

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Breaking down the definition of dyslexia
- » Understanding the different subtypes of dyslexia
- » Identifying and addressing dyslexia
- » Setting the stage for supporting individuals from the jump

Chapter 1

Dyslexia Basics

What exactly is dyslexia? The answer is more nuanced than you may think. Dyslexia isn't the same for everyone, and there's no single formula that captures every person's experience. In this chapter, you unpack the definition of dyslexia piece by piece and explore the different profiles, subtypes, and common co-occurring conditions that help explain why dyslexia looks different from one person to the next.

The more you understand from the start, the better prepared you'll be to recognize the signs of dyslexia, pursue an appropriate evaluation, support effective intervention, advocate with confidence, and provide the kind of ongoing support that helps the people you care about thrive.

Demystifying Dyslexia

For a term that is so widely used, dyslexia remains widely misunderstood. Some people still associate dyslexia with seeing letters backward. Others assume it is simply a reading delay that students will eventually outgrow. Many educators can easily recognize a struggling reader, but fewer are certain about what dyslexia actually is, how it develops, and what makes it different from other reading difficulties.

Part of the confusion stems from the fact that dyslexia is not always easy to identify. It can look different from one student to the next. Some students struggle to connect letters to sounds to read accurately, while others are accurate but read painfully slowly. Some students have strong oral language skills, while others experience language difficulties from an early age. To make matters more complex, dyslexia often co-occurs with conditions such as ADHD, dysgraphia, language disorders, and anxiety, making it difficult to determine where one challenge ends and another begins.

The good news is that our understanding of dyslexia has grown tremendously over the past several decades. Researchers now know far more about how reading develops, why some students struggle with it, and which instructional approaches are most effective. Now more than ever, educators are better equipped to recognize the signs of dyslexia, make a referral for diagnosis, and provide instruction and support that can change the trajectory of a student's academic journey.



REMEMBER

The better we understand dyslexia, the better positioned we are to debunk myths (see Chapter 3) and provide the targeted support that helps these individuals reach their potential.

IDA definition

The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) is widely recognized as a leading authority on dyslexia. Their definition is often viewed as the gold standard among researchers, clinicians, and educators. Grounded in decades of scientific research, the definition reflects our current understanding of dyslexia and highlights important considerations for understanding the signs and ongoing challenges, and for providing the right supports.



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Science is always evolving, and our understanding of dyslexia evolves with it. That's why the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) has updated its definition over the years. First adopted in 1994, revised in 2002, and updated again in 2025, the definition reflects what researchers and clinicians know about dyslexia today.

There are several tenets to the 2025 IDA definition of dyslexia. The following list breaks them down:

» **Dyslexia is a specific learning disability characterized by difficulties in word reading and/or spelling that involve accuracy, speed, or both and vary depending on the *orthography* (a language's spelling system).** People with dyslexia have difficulty learning to read and spell; the process is often effortful and inefficient, requiring substantially more time and practice than it does for their peers.

