



# Nordplus

## E-GUIDANCE

**Project:** Nordic-Baltic organizations unite to improve adult learners  
with dyslexia

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## I. Introduction to specific learning disabilities

### **Understanding Learning Disabilities: Manifestation and Identification in Adults**

Learning disabilities (LDs) are neurological differences that affect an individual's ability to acquire, process, store, and use specific types of information effectively. These conditions do not correlate with intelligence, but rather they reflect differences in particular cognitive processes. While learning disabilities are often identified during childhood, many adults live with undiagnosed learning disabilities that continue to impact their daily lives. Understanding how learning disabilities manifest in adults and identifying these challenges is crucial to understanding what support and interventions would help the most.

### **What Are Learning Disabilities?**

Learning disabilities are a group of disorders that make it difficult for an individual to learn basic skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics. Common types of learning disabilities include dyslexia (difficulty with reading), dysgraphia (difficulty with writing), dyscalculia (difficulty with math), and auditory and visual processing disorders. It's important to note that learning disabilities are distinct from intellectual disabilities; individuals with learning disabilities generally have average or above-average intelligence.

Learning disabilities are lifelong conditions. They are not curable, but with proper support and strategies, individuals can learn to manage their challenges and achieve success in various aspects of life. In adults, the manifestations can be subtle, often making identification more challenging.

Understanding the types of learning disabilities provides a foundation for recognizing how they manifest in adulthood

### **How Learning Disabilities Manifest in Adults**

The manifestation of learning disabilities in adults can vary widely depending on the type and severity of the disability, as well as the coping mechanisms the individual has developed over time. Some common ways that learning disabilities manifest in adults include:

#### **1. Difficulties in Reading and Comprehension:**

Adults with dyslexia or other reading disabilities may struggle with reading fluency, decoding words, and comprehending written text. They might avoid reading for leisure, take longer to read materials, or frequently misinterpret written information. They may also struggle with tasks that require reading comprehension, such as understanding manuals, filling out forms, or following written instructions.

## **2. Challenges with Writing:**

Dysgraphia can manifest as poor handwriting, difficulty organizing thoughts on paper, and struggles with spelling and grammar. Adults with dysgraphia may find it challenging to write reports, take notes, or draft emails. They might rely heavily on verbal communication or avoid written tasks altogether.

## **3. Mathematical Challenges:**

Adults with dyscalculia may have trouble with basic arithmetic, managing finances, or understanding time-related concepts. They might struggle with tasks that involve measurements, scheduling, budgeting, or any activity that requires mathematical reasoning.

## **4. Social and Emotional Challenges:**

The frustration and stress associated with learning disabilities can lead to low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. Adults with learning disabilities may have experienced years of academic or professional failure, which can result in a lack of confidence and reluctance to pursue new opportunities. They might avoid social situations where their disabilities could be exposed, leading to feelings of isolation.

## **5. Workplace Difficulties:**

In the workplace, adults with learning disabilities might struggle with tasks that involve reading, writing, mathematical reasoning, or following complex instructions. They may also have difficulty adapting to new tasks or environments, leading to underperformance or frequent job changes. Without appropriate accommodations, these challenges can hinder career advancement and job satisfaction.

Recognizing these manifestations is the first step in accurately identifying learning disabilities in adults.

## II. How to recognize specific learning disabilities

Identifying learning disabilities in adults can be challenging because the signs are often less obvious than in children. In many countries, there are few or no diagnostic tools available to confirm this diagnosis. Many adults have developed coping mechanisms that mask their difficulties, or they may attribute their challenges to other factors such as lack of motivation or external circumstances. However, recognizing the presence of a learning disability is the first step toward getting the appropriate support.

### 1. Self-Assessment and Reflection:

Adults who suspect they may have a learning disability can start by thinking about their experiences in education, work, and daily life. They might remember academic struggles where, despite putting in significant effort, difficulties with tasks that involve reading, writing, or math. Online self-assessment tools can also provide insights, but they are not a substitute for professional evaluation where it is available.

### 2. Professional Evaluation:

Where it is available, a comprehensive evaluation by a psychologist or a learning disability specialist is essential for an accurate diagnosis. The evaluation typically includes a series of tests that assess various cognitive abilities, including memory, processing speed, reading, writing, and mathematical reasoning. The process may also involve interviews, questionnaires, and a review of the individual's academic and work history. The goal is to identify specific areas of difficulty and determine whether they align with a learning disability.

