

# Supporting Students with Dyslexia



BIRMINGHAM  
City University

A toolkit for the use of mentors, assessors, supervisors and students working together



## Managing the Placement Learning Experience

The Royal Orthopaedic Hospital



NHS Foundation Trust

## Introduction - A toolkit to enable the student with dyslexia

This toolkit has been designed for use by mentors/assessors/supervisors and students from all health care disciplines, within the placement setting. It aims to enable students to achieve and develop within the placement setting by:

- Providing a brief overview of dyslexia and what it can mean for an individual.
- Suggesting strategies, some or all of which may be employed by the student.
- Suggesting strategies, some or all of which may be employed by the mentor/assessor/supervisor in order to enable achievement and development by the student.






Dyslexia however, is unique and individual to each student. Therefore when using this toolkit it is important that students and mentors/assessors/supervisors work together in order to identify individual characteristics (i.e. strengths and challenges) and select relevant strategies.

The development of this document has highlighted the need for further resources to compliment and enhance the information and strategies contained within it and more specifically to enable the student with dyslexia within the practice setting to successfully achieve and develop. It has also drawn attention to the need for additional sources of support for the mentor/assessor/supervisor of the student with dyslexia. It is anticipated that this toolkit will be not only a working document subject to regular review, amendment and updating, but also the first of a number of tools and resources.

We have also provided two coloured overlays (at the back of this toolkit) for students to use when viewing.

This document is available electronically at the Department of Practice Learning (DPL) website: [www.health.bcu.ac.uk/dpl](http://www.health.bcu.ac.uk/dpl) (click nursing then click toolkit) where there is the facility to alter background colour and font size.

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Birmingham City University's Disability Service aims to enable students with disabilities or learning support needs to make the most of their time at university. We regard disclosure of a disability as a positive thing and think it is important that you feel you can tell us about any disability you may have so we can try to support your individual needs.

If you have not made us aware of your disability or you feel you may have a disability please contact the Disability Service on **0121 331 5128**, or email **[disability@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:disability@bcu.ac.uk)**

## What is dyslexia and how does it affect the placement setting?

The word dyslexia comes from the Greek and means 'difficulty with words'. It encompasses a wide variety of features and is often applied as a label without any consideration being given to what it actually means. There are many positive aspects to having dyslexia including being creative, being able to think multidimensionally (that is, in 3D), or in pictures, thinking laterally and being good at solving problems. Having dyslexia is not just about misspelling words or mixing up letters. It can also include difficulty in organising thoughts, problems with differentiating between left and right and problems with memory and sequencing.

Under the terms of the Disability Discrimination Acts 1995 and 2005 [United Kingdom: Parliament (1995) and United Kingdom: Parliament (2005)], dyslexia is considered to be a disability and health professionals with dyslexia are therefore entitled to receive 'reasonable adjustments' both in the educational institution and in the placement setting. However, they still have to demonstrate that they are fit to practise and meet all the learning outcomes/objectives/competencies/proficiencies and skills in the same way as others.

It is essential to remember that an individual with dyslexia will need ongoing and possibly increasing support as their programme of study progresses. It should not be envisaged that any adjustments implemented will be decreased as a student with dyslexia progresses on a programme of study.

What causes dyslexia is not known but some possible explanations include:

- The dyslexic brain is different from the non-dyslexic brain. Studies have shown differences in the anatomy, organisation and functioning of the dyslexic brain as compared to the non-dyslexic brain.
- Some people suggest that people with dyslexia tend to be more 'right brain thinkers'. The right hemisphere of the brain is associated with lateral, creative and visual thought processes.
- Dyslexia is not related to race, social background or intellectual ability but there is a tendency for dyslexia to run in families and this suggests that the brain differences which cause dyslexia may be hereditary.
- The neurological differences cited above have the effect of giving the person with dyslexia a particular way of thinking and learning. This usually means that the person with dyslexia has a pattern of cognitive abilities which shows areas of strengths and areas which present challenges to individuals concerned.

In educational, work or cultural systems which are based on the way that the non-dyslexic brain thinks and learns, the differences cited can be problematic. They can however, also be an asset and an advantage, in systems and disciplines where a range of strengths and approaches can be appreciated and where learning can happen in a variety of ways. (The Glasgow School of Art (n.d.))