- » **These difficulties (discussed more in Chapter 4) occur along a continuum of severity.** There is no single profile of dyslexia. Some individuals experience mild difficulties that are noticeable only during demanding reading and writing tasks, while others struggle significantly with basic reading and spelling throughout school and adulthood. Because dyslexia can look different from one person to the next, it can be difficult to recognize.
- » **The difficulties persist even with instruction that is effective for the individual's peers.** This calls out that students typically require more explicit, intensive, and specialized instruction to improve their reading and spelling skills, but even then, it takes time to remediate.
- » **The causes (see Chapter 2) are complex and involve combinations of genetic, neurobiological, and environmental influences that interact throughout development.** Put simply, dyslexia can run in families and reflects differences in how the brain develops and processes language. In addition, a student's environment (like early language experiences and classroom instruction) influences how dyslexia presents and how successfully it is addressed.
- » **Underlying difficulties with phonological processing and morphological processing are common but not universal.** Some, but not all, students have difficulty working with the sounds in spoken language or have difficulties reading, spelling, or understanding various word parts like prefixes, suffixes, and base elements.
- » **Early oral language weaknesses often foreshadow literacy challenges.** These weaknesses may include delayed language development, limited vocabulary, or difficulty understanding and using language, and can be an early indication that dyslexia may be present.
- » **Secondary consequences include reading comprehension problems and reduced reading and writing experience that can impede growth in language, knowledge, written expression, and overall academic achievement.** Because individuals with dyslexia often engage in less reading and writing than their peers due to the effort and skill these tasks require, there can be a downstream effect on their overall achievement.
- » **Psychological well-being and employment opportunities also may be affected.** Over time, unaddressed reading and learning difficulties can contribute to challenges in self-esteem, mental health, and securing or maintaining meaningful employment.
- » **Although identification and targeted instruction are important at any age, language and literacy support before and during the early years of education is particularly effective.** The greatest gains are typically achieved when language and literacy support begins early, either before or during the first years of formal schooling.



REMEMBER

Definitions matter. Researchers intentionally selected each word to ensure alignment to the current evidence base. As policymakers and school systems begin to adopt the definition, these words will shape who gets identified, who gets support, and what support looks like. The IDA definition provides a research-informed framework for understanding dyslexia and translating that understanding into effective educational practice.

Comorbidities

Dyslexia rarely occurs in isolation. Many students with dyslexia also experience other learning, language, attention, or emotional challenges. These are often referred to as *comorbidities* or co-occurring conditions. The following commonly coexist with dyslexia:



WARNING

- » **Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD):** This is one of the most common co-occurring conditions. Students with both dyslexia and ADHD may struggle with reading and spelling while also having difficulty sustaining attention, managing impulses, or organizing their work.

When attention difficulties are highly noticeable, reading difficulties may be mistakenly viewed as a byproduct of inattention rather than a reading disability. Educators may get to work on supporting ADHD-related behaviors but reading difficulties will persist.

- » **Developmental language disorders (DLD):** Some students experience difficulties understanding or using spoken language (like learning vocabulary or following complex directions). Because reading builds on oral language, weaknesses in language can contribute to literacy difficulties and may serve as early indicators of future reading challenges.
- » **Dysgraphia:** Dysgraphia is a difficulty with handwriting and written expression. Students may struggle to form letters legibly, organize their ideas on paper, or produce written work that reflects their content knowledge. When both dyslexia and dysgraphia are present, reading and writing tasks can become especially demanding because students must simultaneously manage challenges with decoding, spelling, handwriting, and composition.
- » **Executive functioning (EF) difficulties:** Executive functions are the mental processes that help us plan, organize, manage time, regulate attention, and monitor our own performance. Students with EF weaknesses may have trouble keeping track of assignments, following multistep directions, or completing tasks independently. These deficits make academic tasks more challenging and, like ADHD, make it difficult to fully understand the extent of a student's struggles.

» **Anxiety:** Years of struggling with reading and writing can lead students to worry about making mistakes, avoid reading or writing tasks, and doubt their abilities. For some students, the resulting anxiety can become as significant a barrier as the reading challenges themselves.



WARNING

Recognizing conditions like ADHD, executive function deficits, or anxiety does not rule out the coexisting presence of dyslexia. In fact, it may make dyslexia harder to detect, delaying identification and intervention.

Educators who understand these overlaps can help ensure that all of a student's needs are recognized and addressed. For example, a student who struggles with reading may also need support for language, attention, writing, organization, or emotional well-being. Looking at the whole learner allows schools to provide more effective and comprehensive support.

Examining Subtypes of Dyslexia

Because dyslexia exists along a continuum, there is no single dyslexia profile. While people with dyslexia experience difficulty with reading and/or spelling, the underlying reasons for those difficulties can vary from person to person. This is where the concept of subtypes of dyslexia comes into play. Researchers have identified common patterns of strengths and weaknesses that tend to appear together, helping to explain why two students with dyslexia may struggle in very different ways.



