

# Reading Disability

*(Including Dyslexia)*

Students with a reading disability have difficulties sounding out new words, identifying words automatically, reading fluently (with adequate speed), and comprehending text. Children might experience one or more of these difficulties.

*Dyslexia* involves difficulties with phonetic decoding (or the “sounding out” of words), automatic word recognition, and spelling. The brain of a person with *Dyslexia* processes these tasks in a different (and very inefficient) way.

Some students with *Dyslexia* may still read somewhat well. More often these students read with reduced speed and comprehension because difficulty reading words hinders fluency and understanding. Receptive and Expressive Language Disorders (pages 94–99) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (pages 135–146) may also create fluency and comprehension problems independent of difficulties with word recognition.

Because reading is essential in all school subjects, poor readers struggle in multiple content areas. A student’s writing ability also is affected, making it difficult for students to demonstrate what they know in various subject areas.

The type and severity of a reading disability can vary among children. Some students are strong in one area of reading and very poor in others. Others may benefit from additional help in all areas of reading. This section is designed to identify and address different aspects of reading disabilities.

■ Between 10% and 15% of all students have a reading disability. These students account for more than 80% of students identified as learning disabled.

## Behaviors and Symptoms to Look For

Difficulties with reading occur in three major areas:

### **DYSLEXIA (decoding and automatic word recognition)**

Children with *Dyslexia* may:

- Have difficulty decoding “nonsense” or unfamiliar words.

- Have difficulty reading single words accurately and fluently.
- Have poor spelling skills.
- Read aloud inaccurately or in a choppy way.
- Have poor ability to hear the sounds that make up words (such as the difference in sound between *cat* and *cut*).
- Guess at words that appear visually similar to those they recognize (reads *between* instead of *because*).
- Have difficulty naming letters and numbers rapidly.
- Read silently at a very slow pace.
- Have weakness in reading comprehension, vocabulary, and written composition skills in middle and high school.
- Transpose words or letters (such as *b* for *d*, or *bog* for *dog*).
- Struggle with other academic subjects.

## FLUENCY

Students with fluency difficulties:

- Read only with a lot of effort.
- Read with little expression (monotone).
- Read with inconsistent (and generally slow) speed and inappropriate pauses.
- Read words in isolation but not in text.

## COMPREHENSION

Children with comprehension difficulties:

- Have difficulty understanding or identifying main themes or conclusions of text (even though they may recall specific facts).
- May have a limited vocabulary.
- Have difficulty using strategies to understand what they are reading (such as thinking and asking questions about what they're reading, looking ahead or back in the text for facts, and understanding a piece of text before going on in reading).

## Classroom Strategies and Interventions

Kindergarten students with weak phonological skills (for example, difficulty naming letters, distinguishing different sounds of letters, and blending sounds) may continue having difficulties in the first and second grades with skills such as matching sounds with printed letters, rapidly identifying words, and sounding out unknown words. These challenges may in turn lead to difficulties with reading speed, comprehension, and vocabulary in later grades. Early intervention therefore is important. Children who have difficulty *learning to read* in the early years will have trouble *reading to learn* in later years.

The exact form of your literacy efforts will depend on your school's reading program and the areas in which your students are struggling—whether with Dyslexia, fluency, comprehension, or a combination of these.

Despite your best efforts to build reading skills, some children will continue to experience difficulties and will require accommodations in the classroom. As with teaching strategies, these classroom accommodations should not be thought of as “one size fits all.” Instead match interventions with students' respective needs. In the material below, strategies and accommodations are followed (in parentheses) by the reading difficulty they may most benefit, though suggestions may prove effective with any given student.

