



Dyslexia Toolkit

Study suggestions
for dyslexics
by dyslexics

Introduction

This guide has been written by a dyslexic student to help other dyslexic students. While there is already much support for dyslexics out there, not all of it is useful and much wasn't written by dyslexics, so it often misses the mark.

Dip into and try out the following list of suggestions to see if they help you with your studies. Not everything will be of use to you but something may stand out and surprise you.

Contents

Using frequently asked questions or issues dyslexics commonly have, this guide has been divided into the following sections:

Not knowing where to start

Not being clear on a task • Writing an essay or assignment
Lacking confidence • Needing a break from studies

Dyslexia can be a gift

How your mind works • Finding your own learning style
Explaining to others what you need • Four fast facts

Overcoming stumbling blocks

Being put on the spot • Time management

Useful links

Not knowing where to start

Not being clear on a task

Ask! If you don't feel comfortable asking in a class, email your tutor afterwards, catch them after the class is over or ask to arrange a phone call. One of the perks of being dyslexic is improved verbal communication (especially once you relax) so don't be afraid to use this to your advantage.



There is no shame in getting clarification, most tutors are happy when their students ask them questions as it makes them feel appreciated!

Not knowing where to start

The required outcome

Don't be afraid to challenge the required outcome. A task shouldn't just be:

'Write a 500/1000/1500 word report/essay'

The number of words shouldn't be a measure of the quality of the work. Report/essays are often asked for because that's the default format.

If you struggle to write that much, or go into a panic at the thought of having to do so, ask some more questions:

- Does it have to be a written essay, or would a presentation/set of slides/verbal report/infographic be acceptable?
- Could you incorporate these elements as part of the written work? A picture may not be worth a thousand words, but it should count for a hundred or two.
- At work, does the person asking really need a report or do they actually want the information? Get them to be clear on the actual outcome required. The format may be irrelevant.

Not knowing where to start

Writing an essay or assignment

Sometimes, even after you clarify your work, ask for what is wanted and challenge the format, you still get told that you have to write a thousand words or more in an essay.

The word 'essay' is a trigger word, it can invoke the panic and fear of a rabbit in headlights. It certainly does to me, I freeze up, my mind goes blank and my breathing changes. It feels like a giant is looming over you and is going to squash you flat under the weight of words.

Where to start

So what do we do? How do we move forward and face this task?

We kick the 'giant' in the shins. Then we keep kicking till it gives in.

You will have your own way, but this is mine. It even works every once in a while.



Not knowing where to start

Writing an essay or assignment



Breaking it down

I start with what I know, a list of key words/phrases (a mind map could work) then apply this list to what the task asks for. I work out a rough idea of what I need to write and then break it down into small chunks that are easy to manage (although there is normally much more kicking and screaming).

Now I have a set of bitesize things to write that I'll use roughly the same template for: 'this means this, so this'. Then I can write them one at a time and take a break after I've done each one.

Having someone to encourage you to take breaks and make sure they aren't indefinitely long, can be helpful from a work perspective, though it can be hard to remember they are on your side during the process.



Proofreading

The last step is to go back, link the things together and proofread. Proofreading is very important, helps a lot but is a pain to do. However, once it's done (and everyone in the area has stopped taking cover) it's finished.

Having someone else do the proofreading can be useful, but make sure they are clear on what you need. I've had plenty of "helpful" suggestions at this point that just leave me feeling confused. Not having a proof-reader give criticism (does it matter how you kick a giant into submission?) has definitely helped my confidence in the past. Getting criticism at this stage takes away what little drive I have to continue. All you need is clear spelling and grammar advice, nothing more.

Not knowing where to start

Lacking confidence

If you are looking at the work you have to do and it feels overwhelming, break it down into manageable chunks, only look at one of them at a time and check it off when you are finished so you can see how far you've come.

A dyslexic brain is naturally inclined to look at an overview or big picture. It's one of its great strengths and unfortunately, great struggles. Looking at what studying you have to do can easily be overwhelming and lead to panic.



Picture it as a large jigsaw, it's good to get the edges first for an overview of what's to come but then trying to do the whole jigsaw at once can get confusing even with that outline. Putting together individual parts (say the whole of a boat or bird) of the jigsaw and then fitting together those images once you have them is a much less taxing ordeal. It allows you to look back and clearly see exactly how far you have come.

Things may take you longer to complete than non-dyslexics, this isn't a sign that you are worse at those things, it's perfectly normal. Let your boss/tutor/co-workers know that you may need a little longer and work to your time in your own way.