WARNING

Dyslexia subtypes are not rigid categories. A person may fit one subtype, show characteristics of several, or see their profile change as reading demands evolve. Rather than viewing subtypes as permanent labels, they are best understood as descriptions of common patterns that can help guide assessment and instruction.



TIP

Think of dyslexia subtypes as different routes leading to the same destination: difficulty with reading and spelling. While the outcome may look similar on the surface, the underlying challenges are not always the same. By recognizing these differences, educators can move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and provide instruction that addresses each student's unique profile of strengths and needs.

Phonological dyslexia

Phonological dyslexia is the subtype most closely associated with what many people think of when they hear the term “dyslexia.” The primary difficulty involves phonological processing, or the ability to work with the sounds in spoken language. Therefore, individuals with this profile have particular difficulty connecting letters to sounds and using those relationships to read unfamiliar words. For example, a child might read *cat*, *go*, and *help* with ease, but be lost when they come upon words like *strain*, *phrase*, or a made-up word like *splane*.



TIP

A student who reads *mom* and *home* accurately but can't decode a nonsense word like *lat* or *mib* may be relying on memory rather than sound-symbol knowledge. That's why some classrooms assess students on nonsense word reading. These reading behaviors are often associated with phonological dyslexia.

In the classroom, students with phonological dyslexia may read slowly and laboriously, rely heavily on memorizing words they have already encountered or drilled into memory, and experience significant difficulty when faced with unfamiliar words. They often avoid reading because the effort required to decode words can be exhausting and frustrating. In addition to reading difficulty, their spelling often reflects challenges. *Phonetic spelling*, or spelling words the way they sound, is developmentally appropriate in the early stages of literacy development. However, students with this profile often continue to struggle with spelling long after their peers have mastered common spelling patterns, despite having received extensive, explicit instruction.

Rapid naming-based dyslexia

Rapid naming dyslexia occurs when a student has difficulty quickly recalling and naming information they already know. The underlying weakness shows up on a task called *rapid automatized naming* (RAN). Unlike students with phonological dyslexia, these students may understand letter-sound relationships and be able to sound out words correctly. Their challenge is not knowing the information; it's retrieving, or accessing, it quickly. For example, a student may instantly recognize a letter or object but take longer than expected to name it. They may also be able to sound out words accurately but still read much more slowly than their peers. Another common sign is difficulty finding the right word when speaking. Students may know exactly what they want to say but need extra time to retrieve the word, causing them to pause, use vague language, or substitute a different word.

Underlying these difficulties is a weakness in rapid automatized naming, which refers to the ability to quickly access and retrieve verbal labels for familiar visual information. Reading requires much more than accurately sounding out words.

Skilled readers must rapidly recognize letters, access sounds, retrieve word meanings, and move on to the next word. When retrieval is slow, reading speed and fluency often suffer, even when decoding skills are relatively strong. For this reason, some school systems have begun assessing all elementary students on RAN as part of their yearly assessments.



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RAN is primarily an indicator of risk for reading difficulties, which makes it a worthwhile assessment to give, especially when assessing risk for dyslexia. However, rapid naming is not a skill that is targeted through standard intervention.

Because these students can often decode words accurately, rapid naming dyslexia is easy to miss.



REMEMBER

Students with this subtype may perform relatively well on decoding and spelling assessments but continue to struggle with reading fluency. In addition, teachers may report that the student has the knowledge and understands what to do, but consistently works more slowly than classmates, and needs extra time for tasks that require quick recall of information.

Double deficit dyslexia

Double deficit dyslexia occurs when a student experiences weaknesses in both phonological processing and rapid automatized naming. Phonological processing involves working with the sounds in spoken language, while rapid naming refers to the ability to quickly and automatically retrieve familiar information such as letters, numbers, or objects. Researchers propose that when difficulties exist in both areas, reading challenges are often more severe than when only one weakness is present. For example, a student with phonological dyslexia may struggle to sound out an unfamiliar word, while a student with a RAN weakness may know the word but take a long time to retrieve it. A student with double deficit dyslexia faces both challenges at the same time. They have difficulty decoding words accurately and also struggle to recognize words quickly enough to read efficiently and attend to meaning.



