



OGA Definition of Dyslexia

This definition describes dyslexia as it appears in children and adults reading in English.

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that interferes with the development of reading and writing. Individuals with dyslexia struggle with one or more of the following skills: sounding out unfamiliar words, reading words instantly, and/or spelling. The primary causes of dyslexia are genetic, neurobiological differences.

Dyslexia interferes with the development of reading and writing, which are the cornerstones of school success, independent living, and lifelong learning. Dyslexia is linked to neurobiological differences that affect how students learn to read and spell words. These differences usually include a core weakness in phonological processing. The signs of dyslexia look different depending on the language and writing system.

Individuals with dyslexia struggle with one or more of the following skills: sounding out unfamiliar words (decoding), reading words instantly, and/or spelling (encoding). The quality of reading instruction, family genetics, and other factors can influence the development of reading and writing skills for individuals with dyslexia. The challenges posed by dyslexia range from mild to severe.

Consequences of dyslexia include labored reading, poor reading comprehension, and/or poor written expression. Individuals with dyslexia may read less accurately and more slowly than other students their age. The effort required to recognize words may interfere with understanding the text. Expressing thoughts in writing is typically very difficult as well. These challenges may lead to difficulty with school assignments, avoidance of reading for pleasure, reduced experiences with text, and fewer opportunities to learn. Without proper remediation, these consequences can impede growth in language development, thinking skills, and knowledge. In turn, these problems can interfere with school success, self-esteem, peer relationships, and professional achievement.

Dyslexia can present a significant barrier to learning. Dyslexia is not a result of low intelligence. Dyslexia can affect individuals of any ability, ranging from those who are academically gifted to those who have cognitive impairments. It can affect multilingual learners and students who speak any dialect. Dyslexia can occur along with other learning disorders. These include, but are not limited to, speech and language disorders, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder, and autism spectrum disorder.

For some individuals with dyslexia, learning difficulties appear early in school, when they begin working with the alphabet. Students may experience unusual difficulty learning their letter names, learning phonics, sounding out words, and spelling words. Other individuals with dyslexia appear to read adequately in the early grades, but struggle to read longer, unfamiliar words confidently. These individuals may be identified with dyslexia later in elementary, middle, or high school.

Individuals with dyslexia will not become strong readers without accurate identification and specialized instruction to improve their reading and writing skills. They can benefit from intensive instruction at any age, from kindergarten through adulthood. Early intervention is most effective. Individuals with dyslexia may be identified as having a specific learning disability that requires specialized instruction. Dyslexia identification laws vary between states. Individuals with dyslexia may require accommodations in education, post-secondary training, and employment to demonstrate their full potential.

Parents can help their dyslexic child build confidence by noticing and developing their strengths. Professionals with dyslexia expertise can help parents understand their child's learning profile of strengths and weaknesses to provide a foundation for setting instructional goals. Dyslexia can be highly treatable if it is properly identified, and if appropriate intervention is provided by a thoroughly trained instructor.

Contributing Authors

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Ken Pugh, Ph.D., served for 16 years as the Director of Research at Haskins Laboratories in New Haven, Connecticut, and holds academic appointments in the Department of Psychological Science at the University of Connecticut and at the Yale Child Study Center in the Yale University School of Medicine. Dr. Pugh is a cognitive neuroscientist and experimental psychologist who is best known for his work on the neural, behavioral, and cognitive underpinnings of reading. His work has contributed to numerous publications that further our understanding of reading development. He served on grant panels for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Research Council of the National Academies. He served on several Scientific Advisory Boards, including the International Dyslexia Association and the Scientific Advisory Panel for Dyslexia International in Paris. Currently, Dr. Pugh is a member of the Board of Visitors for the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh, the Scientific Advisory Council for the Child Mind Institute in New York, the Scientific Advisory Committee for the Moss Rehabilitation Research Institute, and the Internal Advisory Board for the ILCB at Aix-Marseille University, among others.

Cyndi Schultz, M.A., ATF/OGA, is a speech-language pathologist who has worked in both public and private schools during her clinical career. She served for many years as a board member of the Central Ohio Branch of the International Dyslexia Association and the Orton-Gillingham Academy Board of Trustees. She currently provides consultation and professional development to schools and districts.

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