

Guidelines for the Assessment and Marking of Work by Dyslexic Students Guidelines for the Assessment and Marking of Work by Students with Specific Learning Difficulties: Dyslexia; Dyspraxia and AD(H)D

(1) Overview

Symptoms and prevalence of Specific Learning Difficulties

It is estimated that some two million people in the U.K. are severely dyslexic, with a further two million displaying mild to moderate symptoms, and while dyslexia is the most common form of disability or 'specific learning difficulty' affecting students in Higher Education, dyspraxia and attention deficit difficulties are relatively common. The term SpLD covers a range of impairments, but difficulties tend to relate to the processing of language, particularly written information, and it thus hinders one or more of the activities of reading, spelling and writing. Co-morbidity is common and the spectrum of difficulties is wide, for example people with true dyspraxia tend to read well and may not have difficulties with spelling, but will find organisation, time awareness and sequencing difficult; people with ADD may find it hard to follow through on an argument and will make numerous inconsistent errors. In general difficulties can entail:

- Misreading and misunderstanding of textual detail
- Slow reading further reduced by the need to re-read
- Problems with sequencing, e.g. of dates, letters and arguments
- Poor proof-reading skills due to weak visual processing
- Struggling to plan, organize and express thoughts clearly
- Weak or erratic spelling

It should be noted that 'reading, spelling and writing', for a dyslexic, can include the interpretation and use of all symbols – be they alphabetical, numerical or musical.

Accompanying weakness may be identified in:

- Short-term memory thus rendering note taking inefficient
- Auditory and/or visual perception
- Oral skills(dyspraxia in particular can disrupt the process of spoken language)
- General attention.

Specific Learning Difficulties are not related to intelligence and indeed many individuals are of above average intelligence. They are often referred to as lateral thinkers because of the level of creativity in their reasoning.

Legal requirements

Whilst some of the effects of Specific Learning Difficulties can be alleviated by the use of computer aids, as well as specialist tuition to improve students' reading and writing techniques and enhance their self-esteem, there is no 'cure' as such. SpLD qualifies as a disability as defined by the Equality Act 2010, that is, 'a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on an individual's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'.

Under the terms of the Act, Higher Education Institutions are required to make 'reasonable adjustments' in order to ensure that 'disabled students are not placed at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with students who are not disabled'. A 'reasonable adjustment', in this context, may be defined as an alteration to the delivery or assessment of a given academic programme, necessary to ensure that disabled students have the opportunity to develop and demonstrate their abilities.

The implementation of a reasonable adjustment, therefore, should enable disabled students to achieve their maximum potential within a framework of academic standards.

(2) Forms and conditions of assessment for students with dyslexia

Entitlement to adjustments

Students are only entitled to adjustments in assessment practice if they have a current educational psychologist's report and are registered as having a specific learning difficulty with the Educational Support Office. The psychologist's report will include precise recommendations regarding the conditions under which assessment should take place, and the Educational Support Office will notify departments of these recommendations. The Educational Support Office will also advise departments on the forms of assessment which might be most appropriate to individual students.

Adjustments in the conditions of assessment

Dyslexia alone is not generally considered sufficient justification for extensions to coursework deadlines. However, most students with dyslexia will require extra time in written examinations. Some will also require:

- the use of information technology with the facility to change background colour or font;
- access to larger print versions of the rubric and questions;
- the services of a reader or amanuensis.

The arrangements necessary to meet these requirements will be made by the Examinations and Timetabling Office in conjunction with the Educational Support Office. In the interests of confidentiality, all students requiring adjustments in the conditions of assessment will sit their examinations in a separate designated venue.

Adjustments in the forms of assessment

The primary purpose of all forms of assessment is to enable students to demonstrate that they have achieved the learning outcomes stipulated in the course specifications. Occasionally, however, a student with dyslexia may be significantly disadvantaged by traditional assessment methods, including timed essays written under examination conditions, even when adjustments have been made to those conditions. In such instances, it may be appropriate to change the assessment methods used. Possible changes to assessment methods for individual students would include:

- substituting or supplementing written examinations with a viva;
- accepting portfolios or projects in lieu of some or all of the timed essays ordinarily required;
- allowing students to make presentations via audio or video recordings rather than face to face.

Approval for changes of this nature should be sought in advance from the College Board of Examiners Executive Committee. Where the demonstration of competence in grammar, spelling and written expression under timed conditions is integral to the learning outcomes of a course or programme, this fact should be made explicit to all current students and all applicants to the programme. Any other constraints on the range of permissible assessment methods, whether prescribed in the relevant

subject benchmark statement, or by accrediting professional bodies, should also be publicized.

Adjustments in the presentation of assessment

Students with dyslexia frequently experience difficulty in interpreting written instructions and examination papers. The wording of rubrics and questions should therefore be checked thoroughly for ambiguities. To minimize the visual stress that affects some dyslexics, examination and assignment papers should be copied onto buff or ivory paper. When composing such papers, assessors should also:

- keep dense blocks of text to a minimum;
- use numbers or bullets to break up information where possible;
- employ 1.5 line-spacing;
- adopt sans serif fonts (ordinarily Century Gothic or Arial);
- align text at the left margin only;
- avoid italics, underlining and lengthy instructions in capital letters.