REMEMBER

Skilled readers can read accurately and automatically, or effortlessly. When both systems are affected, students often expend so much effort figuring out words that reading becomes slow and laborious.

In the classroom, these students have significant difficulty learning to read, despite strong instruction. Therefore, they'll frequently require more intensive, comprehensive intervention that targets both decoding skills and reading fluency. If instruction focuses exclusively on phonics, students may improve reading accuracy but continue to face reading fluency difficulties.



TIP

Practice makes perfect! Like most skills, reading and spelling get better with targeted practice and reinforcement. Some students, especially students with double deficit dyslexia, need more practice opportunities to consolidate their skills.

Surface dyslexia

Surface dyslexia is characterized by difficulty recognizing and reading words that do not follow an expected spelling, often called irregular words. Individuals with this profile tend to rely heavily on sounding out words, and that works well for many words, so their difficulties may go unnoticed at first. However, as they encounter more irregular words, their challenges become much more apparent because these words can't be read correctly by applying basic letter-sound relationships alone. For example, a student may accurately decode words such as *stamp*, *fantastic*, or *invented*, but struggle with words like *said*, *debt*, or *yacht*. Because these words do not follow predictable phonics rules, the student may attempt to read them exactly as they are spelled, resulting in mispronunciations.

Underlying these reading difficulties is a weakness in what's referred to as orthographic processing, which is the ability to store, remember, and quickly recognize the visual patterns of written words. Instead of building a large bank of instantly recognizable words, students with surface dyslexia may continue to laboriously sound out words that they've encountered and decoded many times before. They're likely to misread or hesitate with complex words and struggle with spelling words that can't be spelled accurately by relying on sound alone. Their spelling often reflects phonetic logic, producing spellings such as *sed* for *said* or *thay* for *they*.



REMEMBER

Pay attention to how a student makes mistakes. Students with surface dyslexia often make errors that show they are applying phonics correctly to words that can't be read phonetically. When a student pronounces the initial K in *knock* or spells *was* as *wuz*, the issue may not be weak phonics skills. They could actually be having difficulty storing and remembering the specific spellings and pronunciations of irregular words.

Recognizing Dyslexia

Dyslexia is much more than a reading problem; it's a language-based difference that often shows signs long before a child begins formal reading instruction (see Chapter 4 for more). Many children with dyslexia show early difficulties with speech and language, like rhyming words or learning letter names and sounds. While these signs may appear in the toddler years, not every child with a speech

or language delay will develop dyslexia. What matters most is a pattern of persistent challenges that continue over time and begin to affect reading and spelling.

One of the strongest indicators of dyslexia is difficulty with *phonological awareness*, which is the ability to hear and work with the sounds in spoken words. Children may struggle with pre-reading skills like recognizing rhymes, breaking words into syllables, identifying individual sounds, or blending sounds together to make words. Many children with dyslexia also have trouble learning and remembering letter-sound connections (like B represents /b/). They may need far more repetition than their peers to learn the alphabet, connect letters to sounds, or decode simple words. As reading demands increase, they may continue to read slowly, guess at words, or struggle with spelling.

Over time, another challenge often emerges: a lack of *automaticity*, meaning their reading is effortful. Even when students can decode words accurately, reading may remain slow and laborious, leaving less mental energy available for comprehension. Dyslexia is also commonly associated with weaknesses in *working memory*, the brain's ability to hold and manage information temporarily. A child may forget multistep directions, lose track of details while reading, or struggle to remember spelling patterns and rules.

