

Section 1, Chapter 3

What is dyslexia?⁹ Official definitions defined.

If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck,
it's probably a duck.

The wrong road down which the most current and expensive research on dyslexia is headed.

A Few Definitions of Dyslexia:

- **DYSLEXIA IS:** “a disorder manifested by difficulty in learning to read despite conventional instruction, adequate intelligence and sociocultural opportunity.”

—World Federation of Neurology

Translation: If a student isn't dumb and he isn't surrounded by people who hate schools and he goes to school and gets the “conventional instruction” (Look-see or whole language or even phonics), and he has problems reading, it must be that he is dyslexic.

- Developmental dyslexia is a specific learning disability characterized by difficulty in learning to read. Some dyslexics also may have difficulty learning to write, to spell, and, sometimes, to speak or to work with numbers. We do not know for sure what causes dyslexia, but we do know that it affects children who are physically and emotionally healthy, academically capable, and who come from good home environments. In fact, many dyslexics have the advantages of excellent schools, high mental ability, and parents who are well-educated and value learning.

—U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Translation: We don't know for sure what causes dyslexia, but the difficulty in learning to read, spell, speak, or do math (dyslexia) can affect healthy, intelligent people who attend excellent schools (nice buildings, well paid teachers, and look-see or whole language curriculum) and have a good family environment.

- Dyslexia is a neurologically-based, often familial, disorder which interferes with the acquisition and processing of language. Varying in degrees of severity, it is manifested by difficulties in receptive and expressive language, including phonological processing, in reading, writing, spelling, handwriting, and sometimes in arithmetic. Dyslexia is not a result of lack of motivation, sensory impairment, inadequate instructional or environmental opportunities, or other limiting conditions, but may occur together with these conditions. Although dyslexia is life-long, individuals with dyslexia frequently respond successfully to timely and appropriate intervention.

—Definition proposed by
Committee of Members

Orton Dyslexia Society¹⁰, Nov., 1994.

Translation: This means dyslexia is related to the structure of the brain itself that may either be inherited or caused by brain damage.¹¹ The bell curve applies to dyslexics as

⁹ This entire chapter I plagiarized from myself. You can find it again in its entirety in my autobiography *To Teach a Dyslexic*. That's why it's written in the first person. So I'm lazy. Sue me.

¹⁰ The Orton Dyslexia Society has renamed itself as the International Dyslexia Society.

¹¹ My dyslexia could be the result of brain damage. I suffered birth trauma, but since my son and one of my grandsons is dyslexic, it could also be genetic, or perhaps even both.

well as all other segments of society in regards to the individual difficulties in understanding language (written, oral, and body) and in using language in speaking or writing. Dyslexia is not the result of a child not trying or not having sufficient motivation. Dyslexia is not the result of something wrong with the eyes or the ears. Dyslexia is not the result of poor teaching or poor environments. Dyslexia cannot be cured. But some dyslexics can be taught to read and write if they receive "proper" teaching early enough.

- Dyslexia is one of several distinct learning disabilities. It is a specific language-based disorder of constitutional origin characterized by difficulties in single word decoding, usually reflecting insufficient phonological processing abilities. These difficulties in single word decoding are often unexpected in relation to age and other cognitive and academic abilities; they are not the result of generalized developmental disability or sensory impairment. Dyslexia is manifested by variable difficulty with different forms of language, often including, in addition to problems reading, a conspicuous problem with acquiring proficiency in writing and spelling.

—Orton Dyslexia Society
Research Committee, Nov. 1994

Translation: Much the same as the other translations.

What is *my* definition of *dyslexia*? I don't bother defining dyslexia. To me, the word *dyslexia* is a word much like the word *love*. We all know what *love* is. But the more we try to define exactly what *love* is and what *love* is not, the more confused we get.

Besides, who cares what the best definition is? All I care about is that everybody should receive proper instruction in reading and writing. As far as I am concerned, *everybody* can be taught to read and write at least as well as they can speak.

But if I am pressed to give a definition of dyslexia, rather than invent one of my own, I think I would choose the one the Orton Dyslexia Society uses in its brochure *dys ◆lex ◆ia DEFINING THE PROBLEM*. The following passage is quoted directly from this pamphlet. The only exception is the clearly marked notation concerning my personal traits that are associated with dyslexia.

The word *dyslexia* is derived from Greek: *dys* (poor or inadequate); and *lexis* (words). The English meaning is poor or inadequate language. Dyslexia is characterized by problems in expressive or receptive, oral or written language. Problems may emerge in reading, spelling, writing, speaking, or listening. Dyslexia is not a disease; it has no cure. Dyslexia describes a different kind of mind—often gifted and productive—that learns differently. Intelligence is not the problem. Dyslexics may have average to superior intelligence. An unexpected gap exists between their learning aptitude and their achievement in school.