Students devise many 'coping strategies' to help with any difficulties their dyslexia may cause them in the academic setting. Some of these strategies may translate well into the placement setting, but others may be seen as inappropriate. Dyslexia affects students in different ways and symptoms range from mild to severe. Strategies that might work for one student in a placement setting may not be helpful for another.

One in ten people have dyslexia so ten percent of the population are affected by dyslexia to some degree. It is worth remembering that dyslexia is unrelated to intelligence or level of IQ. People with dyslexia are often 'quick forgetters' rather than 'slow learners'. When faced with a task requiring new learning they may have more difficulty than others, despite a similar level of ability. Dyslexia can therefore produce a pattern of strengths and challenges for an individual.

Strengths can include: intuition; lateral thinking and making connections; good at visualisation; good at making links between things; seeing connections; verbal skills; social skills; problem solving; looking at the big picture; good perception; observant; reflective listener; innovative and creative.

Challenges for individuals with dyslexia can include: organisation; inability to use the 24 hour clock; lack of sense of direction; confusing left with right; difficulty following instructions (verbal or written); problems with sequencing information; poor short term memory; difficulties with literacy (e.g. reading, comprehending, spelling, handwriting, structuring writing); difficulties with numeracy (e.g. learning times tables, getting numbers in the wrong order, confusing numerical signs); difficulty with articulation and finding the right words: poor fine motor skills (e.g. handwriting) and problems with doing more than one thing at a time.

## The emotional impact of dyslexia in the placement setting

Dyslexia can sometimes have a negative emotional impact for students in the placement setting. Some students with dyslexia are under emotional stress as they are struggling to conceal their difficulties because of fear of discrimination. This may manifest as a defensive response in the placement setting. They may find the placement setting more tiring than others because of the extreme mental effort that is required.

Some adults with dyslexia may be struggling to come to terms with low self-esteem. They may lack confidence in their abilities, which could affect their performance in the placement setting, particularly if they have only recently been assessed as having dyslexia. They may feel isolated and think that other students are learning procedures and tasks far more quickly than they are. This can lead to frustration, anxiety, panic and anger.

Student life is challenging and also often stressful, however the student who has dyslexia can be particularly susceptible to stress. The challenge of meeting the demands of student life and learning may be harder in some areas because of the primary characteristics of dyslexia.

There are many ways of managing stress but some suggestions are listed.

- Learn to recognise what causes you stress.
- Learn to recognise your strengths and find ways to use them.
- Build a support network.
- Ask for help.
- Take care of yourself physically and emotionally.
- Learn to relax and play.
- Take time off - have fun.
- Learn to assert yourself - say 'no', let others know what you need.
- Learn to use criticism productively.
- Build on your successes.
- Ask questions - get the information you need.
- Learn how to allow yourself to make mistakes and learn from them.
- Learn how to manage your time.
- Learn how to be more organised.

Learn more about how you can use stress to help you. The symptoms of your stress will often offer you clues about what you need to do, for example: if you feel overwhelmed you are probably trying to absorb too much or do too much at once. Break it down into smaller chunks so that you can regain some control. (The Glasgow School of Art (n.d.))

## The positive aspects of dyslexia

As stated earlier, people with dyslexia are considered to have a different way of thinking and learning. They often have many strengths as well as characteristics which may prove challenging.

Students with dyslexia may be able to make unexpected connections, which may result in them being insightful and innovative. They are also often able to look at things in a new light which means they can be good at creating new knowledge. These abilities are not exclusive to students with dyslexia but they are key strengths often associated with people with dyslexia.

Through discussion, solutions to challenges can usually be found which are helpful to both students and the staff working with them. Students are often well aware of their strengths and areas which provide potential challenges and are able to outline their needs to staff working with them.

The sections which follow in this document set out some of the challenges that might occur in the placement setting, and suggest some strategies that can be adopted by mentors/supervisors and students working together to ensure that 'reasonable adjustments' are in place. It is very unlikely that individual students will experience all the difficulties outlined here and it is quite likely that many of the strategies are already part of general good practice within the placement setting. It is worth considering that many strategies useful to students with dyslexia in the placement setting are useful for everyone.

