

Study Skills for older students with Dyslexia

Reading

Many students with dyslexia can read reasonably well and have developed their own compensating strategies. However, sometimes reading continues to be a challenging and time-consuming task. The following recommendations may be of use

Read essential reading first and start with material that isn't too hard. It may not be necessary to read everything on the reading list. If you are at all unsure ask your tutors and lectures for advice on essential reading and what can be left out.

Allow additional time for reading. Be realistic about the time your reading takes and this will help you to plan around your reading.

Make use of any specialist glossaries included in your course materials or get a dictionary that is specific to your area of study.

Familiarity with the key vocabulary really helps when you are reading and thinking about your course.

Change the appearance of text on a computer can make it easier and more comfortable to read.

For example:

- the colour of the letters
- the colour of the background
- the font style
- the size of the letters
- line spacing

If you are reading printed material you can also change how it looks to make it easier to read.

- Try out coloured overlays or coloured 'poly pockets'.
- Try printing out materials on different coloured paper.
- Make hard copies of electronic materials so that you can add your own notes.

Listening to the text help with concentration and your understanding, it may also help with pronunciation of new and unfamiliar words and proof-reading your own work.

It is possible to download software that enables you to listen to all electronic materials including your own writing, course materials and electronically researched material. This software is known as 'text to speech' and there are many freely available (such as <http://www.naturalreaders.com/download.php> and the reader on 'my study bar' <http://eduapps.org/>).

Reading for understanding

One approach to enhance reading for meaning is SQ3R an approach to reading for understanding. SQ3R stands for survey, question, read, recall, review. The steps are outlined below:

1. Survey – look over your reading before you start are there headings, diagrams, tables that might be useful to you?
2. Question – try questioning what the material is about. Ask yourself: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?
3. Read (or listen) – try to read and listen in a relaxed but focused manner.
4. Recall – test your memory of what you've just read or listened to. Jot down what you can remember without looking at the text.
5. Review – go back to the text and read it again, this time taking brief notes. Imagine how you might explain what you've read to someone else.

Note taking

Note taking is a very important element of successful studying. Taking notes usually means doing several tasks at the same time – listening or reading, understanding, summarising, writing.

Remember, the purpose of note taking is to enable you to recall the key vocabulary and concepts– notes do not require a lot of writing, but they do demand skill.

Taking notes can help you in several ways:

- Concentrating – the process of thinking and writing can help you to focus your attention and so to learn more effectively.
- Remembering – writing something down can help you to remember it. You can also refer back to it to check your memory.
- Understanding – making rough notes or a diagram can help you to 'unpack' complex parts of your reading material.
- Keeping a record – of talks, tutorials, broadcasts, things you need to do.
- Summarising – the key points of procedures, course units and so on. Try choosing any passage from a text and writing down five points made in it. Then try linking them in continuous prose, for writing practice. This may be something that a tutor can help you with in an additional session.
- Reordering or organising materials in a way that suits your learning style and picks out the things you need to learn.
- Highlighting key points or ideas so that you can refer to them later.
- Planning – notes are a good way to start off your ideas for an essay or report.
- Developing your reading vocabulary – listing new terminology on paper or electronically (try your mobile phone) can help you develop your reading and writing skills.

Sometimes we take notes so that we'll have a written record of something we've read. But there are other kinds of notes too. You might write out a shopping list, or instructions for finding your way somewhere. You may throw notes away when

they've served their purpose. You might write notes that help you to make links in your head between ideas.

Making notes helps you to concentrate, and forces you to prioritise the important points.

You may prefer one approach over others or you may prefer to have a range of styles that you can apply to different activities.

Use different coloured paper for different topics.

Try different sizes of paper. A3 is a popular choice as it allows more space in which to create an overview.

Explore structures such as flow charts, block designs, family trees, spider plans or other forms of mind map.

Use different coloured pens to help identify and differentiate between topics and subtopics.

How technology can help

Try to explore the tools you already have before looking at others that might require more training and practice.

Computer programs such as Dragon and other voice recognition software may be useful for taking notes. But in addition to software there are electronic devices such as:

portable audio devices: digital recorders, mini-disk and tape-recorders and mobile phones.

Organising your notes

Once you have made notes (whether in writing, on your computer or as an audio file) you'll need to keep them organised so that you can find them easily when you need them.

Good notes should be brief and to the point.

Taking notes helps with active reading. Good notes can help in preparing for essay or reports or revising for an exam.

Try out different styles of note taking, such as linear notes, spider diagrams or audio notes to help you decide which method is best for you.

Try annotating your course materials with highlighter pens or colour-coded sticky notes.

The add-on 'My study bar' available from Eduapps (<http://eduapps.org/>) may also prove very useful to support many aspects of difficulties faced by students with dyslexia.

Essay or report writing

Essay or report writing can be both challenging It involves several different processes such as research, planning, reflection and organisation. But it is an opportunity to develop your thinking and demonstrate your learning.

Students with dyslexia often have very good knowledge and understanding of the course material but can have difficulty organising and structuring this into a piece of written work.

You may be able to express yourself well verbally but a lack of confidence in spelling or grammar may interfere with the flow of ideas when writing.

Try to gain an overview of the course requirements for essay or reports. You can do this by:

investigating how much writing is required in your course

checking the required type of essay or report (for example, report style or essay style essay or reports)

reviewing advice about the appropriate style of writing.

Use this information to give you some ideas for organising your own essay or report. For example, you could break essays or reports into their different parts (introduction, paragraph one about x, paragraph two about y etc.) to give you some ideas for planning.

If a question asks, for example, for three factors affecting

Remember to use any sources of help available to you during writing

Your tutor or study adviser, websites, word processing facilities, other students, friends and family, computer conferences, books and study guides, digital recorders.

