

Top Ten Tips for Supporting Dyslexic learners

1. Be organised

Have a practical approach to helping students with organisation skills. Make sure a student's study space is clear of clutter and help them to organise their worksheets into folders with dividers. Students may need additional support with strategies for remembering kit or equipment for school, so making lists, using graphic organisers and creating posters with things to remember can all be useful.
<http://pdst.ie/sites/default/files/GraphicOrganiserFinal.pdf>

2. Support Spelling

If poor spelling is proving an obstruction to the learning and writing process, provide subject spelling lists that can be stuck at the front of their subject file so they can easily reference and check key words. Sometimes students are reluctant to commit their ideas to paper for fear of making mistakes and feeling stupid. Try using a mini white board with board markers so students can easily correct and rub out ideas. Some students greatly benefit from using a laptop. See my Teaching Spelling pdf for more ideas and tips.

3. Use a multi-sensory approach

Teaching in a multi-sensory way is good for all pupils. Dyslexic students often respond well to visual teaching aids, in the form of pictures, colour and creating mind maps, for example. Be as creative as possible. Help the student extrapolate key information by making clear, concise notes. Use coloured cards, underline or highlight keywords in colour, draw pictures in the margin and so on. Other students may benefit from a 'hands-on' approach, so incorporating movement and action into a lesson may be helpful to the learning process. Some students may learn better using audiobooks. To fine tune our teaching even more, if an emotion can also be attached to a learning experience, such as happiness, love, excitement and so on (preferably not a negative emotion!), then the more powerful the learning experience is. So where possible, try injecting humour, storytelling, role play and a touch of drama to your lessons. The mind boggles at the endless possibilities!

4. Engage your student in the lesson

Avoid their personal barriers to learning. If your student struggles with reading, don't start your lesson by asking them to read! Be creative about introducing topics: use open questions, make use of pictorial representations of ideas, asking which is the odd one out or how the images are connected for example. When introducing a new topic, have the student generate questions about it before providing them with much information. Give the 'big picture' as to why the learning is useful. Explaining why they need to learn the content of the lesson in the context of the world and their life, will validate the effort they are about to put in.

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5. Be careful when using 'growth mindset' language

We often talk about how students can improve if they 'try harder' and 'put more effort' into their learning. For students with dyslexia and other SpLDs, they are often working twice as hard as their peers so this kind of discussion will only add to their frustration. This is where ipsative assessment can be so important: measure the performance of your student against their own previous performances, not against their peers, which can be so damaging to their self-esteem.

6. Encourage intrinsic motivation

We encourage intrinsic motivation by improving proficiency and ability, but it is all too easy to fall into the trap of spoon-feeding our student's information. Allow students freedom of choice and autonomy where possible and encourage them to take ownership of a task.

7. Use *SMART targets

Discuss together to define clear, achievable, short-term goals to give students the tools to learn independently. Try using SMART targets, making sure that some targets can be achieved within the lesson. As tutors we can build the skills for independent learning and 'scaffold' their study to help them achieve their goals.

*SMART stands for: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-based

8. Give comments in a feedback sandwich (+ / - / +)

Start and end with a positive comment, with constructive advice in the middle.

9. Be aware of slower auditory processing speeds

Wait at least 3 seconds for an answer! On average teachers ask 3 to 4 questions a minute and wait less than a second for an answer...

10. Maintain focus

Allow for short breaks to aid focus and attention. Encourage students to stand up and move around for a couple of moments during a break and encourage them to drink water