Finally, some famous people with dyslexia include:

Albert Einstein

Bill Gates

Eddie Izzard

Fred Epstein

Pablo Picasso

Richard Branson

Sarah Mullalety - previous chief nurse

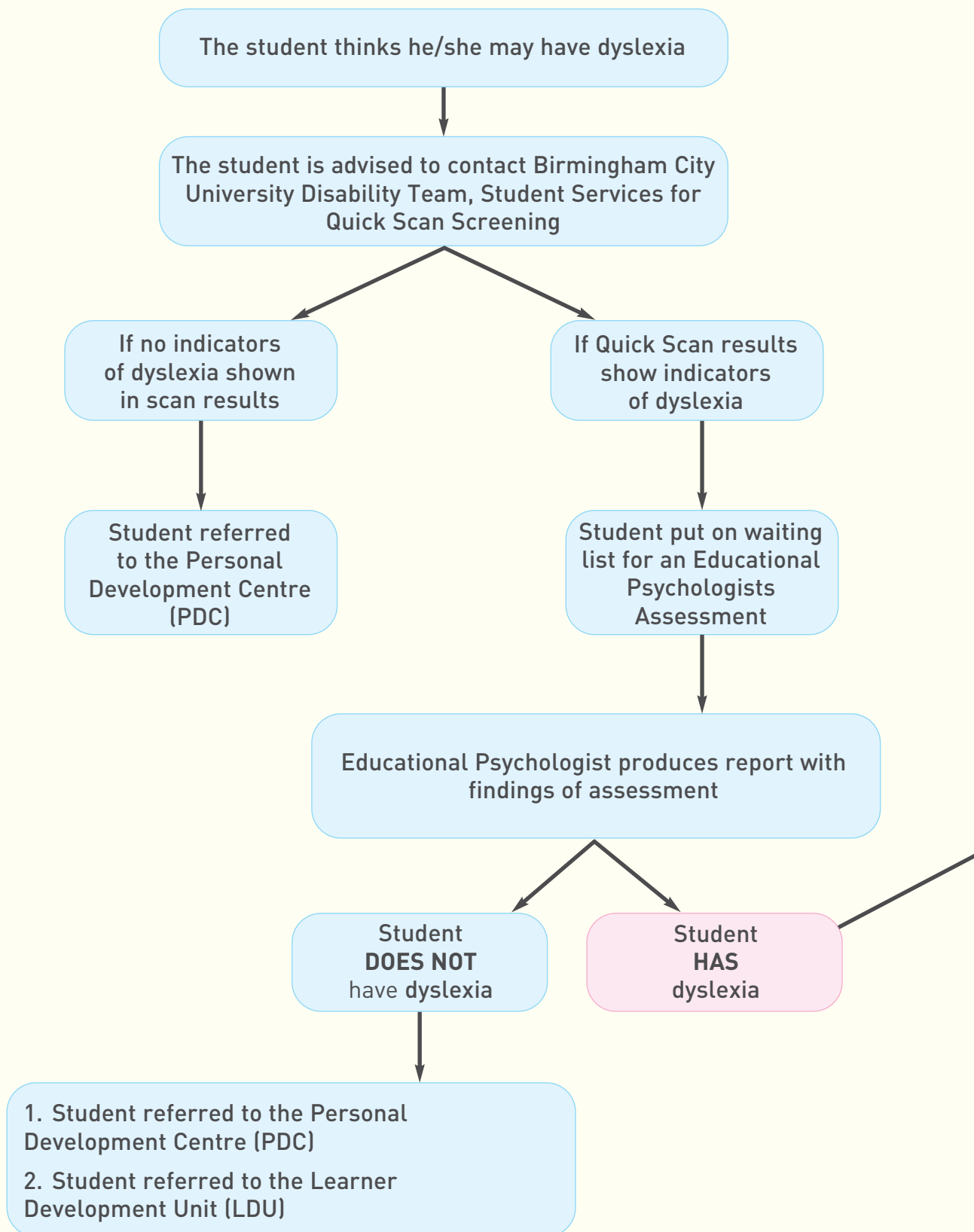
Walt Disney

William Hewlett

Winston Churchill



# Assessing for dyslexia at Birmingham City University



Mentors/supervisors should enable students on commencement of placement to disclose any