### 3. Medical and Psychological Considerations:

It's important to consider that some symptoms associated with learning disabilities can overlap with other conditions, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety disorders, or depression. A thorough evaluation should consider these factors to rule out or address co-occurring conditions. Additionally, hearing or vision problems should be ruled out as potential causes of learning challenges.

### 4. Workplace Assessments:

For adults struggling at work, a workplace assessment can be useful when it is available. This assessment, often conducted by an occupational psychologist, focuses on how

learning disabilities impact job performance. The results can lead to recommendations for accommodations, such as assistive technology, modified tasks, or changes in work processes that can help the individual succeed in their role.

Learning disabilities are lifelong conditions that can have a profound impact on an individual's personal, educational, and professional life. For adults, these challenges can manifest in various ways, especially difficulties with reading and writing. Despite the hurdles, many adults with learning disabilities develop effective coping mechanisms that allow them to navigate life successfully, even if these strategies are not always optimal or efficient.

Identifying learning disabilities in adults is crucial for providing the right support and interventions. Through self-assessment, professional evaluation, and workplace assessments, individuals can gain a clearer understanding of their challenges and strengths. With the appropriate accommodations and strategies, adults with learning disabilities can improve their quality of life, enhance their performance in various areas, and achieve their personal and professional goals.

The key to thriving with a learning disability is recognition, understanding, and the willingness to seek out and accept support. With these elements in place, adults with learning disabilities can turn their challenges into opportunities for growth and success.

### **III. How information can be presented visually to make it more relevant for adults with specific learning disabilities (dyslexia)**

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that primarily affects reading and writing. For adults with dyslexia, traditional text-heavy presentations can be overwhelming and challenging to process. Therefore, to create an inclusive learning environment, it is essential to present information in a way that is accessible and effective for these learners. This will be elaborated in the following sections.

#### **1. Use of simple and clear layouts:**

A minimalist design with ample white space helps reduce distractions and makes it easier for dyslexic learners to focus on the content.

Consistent formatting across slides, such as uniform font sizes and styles, helps maintain a predictable structure that aids comprehension. (Clark & Mayer, 2016)

#### **2. Text presentation:**

Dyslexia-friendly fonts, such as Arial or Verdana, should be used to enhance readability. Avoid serif fonts that can be difficult to read.

High-contrast color combinations (e.g., black text on a white background) improve readability.

Text should be large enough to read comfortably, with at least 1.5 line spacing to prevent crowding of words.

Use bullet points instead of paragraphs to break down information into manageable chunks, facilitating easier processing. (Rello & Baeza-Yates, 2013)

#### **3. Incorporating images and graphics:**

Use images that are directly relevant to the content to help illustrate key points. Simple graphics, such as flowcharts or icons, are effective tools for visually summarizing information. (Mayer, 2009).

#### **4. Use of videos and animations:**

Short, focused videos and animations can be highly effective, provided they are directly related to the content of the lesson. This can enhance understanding and memory retention (Clark & Mayer, 2016).

In conclusion, presenting information to adults with dyslexia requires thoughtful consideration of design and content delivery to enhance accessibility and comprehension. A clear and simple layout with ample white space helps reduce distractions, while consistent formatting provides a predictable structure for easier navigation. Dyslexia-friendly fonts, high-contrast color combinations, and well-spaced text contribute to improved readability. Breaking down information into bullet points instead of large paragraphs supports processing. Additionally, incorporating relevant images, graphics, and videos can enhance understanding and retention, making the content more engaging and easier to digest.

## IV. How a lesson/lesson/lecture plan should be planned to make it more appropriate for adults with specific learning disabilities (dyslexia)

### 1. Language and Instructions:

**Clear and concise language:** Use simple, clear language when delivering instructions and content. Avoid using overly complex words or jargon that could confuse learners. Using key words to be learned is also very relevant (Snowling & Stackhouse, 2013).

**Step-by-step instructions:** Provide instructions in a step-by-step manner, both verbally and in written form. Allow time for learners to ask questions and clarify any doubts before moving on (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

### 2. Use of visual supports

**Visual aids and tools:** Integrate visual aids like slides, charts, and diagrams to complement verbal explanations. These tools can help learners better understand and retain information (Mayer, 2009).

**Mind maps and summaries:** Use mind maps or summary charts at the end of each lesson to help learners review and organize the key points covered (Reid, 2009).

### 3. Flexible pacing

**Adjustable pace:** Be prepared to adjust the pace of the lesson based on the needs of the learners. Some may need more time to process information or complete tasks (Gregg, 2009).

