

Strategies for students with dyslexia

(Some of these strategies can be found in more detail in Reid, G. and Kirk, J. (2001) *Dyslexia in Adults*. Wiley)

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Aids for study

There are several electronic aids and types of software to support the learning of adults with dyslexia. A computer with word-processing facilities is virtually indispensable for producing accurate written work. However, the following are also useful and less expensive aids for studying:

- Coloured writing pens
- Coloured highlighting pens
- 'Post-it' notes in different shapes and colours
- Paper in different colours
- A wall chart
- Cork board for checklists
- Bluetac for attaching aide-memoires to visible objects
- Index cards and box for notes

For most people an important aspect of study is planning: for adults with dyslexia good organisation is even more essential.

Reading strategies

Adults with dyslexia often have difficulty, not with understanding the content of texts, but with the pace at which they process the written word. It is essential that they acquire strategies to support them with the essential skill of reading.

Ann Arbor (1987) provides a course of tracking in three parts which strengthens eye co-ordination and, therefore, increases the speed of reading. In part 1 the student has to identify the letters of the alphabet in

sequence from a passage of random letters under timed conditions. A record is kept of the improvement in the rate of completion of each passage. There are 60 short passages. When a plateau is reached then the student graduates to part 2. Part 2 consists of a number of passages of non-words grouped in sentences. In each passage there is included commonly used words such as *then*, *but* or *and*. Again, under timed conditions the student identifies and highlights the prescribed word or words. Passages are worked through systematically until the time plateau is reached. The student then graduates to the final part 3, where they are asked to identify full sentences from nonsense passages. Improvement to the speed of reading occurs when the exercises are done regularly. Three or four every day of the week is better than twenty on a single day.

Planning

Try to know what you want to obtain from the text: in advance,

- note key words and issues,
- list any people or places needed, and
- make a rough outline of the text so that you know the geography of the book.
- It is advisable to look at different sections before reading the main body of the book.
- The contents and the index can provide a good overview of the content of the book.
- Reading the introductions and summaries of the chapters, if available, will also be found helpful.
- The headings in a chapter will help to build up a picture of the content
- It is important to prepare for reading a book particularly if specific information or ideas are needed. A variety of approaches should be tried until suitable strategies are identified.

Reading Strategies

You need to identify reading strategies such as :

- skimming; scanning; reading for detail; reading for revision; and learning and reading for entertainment.
- **Scanning** is adopted when it is necessary to find a specific item in a passage. Since the aim is to focus on trying to find key words only, the remainder of the text can be ignored. The rest of the text would be ignored.
- **Skimming** is useful when it is necessary to find out what a passage is about: it provides a rough idea before beginning to read in detail.
- **Reading for detail** is used when we have to read short complicated pieces of text, for example, to identify unfamiliar technical words or complex formulae.
- A method of **reading for study** is (SQ3R): Survey, Question, Read, Recall, Review. This method provides a structure for reading; and it is particularly valuable for adults with dyslexia since it helps such learners to establish specific routines in their reading.

Note-taking

Taking accurate notes from whatever source is not only a key study skill but also a life-skill. Notes can be made from two main sources of information:

- From written materials- textbooks, reports, articles
- From spoken sources- lectures, talks and seminars

For each source adults with dyslexia need to think about their strengths and weaknesses so that they can use appropriate coping strategies. Learning styles also play an important role in acquiring efficient note-taking skills. People with dyslexia need to know how they process information in whatever form.

The following are hints for taking notes from a listening source

- Prepare in advance
- Try to establish the structure of the talk or lecture.
- Fold one third of the page length-wise and leave it blank to enter key points later.
- Listen for clues, for example, repetition of points or emphasis
- Remember anecdotes as a way of memorising
- If lecture notes/overheads come from an electronic source print them off in triple spacing so that notes can be placed in the appropriate space
- Keep thinking about the topic

The following are hints for taking notes from the written word

- Avoid simply noting down the words of the author. One of the key tests of understanding is that we can translate what we read into our own words
- Do not begin taking notes too early: wait until the main points emerge
- Assess whether or not a point is note-worthy

Notes can either be made in diagrammatic or linear form. People with good spacial awareness should practise using 'spider' diagrams and mindmaps. Those with strong visual perception are advised to use linear note form.

Other strategies which are helpful in taking notes are as follows

- Use colour to separate topics or issues
- Use highlighter pens to emphasis key points
- Devise shorthand to make it easier to note certain commonly repeated words, but keep it simple
- keep the material well-spaced
- add examples, if possible
- use headings
- make lists

Benefiting from Lectures

How is it possible to derive maximum benefit from a lecture? The following advice may be helpful

- Find out where the lecture fits into the sequence
- Prepare for the lecture in advance: note the structure
- If a reading list is on a handout or course booklet have it open ready to mark texts that are mentioned
- Be proactive during the lecture- think, question
- Request that the handout is produced with double-spacing or wide margins so that notes can be merged with those of the lecturer
- Review material as soon after the lecture as possible
- Exchange notes with other students to find out if you have identified the same key points or missed any important facts
- Do not try to write down too much

Essay writing

Essay writing is problematic for many students with dyslexia. The main reason for the difficulty is that in writing an essay you have to demonstrate an expertise in a wide range of study skills: reading, note-taking, organisation, and information-gathering from all sources. In addition, you have to show that you can translate all the ideas into accurate, continuous prose.

As with other aspects of study, organisation is a key feature of successful essay writing. The task becomes much easier if it is split into manageable sections and a time limit imposed for each stage.