As children grow, many develop clever ways to compensate for their reading difficulties. Some use pictures, context clues, word parts, or strong comprehension to figure out a word without fully decoding it. While these strategies may help students succeed in the short term, these compensatory strategies can sometimes mask underlying reading difficulties, making dyslexia harder to identify.



REMEMBER



WARNING

Strong comprehension does not eliminate the need for accurate and automatic word reading skills, especially as decoding demands increase with age.

Avoid the “wait and see” approach. Noticing signs and seeking early intervention is highly effective, but waiting for a child to “grow out of it” can lead to unnecessary frustration and lost learning opportunities. (Find out more about school-based evaluation in Chapter 5 and private evaluations in Chapter 7.)

Diagnosing Dyslexia

Diagnosing dyslexia is a process; it's not determined through a single test or checklist. Schools typically begin by collecting information over time to determine whether a student's reading development is unfolding as expected, as explained

in Chapter 10. They ideally begin by administering universal screening assessments, which are brief assessments given to all students several times a year. If a student shows signs of risk or performing below expectations, teachers may follow up with more detailed diagnostic assessments and ongoing progress monitoring to determine which reading skills are weak, implement a plan to improve skills, and determine whether targeted intervention is helping.



TIP

When inquiring about a student's reading abilities, it's best to compare their progress on national, standardized tests rather than classroom grades. A one-minute oral reading fluency probe given to students across the country tells a lot more about a learner than a ten-word spelling test given last week.

If a student continues to struggle despite high-quality instruction and intervention, the school may consider a comprehensive evaluation to determine whether an underlying learning disability, such as dyslexia, is contributing to the difficulty. A formal evaluation typically begins with a referral, which may come from the school after reviewing assessment and intervention data or from a parent with concerns about their child's reading development. Parents have the right to request an evaluation in writing, and schools are required to respond. Once an evaluation begins, a team of professionals — including school psychologists, teachers, reading specialists, speech-language pathologists, parents, and sometimes the student — collects information from multiple sources such as cognitive and academic testing, classroom observations, developmental history, intervention data, work samples, and input from parents and teachers.



REMEMBER

Dyslexia is diagnosed based on patterns, not individual test scores. Evaluators look for persistent reading difficulties that are unexpected given the student's age, instruction, and opportunities to learn.

When an evaluation is complete, families receive a written report summarizing the findings. These reports typically include background information, developmental and educational history, assessment results, behavioral observations, diagnosis conclusions, and recommendations.



TIP

The most useful sections are often the summary and recommendations because they explain what the results mean in everyday language and outline practical next steps for instruction, intervention, accommodations, and support.

Some families choose to pursue a private evaluation instead of, or in addition to, a school evaluation. Common reasons include disagreement with school results or a desire for a more detailed understanding of a child's learning profile. Adults may also seek evaluations later in life after recognizing long-standing reading and spelling difficulties. Whether the evaluation is completed through a school or a private provider, the ultimate purpose is the same: to understand why reading is difficult and determine what support is needed.

As we discuss in Chapter 6, diagnosis itself is only the beginning. The most important outcome of any evaluation is a clear plan that translates assessment findings into effective instruction, intervention, accommodations, and ongoing progress monitoring so every student receives what they need to grow.

Treating Dyslexia

Treating dyslexia can feel overwhelming at first, especially when families encounter conflicting advice about what works. The good news is that decades of research on reading development have led to broad agreement on the type of instruction that best supports students with dyslexia: structured literacy. Understanding what structured literacy is, how to identify it, and how to monitor progress can help families and educators make informed decisions and avoid approaches that lack evidence.

Structured literacy (see Chapter 8) is an explicit, systematic approach to reading instruction that teaches the skills needed for proficient reading and writing. Instead of expecting students to discover patterns on their own, teachers directly teach skills in a carefully sequenced order with frequent review and practice. Instruction includes the major components of reading, often called the “Big Five”: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Structured literacy supports all learners but is especially important for students with dyslexia because it directly targets the underlying language and reading skills where they often experience difficulty.