**Frequent breaks:** Include regular breaks to help learners stay focused and avoid cognitive fatigue. Breaks also provide time for informal discussion and clarification of any misunderstandings (Shaywitz, 2003).

### 4. Assessment and feedback

**Regular check-ins:** Use formative assessments (e.g., quizzes, quick polls, or Q&A sessions) throughout the lesson to gauge understanding and adjust the teaching approach as needed (Reid, 2016).

**Varied assessment methods:** Offer different ways for learners to demonstrate their understanding, such as through oral presentations, oral or video recordings, written summaries, or creative projects (Sparks & Lovett, 2009).

## 5. Constructive feedback

**Timely and specific feedback:** Provide feedback promptly, focusing on specific areas for improvement and recognizing achievements. Offer suggestions for how learners can improve their work (Mercer & Pullen, 2009).

**Encouragement and support:** Emphasize a positive, supportive approach that encourages learners to ask for help when needed and to view mistakes as opportunities for learning (ShaywitzSchaywitz, 2003).

## 6. Building confidence

**Encourage self-advocacy:** Empower learners to communicate their needs and preferences, whether that's asking for extra time or requesting materials in a different format (Gregg, 2009).

**Positive reinforcement:** Use positive reinforcement to build learners' confidence and motivation. Highlight their strengths and progress throughout the course (Goldberg et al., 2003).

## 7. Access to resources

**Additional support materials:** Provide access to additional resources, such as reading materials, tutorials, or one-on-one support sessions, to help learners reinforce their understanding outside of class (Clark & Mayer, 2016).

**Technology Aids:** Recommend or provide access to technology tools designed to assist individuals with dyslexia, such as text-to-speech software, audiobooks, or specialized apps (Reid, 2016).

In summary, effective lesson content and delivery for adults with dyslexia should prioritize clear, concise language, step-by-step instructions, and visual supports like slides, diagrams, and mind maps to enhance understanding. Flexible pacing and regular breaks accommodate varying processing speeds, helping learners stay focused. Assessment methods

should be diverse, including both formative assessments and varied ways for learners to demonstrate understanding, with timely, constructive feedback to guide improvement. Creating a supportive learning environment involves building confidence through positive reinforcement, encouraging self-advocacy, and providing access to additional resources and technology aids. This holistic approach fosters an inclusive and empowering learning experience.

## **V. Adapting assignments/homework/exams and additional aids for adults with specific learning disabilities (dyslexia)**

### **Suggested accommodations in teaching dyslexic adult student**

#### **1. Wider areas in which adult learners with dyslexia need help**

There are 4 wider areas on the educational pathway in which adult learners with dyslexia may need help: a) continuing studies and further education b) higher education or vocational education, c) adult studies and d) learning skills and psycho-emotional areas.

##### **1.1. Continuing studies and further education**

Learners with dyslexia may need help from the very beginning steps in the process of continuing the interrupted learning path. Learners with dyslexia may struggle in the planning evaluation and entering process. Their slow and laborious reading and lack of functional reading obstacle the time limited performances.

##### **1.2. Higher education and vocational education**

There are a lot of services available in many higher and vocational education institutions, which are often difficult to find in school information. It is appropriate to ask the teaching staff directly for adaptations of study work and exams if they are not presented in publicly available information.

##### **1.3. Adult studies**

Adult learners must keep track of a lot of study materials and also organise their personal time effectively. Many people with dyslexia find organisation a challenge and need help to find out what works for them in studies and professional life.

##### **1.4. Learning skills and psycho-emotional area**

Most dyslexic learners lack effective reading and learning skills. Helping to acquire and use more effective learning strategies could be the overarching goal throughout the studies and professional life. Failure in studies leads many learners to emotional and psychological problems, a decrease in motivation and to drop out of studies. Tutors and mentors are powerful resources helping in study processes and professional life. (Reid, 2020; BDA homepage [Further Education/Apprenticeships - British Dyslexia Association](#)).

## **2. Practical accommodations: strategies and accommodations in supporting**

### **2.1. Studies, exams and organizational skills**

#### **Exam and evaluation arrangements can include:**

- Extra time and rest breaks.
- Human or computer readers for learners who struggle to read by themselves.
- Reading aloud for those who can concentrate better if they hear themselves read.
- Voice recognition software for very poor or slow writers who cannot write by themselves.

#### **Studies and learning skills**

- Additional academic time and delayed dates for completing the tasks.
- Printed notes instead of handwritten notes that may be illegible.
- Deal with study materials as soon as these are received, check the contents list to make sure everything is there.
- Improvement of learning skills, especially reading skills.
- Provide the concentrated main information.