For example:

- | | |
|---------|---------------------------|
| Stage 1 | collection of information |
| Stage 2 | planning |
| Stage 3 | writing |
| Stage 4 | proof reading |

Stage 1 Collection of information

Libraries can be confusing places for adults with dyslexia. In order to find the materials they need they have to use a number of processing skills that they find difficult to use: sequencing, reading, and note-taking. As much time as possible should be allowed for this stage: being pressurised by time only makes the task more difficult. It is important to keep asking questions about the procedure: What exactly am I looking for? How much information do I need? Is this the most up-to-date account? Do I have evidence from both sides of the argument?

If a vital text cannot be located it is essential not to give up. Rather, the library staff might be asked for help. Adults with dyslexia desperately want to be independent but sometimes they need to be able to know when to ask for help, especially when library staff are eager to provide it.

Another source of information is from the Internet. Search engines allow Web users to find the information they require. Examples of popular search engines are:

Alta Vista www.altavista.digital.com

Infoseek www.infoseek.com

Yahoo! www.yahoo.com/search.html

By entering key words, relevant information can be sourced. However, there are no editors and publishers evaluating information that appears on the Internet. Therefore, the user must be alert and pay critical attention to the source of such information.

Stage 2 Planning

The first step to planning an essay is to understand the question. There are three issues to address before making an outline plan:

1. Where in the course does this topic come?
2. What are the issues?
3. What precisely am I being asked to do?

The third of these questions involves understanding the processing words usually used or implied in essay questions: for example, 'describe', 'evaluate' or 'contrast'. Definitions of such words can be found in most

books on study skills. A particularly clear table of common instruction words can be found on page 57 of *The Student Skills Guide*, Drew and Bingham Gower:1997.

A plan should be made, in diagrammatic form, to break down the task into smaller, manageable chunks. A 4000 word essay can seem an difficult task but when it is broken down into sections of 500 words it can appear much more manageable.

Stage 4 Proof-reading

Proof reading is problematic for dyslexic people. They cannot identify errors in their writing. It helps to read the essay aloud. Sometimes it is possible to hear where a sentence ends or where a subject does not agree with the verb. Microsoft Word can assist with proof reading. The spell and grammar check can identify errors but only writers know the exact meaning they wish to express. Other technological aids can help in proof-reading:Texthelp, scanner with text-reading software and Write:Outloud.

Checklist for the essay writing

Some suggested questions for inclusion are:

- Have I kept to the essay question?
- Does the introduction signal what I have done in the essay?
- Have I demonstrated that I have read and understood the prescribed texts?
- Have I been analytical, critical and questioning?
- Does the essay flow logically?
- Have I linked the paragraphs?
- Does the conclusion show how I have developed the points?
- Have I kept to the recommended number of words?
- Have I included a reference section and bibliography?
- Have I adhered to the instructions for the production of the essay?
- Have I included the title?
- Have I given my own name or some other means of identifying the writer?

Presentations

Adults with dyslexia usually have good oral skills and communicate with people extremely well. Oral presentations, therefore, provide an opportunity for them to demonstrate their abilities to the full. However, there are three areas that must be considered:

- Preparation
- Anxiety
- Visual aids

The most important thing to consider when preparing a presentation is to think about the audience. Who will they be? How much of the topic will they know already? Will they all have the same level of knowledge?

The structure of the talk could follow the plan for essay writing as described in the last section. It will cover the following:

- introduction where an overview is given;
- the main body where issues are raised and discussed;
- the conclusion or summing up where key issues are reinforced.

Since nervousness in a presenter is very uncomfortable for the audience, self-confidence is an important factor in successful presentations. To feel confident the presenter must be so well prepared that interesting and appropriate material is offered. During the talk it is important to establish eye contact with members of the audience. Positive feedback increases confidence and relaxes the speaker. It is useful to anticipate potential problems such as awkward questions or how to respond if the thread of the talk is completely lost. It is important to ensure that any visual aids are entirely visible and that they are not obscured by the presenter.

Most presentations are accompanied by overhead projector slides. When preparing slides the following suggestions might prove useful:

- Make sure they can be read by the whole audience: use 28 point or above
- Include only key words or phrases
- Avoid too much technical detail
- Select colour appropriately
- Pie charts and graphs are easier to read than tables

Examinations

Students with dyslexia need to acquire strategies to cope with processing difficulties associated with their specific learning difficulties: memory problems; working under strict time constraints; spelling and syntax inaccuracies; and, finally, what might be termed 'structure' challenges.

Revision

Memory problems can be overcome by systematic, planned revision. The object of this revision is not to memorise the complete course but rather to enhance understanding of the issues and be able to develop important points in the examinations.

As with the other study strategies, the key to success for the adult with dyslexia is organisation. A study plan should be made in detail, including day-to-day living tasks (see section on organisation), and displayed on the wall. A duplicate could be made for family/flatmates so that interruptions will be minimised. Provision should be made for spare time in the plan in case extra work is required on one topic.

For each topic a programme of multi-sensory revision should be undertaken. It is possible to identify a number of helpful steps

- Step 1 Compile notes for the topic. Check that lecture notes are complete. Are comments on prescribed reading included?
- Step 2 Dictate key points and issues on to tape, using a voice-activated tape-recorder.
- Step 3 Listen to information gathered on the tape
- Step 4 Listen a second time but on this occasion enter the information on a prepared mind-map or diagram
- Step 5 Write linear notes from the diagram
- Step 6 Put key words for each section on index cards
- Step 7 Place title of topic and 3 or 4 headings on a post card

Revision, it must be remembered, is an active process, not simply a reading exercise.