**Provide reading and vocabulary instruction accompanied by images.** Pictures from books, magazines, or other media can give children a concrete image with which to associate words. Ask students to visualize a given word as you provide a visual representation. (Dyslexia)

**Encourage children to use kinesthetic learning methods.** Ask students to say new words while also tracing them with their fingers on their arms or desk. Incorporating multiple senses can aid memorization. (Dyslexia)

**Use already acquired word knowledge.** When children struggle phonetically with particular words, bring to their attention similar words they are able to pronounce. This can help them recognize how a given letter or letter pattern sounds and should be spoken. For example, a student who is able to say the *o* sound in *rock* can apply it to the word *clock*. (Dyslexia)

**Provide visual cues and tools to reinforce language instruction.** Consider posting new or difficult words in a prominent place within the classroom. You might do this by using markers on a whiteboard or creating a bulletin board display specifically for vocabulary. (You might also use this technique to display common words that are often misidentified or misunderstood by weak readers.) Encourage students to create flashcards for use outside of class. (Dyslexia)

**Use music and rhythm in language instruction.** Most children enjoy music and rhyme. Songs, raps, and rhymes can be effective toward reinforcing word sounds and meanings. (Dyslexia)

**Teach specific skills for finding the main idea, finding facts, and drawing conclusions.** When discussing a reading assignment, ask, “Who, what, when, where, and why” questions. (“Who was the main character? What was the big problem she had to solve? When did the story take place? Where did the character live? Why did the character have this problem?”). Teach students to summarize the facts of a story in a logical sequence so they can verbalize or write a summary. In class discussions, call on students who have comprehension difficulties only if you’re reasonably certain they might provide the right answer. (comprehension)

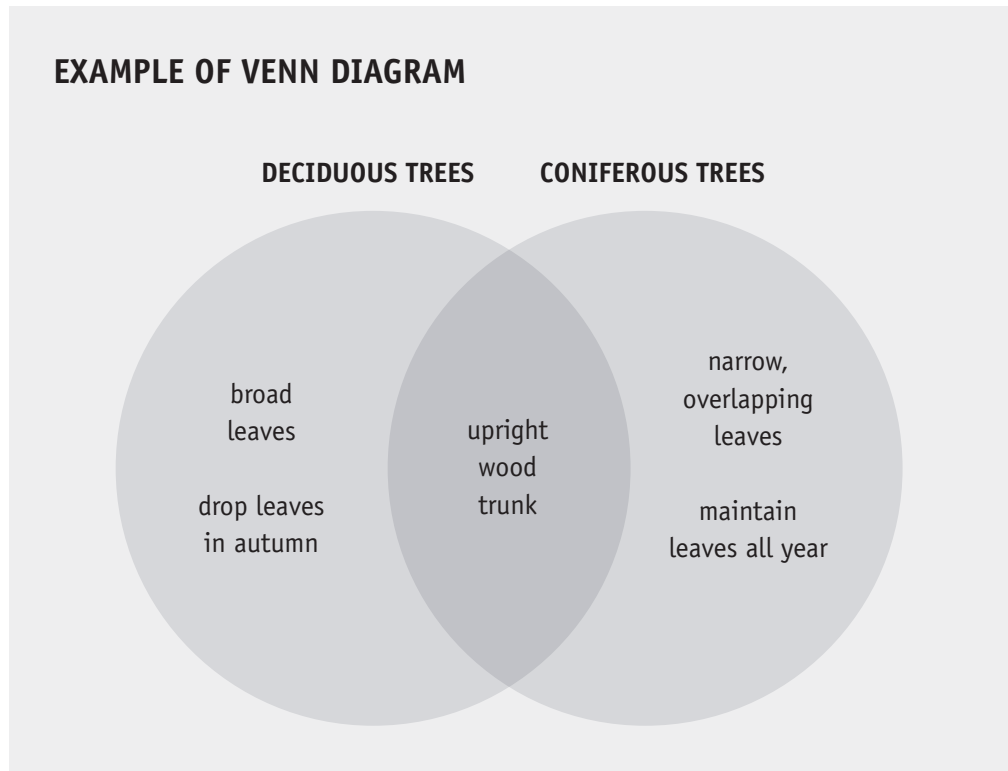
**Ask students to make predictions.** Provide consistent breaks in reading to ensure that everyone understands themes from a story or book. At important points, ask students to make predictions of what will occur next in a story. (“Okay, so we know that George has just found out where the dragon lives. What do you think will happen next?”) Predictions can help prepare weaker readers for upcoming content in reading assignments. (Dyslexia, comprehension)

