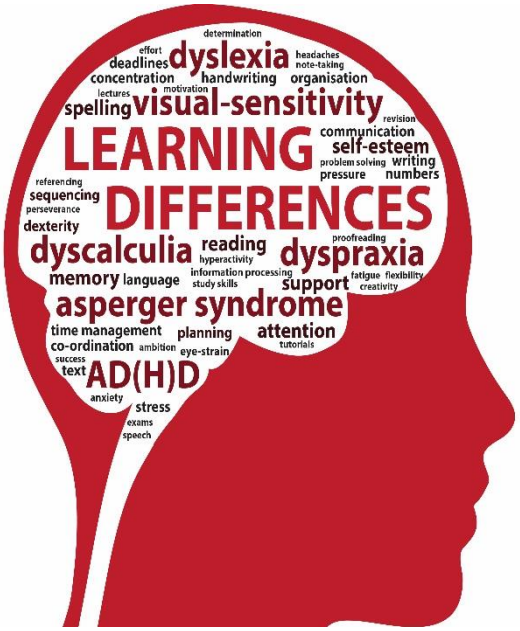
Dyslexia Team

Disability Services, Bangor University

Guidelines for marking and feedback for students with specific learning differences (SpLDs)



(Adapted from Poster designed by Laura Haggett, Psychology Postgraduate, 2013)

"…it is a common misunderstanding that the role of the dyslexia tutor is to correct errors in their students' work. The dyslexia tutor is employed to *teach* the dyslexic student to develop strategies that they can employ themselves and become independent; the role is **not** to proofread a student's work. In reality, even with the use of assistive technology and support from a dyslexia tutor, many students with dyslexia will still be unable to correct their errors despite their best efforts. Many students with SpLDs do not have access to a dyslexia tutor. Flagging up coursework compensates for these disparities" (Conway and Turner 2011:3).

(August 2017 - JJ)

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1. Introduction

This short booklet provides practical guidelines and information to support lecturers in marking coursework and examinations, as a reasonable adjustment for students with dyslexia and / or other Specific Learning Differences (SpLDs), whilst maintaining academic standards. Guidance is also given on marking the work of oral presentations.

This booklet is not intended as a set of prescriptive rules. Bangor University offers a diverse portfolio of course provision and academic staff and professional / statutory bodies are best placed to decide on what is legitimately measured when marking work.

Neither is it intended that these guidelines should conflict with assessment criteria. **For example, if the specified assessment criteria for an assignment or examination include the standard of written English achieved by the student, then to ensure that the intended learning outcomes of the programme have been achieved, those criteria should be applied and where necessary, explained in feedback to help the student develop the relevant skills.** However, as a reasonable adjustment, it is still necessary to consider whether an alternative method of assessment should be used to determine the student's knowledge of the subject material (University of Bournemouth, 2003).

The booklet begins with a brief explanation of Specific Learning Differences (SpLDs) before moving to discuss reasonable adjustments, the yellow slips and competence standards in order to contextualise the advice that follows on marking: coursework, examinations and oral presentations. Finally, the last sections set out some guidelines when giving feedback and some frequently asked questions that have been raised during both the PGCertHE induction (2014) and the School of Health and Sports Science (SHES) workshop (2014) at Bangor University.

2. What are Specific Learning Differences (SpLDs)?

The British Dyslexia Association (BDA) (2012) point out that Specific Learning Differences impact on the way information is learned and processed. These differences are neurological in origin rather than psychological and usually run in families. They also occur independently of intelligence. Notably, such differences can impact significantly on education and learning and on developing literacy skills.

"SpLD is an umbrella term used to cover a range of frequently co-occurring differences, more commonly:

- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia
- Dyscalculia
- A.D.D. / A.D.H.D.
- Auditory Processing Disorder

SpLDs can also co-occur with differences on the autistic spectrum such as Asperger Syndrome" (p.1).