Plan your time

Be sure to allocate sufficient time for each stage of the writing process – students with dyslexia may need to allow more than the recommended time. Knowing that you have organised your time can minimise some of the stress involved in working to a deadline #

Reading the question

Identify precisely what you are being asked to do
Gathering ideas Gather all relevant information (index cards, notes etc.)
Decide which illustrations and examples to use
Planning Produce an overview of all content required (e.g. as a spider plan, mind map, list, notes on PowerPoint)
Decide on the overall structure
Decide on the basic paragraph structure
Group ideas and topics together (e.g. using coloured highlighters)
Drafting Take each topic separately. Write a list of relevant points, using short and simple sentences
Reviewing Re-read the question and your draft, and if possible ask someone else to read it for you
Check for content and structure
Final edit Make a final draft, incorporating comments

Preparing for your next essay or report Using feedback

When your work has been marked, read the feedback carefully. Your tutor's feedback will contain advice and pointers for improving your future work and will help you to learn. Tutors are skilled at giving constructive advice. Make a note of things you would like to improve in your next essay or report. If you are unclear about what the comments mean ask your tutor to explain further.

Discussion with other students can also give you ideas about good construction and other aspects of composition. General advice and feedback on common mistakes are often given on computer conferences and websites. Seek help on areas of weakness when working on your next essay or report.

Spelling

Spelling can be one of the biggest worries. Your difficulty with spelling may be that you don't automatically recall how to spell a word, so you have to learn each word individually. You may forget a spelling from one sentence to the next, so that you always have to look it up.

It's not always essential to spell with complete accuracy, unless a wrong spelling changes your meaning. Ask your tutor what level of accuracy is acceptable, and discuss the most helpful way of having your mistakes pointed out.

Organisation and time management

Many students with SpLD find it difficult to keep track of the various kinds of material.

If you normally find it difficult to manage your time then you may find that this is particularly challenging when you start university. Juggling study time and other commitments such as work, friends and regular leisure activities can be demanding. You do need a lot of self discipline in order to be successful.

Good study habits make a big difference to your learning. Good organisation can help reduce the amount you have to remember. Students with dyslexia often find that it helps to be even more organised than other students, but you may first need to develop the strategies required

It is well worth spending some time thinking through the skills you use now, in different areas of your life. You may be surprised at how many strategies you do have already. Whether you are organising something to a deadline, such as a holiday, or dealing with everyday paperwork at work or at home, you already use some planning and organisational strategies. Try to list some of these strategies and consider which could be useful for your university study. Perhaps you already chunk your shopping list under sub-headings, which is a useful strategy for planning an assignment. Maybe you record dates and events on a calendar in your mobile phone, which you can continue to do for managing study deadlines

Organise your materials

File things in the correct place straight away. One way to make them more manageable is by colour coding. You could put a green label or small sticker on everything to do with course materials, for example, and a red one on everything to do with administration, or have different colours to split the course materials into different topics. If folders, books, notes, file cards, audio materials are all marked in this way, you can easily find the materials you need for the task in hand, everything you need to learn and remember – is much more manageable if you pick out the most important things and make them easy to find.

Set up your computer

Make sure your word processor is set up to suit your needs. Here are some options.

Place your screen where it is free of reflections, and adjust its brightness and contrast.

Adjust the colour of the text and the background.

Select the font style and size.

Use Zoom to make the 'page' on your screen whatever size you find easiest to work with.

Left-justify your text (as in this report). Many dyslexic people find that this helps to overcome visual distortion.

Use the keyboard or the mouse, whichever you prefer.

Set up Auto Correct to deal with errors you're particularly likely to make, and to complete words and phrases you type in frequently.

AutoText (in Microsoft Word) enables you to store text (such as your address or student details), and even images, for insertion into any document.

Add more control buttons on the toolbar, to save hunting through the menus.

Create a template if you're going to produce several documents of a similar kind.

Organise your computer files

Sorting out your electronic filing system before you start your studies can really help. Think through what folders you may need. It helps to use multiple folders to organise work, with sub folders for different areas, and you can add more later if you need them.

If you prefer verbal records to text, you may like to consider using speech recognition software and/or a digital voice recorder. These can be useful for assignment writing and note taking at tutorials. A word of warning, though – software takes some time to learn to use effectively and you may need a lot of training. It is not for everyone, but if you think this might be useful you can find up-to-date information on the web. Always keep an exact copy of your submitted essay.

Organise your time

Finding and organising time for study is a challenge for every student, but can be an even bigger one if you are dyslexic. You might be wise to allow twice the recommended time for each new study task, at least during your first course. Allowing extra time will relieve the pressure and give you scope for developing new strategies.

Having a clear idea of when you are most likely to find time to work does help.

Add extra detail to your calendar. Look at the deadline for your first assignment and plan backwards from this, working out a realistic time for completing each stage

You could discuss the deadlines with your tutor or study adviser at the beginning of your course so you can both identify effective strategies.

Organise a working space

You don't have to be super-tidy to study effectively. You could be surrounded by apparent chaos, so long as it doesn't interfere with what you want to achieve. Many people feel more comfortable with chaos than with clinical tidiness.

Choose and organise a working space to suit your preferences. Here are a few ideas to think about or to adapt.

Your study area ideally should be a place where:

- you can leave things and they won't be moved
- there's as little distraction as possible (choose, for example, a quiet room)
- the temperature is comfortable
- there's space for a worktop, filing, shelves and a notice board
- you can put up a large wall calendar, with colour-coded stickers for assignment dates, tutorials, exams and so on.

In reality you may have to manage with less than this, but once you have established your study place, make a habit of using it regularly.