**Model fluent reading.** Read out loud frequently to students. Teach students how to read smoothly and with expression. (“Did you hear how I said, ‘up on the roof’? These words go together. That’s how we know where the cat went. Then, when I read that the boy was asking how the cat got up on the roof, I raised my voice at the end because he was asking a question and there is a question mark (pointing to it) after ‘How did he get up there?’”) Also encourage students to practice reading out loud with an adult at home. (Dyslexia, fluency, comprehension)

**Provide repeated practice in oral reading.** Having a student repeat the same text multiple times will increase his fluency especially if he is given feedback. The text should contain words the student knows so that word recognition problems are not interfering and the text should be relatively short. (Dyslexia, fluency)

**Practice repetitive, unison reading.** Ask students to read as a class or in groups. This strategy allows students to work on reading aloud without exposing an individual student’s reading weaknesses. (Dyslexia, fluency)

**Teach reading comprehension strategies.** Provide students with tools they can use to focus on particular elements of a story and visually organize information. For example, a Venn diagram might be used for comparing and contrasting two concepts from a nonfiction text. Semantic and graphic organizers may also be helpful. You may suggest a student create a story map as he reads. Older students can be taught to use the SQ3R method (survey, question, read, recite, review) to organize and reinforce ideas from a given text. (comprehension)



**Use audiotope or CD-assisted reading.** Ask students to read along in their books as they listen to another reader on a tape or CD. This can help a student read more smoothly and with expression. (Dyslexia, fluency, comprehension)

**Emphasize vocabulary instruction.** Reading is a primary contributor to vocabulary development, but students with reading difficulties tend to avoid reading. Consequently, their vocabulary may be limited. This cycle further hinders their reading fluency and comprehension. Vocabulary development using computer-based instruction has shown impressive results. You also can preview a text by explaining certain vocabulary words. Show students the same word in multiple contexts and show them how to use a dictionary to look up meanings. (fluency, comprehension)

**Shorten reading assignments.** Children may be very slow readers. As appropriate, reduce the amount of reading you assign to students to accommodate this pace and emphasize comprehension of the material they are able to complete. Encourage students and provide genuine praise on their progress. (Dyslexia, fluency, comprehension)

**Read written instructions.** Students often make mistakes on assignments and tests because they don't fully comprehend written instructions. Help avoid this by

reading aloud all instructions, including those posted on the board. (Dyslexia, fluency, comprehension)

**Be cautious in requiring oral reading.** Most students feel self-conscious or ashamed of reading disabilities. To avoid making these feelings worse, choose small parts of a text you know a student can manage. Reduce classroom pressure by reassuring the student you will only call on him when you know he's able to answer. (Dyslexia, fluency)

**Assign a reading buddy.** A reading buddy is a student who sits near the child with a reading disability. When a child begins to struggle, she may quietly solicit the help of this buddy to sound out words or clarify meaning. (Dyslexia, fluency, comprehension)

**Avoid grading a student's spelling.** Poor spelling skills typically accompany Dyslexia. When appropriate (such as on creative writing assignments) assure students they will not be graded on spelling but on the overall content of their work. (Dyslexia)

**Allow students to demonstrate knowledge in alternative ways.** When appropriate, allow students who struggle with reading to show what they know in ways that don't involve excessive reading or writing. These students might give oral reports or create art projects in place of reading lengthy books or writing reports. Consider administering tests orally to students who have reading or writing difficulties. (Dyslexia, fluency, comprehension)

**Allow extra time for assignments and tests involving reading.** Students with weak literacy skills may need more time to show they understand and can answer questions based on reading material. Relax deadlines and time constraints on assignments and tests. (Dyslexia, fluency, comprehension)

**Monitor student progress on assignments.** Verify that a student is on schedule with a reading assignment. Ask him if he has any questions and encourage the progress he has made. (Dyslexia, fluency, comprehension)

