UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER

Dyslexia

Student Guide

Contents

1 Welcome to students with dyslexia

The University of Westminster recognises the extra determination, hard work and skills that students with dyslexia can bring to their studies.

The experience of dyslexia varies greatly from person to person:

- You may already have chosen to share with us how dyslexia affects your work
- Maybe, because of bad experiences in the past, you have chosen to cope independently without asking for help
- You may feel that your dyslexia is not an issue any more
- Perhaps you suspect that you might be dyslexic, and would like to explore this more…

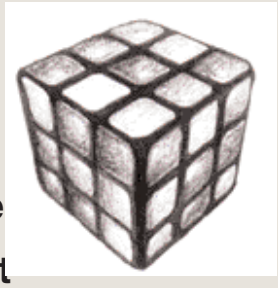
Without doubt, you will already have found many coping and survival strategies within yourself to get around your weaknesses and build on your strengths. Whatever your experience, you don't need to struggle by yourself, unless you choose to. There are various different sources of help available both within and outside the University.

This guide sets out to:

- Help you understand dyslexia more and explain it to others
- List and explain support on offer to you at the University
- Point you in the direction of other useful information

2 Explaining dyslexia to others

It can be hard to fully understand your own dyslexia; it can be even harder to explain it to others. Most people have heard something about dyslexia, but as you probably already know, there is a lot of confusion and ignorance around. It isn't easy to change attitudes, but clear information can help a lot.



Definitions

It is difficult to pin down a definition of dyslexia that suits everybody. This is because dyslexia is a complex condition, which varies from person to person. Dyslexia is most commonly described as a specific difficulty with written language. It is said to affect roughly 10% of the population – 4% severely. The difficulty is not caused primarily by lack of intelligence, poor schooling, or physical ailments (hearing, sight, mobility, illness etc.).

Often children with dyslexia are not identified when they start having unusual learning difficulties at school or home. These difficulties are often wrongly put down to any of the following:

- Slow learning
- Personal or family problems
- Clumsiness
- Bad behaviour
- Laziness
- Lack of concentration

Many students are only referred for diagnosis when they reach Further or Higher Education. Usually a member of staff has noticed that the individual's written or examination performance does not seem to reflect his/her potential.

Common difficulties

Dyslexia is often referred to as a 'syndrome' – a complex collection of difficulties – as it can affect several areas of learning or function. Difficulties may include:

- Expressing ideas in writing
- Spelling
- Punctuation and grammar
- Handwriting
- Reading numbers, words, and symbols
- Spoken language: acquiring new vocabulary, pronouncing certain words
- Forgetting what you want to say
- Memory of words, dates, names, facts
- Dealing with numbers or time
- Organisational skills
- Sequencing letters, words, numbers or ideas
- Confusing directions (left/right) and getting lost
- Unusual visual problems affecting reading

Some students experience tiredness, headaches and unstable print when reading. This can lead to slow reading, frustration, tiredness, errors and headaches. These problems get worse with small close print on white or shiny paper. Using a sheet of special coloured transparent plastic overlaid on print can bring great relief from discomfort, and in some cases greatly improve reading speed and comprehension.

If you have any of the visual problems described above, it is important to have a professional diagnosis with sight specialists (see 'Other useful information' section).

Other suggestions for making reading more comfortable are made on page 32.

Possible effect of dyslexia on studies

At some point, you may have difficulties with any of the following:

- Coping with a large amount of reading
- Finding and selecting information for research
- Making notes from books
- Putting together a piece of academic writing
- Group work
- Oral presentations
- Taking notes from lectures
- Learning new practical skills

- Learning new vocabulary
- Learning a new language
- Examination revision
- Working under examination conditions
- Time management
- Mathematical calculations

There are effective and creative solutions to all these difficulties. Some suggestions are made in Section 5: How can technology help?

Special skills of people with dyslexia

A single cause for dyslexia has never been found, but research is progressing all the time. One theory is that some people with dyslexia may use their brain differently from non-dyslexics. This may cause both weaknesses in certain areas of brain function (language, memory, motor skills), and special strengths in others (visual-spatial thought, intuitive problem solving, music etc).

Another related theory is that people with dyslexia have a preferred 'learning style', which appears to favour right-brain thinking. This can explain the pattern of strengths and weaknesses that many people with dyslexia can experience.

The diagram opposite of the two halves of the brain is often used as a somewhat over-simplified model of how the brain works. As you can see, each side of the brain is seen as specialised in different types of thinking processes. However, it must be stressed that both hemispheres are now considered to share tasks more than was previously believed.