The problem is not behavioral. It is not psychological. It is not social. It is not a problem of vision; dyslexics do not "see backward." Dyslexia results from differences in the structure and the function of the brain.

Dyslexics are unique. Each has individual strengths and weaknesses. Many dyslexics are creative and have unusual talent in areas such as art, athletics, architecture, graphics, electronics, mechanics, drama, music, or engineering. Dyslexics often show special talent in areas that require visual, spatial, and motor integration.

Their problems in language processing distinguish them as a group. This means that the dyslexic has problems translating language to thought (as in listening or reading) or in translating thought to language (as in writing or speaking).

CHARACTERISTICS

that may accompany dyslexia

- ✓Lack of awareness of sounds in words—sound order, rhymes, or sequence of syllables.
- ✓Difficulty decoding words—single word identification.
- ✓Difficulty encoding words—spelling.
- ✓Poor sequencing of numbers and of letters in words, when read or written, e.g.: b-d; p-q, sing-sign; left-felt; soiled-solid; 12-21.
- ✓Problems with reading comprehension.
- ✓Difficulty in expressing thoughts orally.
- ✓Delayed spoken language.
- ✓ Imprecise or incomplete interpretation of language that is heard.
- ✓Confusion about directions in space or time (right and left, up and down, early and late, yesterday and tomorrow, months and days).
- ✓Confusion about right or left handedness
- ✓Similar problems among relatives.

Characteristics that I possess

When I take tests that use nonsense words run together in normal speech patterns, I fail miserably.

I have no problem. My sister was a good teacher

Again, no problem. Same reason

In tests using nonsense words without normal patterns such as nsoeensn, I do miserably. Transposing numbers has often created problems for me, especially dialing telephone numbers.

No real problem. Same reason.

Yes. I never know when something I know, word or fact or name, suddenly cannot be retrieved. But I have developed many compensating verbal skills.

I was the slowest in my family to talk. I had speech therapy from 1st Grade through the 4th.

I heard “mustard” for Buster, and “for all intensive purposes” instead of intents and purposes. I find it difficult to hear words when sung or when I can’t see the person who is speaking.

In buildings or in cities where hallways or streets do not follow nice neat patterns, I’m lost. Without a watch, I have no sense of time.

I bat and throw with either hand, and can even write with either hand or play table tennis equally badly with either hand.

My son and grandson exhibit many of the same symptoms.

CHARACTERISTICS *that
may accompany dyslexia*

✓Difficulty with handwriting

✓Difficulty in mathematics—
often related to sequencing of
steps or directionality or to
the language of mathematics.

*Characteristics
that I possess*

*The only grade below an A that
I received in grade school was
in handwriting. Although most
people consider my handwriting
to be excellent, I have only achieved
what would have been good enough
for my Cook School teachers to be
given a C.*

*As long as I had good teachers,
I have had no problem.
However, learning the symbols
and formulas in statistics was a
nightmare for me.*

**FEW DYSLEXICS EXHIBIT ALL THE SIGNS OF THE DISORDER.
THEIR PROBLEMS IN LANGUAGE PROCESSING DISTINGUISH THEM AS A GROUP.**

End of Quotation. *Column of italics is mine.*

Would I add any characteristics to Orton's list? Yes. Having a logical mind and wanting to know *why* is a characteristic I have found most dyslexics share. Most dyslexics, by the time they reach high school, will be able to read and spell *cat, fish, peck, and helpful*. Yet a word like *special* is liable to absolutely throw them for a loop. Why? Logic. Major premise. Words with the letter c have either a /k/ sound or a /s/ sound. "Spek-eye-al" is not a word. "Spee-sigh-AL" is not a word. All combinations of sounds and accents lead to nothing. The word *special* can't be sounded out using what I have been **taught**. BEEP BEEP BEEP goes the logical computer. It does not compute. Non-dyslexics generally have no problem learning this word. Logic and rules don't interfere. Someone told them that the letters s-p-e-c-i-a-l spell special. So they learned. Maybe not the first time, but it didn't take many repetitions for them to learn.

And I do think the problem lies in the underlying, unstated, and definitely not-admitted-to-by-our-educational-leaders assumption that schools need only ensure that students learn the names of the letters of the alphabet, write the letters somewhat legibly, surround the students with words and pretty pictures, and expose them to literature, and they'll learn to read. That this is all that is necessary for some to learn to read is undoubtedly true. And it is some of these "some" who run our schools. Their unspoken logic is: What was enough for them to learn should be good enough for everybody else. **WRONG!**