

DYSLEXIA: Fact and Fiction

Fiction: Dyslexia is a four-letter word.

Fact: It has eight.

To some that may mean it is twice as bad. For students with dyslexia and their teachers, it is neither bad nor something to deny. *Dyslexia* is a specific language-based learning disability. It refers to a variety of characteristics that result in people having difficulty in varying degrees with the language skills of reading, writing, spelling, and/or speaking.¹

Research is showing that dyslexia is a neurological-based condition and that the brain of the dyslexic develops and functions differently from other brains. Not better, not worse, just differently.²

Dyslexia can be modified with appropriate instruction and cherished as the students develop their unique talents and experience success in learning.

Fiction: A student with dyslexia cannot read because of low intelligence.

Fact: Winston Churchill and Albert Einstein are now thought to have been individuals with dyslexia.

Although not all students with dyslexia will become outstanding politicians or gifted scientists, most are bright and have the potential to learn and live successfully. Dyslexia will not be outgrown and does not result from limited intelligence, poor instruction, brain injury, disease, vision problems or laziness. One student with dyslexia stated, “My thinking is okay, but my words aren’t.” Another wrote, “Sometimes I just feel up in the dumps.”

Research has demonstrated that intensive remedial teaching which begins instruction with the basics and builds the learning continuum step by step is the most effective approach. It includes strategies and materials that are based on the student’s specific needs, adaptation of the content and curriculum, and is individualized for each student.³

It is not easy. Dyslexia is a life-long condition. However, under the tutelage of a well-trained specialist, students with dyslexia can learn to read.

Fiction: There are only a few students with dyslexia.

Fact: Research indicates that up to 20% of students have a significant reading

disability.⁴

Some people have mild difficulties such as lack of organization, messy handwriting, reading hesitantly, or a poor sense of time and space. Others have severe problems in reading, writing, spelling, remembering, listening, comprehension and sequencing. In a classroom of 25, teachers may find several students with mild difficulties. One or two students may have significant problems that are impervious to even a good literacy curriculum and require direct teaching of language skills.

Fiction: English is so unpredictable that it is difficult to learn.

Fact: English is 95% regular for reading and 85% regular for spelling.⁵

Regular means that students can depend on the letters representing particular sounds. Using this consistency of the language, explicit instruction in core areas is possible, essential and successful for students with dyslexia. This instruction, with anecdotes from students with dyslexia, is outlined below. It incorporates multisensory teaching that simultaneously uses all of the learning pathways (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic) to enhance memory and learning.^{6 7}

- Phonology and Phonological Awareness - the study of sounds and understanding the linguistic structure of words. For example, students learn that the word *tack* has the three sounds [t] [æ] [k] which are represented by two letters and a digraph and that the sounds can be switched to create *cat* or changed by deleting a sound to form the word *at*.
- Sound-Symbol Association (phonics) - the knowledge that sounds have a corresponding letter or a combination of letters. Carrying it to an extreme and not quite following all of the rules, a student, *Katy*, was so thrilled to learn about this aspect of the language that she legally changed her name to *Chaytea*.
- Syllable Instruction - syllable division rules and the six types of syllables in English. [closed (*cat*); open (*she*); vowel-consonant-e (*make*); r-controlled (*far*); final-stable-syllable (*ta'-ble*); and double vowel (*greet*)].
- Morphology: - the study of base words, roots, suffixes, and prefixes. (“My teacher has a migraining headache.”)
- Syntax - grammar, sentence types, and the mechanics of language. (“Tomorrow I went to the dentist, no...I mean yesterday I’m going to the dentist.”)

- Semantics - vocabulary and comprehension of language. (“When I get tense, I like to get in a *hot katoozie*.” and “What do you **mean**, anyway, *a stitch in time saves nine*?”)

Fiction: Spelling doesn’t matter.

Fact: It matters to those who can’t spell.

Some spelling problems are more straightforward than others. For instance, the fifth grader who did not quite understand capital letters and vowels:

“grj wshngtn ws th frst prsdnt”

Or, the student in high school who had persistent difficulty with sound/symbol correspondence and spelling rules (the close-but-no-cigar category):

“My parnts are lettening me be on the sking teem. There all very good hear. It is very toughf and I must work harder know.”

Or, the seventh grader whose spelling, handwriting and composition difficulties began to affect comprehension:

“Peple ut one wich is like I send weh loots of people started movein in one came and went relly sloyly.”

And, sometimes it just seems to look like this:

“Σομετιμεσ Ι φυστ ωιση τηατ Ι χουλδ”

A dyslexic student said, “I hate spelling and I hate *suppository writing*.” Because it can be so difficult for them, dyslexic students (and adults) often report that they dislike writing and are embarrassed by their spelling. The English language may be somewhat more complex than other languages. However, it is teachable. Using the instructional components outlined above supplemented with modern technology, spelling and composition can be taught successfully through structured, sequential curricula.⁸ Some people with dyslexia such as John Grisham and John Irving have become successful professional writers.

Research has dispelled the myth that dyslexia does not exist. As dyslexia has become better understood, it is clear that the prevention and resolution of

the serious effects of dyslexia are in the hands of educators. For students with dyslexia, the fact is that learning to read, write, and spell takes time, patience, motivation, cooperation, understanding, and humor⁹ *along with* a thoroughly trained individual using appropriate instruction. But, then, what teaching doesn't?

Not better, not worse, just different.

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¹ *Basic Facts About Dyslexia: Part I and II*. Baltimore: The International Dyslexia Association (www.interdys.org) 410.296.0232.

² Shaywitz, Sally and Shaywitz, Bennett (1998). Functional Disruption in the Organization of the Brain for Reading in Dyslexia. *Neurobiology*, Volume 95, Issue 5 2636-2641.

³ *Just the Facts: Looking for an Academic Language Therapist*. Baltimore: The International Dyslexia Association (www.interdys.org) 410.296.0232.

⁴ Lyon, G. Reid (1999). *The NICHD Research Program in Reading Development, Reading Disorders and Reading Instruction*. NCLD National Summit on Research in Learning Disabilities.

⁵ Dillon, Sandra (2002 revision). *The Structure of the English Language*. Albuquerque: SIS Publishing.

⁶ Birsh, Judith, editor (1999). *Multisensory Teaching of Basic Language Skills*. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing Co.

⁷ National Reading Panel Report (2000): www.nationalreadingpanel.org or order report from www.NICHD.NIH.gov/publications.

⁸ Moats, Louisa (1995). *Spelling: Development Disability and Instruction*. Baltimore: York Press.

⁹ Note: A special word of thanks to Roger Saunders, Psychologist, and his session at The International Dyslexia Association Conference in Albuquerque, October 2001, *Dyslexics Can Say the Funniest Things!*