

What is a specific learning disability?

Specific learning disabilities (SLDs) are common "hidden" biological disabilities that can affect anyone regardless of race, age, or gender. Specific learning disabilities are neurological disorders that affect the brain's ability to receive, process, store, and recall information. A student with a specific learning disability will often exhibit an impaired ability to listen, comprehend, reason, speak, read, write, do mathematical calculations or spell. Students with a specific learning disability tend to have normal to above average intelligence.

Dyslexia

Processing of written language

- Reading (slow reading rate)
- Comprehension
- Writing (slow writing speed and poorly formed or illegible letters)
- Spelling
- Poor vocabulary
- Reversals (e.g. writing "p" for "d", "w" for "m", confusing left and right)

Dyscalculia

Maths and calculations

- Calculations
- Memorising math facts and formulas
- Problems understanding quantities
- Concept of time and money

Dysgraphia

Written Language

- Poor handwriting
- Poor spelling
- Problems with expressive writing style

Dyspraxia

Fine motor skills

- Poor co-ordination
- Deficits in manual dexterity

Academic difficulties

- Information assimilation
- Information processing
- Information recall

Strategies to assist the student

Lectures

- Start lectures with revision of the last session
- Present a short overview or outline of the topics to be covered during that lecture
- Allow students to use a dictaphone to tape lectures (talk about respect for privacy if appropriate)
- Provide a copy of overheads and handouts at the beginning of the lecture - this will minimise the amount of notes they will have to take and prevent them from falling behind. If they are consistently not keeping up, contact the Disability Liaison Office for further assistance
- Highlight key concepts or difficult terminology
- Use a variety of methods and modalities in lectures: hand-outs, overheads, demonstrations and discussions
- Make good use of examples or personal anecdotes to present ideas and theories
- End the lecture with a summary of the points covered

Tutorials, Laboratories and Field Trips

- Be aware that a student may have difficulty reading and following a set of written questions. Discuss other ways the student may meaningfully participate in sessions, e.g. volunteering comments or making short presentations

Assignments and Assessments

- Students with learning disabilities may take longer to complete assignments, so it is important to provide a detailed course outline at the beginning of the first lecture listing all assignments and due-dates
- Issue a reminder of work due at the beginning of each week
- Assessment questions should be clear, direct and be given in sequential order

- Avoid asking questions with difficult sentence structure, double negatives or embedded meanings
- Make sure that exams are clearly written or typed. Provide a test in enlarged print with extra spaces between lines
- Avoid cramming too many questions or math problems onto one page
- Print on only one side of the paper
- Group similar types of questions together, e.g. true/false, multiple-choice, short-answers and paragraph questions. Leave spaces between multiple-choice items.
- Provide students with extra paper for drafting answers to essay questions
- Suggest that math students use graph paper (or lined paper turned sideways) to encourage neatness and to avoid confusion when performing math calculations
- Contact the Disability Liaison Office to discuss alternative assessment arrangements if the student is struggling with assessments. Exam readers, writers, extra time, a separate venue, use of adaptive technology or an alternative format may be highly beneficial to the student. **It is essential for the student with a specific learning disability that the assessment of their work be based on testing their knowledge of the content you have taught, and not on their ability to read or write**

Support services available

- In-class notetakers (Disability Liaison)
- 1:1 or small group study support
- Adaptive technology (Disability Liaison: portable scanning/reading pen, dictaphones, alphasmart keyboards, digital and printed dictionaries)
- Alternative assessment arrangements