

Specific Learning Difficulties

Listed below are some of the difficulties that can be experienced by students with, for example, dyslexia, dyspraxia, Autism Spectrum Disorder, attention disorders and mental health conditions. Each student will have a different cluster of these difficulties and a different learning style, however the problems will manifest across all courses.

Processing

- Memory problems, particularly short term.
- Problems organising written work.
- Poor concept of time.
- Short concentration span.
- Easily distracted.
- Problems with sequencing.
- Inaccuracy in calculations.
- Poor spatial awareness.
- Difficulty combining listening with writing.
- Problems organising study.
- Difficulty understanding social cues/messages.

Reading

- Difficulty skim-reading.
- Difficulty retaining and recalling text.
- Tendency to misread instructions.
- Tendency to confuse words: submit/summit.
- Difficulty learning similar sounding terminology: mean/median/mode.
- Difficulty in multiple choice exams due to recognise (not recall) text.
- Poor proof reading skills.
- Tendency to hear mistakes but not see them.
- Preference for visual information.

Writing

- Erratic and bizarre spelling due to guessing.
- Confusion of function words: on/off, so/as...
- Mistakes at individual letter level: b/d, p/q, s/c
- Tendency to confuse homonyms: fair/fear.
- Avoidance of words which are difficult to spell.
- Confusing numbers and letters: 6/9, 3/E
- Problems with grammar including agreements of subject and verb and starting a new paragraph.
- Discrepancy between written and verbal ability.
- Difficulty structuring answers.
- Slow and poorly constructed hand writing.
- Tendency to choose the difficult essay option.
- Inaccuracies when copying.
- Poor note taking skills.

Speaking

- Tendency to mispronounce words: dyslexic/dylectic, identify/indentify.
- Errors in grammar: was/were.
- Difficulty keeping to the topic.
- Tendency to talk about issues before focusing on the learning task.
- Variable speed of delivery.

Teaching inclusively

Every student has a different cluster of learning strengths and weaknesses. However, we can meet the diverse needs of all our students if we apply the principles of inclusive teaching and learning:

Inclusive environment

- Seat students with learning disabilities near the front of class.
- Identify barriers to learning in advance.
- Provide advanced access to material whenever possible.
- Talk with student about how to best meet needs.

Presentation style

- Stand in the sightline of student.
- Present key information in different ways.
- Regularly check for understanding.
- Balance speaking with activities (20 minute rule).
- Give time to read slides, make notes and ask questions.
- Avoid asking students to write on board or read aloud. Asking for volunteers is a better option.
- Provide opportunities for reflection.

Language

- Make instructions clear and explicit.
- Present instructions in verbal and written form.
- Reduce passive voice for key points.
- Use repetition for emphasis.
- Avoid phrases that imply stereotyped view of disabilities ie, You don't seem dyslexic.
- Avoid judgemental comments ie, I can't understand.

Structure

- Be clear at outset about expectations.
- Provide an outline at beginning of session.
- Use checkpoints/signposts.
- Recap teaching points at end of session.

Content and style

- Teach to different learning styles.
- Provide multisensory learning opportunities.
- Use a variety of media.
- Provide glossaries/lists of key terminology.
- Acknowledge difference through choice of activities.
- Avoid prolonged copying and reading activities.
- Avoid information overload.
- Emphasize threshold concepts.

Resources

- Limit information on slides.
- Use numbered points.
- Provide electronic access (in advance).
- Use clear font such as Helvetica and size (11 or 12).
- Balance images/visuals with written text.
- Left align material whenever possible.
- Check compatibility with reader/writer software.