#### **Organization strategies**

- Color-coding: keep all lecture notes, essays and materials on a particular subject color coded and filed together.
- Identify what's important: use highlighters, post-its or annotations to find information easily.
- Use a time planner to keep track of projects and deadlines on a daily basis. Set realistic goals to complete the assignment on time.
- Use a reminder on the phone for lectures, tutor meetings and course deadlines.

- Minimize distractions: set time for a task and switch off your phone, tv and radio. (Reid, 2020; BDA homepage <https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/advice/adults/in-education/further-education-apprenticeships>)

## **2.2. Psycho-emotional support and motivation strengthening**

### **2.2.1. Encourage diversity in learning styles**

Dyslexic learners do not match the learning styles previously presented in their schools. For that reason, it is important to encourage diversity in learners' learning preferences. This can be done by offering them choice and giving them the opportunity to utilise their own learning style in the classroom. It is important to ensure that flexibility is used to encourage diversity.

### **2.2.2. Encourage creativity**

For many learners' creativity is the principal motivating factor but that there is little room for deviation and creativity is encouraged in school systems. Encourage creativity in all aspects, especially in learning and reading.

### **2.2.3. Ensure success with small achievable steps**

Success is an essential factor for motivation and for successful learning. It is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that the learner meets with success.

### **2.2.4. Provide feedback to learners about their own personal progress**

Progress is personal – progress for one may not be progress for someone else. It is important that the criterion for progress be individualised, explicitly expressed and therefore the progress more easily identified.

### **2.2.5. Learners need to believe in their own abilities**

Self-belief is crucial if one is to accomplish any degree of success and motivation. Yet often the education system is geared to select and to grade. These factors can totally wipe out any element of self-belief.

### **2.2.6. Acknowledge the individual styles of each child**

This is important although it can be challenging in today's inclusive classrooms. Even if the young person is made aware of his/her learning style then this can set them up for independent learning at home and beyond school.

### **2.2.7. Use group work effectively**

Working in groups can be a great motivator but at the same time it is important to ensure that the dynamics of the group provides a positive experience for all. Group work should also be closely monitored and the group should report on their progress after short intervals.

### **2.2.8. Encourage self-assessment**

This is important to help students with dyslexia to take control of their own learning. They should be encouraged to assess their own progress and this can be a motivator in itself. Self-assessment encourages self-reflection and this helps to develop higher order thinking skills.

### **2.2.9. Develop student responsibility**

The key to successful learning is student autonomy. This is important as it provides the learner with some control over his/her learning. It is this control that fosters responsibility and makes it possible for the student to move from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation.

### **2.2.10. Focus on learning as well as teaching**

It is important to identify and recognize the strengths shown by learners with dyslexia and to attempt to incorporate these strengths into a teaching program.

### **2.2.11. Self-esteem**

Often people with dyslexia have relatively low self-esteem, and significantly this low self-esteem is not confined to only academic self-esteem. It can be concluded that there may be several risk factors in the lives of dyslexic people which can contribute to low self-esteem. It is important to value the dyslexic person at first as an individual. The presence of dyslexia can accentuate some of the difficulties and

barriers which often prevent individuals from reaching their desired goals. Though the persons with dyslexia can have considerable skills in some areas it is important that their emotional and social needs can also be considered alongside their strengths.

(Reid homepage: <https://www.drgavinreid.com/free-resources/motivation-ideas/>)

### **2.3. A short reminder for teachers to improve their teaching**

Four scaffolding and teaching strategies to help adult learners with dyslexia thrive.

#### **2.3.1. Make sure that all your students can understand what you are asking them to do.**

A multi-sensory approach is helpful in communicating complex instructions. Use visual instructions to go along with verbal instructions.

- Speak slow and repeat complex steps.
- Make sure students have access to written instructions.
- Check for understanding.

**2.3.2. Create and maintain good classroom routines.** A strong and predictable classroom routine can help students with dyslexia feel welcome and reduce their anxiety around learning. Adult students with dyslexia can easily feel like they are stupid or lazy. Strong classroom routines will help alleviate or even avoid this anxiety.

**3. Support and showcase the strengths of your adult students with dyslexia.** Give students with dyslexia a chance to succeed and show their mastery. Help them to showcase their strengths. Some strengths of these adult students and their success opportunities may be:

- **Creativity:** Showcase their creativity even in the smallest subjects. Share their creation in your classroom.
- **Problem solving:** Their thought process could be an example of how to use multiple approaches to solve a problem.
- **Empathy:** Introduce your adult student with dyslexia to complex characters and have them share their character analysis with the class.

