic, cultural and/or linguistic factors

3. Which of the following is normally not a sign of dyslexia?

- a) unintelligible speech
- b) messiness
- c) poor drawing skills

4. How can you make your classroom Dyslexic-friendly?

- a) put up clocks and clear written instructions around the room
- b) provide a separate quiet workspace for Dyslexic and SEN students
- c) ensure accommodations are in place for Dyslexic students

5. Why is it difficult for Dyslexic students to read, silently or out loud?

- a) lack of interest in reading
- b) their parents didn't read to them enough as small children
- c) difficulties in phonological decoding

6. I can tell if a student has Dyslexia by...

- a) their apparent inability to read out loud and understand written texts
- b) noticing an unusually high number of individual indicators
- c) observing their social interaction with the rest of the class

7. Which of the skills below represent positive aspects of dyslexic students?

- a) often at least average intelligence
- b) good logic and problem-solving skills
- c) conceptual thinking: seeing connections and concepts

Answers

1. The correct answer is b: Students with dyslexia are often very good at seeing the bigger picture. Building on strengths in creativity and big-picture thinking can be very beneficial for a SEN student's learning and wellbeing.

2. The correct answer is b: The challenges Dyslexic students face are due to differences in how the brain processes information. If you consider the many atypical variations in structures and functioning of the brain's two hemispheres in Dyslexic people, it is easier to comprehend their difficulties with phonological processing, syntactic-grammatical processing and short-term working memory.

3. The correct answer is a: Unintelligible speech is not a sign of Dyslexia whereas organizational difficulties that lead to messiness and incoordination which can lead to poor drawing skills are both Dyslexia difficulties.

Unintelligible speech is, in fact, a sign of severe Dyspraxia which may also be referred to as apraxia of speech. It is not uncommon for Dyslexia to co-present with Dyspraxia, a motor skills difficulty that impacts on movement coordination and sequencing.

4. The correct answer is c: You can make your classroom Dyslexic-friendly by ensuring accommodations are in place for the Dyslexic student.

Accommodations are "a set of enabling arrangements which are put into place to ensure that the Dyslexic student can demonstrate their strengths and abilities and show attainment". (Crombie 2002: 222). Even simple accommodations can make a huge difference.

5. The correct answer is c: Non-standard phonological decoding processes make it difficult for Dyslexic students to read, silently or out loud.

The lack of an ability to phonologically decode can lead to a lack of comprehension, because without knowing what the word sounds like, it's difficult to really *know* the word.

6. The correct answer is b: In order to tell if a student is Dyslexic, you must look for an unusually high number of individual indicators.

Individual signs may mean nothing, but taken together they could indicate Dyslexia. The trick is to say to yourself: I've spotted quite a number of the signs now... perhaps it's time to start thinking Dyslexia.

7. The correct answer is all of the above: these are but a few examples of the many "positives" associated with Dyslexia

There are many amazing positive aspects of dyslexic students that can be utilized and nurtured in an accommodating educational context in order to facilitate social inclusion and bring out potential.

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 is your biggest takeaway from this module about the challenges that dyslexic learners face in the classroom?

2. What do you commit to changing in your practice to accommodate the basic needs of dyslexic students?

3. What do you understand about how dyslexia impacts different people in different ways?