The student knows he/she has dyslexia



The student takes evidence to Birmingham City University Disability Team, Student Services



Standard concessions put in place via an initial support statement, which is emailed to the Faculty Registrar



1. Student advised to apply to their funding body for Disabled Student Allowance (DSA)
2. Student given access to interim support – dyslexia tuition and study skills workshops



When funding body writes to confirm student eligible for DSA, student can then proceed to have Access (Needs) assessment



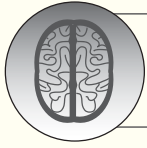
On receipt of Access Report a full support statement is emailed to the Faculty and additional support implemented (i.e. if note-taking is recommended)

issues or challenges which could affect their achievement in the placement setting.





# Useful Tools



## Memory difficulties, organisation and time management

Students may take longer to 'fix' information into their long-term memory and may require information to be presented more than once. They may appear to have a short attention span and be easily distracted in meetings. People with dyslexia often find it more difficult to discard irrelevant or redundant information which can lead to 'memory overload' and confusion.

Some students with dyslexia may experience difficulty with:

### Memory:

- Following instructions.
- Remembering names and job titles.
- Remembering drug names and medical conditions.
- Recalling of procedures, instructions or observations taken.
- Keeping diary appointments, e.g. turning up on wrong date.
- Reading dates and times, e.g. forgetting birthdays.
- Remembering phone messages accurately.
- Remembering all the information to pass to others.
- Recalling routines/procedures quickly.
- Understanding exactly what is expected of them.
- Keeping track of diary, keys etc.

### Organisation:

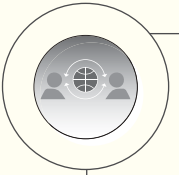
- Ordering ideas.
- Filing and looking up information alphabetically or sequentially.
- Sequencing the order of tasks correctly - particularly if more than one task is given at a time.
- Reacting quickly in busy environments.

### Time Management:

- Managing the balance between coursework and placement commitments.
- Planning ahead or planning work schedule.
- Estimating how much time is needed for a specific task.
- Allocating a realistic time-frame for different placement tasks.
- Completing tasks on time.
- Multitasking - the ability to do several things at once - it demands good memory and time management, as well as the ability to work sequentially and to be organised.

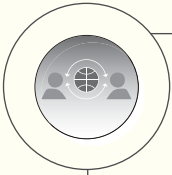


# Useful Tools



## Memory difficulties, organisation and time management strategies for mentors/assessors/supervisors

- With the learner, draw up a plan for the placement at the beginning, highlighting important information and dates.
- Provide clear instructions and expectations and check understanding.
- Provide additional time in structured supervisory sessions to go through administrative procedures and routines for the placement. Explain tasks more than once at the beginning.
- Give lots of opportunities for observation of yourself or other qualified staff with patients/clients in the first few days. Demonstrate and explain procedures simply, relating them to the individual patient/client. Ask the student to repeat/outline what s/he is going to do. Encourage reflection.
- Do not give too many instructions at once, particularly if the instructions are only given verbally.
- Beware of overloading the student with information.
- Allow the student time to organise their thoughts.
- Give instructions in both verbal and written form wherever possible.
- New information needs to be given more than once even if the student appears to understand.
- If a task involves following a sequence, this could be set out clearly on a wall chart, manual or instruction sheet. Students with dyslexia like to know the whole and then they are happy to tackle the part.
- If available provide the student with a placement pack setting out useful information and standard procedures in advance of the placement if possible. This could include a glossary of terms, a plan of area and details of routine.
- Give the student a map of the hospital/building.
- Encourage the student at the start of the shift to note the priorities for the patients and the day.
- Communicate slowly, preferably in a quiet location.

