



## Deconstructing Dyslexia

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Developing reading competency is crucial to the success of school-aged children, yet research suggests that up to 20 percent of our population will find mastering foundational literacy skills to be the single greatest challenge of their childhoods. Even more perplexing to teachers, and sometimes parents, these same children are often verbally precocious and capable of quick, inventive thinking outside of literacy-based learning tasks. Dyslexia impacts one in five learners today, and children with this specific learning difference exist in every school setting across our nation.

### Definition, Causes, and Commonalities

Researchers define dyslexia as a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction.



Students with dyslexia share common characteristics in their approach to reading, including limited phoneme awareness. Linguists explain that English is an alphabetic-phonetic code and making meaning of words in print requires a developed ability to associate sounds with letters and patterns of letters. Though individuals with dyslexia may not innately make these associations, explicit instructional interventions that emphasize sound-symbol relationships can elevate a student's ability to interpret the sounds in words more effectively.

Further, individuals with dyslexia are known to over-rely on context and guessing when reading printed material. Given weaker decoding skills, students make predictions about words based on picture clues and surrounding context from the reading material. In studies of highly skilled readers, however, researchers found that context is not used as a primary strategy for determining unknown words. Ultimately, good readers assess letters in words, not context or pictures.

### Solutions for Success

Without intervention, students with dyslexia do not develop the strategies necessary for decoding,

which, in turn, means that substantial levels of energy must be devoted to interpreting the words on the page. This leaves less available resources for finding meaning or enjoyment when reading.

Dyslexia is also associated with slower naming speeds, or difficulties with recognizing individual words. Children with this learning profile will work to decode a word on one page, only to struggle over the same word repeated soon after. Automatic word recognition occurs when students can reliably intuit the phonological patterns of English. Once students can effortlessly make connections between sounds and letters, reading fluency can be more readily attained.

Importantly, the majority of struggling readers, when exposed to instruction that combines phonics, fluency development, and reading comprehension strategies from teachers well-versed in the linguistic structure of words, will see an increase in reading skills to average reading levels. With quality interventions and lots of practice, students with dyslexia can become competent readers.