Left hemisphere

Language
Logic
Analysis
Details
Numbers
Sequencing
Abstract thinking

Right hemisphere

Visual-spatial thinking
Intuitive understanding
Imagination / Emotion
Creative problem-solving
Holistic thinking
Music
Colour/pattern/design
Practical/concrete thinking

In brief, it appears that most people have a dominant left hemisphere. However, it is suggested that some dyslexic individuals have a dominant right hemisphere and can develop right-brain skills to a very high level. It is also suggested that some dyslexic individuals do not have a dominant hemisphere and therefore both hemispheres compete to tackle tasks, creating delays, confusions and overloads in thinking processes.

Broadly speaking, this distinction between left and right hemisphere functioning can be helpful. If you appear to have weaknesses in 'conventional' academic type skills, it is very useful to value and develop your own particular strengths to get round weaknesses.

A word of caution: each individual with dyslexia is uniquely affected by his/her dyslexia and rigid attempts at imposing a particular unproven model of dyslexia on all dyslexics will not be helpful.

The secret of success

Many successful people with dyslexia have developed the skills described above to a high level. They have been very successful in their lives, despite having difficulties with conventional education.

Research has found that the secret of success is often due to having personal qualities such as determination, a positive realistic outlook on life and hard work, as well as having a good support system.

Many people with dyslexia get on quietly with the ups and downs of their lives; others have become very famous. Albert Einstein – the great scientist – apparently did not learn to read until he was nine years old. Yet by the time he was twelve, he had become an outstanding mathematician. He later failed to get into college, and yet we often associate his name with genius.

Other well-known people with dyslexia include:

- Richard Branson – business tycoon
- Winston Churchill – politician
- Leonardo Da Vinci – artist/ inventor
- Duncan Goodhew – swimmer
- Eddie Izzard – comedian
- Sir Richard Rogers – architect
- Jackie Stewart – racing driver
- Cher – actress and singer
- Tom Cruise – actor
- Whoopi Goldberg – actress
- Susan Hampshire – actress
- Linda La Plante – writer
- Auguste Rodin – sculptor
- Suzie Quatro – musician

3 Screening and diagnosis of dyslexia

Do I need a formal diagnosis of dyslexia?

To help you decide whether you need a formal diagnosis of dyslexia, think about the questions below:

1. Do you have persistent difficulties with any of the following: reading, spelling, handwriting, grammar, putting your ideas into writing, mathematics?
2. Did you have difficulty learning to read and/or spell during your early school days?
3. Did you get any extra help for learning difficulties at school?
4. Has anybody ever mentioned to you that you might be dyslexic?
5. Do you have difficulty remembering the alphabet, names, telephone numbers, times tables?
6. Did you have difficulty learning to tell the time?
7. Do you mix up left and right or have problems with direction?
8. Do you or did you ever have any speech difficulties?
9. Do you find it difficult to concentrate and take in spoken information?
10. Do any other members of your family have similar difficulties?

11. Do you get letters, numbers, words back to front or jumbled up?

12. Does print ever appear to move or is it blurry?

If your answer is 'yes' to at least half of these questions, it could be helpful to have a initial screening test with one of the Disability Advisers. But remember: you could answer 'yes' to the above questions and still not be dyslexic. There are many other possible reasons for having a learning difficulty.

If you suspect you may have dyslexia what should you do?
Make an appointment with the relevant Disability Adviser. Disability Services offer a screening service, a mini version of the full diagnostic test, the Dyslexic Adult Screening Test – DAST. This can provide you with more information about where your strengths and weaknesses lie and also provides more evidence to help support claims for further testing. The results of the screening alone will **not** enable you to claim support within the University.

The Dyslexia Tutor can also screen students whose first language is not English.

Who should I go to for a formal diagnosis?

If you need to update an old diagnostic report, or want to further explore your learning difficulties, you will need to see a qualified Chartered Psychologist. Remember that you will need a formal and recent diagnosis to get special examination concessions and to apply for the DSA (Disabled Students' Allowance). A suitably qualified teacher of adults with dyslexia may also be able to assess your learning needs. **It is most important that the person doing the diagnosis is experienced in adult dyslexia.**

A diagnosis can cost anything between £150 to £300. If you cannot afford this fee, you may be able to claim financial help from the Hardship Fund. The Disability Advisers can give you further information about contact details and funding. You can also get a list of psychologists from the British Dyslexia Association.