Not knowing where to start

Needing a break from studies

Dyslexics can use up to five times more physical energy when conducting linear tasks, such as reading or writing. This is due to the different wiring of their brains so it's not unusual for them to get tired more quickly than others.

Taking more time off to recharge often isn't an option. However, there are ways to relax more effectively that can counter the drain of work.

It's hard to relax when we are worrying or thinking about something stressful. The brain will worry in the background if it's left to idle and so the best way to fully relax the mind and de-stress is an activity that occupies all of our attention.



A walk on its own isn't enough as it's too passive. Something more physical can be:

- Swimming (or other active exercise)
- Baking/cooking
- Doodling/painting
- Or just reading/listening to a good book

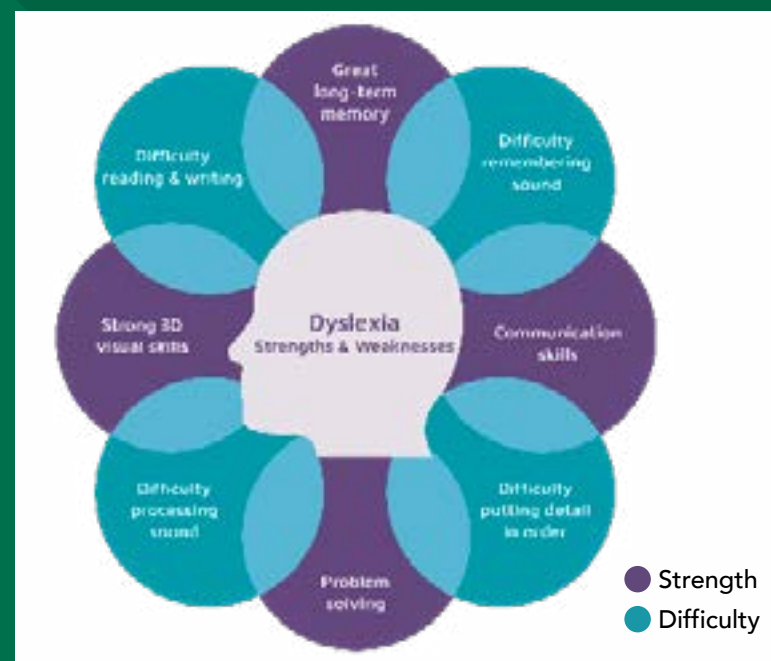
In short, activity that we enjoy and occupies our mind.

Dyslexia can be a gift

How your mind works

It truly is a gift. It just isn't always easy to appreciate it. It's not a 'problem' or something to 'fix' it's a state of being and simply that your brain is physically wired different than most.

That's not a metaphor or an insult. A dyslexic brain is geared to using its right side far more than 'typical' people (who primarily use the left). This allows **far greater visualisation, problem-solving and lateral thinking skills**, but lessens those for reading, writing and more sequential thinking (controlled by the left side of the brain). There are full brain scans to prove this.



Source: <https://www.geniuswithin.co.uk/what-is-neurodiversity/dyslexia>

A good analogy is that dyslexia takes 'skill/talent' from some things and adds it back on to others. Above is a diagram of eight of the more general characteristics of dyslexia.

As every dyslexic is unique not all of these will necessarily apply to you. There are things you can do and ways you can excel that others cannot. It's just a matter of finding how to play to your unique strengths.

*Everybody is a genius.
But if you judge a fish
by its ability to climb
a tree, it will live its
whole life believing
that it is stupid.*

OFTEN ATTRIBUTED
TO EINSTEIN

Dyslexia can be a gift

Finding your own learning style

You don't think in the same way as most, so don't be afraid to experiment and find your own way.

Do your own research and try new things to see what fits you best. Just because you haven't found it yet, doesn't mean you won't and should stop looking.

One of the hardest things to overcome is not wanting to stand out as 'different', coupled with the fear of looking 'stupid' or 'strange'. It puts us off wanting to try new methods.

Things I have personally tried include:

- Software for notetaking/dictation/screen reading (Evernote, Dragon Dictate, Claro read/Natural reader)
- Making mind maps (ClickUp/SmartDraw)
- Pens designed for dyslexics to be easier to hold and write with (Stabilo)



I rejected many of these after a while as they didn't quite fit my personal learning/working style, however I do thoroughly recommend giving them a go to see if they work for you. Even something as simple as changing or inverting the colour of a page or document when reading it can be a massive improvement.

I best read white text on a black page, for example. It's possible to do this to many webpages. Some have the option or there is software available. Even Word documents can have the background colour changed, as well as the text (see 'design' on the right of the top menu bar).

Do give new techniques time to see if they help or not. If you don't relax into them, you can't get the most out of them. As annoying as it is, patience is very important.

