

Guidance on marking the work of dyslexic students.

**University of Teesside**  
Assessment Working Group

# **Guidance on marking the work of dyslexic students**

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## 1. Introduction

This guidance has been produced at the request of, and in consultation with, School Disability Co-ordinators and the University's Assessment Working Group and is offered to assist lecturers to mark the work of identified dyslexic students. 'Identified' dyslexic students in this context means students who have disclosed their disability and provided appropriate diagnostic evidence to Student Services.

It has been compiled following consideration of disability legislation, good practice guides, marking guidelines for dyslexic thinkers from other institutions and an understanding of some of the issues – both from a student and staff perspective. It is particularly relevant to the marking of essay-based work and oral presentations but the principles can be applied to all assessment methods.

Details of the context in which we consider how we mark the work of a dyslexic student are necessarily included. The University's Rough Guide on Inclusive Assessment would complement this guidance.

This guidance is not a simple set of prescriptive rules – this is not possible given the diversity of our course provision and the need for academic staff and professional/statutory bodies to decide on what is legitimately measured when marking work. However, the guidance does include two checklists – one for marking and one for giving feedback – which should support tutors when they have a piece of work in front of them. These are located at the front of the document for ease of access.

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**Checklist for action when marking**

1. Evidence of dyslexia received?
2. Understand impact of dyslexia on individual student.
3. Skim read for overview of knowledge, ideas and understanding.
4. Identify the key competence standards required.
5. Can structural flaws be ignored?
6. Ignore weaknesses in writing skills – spelling, grammar and punctuation (unless accuracy is of vital importance to the subject being assessed in order to meet a competency standard)
7. Consider appropriate feedback.

**Checklist for giving feedback**

1. Be positive – state what has been done well.
2. Be constructive – explain what is required.
3. Write legibly and in plain English.
4. Be sensitive – if possible agree with the student what would be helpful.
5. Annotated papers – use different coloured pens (not red).
6. Consider use of coding system for errors with language skills.
7. If you have marked for ideas only – say so.
8. Make clear that any comments on spelling, punctuation and grammar are to support skills development and not to penalise.
9. Support verbal feedback with a written summary.
10. Offer verbal feedback in addition to written comments.
11. Set comments against marking criteria and competence standards.

## **2. What is Dyslexia?**

Dyslexia is a 'Specific Learning difficulty' that exists across the whole spectrum of intellectual ability. It is manifested through anomalies in brain function in specific areas, leading to difficulties with particular activities associated with learning.

### **2.1 Dyslexia Action's Definition**

This definition is a comprehensive one and particularly relevant to education.

'Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty that mainly affects reading and spelling. Dyslexia is characterized by difficulties in processing word-sounds and by weaknesses in short-term verbal memory; its effects may be seen in spoken language as well as written language. The current evidence suggests that these difficulties arise from inefficiencies in language-processing areas in the left hemisphere of the brain which, in turn, appear to be linked to genetic differences.

'Dyslexia is life-long, but its effects can be minimised by targeted literacy intervention, technological support and adaptations to ways of working and learning. Dyslexia is not related to intelligence, race or social background. Dyslexia varies in severity and often occurs alongside other specific learning difficulties, such as Dyspraxia or Attention Deficit Disorder, resulting in variation in the degree and nature of individuals' strengths and weaknesses'.

## **3. What difficulties do dyslexic students have?**

Consideration of the impact of dyslexia on individuals can help to clarify the rationale behind having specific guidance for marking.

### **3.1 General issues:**

- Literacy standards fall below expectation
- Poor organisational skills.
- Difficulty sequencing information in a linear format (tendency to think 'holistically').
- Difficulty with numbers.
- Difficulty keeping information in the short-term memory – forgets easily.
- Difficulty following instructions.
- Difficulty relaying messages correctly.
- Inability to make effective notes.

- Difficulty with orientation – left/right, up/down, east/west.
- Poor time management skills.
- Short attention span.
- Distracted easily - e.g. by background noise.
- Low self-esteem.
- Exhaustion.

## **3.2 Literacy issues**

### **3.2.1 Writing:**

- Poor handwriting.
- Lack of coherence when presenting ideas in writing.
- Difficulty presenting material in a sequential manner.
- Poor use of punctuation.
- Incorrect use of homophones.
- Incorrect/inconsistent use of tenses.
- May present long rambling sentences.
- Uses limited vocabulary.
- Restricts what is written to avoid spelling difficulties.
- Difficulty getting ideas onto paper.
- Cannot identify errors – particularly in examinations.

### **3.2.2 Spelling:**

- Bizarre spelling – even in ‘common’ words.
- Choosing the wrong words when spelling.
- Omission or transposition of letters.
- Tendency to spell phonetically.
- Inability to see errors in word processed documents.