What is involved in a formal diagnosis?

Each psychologist has his/her own particular way of working. So make sure you ask for details of how he/she works before you commit yourself. If you feel at all uncomfortable, try somebody else.

Some questions you may want to ask:

- What diagnostic methods will be used?
- How long will the diagnostic session take?
- How long is the waiting list?
- How long do I have to wait for a report to be written up?
- Will I get any feedback after the report has been sent?
- How much is the fee and when is it payable?

Most psychologists will give you some sort of IQ tasks (tasks to measure your 'intelligence'), as well as some reading and writing tasks. There is much debate about the validity or usefulness of IQ scores, so try not to get too hung up on your IQ scores. Similarly, many reading and spelling tests will result in giving you a reading or spelling age, which is appropriate for a child. The important point to hold on to is that test results are most useful when used to highlight any unusual pattern of weaknesses and strengths in your learning skills.

The psychologist will also ask you questions about your past and present experience of learning and any other events that might have affected your learning. The procedure usually lasts between two and five hours.

Diagnosis is supposed to be supportive, but you may find the procedure tiring and nerve racking. It may also bring back some negative feelings or memories of schools and tests. Tell the person doing the tests how you are feeling, as this might affect results.

You may not receive results or a report for some time. An experienced psychologist should however be able to give you some immediate feedback at the end of the session. Check exactly how long the report will take, as waiting can be quite unsettling. Don't be afraid to contact your psychologist, if you think you are waiting too long.

After receiving results, you may feel some very strong emotions – of relief, sadness, anger, disappointment, confusion or even denial. This is very natural, given that you have waited a long time for a possible explanation about difficulties you have experienced in the past. It is important to explore these feelings and read your report through with a counsellor, dyslexia expert, personal tutor or anybody else you can trust.

Many diagnostic reports are difficult to read and understand. Be sure to ask your psychologist any questions about anything you don't understand in the report. The report belongs to you and it is vital that you understand it, so as to make best use of it. The guide below is a list of specialist terms that should be helpful when trying to understand a psychologist's report.

Guide to psychological terms

Ability:	Your existing level of skill, usually as measured by an IQ test. Other words similar in meaning: 'achievement' 'competence' 'attainment'.
Aptitude:	What you are potentially capable of, even if you have not currently achieved it.
Assessment:	Evaluation of your existing skills and what you could achieve, using tests, observation and discussion.
Assessment of need:	Formal interview to assess your equipment and support needs in terms of your strengths and weaknesses.
Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD):	Range of behaviour disorders, including poor concentration, hyperactivity and learning difficulties.
Auditory short-term memory:	see 'Short-term memory'.
Cognitive functioning:	Your performance in mental processes such as thinking, understanding and remembering.
Cognitive style:	A general approach for problem solving or intellectual functioning consistently used by an individual. (See pages 36/37 for a discussion about typical dyslexic cognitive styles).

	Other words similar in meaning: 'learning style'.
Compensatory strategies:	Alternative, faster or harder methods used to get round your weaknesses.
Comprehension:	1. Ability to understand spoken or written information. 2. The name of an IQ test from the WAIS (see page 16) which aims to assess your ability to understand the cause and affect of actions.
Decoding:	Breaking written words down into familiar sounds or shapes in order to make sense of them.
Diagnosis:	A word borrowed from the medical world. Describes the process of explaining the nature and cause of somebody's learning difficulties.
Digit Span:	The name of an IQ test from the WAIS (see page 16) which aims to test your auditory short-term memory. This involves repeating increasingly long numbers forwards and backwards.

Digit Symbol Coding:	The name of an IQ test from the WAIS (see page 16) which aims to test your visual short-term memory and fine motor skills. This involves matching, remembering and copying symbols.
Disabled Students Allowance (DSA):	An allowance available to some students with disabilities in Higher Education. Intended to help you cope with any additional costs in your studies that arise directly out of your disability. Specific Dyslexia is a recognised disability, providing a formal, valid and recent diagnosis has been carried out. See page 24 for more details.
Dyscalculia:	Specific difficulty with maths and numbers.
Dysgraphia:	Specific difficulty with writing, including spelling, sentence structure and handwriting.
Dyslexia:	*Note: There is no agreed definition of dyslexia. Here is a simple one to use when trying to explain dyslexia quickly to others.* Specific difficulty with written language, which exists despite adequate intelligence, health and education. Other common difficulties include memory, coordination, sequencing and direction.