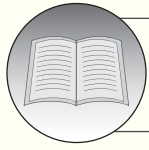


## **Memory difficulties, organisation and time management strategies for the student**

- Agree realistic target dates with your mentor for fulfilling placement competencies and record these on the clinical practice report.
- Ensure you have a pen and paper with you at all times.
- Use coloured pens, highlighters or folders to help organise and prioritise work.
- Use a small personal notebook or electronic diary.
- Create a simple flow chart on a small card as a memory aid.
- Have appropriate telephone pads to hand for taking messages, with as much information as possible filled out beforehand (e.g. date/subject/from).
- Read message back over the telephone to double check all information.
- Devise some prompt sheets to help with tasks or sequencing of tasks. Mentors/supervisors could help with this.
- If possible use a quiet area where you can write up/read notes etc.
- Invite your dyslexia tutor to visit you on placement and to meet your mentor.
- Try using mind maps.
- Devise your own handover sheet for recording patient details and/or use a computer print out of patient details where this is available.
- Devise a diary system that ensures you attend your placement on the right day/time. Consider colour coding different shifts.
- If there is the opportunity, visit the placement before you start and if the organisation's policy allows, collect any placement relevant documents which you would find useful to view prior to starting.
- Repeat back instructions to clarify understanding.
- Record tasks in list form. You may then develop a priorities list to organise care and ensure everything is completed.



# Useful Tools

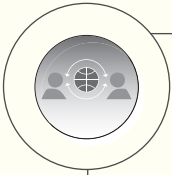


## Reading

**Some students with dyslexia may:**

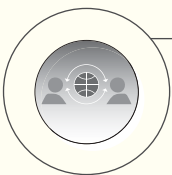
- Need to read something over and over in order to make sense of it.
- Feel embarrassed about reading aloud.
- Misread unfamiliar words.
- May lose the place on a page and have to start again.
- Read very slowly and find scanning or skimming difficult - may find reading very tiring.
- Find text is distorted, particularly black print on white.
- Find it difficult to read with noise distractions.
- Have difficulty understanding medical and pharmacological language and abbreviations and/or differentiating between technical language such as drug names, particularly those which look or sound similar.
- Have difficulty reading information from whiteboards.
- Have difficulty reading information on charts if different layers of information are presented on one chart or if information is presented on different levels – reading both across and down.
- Find it hard to work out monitor readings and might give an inaccurate reading without being aware of it.





## **Reading** strategies for mentors/assessors/supervisors

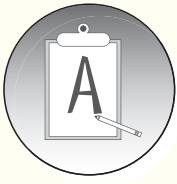
- Allow extra time for reading. Present the student with essential reading well in advance of meetings, highlighting important parts if appropriate.
- Provide opportunities to discuss reading.
- Any written information specifically produced for the students would benefit from being 'dyslexia friendly': Font size for print should be 12 or 14 plain, sans serif such as 'Arial'; case should be a mixture of upper and lower case letters which help to give words a distinctive shape and so aid recognition; use bold or a box to highlight text, rather than italics or underlining which can interfere with the appearance of individual words; write in a logical sequence; avoid small print; use bullet points in preference to sentences; use simple words and space the information so it is not cramped; avoid overuse of jargon or uncommon words.
- Use colour and space on whiteboards to differentiate sections.



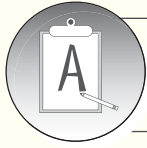
## **Reading** strategies for the student

- Use a small alphabetical notebook to record useful words and meanings of abbreviations.
- Devise a card system for particularly difficult medical terms and abbreviations, with spelling on one side and meanings on the other.
- Use an electronic dictionary.
- Use mind maps and/or flow charts where appropriate.
- Use a coloured overlay, if appropriate.
- Use highlighter pens for main points.
- Read condensed versions of notes etc wherever possible and appropriate.
- When reading use a ruler under the line you are reading to focus on one line and not the whole text.
- Use a coloured overlay ideally with integral ruler.