Dyslexia can be a gift

Explaining to others what you need



Be upfront with your requirements. It's nothing to be embarrassed about. It's how people can get the best out of you. Most people don't know dyslexia as anything other than a burden so be prepared to educate them on the gifts it gives, as well as your needs. It may take time for them to understand but be positive and patient.

A few good questions to ask that may help you understand what others want and give you some breathing room include:

- What would a good piece of work look like?
- What do you want to achieve from this meeting?
- Can I think about this and come back to you in about 30 minutes?
- Can you wait a second while I write that down/type it up?

Dyslexia can be a gift

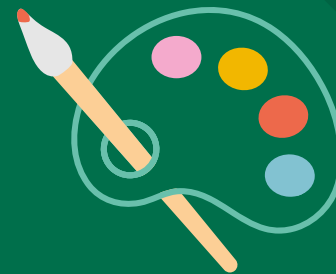
Four fast facts



1. One in two employees at NASA are dyslexic. They are gifted with enhanced 3D visualisation skills, which are invaluable to space exploration.



2. GCHQ actively recruits dyslexics for their big picture thinking and ability to see patterns.



3. Picasso was dyslexic. It's what allowed him to see a whole object at once, which is what he painted.



4. Dyslexia is not lack of intelligence in any way. Nearly all dyslexics have average or above IQ. We aren't stupid, we're different.

Overcoming stumbling blocks

Being put on the spot

We've all been there. Someone asks us a question out of the blue, our mind goes blank and we can't answer. Then the asker is looking expectantly or pushing for an answer and we just want to run away.

A dyslexic often prefers to mull over a question for a few seconds and/or doesn't like surprises, especially those that put us on the spot. There are ways to deal with these situations without feeling embarrassed or like we've done something wrong.

A few easy things to say that buy time and put pressure back onto whoever asked the question are:

- "Oh, good question"
- "Let me think about that one"
- "One moment please"



One of the most effective, especially if you've already talked to them about your dyslexia and what they should or should not do: "Now you've put me on the spot".

If it's not a question and something else unexpected that has completely thrown you off and you are struggling to think straight/concentrate, then the best thing to do is to take a break and move to a different environment. Outside, another room, anything. Catch your breath, relax and do something you find calming, like getting a glass of water, before you go back to your desk. Personally, I've got into the habit of saying "right then" and letting out a deep breath as I sit down. This causes me to feel a little more clear-minded and ready for work whenever I do so.

Overcoming stumbling blocks

Time management

Timekeeping is a stumbling block for many dyslexics. Many of us often struggle with one aspect or another of managing our time, especially when studying. It can be hard to plan how long things will take and even if we do, sticking to it can be even harder.

There's nothing wrong with setting up alarms and reminders. For example, I've know people who when revising set a reminder for the start of every study session and for every break within those sessions.

Working out how long to study is often a conundrum when trying to balance breaks, work and willingness. My personal timeframe is to work for 20-30 minutes, then have a five minute break and repeat until I've worked for two hours, before having a longer break.



I know someone who dug out their old school timetables and substituted their new work in place of lessons to give their bodies the feeling and structure of a school day.

Whatever you decide, try to make a routine out of it. Once something becomes a 'normal' part of the day, it becomes much easier to do.

Time limits for studying should have a certain flexibility depending on how the studying is going. For example:

- If it's going well and you are pushing through there's nothing wrong with keeping going for a bit longer than you originally planned as long as you have a full break once you are done. Call it a 'soft limit'.
- If the work feels a bit slow going, but is still doable, then treat the original length as a hard time limit and go until the end.
- If nothing is making sense, until it all feels too much and you aren't making any progress, finish up something to give you a solid end to what you are doing. Take a long break, an hour or so, and then go back to it. If you are at work, find a repetitive task to do.

Useful links

dyslexia.com/research/articles/alternative-brain-pathways

Differences in brain structure between dyslexics and non-dyslexics. This has been very useful in getting people to understand the nature of dyslexia. The rest of the website has some very insightful articles.

dyslexialifehacks.com

'Hacks' submitted by dyslexics that they use to make their lives a little easier. I use a few of them myself.

dyslexia.com/about-dyslexia/signs-of-dyslexia/test-for-dyslexia-37-signs

Common characteristics of dyslexia. I have quite a few of the signs mentioned to some degree.

About the author

Julian Berridge is proudly dyslexic and is the Learning Styles Research Intern at Cambridge Marketing College. He can be contacted at

Intern@marketingcollege.com

 [linkedin.com/in/julian-berridge-a9b938221](https://www.linkedin.com/in/julian-berridge-a9b938221)