### **3.2.3 Reading:**

- Reading words incorrectly/mispronunciation.
- Lack of fluency when reading aloud.
- Inability to skim/scan text.
- Slow reading speed.
- Difficulty using the LRC.

But, everyone is different. Not all people with dyslexia experience difficulties in all these areas. The degree to which a person experiences problems depends on how severe their dyslexia is, their individual strengths, level of self-esteem, at which point in their academic career dyslexia was diagnosed, and the kind of teaching and support they have had previously.

All students in higher education will have developed skills and strategies to compensate for some of their difficulties. But sometimes the

pressures of higher education can render some of these strategies inadequate. For example, if an individual's strategy for reading and understanding written material is to devote a lot of time to the task, reading and re-reading, this can become unmanageable where the volume of required reading increases substantially. This can also explain why some students get to higher education without ever being diagnosed with dyslexia. Indeed some students do not encounter difficulties until their final year.

#### **4. Evidence of dyslexia**

When students declare that they have dyslexia they must provide appropriate diagnostic evidence. The evidence must provide details of the areas where their dyslexia impacts on their performance.

Some students have had screening tests in college and these are not the same as diagnostic tests. This can be disappointing as students may have been receiving support from their college based on these screening tests but cannot access funding and support in higher education on this basis.

The information is used in conjunction with an in-depth discussion with the student and details of the requirements of the course, as supplied by the School, to enable disability advisers/assessors to build up a picture of an individual student's difficulties and the support required.

There are three ways in which difficulties are outlined and support recommended by Disability Services staff:

- An email, sent via the School Disability Co-ordinator, to relevant staff in the School. This is sent as soon as a student with dyslexia is identified, their needs discussed and permission given for information to be circulated.
- A section of a Needs Assessment Report is circulated, by the School Disability Co-ordinator, to all staff involved in the teaching and assessment of the student.
- 'Dyslexia slips' – that students can attach to work handed in for marking to remind the marker of their dyslexic. These can also be attached to exam papers. (See Appendix 1 for a sample slip)

Students can decide whether or not they wish to have their dyslexic difficulties identified to staff and whether they wish to attach dyslexia slips to their work.

Once staff have been given the information they have a legal duty to respond appropriately.

## **5. Legislative duties**

People with dyslexia are covered by the disability discrimination legislation.

Staff are therefore required to make 'reasonable adjustments' in respect of identified dyslexic students where the student may be at a 'substantial disadvantage' because of the impact of their dyslexia on study activities.

### **5.1 Examples of 'reasonable adjustments' that might be made when marking essay-based work:**

- Skim reading (fast) first to get a general overview of the knowledge, ideas and understanding demonstrated.
- Marking for content only.
- Ignoring structural flaws, such as organisation and sequencing of information.
- Ignoring spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors (unless accuracy is of vital importance to the subject being assessed in order to meet a competency standard).
- Ignoring quality of handwriting (e.g. in examinations).
- Taking into account that less reading may have been possible within the time scale.

### **5.2 Examples of 'reasonable adjustments' that might be made when marking oral presentations:**

Some dyslexic students prefer oral presentations to written work. But, for some, this method of assessment is equally challenging.

- Ignore aspects of delivery that affect fluency; e.g. hesitation and mispronunciation.
- Ignore apparent stress and anxiety.
- Create a calm environment; e.g. fewer people watching.
- Allow extra time.
- Ignore similar difficulties apparent in the presentation of written work, such as organisation and sequencing.
- Take account of difficulties reading out loud from notes.
- If questioning is part of the process – ensure that questions are presented clearly and repeated where necessary.
- Allow thinking time for responses.

There is an 'anticipatory duty' in respect of disabled students – in our planning stages we must consider how we will mark the work of dyslexic students and need to consider the best way of ensuring that they are not disadvantaged by assessment processes.

The need to maintain academic standards is fundamental; so is encouraging students to develop their skills. So, it is necessary to consider both these areas together.

### **5.3 Competence standards**

Consideration of whether the student has demonstrated the required knowledge and understanding of the subject and can achieve the 'competence standards' required is the key factor that determines whether a student can successfully complete their studies.

It is therefore important that there is clarity around what is being assessed – the knowledge, skills and understanding expected.

The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) has had several amendments - one of the latest being the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (Amendment) (Further and Higher Education) Regulations 2006. These Regulations introduced 'Competence Standards' as the term used to describe the 'academic, or other, standard applied ....for the purpose of determining whether or not a person has a particular level of competence or ability'.

'Competence standards' apply to all aspects of courses – admissions, assessment and awarding qualifications.

The regulations state that the competence or ability must be relevant – a 'proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim'.