# Useful Tools



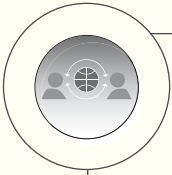
## Writing and Spelling

Some students may have difficulty with:

- Legibility.
- Writing in an appropriate language.
- Writing concisely.
- Writing accurately – work might contain inconsistent spelling and frequent grammatical errors. Students may confuse or miss out words.
- Writing under time pressure – some students may write very slowly and need to re-draft their work. Other students may write very quickly in an attempt to write their thoughts down before they lose them.
- Spelling technical terms such as drugs and medical terms, especially those which look or sound similar; e.g. gastrectomy and gastrostomy; hypertension and hypotension.
- If spelling is a problem, students may have problems with spelling small words, and may spell words as they sound.
- Identifying numbers and letters and/or getting them in the correct order.
- Filling in forms, especially when required to do so at speed.
- Structuring and organising their thoughts when writing reports etc.
- Making sense of what they have written when they read it back.

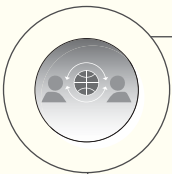






## **Writing and Spelling** strategies for mentors/assessors/supervisors

- Allow extra time to write reports and other paperwork. Allow students to write notes on rough paper to be checked before they are written up.
- Proof read paperwork at the beginning of the placement.
- Help the student to summarise the main points that should be covered using a mind map, spider diagram or flow chart.
- Give sample or 'model' reports so the student has a clear idea about the level and content required and the expected format.
- Provide templates for letters, reports and forms etc.
- Where possible, allow the student to submit reports on cream paper with a dyslexia friendly font such as 'Arial' or 'Comic Sans' in the appropriate size.

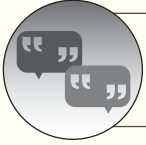


## **Writing and Spelling** strategies for the student

- It is important to be familiar with the layout of documents. If the organisation's policy allows, take one home initially to familiarise yourself with the layout. If not, spend a few moments in the placement setting reviewing unfamiliar documents.
- Use a recording device to record ideas if possible, whilst maintaining patient confidentiality.
- Use a small personal dictionary or electronic speller. Keep a record of common words and words specific to the ward.
- Devise templates for letters, memos and assessment reports.
- Develop effective checking procedures and proofreading skills.
- Use mind maps (Glasgow School of Art (n.d) p38) or spider grams to organise information.
- Write down words you find difficult to spell.
- Use block capitals to make it easier to read.
- Use a different word, if possible, if a word is hard to spell, always ensuring that your alternative has the same meaning as the original.



# Useful Tools

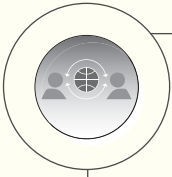


## Language

A few students may feel embarrassed about language difficulties. Some students may:

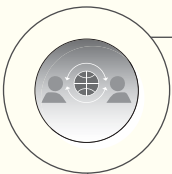
- Struggle to find the right word to say.
- Mispronounce unfamiliar words.
- Find it difficult to express themselves orally and talk in a disjointed way.
- Find it difficult to give clear instructions and/or information and have a tendency to 'go off on a tangent'.
- Sometimes experience a 'mental block' and be unable to express ideas clearly, particularly under stress.
- Take everything 'literally' or at face value (beware of words with double meanings).
- Struggle to assimilate verbal information.





## **Language strategies for mentors/assessors/supervisors**

- If the student has difficulty with pronunciation of medical or other technical terms, an audio tape of specific language would be useful.
- Provide a checklist of vocabulary typical in the placement, e.g. drug names, common medical conditions and treatments.
- Give clear oral instructions slowly. Positive statements are important as some people with dyslexia are not able to 'read between the lines' or pick up on implied meaning.
- Be willing to repeat instructions or allow the student to have the confidence to ask questions.
- Encourage the student to repeat instructions back to you to ensure understanding.

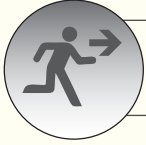


## **Language strategies for the student**

- Build up a list of words and phrases frequently used in case notes, reports etc.
- Ask for clarification if you are not sure about any terminology.
- Use specialised reference books such as Mosby's Medical Drug Reference 2007 (Ellsworth A.J, 2007) and texts which give the pronunciation of words.
- Practice explaining things you find difficult to express to a friend or family member, maintaining patient/client confidentiality at all times.
- Discuss notes with other students and staff, maintaining patient/client confidentiality at all times.
- Learn and practise new words and terms.
- Rehearse what you would say at handover/practice verbal report giving, maintaining patient/client confidentiality at all times.