One of the most important lessons from reading research about treating dyslexia is that early intervention matters. The earlier reading difficulties are identified and addressed, the better. Researchers often describe a window of opportunity in the early elementary years when the brain is especially responsive to reading instruction.



WARNING

Waiting for students to fail before providing support can make intervention more difficult and often requires significantly more intensive services later.

Despite growing awareness of dyslexia, many families still encounter barriers in obtaining support. Misunderstandings about dyslexia, limited access to trained professionals, and inconsistent school programming can delay intervention. Families may want to ask questions about the teacher’s training, certifications, and experience working with students who have reading difficulties because the expertise of the teacher often matters just as much as the curriculum and instructional approach. Discover more about finding the right supports in Chapter 9.

In some situations, additional outside support may be necessary. Families may explore options such as compensatory education, school transfers, high-dosage tutoring, or additional intervention services. The best choice depends on the student's needs, the quality of services currently available, and practical considerations like scheduling and cost.



REMEMBER

While no single option is right for every child, intensive, evidence-based instruction delivered by qualified professionals tends to produce the strongest outcomes.

Providing effective instruction is only part of the process. Students' progress must also be monitored over time. Educators use a variety of assessment measures to determine how students are performing and whether they are making adequate progress. In addition to formal assessment data, classroom performance should always be considered for a more complete picture of the student's skills. Continuous monitoring shows whether a student is making enough progress to close skill gaps.

As students grow and their needs change, supports may need to be adjusted, so intervention plans should remain flexible. Some students may gradually require less intensive intervention as they meet their goals, while others may need a different instructional approach if progress slows.



REMEMBER

Effective dyslexia support is not a one-time decision; it is an ongoing process of instruction, assessment, and adjustment. By understanding what works, finding qualified support, and carefully tracking progress, families and educators can set students with dyslexia down the path for long-term reading success.

Supporting People with Dyslexia

Supporting individuals with dyslexia extends beyond securing a diagnosis and implementing services. Understanding how support changes across different stages of life can help families, educators, and individuals advocate for what's needed.

One of the most important forms of support in school is the use of accommodations. *Accommodations* (covered in Chapter 11) are adjustments that help students access learning and demonstrate their knowledge without changing what they are expected to learn. Instructional accommodations may include providing written notes, breaking large assignments into smaller tasks, or offering additional practice opportunities. Environmental accommodations can reduce distractions or

provide preferential seating, while assessment accommodations may include extended time, oral administration, or alternative ways to demonstrate learning.



REMEMBER

Accommodations are supports that help level the playing field so students can focus on learning content rather than overcoming reading barriers.

While accommodations are valuable, they should not replace intervention. Intervention helps students develop reading and writing skills, while accommodations provide access to learning as those skills continue to grow. Having both allows students to participate meaningfully in classroom activities while still receiving targeted instruction to address underlying areas of need.

Support at home plays an equally important role in a child's success, as we discuss in Chapter 12. Families can create literacy-rich environments by modeling authentic reading and writing, engaging in meaningful conversations, reading aloud, and providing access to books. Home support also includes creating organizational systems that promote consistency and independence.



TIP

Predictable homework routines, visual schedules, and calendars can help children manage time and responsibilities more effectively.

Emotional support is just as important as academic support. Students with dyslexia may experience frustration, anxiety, or self-doubt as they work through their difficulties. Teachers and families can help by emphasizing effort and progress over perfection. In addition, ongoing communication between home and school to celebrate growth of any size goes a long way.

For some individuals, dyslexia is not identified until adulthood, as discussed in Chapter 13. A late diagnosis often brings mixed emotions. While some adults describe feeling relieved to finally have an explanation for years of struggles, others experience sadness, frustration, or grief about opportunities they feel they missed. Processing these emotions can take time, and support from counselors, therapists, support groups, dyslexia communities, and related advocacy organizations (see Chapters 12–14) can help individuals better understand their experiences and move forward.