**Provide background information on assignments and tests.** When assigning stories or books for students to read, give weaker readers copies of notes, story summarizations, outlines, lists of key vocabulary words, and other tools that can help prepare them for what they will read. (Dyslexia, fluency, comprehension)

**Consider using multimedia formats in the classroom.** Recorded texts are available through Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic ([www.rfbd.org](http://www.rfbd.org)). These can help students understand a text that may be too difficult or lengthy for them to read. Following along in a book while listening to a recording also can help students

recognize words and improve reading speed. Encourage the use of other technology such as highlighter-type word scanners or computer-based reading software that scans textbooks and audibly reads material back to the student. Big Books—large, illustrated editions of texts—and CDs of texts also are available from many publishers. (Dyslexia, fluency, comprehension)

**Make accommodations or exemptions for learning a foreign language.** Students with Dyslexia will likely have difficulty learning a foreign language. Accommodations or exemptions from a foreign language requirement should be considered. (Dyslexia, fluency, comprehension)

**Increase student interest and engagement.** Poor readers often don't like to read. These students experience reading as boring or too difficult and they tune out or give up. Counteract this disengagement by including in your classroom (and within curricula) reading materials from a wide range of ability levels and interests. If you know a particular student likes animals, for example, suggest she read a book about them in place of a text she's found too boring or difficult. (Dyslexia, fluency, comprehension)

**Promote an attitude of enthusiasm for reading.** Talk about all of the great things about reading and how it can be a lot of fun. You may want to talk about some of the books that have excited you. Ask students to talk about books they're interested in and why. Avoid making judgments on reading preferences. For example, if a student loves reading comic books or a particular Web site, reinforce the act of reading itself without offering any opinion about the content. (Dyslexia, fluency, comprehension)

**Build students' self-esteem as you teach reading skills.** Children who have difficulty reading often think of themselves as “stupid” and may choose to give up on reading efforts because they feel they'll “never learn.” Emphasize that reading difficulties are not an indication of low intelligence. Rather, some students merely have not found the right reading strategies to succeed. Talk about how you are teaching them tools they can use to read better. (Dyslexia, fluency, comprehension)

**Eliminate mistreatment and bullying.** Many children who struggle with reading may be singled out for teasing. Immediately stop any harassment you observe. For ideas toward creating supportive school environments, see “Establishing a Safe and Caring Classroom” on pages 35–36. (Dyslexia, fluency, comprehension)

**Coordinate literacy efforts with other teachers, special education services, and parents.** Work with other school staff to improve reading ability in multiple settings and across content areas. This may involve making others aware of student accommodations you have found helpful or setting up a cross-disciplinary project. Also engage adults at home to encourage and support students as they work to improve their reading abilities. (Dyslexia, fluency, comprehension)

## PROFESSIONAL TREATMENTS

Some students may require more individual reading instruction or remediation than is available in school. They may require the help of reading specialists who are well-trained in research-based reading instruction methods. •

## ELEMENTS OF CLASSROOM READING INSTRUCTION

Reading instruction may vary a great deal between schools. Following are some key elements that should be included in all reading programs.

- Instruction must be *explicit*. Learning fundamental reading skills of letter-sound relationships cannot be left to chance. It cannot be assumed that a student knows that “t” makes a certain sound, or that “a” can make multiple sounds or that “au” sounds different from “ae.” These “connections” must be taught, repeated, and practiced.
- Instruction must be *systematic*. Phonics instruction should be taught in a logical sequence. For example, students should master all single letters before learning letter combinations.
- Instruction must be *intensive*. Students identified as weak readers should be provided with considerably more reading instruction as early as first grade.
- Instruction must be delivered *sequentially and gradually*. Students should learn, practice, and master one skill before moving on to tackle another skill.
- Phonics instruction should not be taught in isolation but in the *context of academic content*. Fluency and comprehension also should be emphasized.
- Students with any type of learning difficulty require more *positive emotional support and reinforcement*. Teachers should be “cheerleaders” for these students.

For more information on specific reading strategies and programs, see “Resources” on page 187.