A 'competence standard' must not be discriminatory. It must be genuine and fair to disabled students. If there is a discriminatory impact then the need for the 'competence standard' must be 'objectively justifiable'.

In order to be lawful, 'competence standards' must be set appropriately in relation to the type or level of qualification being awarded.

There is no duty to make a 'reasonable adjustment' to a 'competence standard'. But 'reasonable adjustments' must be made to enable a disabled student to meet the 'competence standard'.

Generally there is a difference between the 'competence standard' and the way in which a student could demonstrate the achievement of that

standard. It is unlikely that the ability to perform in a time constrained examination could be justified as a 'competence standard' and so, for some severe cases of dyslexia, a 'reasonable adjustment' may be to design another method of assessment for an individual.

However, in some cases the 'competence standard' may be linked to the process of assessment; for example the completion of a practical test to demonstrate a skill or ability.

It is important therefore to be able to determine which requirements are genuine 'competence standards' and which are not.

When designing methods of assessment and marking criteria, consider the 'anticipatory' nature of the 'reasonable adjustments' duty to make assessment as accessible as possible and to guide staff for marking purposes. There is therefore a need for clear and transparent marking criteria.

The less 'woolly' we are about what is being tested, the less difficult it will be to mark.

## **6. Student preparation**

It would be particularly useful if students were aware of and understood the marking criteria. This would help them to identify the areas they need to develop. And dyslexic students would be clear about the areas where they might seek additional support to enhance their skills.

A statement for dyslexic students, such as in programme guides, would demonstrate understanding, transparency and fairness. It would also help to clarify expectations and promote equal opportunities.

Being transparent about the 'competence standards' required for a programme of study pre-entry would allow potential students to decide whether a particular course is right for them. It would also help to avoid situations where a 'competence standard' cannot be achieved by an individual.

## **7. Giving feedback**

Many dyslexic students have had very negative experiences of receiving feedback. Teachers may have been critical of the things students cannot change, not because they are 'stupid' but because they are dyslexic. They may have been misunderstood by people marking their work. The perception some dyslexic thinkers have is that markers

without an understanding of the effect of dyslexia may wrongly judge them to be 'lazy' or 'thick' or simply not trying hard enough.

### **7.1 Principles of good feedback for dyslexic students:**

- Positive – state what has been done well.
- Constructive – explain what is required.
- Write legibly and in plain English.
- Sensitive – if possible agree with the student what would be helpful, e.g. whether to comment on language skills.
- Annotated papers – with different coloured pens (not red).
- Consider use of a coding system for errors with language skills e.g. SP – spelling, G – grammar, P – punctuation, T – tense and so on.
- If you have marked for ideas only – say so.
- Make clear that comments on spelling, punctuation and grammar are to support skills development and not to penalise in marks (unless accuracy is of vital importance in the subject being assessed in order to meet competency standards).
- Support verbal feedback with a written summary.
- Offer verbal feedback in addition to written comments.
- Set comments against marking criteria and competence standards.

Feedback is best understood when clearly set against the competence standards identified in the marking criteria. In this way, dyslexic students are less likely to feel that they were wrongly judged because of their disability. This would defend staff in requests for assessment review.

Model answers can be bewildering unless time is taken to explain them. Annotated papers are more useful, particularly if marked with different coloured pens – one for ideas, knowledge and understanding and one for presentation. Neither pen should be red as it can have bad psychological associations.

Lecturers, in partnership with staff in Disability Services, can assist to develop individual potential. A dyslexic student can, with the right support, learn strategies for the areas where they experience difficulties – such as with written English. Feedback can help to encourage use of resources, such as dyslexia tuition, to enhance skills even if this may not affect the marks. And students can be re-assured that they are not being penalised but supported, particularly if they have a discussion with their lecturer about how feedback will be given.

Verbal feedback is best supported by clear written comments, as it may be difficult for a dyslexic student to hold verbal information in their memory. And where there are issues of confidence and self-esteem, students may need support to see the positive comments and to put the criticisms into perspective.

## **8. Concerns of ‘double support’**

Some staff have commented that they are concerned students might get ‘double support’ if they have specialist software and dyslexia tuition available to them to assist them to present academic work at a good standard and are also getting marked to take account of their difficulties.

However, a student can be receiving tuition and/or using specialist software to assist them to enhance their skills of e.g. structuring their work but it does not mean that their difficulties will be ‘cured’, simply that they are more likely to present a more logically structured piece of work. Further, the length of time it can take for an individual to begin to use these strategies effectively can vary.

## **9. Support from specialist dyslexia tutors**

The Department of Student Services employs a team of specialist dyslexia tutors. It is perhaps helpful to understand the nature of their work and to help manage students’ expectations about what can realistically be achieved through this support.