- **Meta thinking:** Help your adult students with dyslexia showcase their higher-level planning skills.
- **Narrating skills:** Support your students narrative writing with strong academic scaffolds such as mentor texts, graphic organizers, and rubrics. Then showcase your students' narrative writing successes!

Finally, remember, much of what a teacher can do to meet the needs of adult students with dyslexia are best practices for every student.

(McCormick, 2022)

## **VI. Whether all these techniques are also useful for neurotypical adults**

In recent years, increasing attention has been given to strategies that support adults with specific learning disabilities, particularly dyslexia. These include adaptations in teaching, communication, assessment, and environmental design. But a key question emerges: Are these techniques also useful for neurotypical adults—those without diagnosed learning disabilities?

The short answer is yes. Many of the teaching strategies, visual supports, and psychological scaffolding designed for adults with dyslexia also benefit neurotypical learners by enhancing clarity, engagement, and retention.

### **1. Clear and Concise Communication Benefits Everyone**

Adults with dyslexia often struggle with dense or ambiguous instructions. To address this, educators are encouraged to use plain language, avoid jargon, and present information step by step (Snowling & Stackhouse, 2013). These principles align with universal design for learning (UDL), which benefits all learners—especially in fast-paced educational or workplace environments where clarity improves efficiency.

### **2. Visual Aids and Multimedia Reinforce Learning**

Visual supports like infographics, mind maps, and diagrams are recommended for learners with dyslexia to aid comprehension (Mayer, 2009). Neurotypical adults also benefit from these tools, particularly those who are visual or kinesthetic learners. Multimedia elements (videos,

animations, and interactive slides) engage multiple senses, reinforcing memory and understanding for all learning types (Clark & Mayer, 2016).

### **3. Flexible Pacing and Breaks Improve Focus**

Frequent breaks and adjustable pacing are essential for dyslexic learners, but they are also crucial for avoiding cognitive fatigue in neurotypical learners. Techniques like the Pomodoro method, which involves focused work intervals followed by short breaks, are widely used to enhance productivity across populations.

### **4. Multiple Assessment Methods Foster Deeper Engagement**

Offering diverse ways to demonstrate knowledge—such as oral presentations, creative projects, or visual summaries—helps dyslexic learners thrive (Sparks & Lovett, 2009). These methods also encourage critical thinking and creativity in neurotypical adults by moving beyond traditional exams, which often only test rote memory.

### **5. Psychological Support and Motivation Help All Learners**

Encouragement, positive reinforcement, and self-reflection strategies are central to helping adults with dyslexia maintain motivation and build confidence (Reid, 2020). These same elements help neurotypical learners develop growth mindsets and resilience, which are essential in both educational and professional settings.

### **6. Organizational Strategies Enhance Time Management**

Adults with dyslexia benefit from tools like color-coded folders, time planners, and checklists. These methods are equally effective for neurotypical individuals juggling work, family, and education, supporting executive functioning skills that are vital in adulthood.

It's important to recognize that many of the instructional techniques, tools, and support systems developed for individuals with specific learning disabilities were originally intended to level the playing field for those facing unique cognitive challenges. However, over time, educators and researchers have observed that these same methods benefit all learners, not just those with diagnosed conditions. This phenomenon is grounded in the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which posits that when educational materials and environments are designed to be accessible and inclusive from the outset, they enhance learning outcomes for everyone.

For example, strategies such as breaking complex information into smaller, digestible chunks, providing materials in multiple formats (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic), and allowing flexible

time for completion are beneficial not only for adults with dyslexia but also for neurotypical individuals who may have different learning preferences, experience stress, or are returning to education after a long break. Similarly, the use of visual aids, structured layouts, and consistent formatting—hallmarks of dyslexia-friendly design—are appreciated by all learners because they reduce cognitive load and make content easier to navigate.

This overlap demonstrates a broader truth in education: accessible design and differentiated instruction don't dilute the quality of learning; rather, they enhance it. By focusing on inclusivity, educators and institutions create environments that foster greater engagement, reduce anxiety, and promote success for all adult learners, regardless of whether they have a learning disability. Thus, what benefits the few ultimately supports the many.

Although these techniques were initially designed to address the unique needs of adults with dyslexia, their broader applicability to neurotypical adults underscores a vital truth: inclusive practices elevate learning for everyone. By embracing flexible, multimodal, and psychologically supportive strategies, educators and employers can create environments where all adults—regardless of cognitive profile—can succeed and thrive.

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