Adjustments in the treatment of assessed work

All written coursework and examination scripts identified as having been produced by a dyslexic students should be treated in accordance with the guidelines on marking practice for written work detailed below.

Consideration of examination results

A Sub-board of Examiners can, at the discretion of the chair, take medical and/or other evidence (including evidence provided by the Educational Support Office) into account when considering a student's results. However, this should only normally be done in cases where that student has not already benefited from special arrangements such as differential marking and adjustments in the methods or conditions of assessment.

(3) Marking practice for written work by students with dyslexia

Academic standards

The primary purpose of coursework and examinations is for students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding. There must be no difference in the requirements for dyslexic and non-dyslexic students to provide evidence of learning. However, as a direct result of their learning difficulty, written work submitted by students with dyslexia may differ in certain respects from that of their peers, and it is for these differences that assessors may need to make adjustments.

Identification of work by dyslexic students

All assessed coursework and examination scripts produced by dyslexic students should be flagged up by means of a sticker unless they have explicitly requested otherwise.

Should an assessor suspect that this sticker has inadvertently been left off, he or she should ask for the student's name and/or number to be checked against the list of individuals registered with the Educational Support Office. If a student does not appear on the list, the work should be marked in the usual way.

Marking with due consideration for the effects of dyslexia

Students with dyslexia typically experience difficulty producing written work as quickly as other students; they are likely to make more spelling errors even in word processed work; their punctuation and grammar may be weak and they sometimes

omit, repeat or insert small function words or word endings. While not without structure, written assignments submitted by dyslexic students may lack the 'polish' demonstrated by those of their peers. Assessors might reasonably, in normal circumstances, consider such work 'shoddy' or careless, and might deduct marks for poor presentation. However, in the case of dyslexic students, such errors should be understood and overlooked unless orthographic or grammatical accuracy is of vital importance in the subject being assessed (see subject differentiation below).

Coursework and examinations differentiation

All written coursework and examination scripts produced by dyslexic students should be marked with due consideration for the effects of dyslexia, as detailed above, particularly those that are unlikely to be masked by the use of word processing software and careful proof-reading by the author him- or her- self. However, assessors might fairly expect a higher standard of presentation in written work that has been produced in students' own time than they would do in written work produced under examination conditions.

Subject and professional differentiation

The issue of differential (sometimes called 'sympathetic') marking may pose more difficulties in some subject areas than others. Assessors in certain subjects, such as Modern Languages, may be explicitly evaluating competence in grammar, spelling and written expression. There may also be professional considerations in some areas where accrediting bodies external to the college have expectations as to standards and formats of written expression. However, it is not for the individual lecturer to make decisions on this. Each programme needs to have clear aims and objectives, taking into account the expectations outlined in the relevant subject benchmark statement, as well as any professional considerations that apply. These aims and objectives should clarify the importance of written language skills relative to other skills, and the weighting given to fluency and accuracy in written expression. In a few subjects such as English, form and content are so closely linked as to make it difficult to explicitly identify the proportion of the grade allocated to the form and that allocated to the content of the work assessed. However, for all subjects, both aims and objectives and the marking criteria used by assessors need to be made explicit to all applicants to the programme.

The role of marking criteria

Departmental marking guidelines normally stipulate the levels of knowledge and understanding that need to be demonstrated in order to attain each class mark or grade. It is rare for spelling to be included as a marking criterion; where it is not, neither dyslexic nor non-dyslexic students should be heavily penalised for spelling mistakes. The same would apply to minor errors in grammar and punctuation. In subjects such as Modern Languages or English, in which accuracy and fluency in written expression are of particular importance, the number of marks that can be lost for inaccurate spelling, grammar and punctuation should be stipulated, and dyslexic students notified that they may lose some or all of these marks in consequence of their subject choice. Usually, marks for spelling, grammar and punctuation should constitute only a small percentage of the overall grade.

Feedback to dyslexic students

If assessed coursework is to be returned to a student after marking, any comments provided by the assessor should be as positive and constructive as possible. Written feedback should ideally be word processed and annotations in the margin should be clearly linked to the portions of the assignment to which they refer. Red and/or green ink should be avoided, since both can be difficult for some students to read.

Corrections to spelling, punctuation and grammar are often appreciated but should be limited to major errors unless orthographical and grammatical accuracy are explicitly under evaluation.

Further guidance

If you have any queries regarding the design and implementation of assessment, the maintenance of academic standards for dyslexic students, or differential marking, please contact a member of staff in either the Educational Support Office or the Educational Development Centre at the following addresses:

Educational Support Office
Founder's West 151
01784 443966
educational-support@rhul.ac.uk

Educational Development Centre
Bedford Library Level 2
01784 414291
edc@rhul.ac.uk