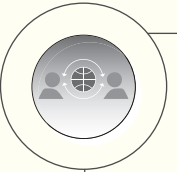


# Useful Tools



## Motor Skills

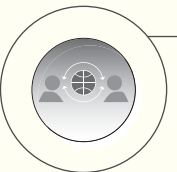
- Some students with dyslexia have right and left co-ordination difficulties.
- Some students take much longer to learn to follow a sequence, e.g. wound dressing.



## Motor Skills

### strategies for mentors/assessors/supervisors

- Demonstrate skills more than once at the beginning of a placement.
- Supervise practice until the student is confident.
- Diagrams and flow charts detailing the sequence for given skills can help.



## Motor Skills

### strategies for the student

- Ask for extra time to practise any skills you are unfamiliar with.
- Write the sequence of skills down in the form of a diagram or flow chart.
- Access university skills labs to practice new or unfamiliar skills.
- Devise your own strategy to identify your left or right side; e.g. wearing a watch or bracelet always on the same wrist/a ring on the same hand/a name badge/fob watch always on a particular side of the uniform.

## References

ELLSWORTH, A.J (2007) Mosby's Medical Drug Reference 2007 St Louis: Elsevier Mosby Saunders.

THE GLASGOW SCHOOL OF ART (n.d.) Understanding Dyslexia. An Introduction for Dyslexic Students in Higher Education.

[www.sfc.ac.uk/publications/pubs\\_other\\_shefcarchive/understanding\\_dyslexia.pdf](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications/pubs_other_shefcarchive/understanding_dyslexia.pdf) (accessed 31st July 2008).

UNITED KINGDOM: PARLIAMENT (1995). The Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

London: Office of Public Sector Information.

[www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1995/ukpga\\_19950050\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1995/ukpga_19950050_en_1) (accessed 31st July 2008 2008).

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London: Office of Public Sector Information.

[www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2005/ukpga\\_20050013\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2005/ukpga_20050013_en_1) (accessed 31st July 2008 2008).

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON (n.d.) Supporting Dyslexic Students On Placement settings. For the Use of Supervisors/Mentors Working With Students On Health And Social Care Courses.

[www.soton.ac.uk/studentssupport/ldc/docs/dyslexia\\_lo.pdf](http://www.soton.ac.uk/studentssupport/ldc/docs/dyslexia_lo.pdf) (accessed 31st July 2008).



## Resources/Useful Links

The following links were valid at the time of going to press (July 2008).

A Review of the literature into Dyslexia in Nursing Practice

[www.rcn.org.uk](http://www.rcn.org.uk) - enter dyslexia in the search box

Adult Dyslexia Organisation

[www.futurenet.co.uk/charity/ado/adomenu/adomenu.htm](http://www.futurenet.co.uk/charity/ado/adomenu/adomenu.htm)

Association of Dyslexia Specialists in Higher Education (ADSHE)

Guidelines For Good Practice: Supporting learners on placement

[www.adshe.org.uk/resources.htm](http://www.adshe.org.uk/resources.htm)

Direct Gov – Public Services All in One Place

[www.direct.gov.uk/en/disabledpeople/rightsandobligations/disabilityrights/DG\\_4001068](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/disabledpeople/rightsandobligations/disabilityrights/DG_4001068)

British Dyslexia Association

[www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/index.html](http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/index.html)

Dyslexia Action (formerly Dyslexia Institute)

[www.dyslexiaaction.org.uk/](http://www.dyslexiaaction.org.uk/)

Equality & Human Rights Commission

[www.equalityhumanrights.com](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com)

MCCLOUGHLIN. D, FITZGIBBON. G, YOUNG. V, (1993) Adult Dyslexia. London: Whurr Publishers

School of Nursing and Academic Division of Midwifery, University of Nottingham.

RLO: Understanding Dyslexia

[www.nottingham.ac.uk/nursing/sonet/rlos/placs/dyslexia1/](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/nursing/sonet/rlos/placs/dyslexia1/)

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(click nursing then click toolkit)