Dysphasia:	Specific difficulty with speech and language patterns.
Dyspraxia:	Specific difficulty with motor skills, including speech, hand movements and eye movements.
Educational Psychologist:	Psychologist with Postgraduate qualification, specialising in learning processes, allowed to administer the WAIS IQ Scales: (see below).
Hemispheres:	The brain is divided into two parts, called 'hemispheres'. There are two hemispheres: the left and the right. Each hemisphere is said to be specialised in different thought processes. See pages 6 and 7 for a fuller explanation.
Hereditary:	A characteristic that is passed from one generation of a family to another. Dyslexia often runs in families.
IQ test:	Test or group of tests (such as the WAIS) to measure how intelligent a person is in comparison to the rest of his/her age group. There is however no common agreement as to what intelligence is and how to measure it objectively. Other words similar in meaning: See 'psychometric tests' below.

Learning style:	A method for problem solving or intellectual functioning consistently used by an individual. (See pages 36/37 for a discussion about typical dyslexic learning styles). Other words similar in meaning: 'cognitive style'.
Meares-Irlen Syndrome:	A visual problem causing a physical discomfort with print. This can lead to slow reading, frustration, tiredness, errors and headaches. The reader may become tired after 5 to 10 minutes of reading. Lines may appear to jump, move or distort. Problems are intensified with close print on white or shiny paper. The use of special coloured glasses or a transparent plastic overlay over text can bring relief.
Neurological:	Other words similar in meaning: Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome; Colour Sensitivity; Irlen Syndrome. Relating to the functioning and structure of the brain and nervous system.

Percentile rank:	A system of grading you in comparison to a similar group of a hundred people. For example, if a hundred students of similar age to you took a spelling test and you scored in the 30th percentile, that would mean that on average 69% of students would score better than you, and 29% would score less well. 30% of students would score the same as you.
Perception:	Awareness and interpretation of sounds, sights, smells, tastes or feelings. Other words similar in meaning: 'auditory perception' – often used to describe our interpretation of speech sounds.
Performance IQ:	Your 'intelligence' as tested by manual and visual tasks that require no speaking or writing of words or sentences.
Phonological awareness:	Your understanding of how letters of the alphabet represent speech sounds.
Profile:	A short description – often of your learning strengths and weaknesses.
Psychometric test:	Measurement of psychological skills by tests.

Reading age:	The results of certain reading tests are expressed in ‘reading ages’. For example, if your reading age is found to be ‘12 years and 6 months’, this is supposed to mean that your reading skills are average for a child of that age. Many reading tests have a ‘ceiling’ age, for example 15 years. This means that, even if you read everything perfectly, you still would be compared to an average 15 year old. Not very helpful or flattering for an adult of say 34 years. A similar system exists for some spelling tests.
Scotopic sensitivity:	Literally means: ‘vision in dim light’. See ‘Mears Irlen Syndrome’ on page 17.
Sequencing skills:	The ability to arrange letters, words, numbers, ideas or tasks in a formal or logical structure. This is often seen as an area of weakness for people with dyslexia.
Short-term memory:	Other words similar in meaning: see ‘working memory’ on page 21.
Specific Learning Difficulty:	A difficulty with a particular aspect of learning, rather that all learning tasks. Dyslexia is seen as a ‘specific learning difficulty’.

Speed of information processing:	This refers to how long it takes you to make sense of and use visual or auditory information. This is often seen as an area of weakness for people with dyslexia.
Spelling age:	See 'reading age' above.
Standardised:	When a test score is 'standardised', that means that an average score has been worked out for people of a particular age.
Subtests:	Smaller tests that form part of a larger test.
Symbol:	Something which visually represents something else. For example, a letter of the alphabet or musical notation can represent a sound. Mathematical symbols are used to represent number values or relationships. It is said that some dyslexic people has difficulty with symbols.
Verbal IQ:	Your 'intelligence' as assessed by your knowledge and understanding of language, your general knowledge and your working memory. This is often contrasted with your 'Performance IQ' (see page 18). Tests may include such things as: vocabulary (your ability to define words) or abstract verbal reasoning (your ability to solve problems you hear using logic and common sense).