Common misconceptions are that tuition can be a ‘quick fix’ or that tutors proof read and correct written work.

Dyslexia tutor support:

- Helps with basic study skills for students with dyslexia who are experiencing difficulties.
- Aims to impart generic skills which help an individual become a more independent learner.
- Considers individual needs as demonstrated in diagnostic profiles and taking into account course requirements.
- Sets goals and timescales, reviewed regularly.
- Helps students to understand their own dyslexia and be aware of areas of strength and weakness.
- Assists in the development of key strategies such as:
  - Organisation and time management: e.g. use of diaries, wall planners, coloured pens, prioritising, target setting etc.
  - Effective strategies for accessing lectures and notes.

- Reading strategies, such as screening for coloured overlays where appropriate.
- Researching, planning and structuring essay-based work.
- Proof reading strategies to assist students to identify errors and upgrade their written work.
- Revision strategies and techniques for examinations.

The principles on which the tuition support is based are that dyslexic students are not slow learners, they are quick forgetters and effective learning takes place when strategies are rehearsed many times.

## **10. Confidentiality**

Dyslexic students have a legal right to keep their dyslexia confidential and to only disclose to identified staff. This means that staff have a duty to ensure that they do not unintentionally disclose to people not identified. For example, a member of staff who discusses an individual's dyslexia in front of peers would be breaking confidentiality.

## **11. Handling suspected dyslexia when marking work**

Dyslexia Awareness sessions are available, either through the CLQE Staff Development Portfolio or on a tailored basis, for staff and include information to assist staff to spot possible dyslexic characteristics. However, whilst difficulties may be apparent there is no easy method of detecting whether they are due to dyslexia.

Good practice suggests being pro-active in terms of identifying students who are experiencing difficulties and discussing concerns and options with them.

If the student agrees that they experience difficulties – they may disclose that they are dyslexic or they may agree that their difficulties could be further investigated. They can then be referred to Disability Services.

The process of diagnostic assessment takes time – funding and appropriate tests will need to be organised by the student, with the help of a disability adviser. If a student is not eligible for funding to pay for a diagnostic test they will have to fund it themselves if they wish to secure support. Generally the cost will be in the region of £300 - £400.

Support will not be recommended until an appropriate diagnosis has been made and this can take several months. People experience a variety of emotions when getting a diagnosis – from relief to significant distress. It can take time to work with an individual to move from the

point of trying to come to terms with their dyslexia to effectively accessing support and developing strategies to overcome the difficulties.

## **12. Retrospective remarking**

Following a positive diagnosis of dyslexia, some students request that previous work submitted for assessment be re-marked in light of the new information.

It is probably fair to retrospectively mark where dyslexia has just been discovered. However, where the student had prior knowledge and chose not to declare that this has, arguably less merit for remarking. There is a responsibility on the student to inform the University so that reasonable adjustments can be made in a timely manner.

One of the key issues is therefore identification of dyslexia as early as possible; either through encouraging disclosure or through concerns raised by tutors and referral to Student Services.

Retrospective remarking of work should take place for all written work submitted in the academic year that the diagnosis of dyslexia was confirmed.

## **13. Conclusion**

Marking the work of a dyslexic student can be a source of anxiety for staff as well as for the student. The aim of this guidance is to reduce anxiety for all.

Hopefully it will act as a catalyst for further discussion and debate, leading to clear and transparent decisions about how to handle dyslexic difficulties.

The further development of good practice with dyslexic students in mind will enhance the learning experience for all students.

## Appendix 1

**University of Teesside, Department of Student Services  
Disability Services  
Dyslexia Slip**

**For Student:**

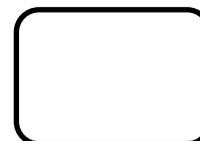
- **This slip must be attached to work handed in for marking to enable the marker to take your dyslexia into account.**
- **Please indicate:** If the marker would usually comment on grammar, spelling, and punctuation, would you like them to do so, even if you will not be penalised for errors?  
Yes  No

**Name:****Enrolment No:****Course of Study:****Year:**

The above student has been identified as experiencing difficulties as a result of their dyslexia. Please take this into account when marking this piece of work

**Signed:****Date:**

Disability Adviser

**Official Stamp:****For marker: checklist for action when marking**

For more information please refer to the 'Guidance on marking the work of dyslexic students'.

1. Skim read for overview of knowledge, ideas and understanding.
2. Identify the key competence standards required.
3. Can structural flaws be ignored?
4. Ignore weaknesses in writing skills – spelling, grammar and punctuation. \*
5. Consider appropriate feedback, taking into account student's preference as indicated above.

\* Unless accuracy is of vital importance to the subject being assessed in order to meet a competency standard.