Visual-spatial reasoning:	Your ability to solve problems using concrete objects or visual forms. Tests may include carrying out physical tasks or remembering, analysing or organising visual information. This is sometimes considered an area of strength for people with dyslexia.
Word recognition:	Your ability to accurately recognise and understand a word that you read.
Working memory:	1. Memory that can hold a limited amount of information for a short period of time, very roughly about seven items for between two seconds and a minute. 2. Describes the store in which new information is placed after being processed. 3. A temporary store for retrieving information from long-term memory. Poor working memory, either auditory or visual, is commonly seen as a symptom or cause of dyslexia. Other words similar in meaning: 'short-term memory'.

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WRAT:	This is an abbreviation for the 'Wide Range Achievement Test.' This includes a standardised spelling and reading test. The reading tasks test for single word recognition.

4 Your rights and responsibilities

The law and dyslexia

Dyslexia is recognised as a disability under the Chronically Sick and Disabled Person's Act (1970). It is also recognised as a Special Educational Need as defined by the Education Act (1993). The SEN and Disability Right Bill (2001) brings education under the Disability Discrimination Act. It states that providers of education have a duty to provide 'reasonable adjustments' to make sure that disabled learners have equal access to the curriculum. You may not like the label of 'disabled', but it can protect your rights to equality of opportunity in education.

Entitlements at the University

The University has a Disability Statement, a comprehensive booklet on provision throughout the University entitled 'Provisions for Students with Disabilities and Specific Learning Difficulties': this is available on request. If you have formal evidence of dyslexia, you may be entitled to the following:

- The Disabled Students' Allowance (see page 24).
- Special examination arrangements
  - You can apply for these via your Campus Office. This should be done at least 6 weeks before each exam period. Most dyslexic students receive extra time. However, if your condition warrants different arrangements, it may be possible to secure these. (See pages 50–52 to read your Institution's Examination Policy for Students with Dyslexia).
- Advice and support from Disability Advisers and other staff, providing they have full understanding of your needs and difficulties.

- Library arrangements
  - Some students with dyslexia find libraries very daunting. If you need help finding resources, do not hesitate to ask for help.

  To get extended loans for books on short loan, you need to make an appointment with the Disability Adviser.

Limitations

It is your responsibility to help yourself as much as possible, and build yourself a wide support network both inside and outside the University.
The University does not claim to meet every need, but is continually working towards improving its service.

The Disabled Students Allowance

What is the DSA?

This allowance covers the cost of the specialist technology, extra study expenses, study skills tuition and human support that you may need, as a direct result of your disability.

You will be able to benefit from the DSA if:

- You can provide a full diagnostic report undertaken by a suitably qualified and experienced specialist in dyslexia, such as an Educational Psychologist. If your report needs updating, please contact the Disability Adviser for advice and information on funding to meet the additional costs.
- You are enrolled on an eligible undergraduate course or a recognised taught or research postgraduate course.
- You are studying for 60 credits or 50% of a full-time course in the academic year, and are personally eligible for maintenance support for that course.

You will not be able to benefit from the DSA if:

- You are an EU student, eligible only for support with your fees.
- You are a sandwich-course student on a full year paid placement.

You should apply directly to your LEA to claim the DSA.

5 Technology

What is the Special Equipment Allowance (SEA)?

The University has an allowance, which is used to provide specific pieces of equipment to aid study for students **not** eligible for the DSA. These items can be loaned to students for the duration of their course. It may also be possible for equipment to be bought as an interim measure for students waiting to receive the DSA award.

Apply for the SEA through the Disability Advisers.

How can technology help?

Technological aids can include anything from cheap, simple gadgets to sophisticated 'talking' computers. Technology can help you cope better with reading, writing, numerical and organisational tasks. It certainly won't solve all problems, but it can make life a lot easier.

To make full use of equipment

You will need sound advice on:

- Choosing the right equipment to suit your own particular needs.
- Acquiring new skills, such as touch typing, Mind Mapping or time management.
- Learning how to use new equipment.
- Coping with any problems or breakdowns that might occur.
- Finding useful self-instructional videos, manuals and computer programmes to teach you how to use your equipment or software.

Technological aids can include:

- Recording devices: cassette, digital or memo
- Pre-recorded books, CD ROMs and videos on your subject area
- Computers – desktops or laptops
- Computer software packages for: word processing; spell checking; grammar checking; voice recognition; read-back; typing; Mind Maps etc
- The Internet and email
- Printers
- Portable keyboards
- Scanners
- Electronic hand-held spellcheckers, dictionaries and thesaurus
- The uses of colour and coloured overlays
- Calculators
- Aids for using the telephone, time keeping and organising yourself

For more details and advice on technology see section on:
'Other useful information'