Due to the high level of co-occurrence between different SpLDs, one should note that each individual profile is unique to the person and can manifest in a variety of experiences. Effects can range from mild to severe and it may be difficult to diagnose, determine the impact and accommodate.

The BDA defines dyslexia as a specific learning difference mainly affecting the development of literacy and language related skills. It is likely to be present at birth and to be life-long in its effects. Dyslexia is characterised by differences with phonological processing, rapid naming, working memory, processing speed and the automatic development of skills that may not match up to an individual's other cognitive abilities. It tends to be resistant to conventional teaching methods but its effects can be mitigated by appropriately specific intervention.

Some common characteristics of SpLDs are difficulties with:

Memory; organisation; visual processing; auditory processing; reading; writing; time management; sensory distraction: an inability to screen out extraneous visual or auditory stimuli; visual stress (BDA, 2012).

3. Reasonable Adjustments

The Equality Act 2010 requires reasonable adjustments to be made by institutions to alleviate or remove the effects of 'substantial disadvantage'. In practice, this means doing things differently if the usual way would substantially disadvantage a disabled person. Or it might mean providing additional services or equipment. **Marking guidelines is one example of a reasonable adjustment.**

What is reasonable is dependent on the individual circumstances of the case, including how important the adjustment is, how practical it is and the financial or other resources of the institution. Of note: it is the financial resources of the institution as a whole and not the budget of an individual department or service area that is applicable in this context (University of Liverpool, 2014).

At Bangor University, students with evidence of a SpLD and who have registered with Disability Services will have a Personal Learning Support Plan (PLSP) drawn up. An agreed reasonable adjustment by Bangor University and reflected in the PLSP for SpLD students is the "*consideration for individual difficulties in assessing work (as learning outcomes permit)*" (the yellow slip – see Appendix 2).

4. Yellow Slips

Yellow slips are attached by students to their coursework and examination scripts. They also carry a note to the effect that, where learning outcomes permit, as a reasonable adjustment assignments should not be marked down unnecessarily for aspects of written work which are not critical to the demonstration of achievement.

The specific differences which an individual student may experience with different aspects of written language are difficult to quantify exactly, as in different contexts, at different times, and under different pressures, a student's performance will vary. **Therefore, the range of specific difficulties that students with SpLDs may experience to varying degrees are listed at the top of the yellow sheet, rather than individualised.**

The students *may* be able oral communicators and do well in practical assessment, but struggle with expressing the theory *in writing.* It is safe to make the generalisation that, as a result of dyslexia, dyspraxia or ADHD, their literacy skills are neither fluent nor automatic; reading and writing take longer and more effort. As students' skills are fragile, written work – especially that produced under pressure of time constraints - may not reflect students' intellectual capabilities or their learning.

However, the most important message is that **the yellow slips are there for guidance;** they are not intended as a signal that marks should be added in compensation, but **simply that in so far as learning outcomes allow, students should not be penalised unnecessarily for any aspects of their work which reflect their specific learning differences.**

All work from students with SpLD should be marked according to the **specified** learning outcomes. **The expected achievements and learning outcomes should be made clear to all students, regardless of whether they have a SpLD.**

The main benefit from identifying the work from a student with SpLD relates to the type of feedback required (University of Northampton, 2008). See Section 9 for further guidance on feedback in this booklet.

5. Competence Standards

Consideration of whether the student has demonstrated the required knowledge and understanding of the subject and can achieve the 'competence standards' required is the key factor determining whether a student can successfully complete their studies.

It is therefore important that there is clarity on what is being assessed – the knowledge, skills and understanding that is expected. The Equality Act 2010 sets out that competence standards:

- Apply to all aspects of courses – admissions, assessment and awarding qualifications.
- Must be relevant – proportionate means to achieve a legitimate aim.
- Must not be discriminatory.
    - Must be genuine and fair to disabled students.
    - If there is a discriminatory impact then the competence standard must be objectively justifiable.
- Must be set appropriately in relation to the type or level of qualification being awarded.
- There is no duty to make a reasonable adjustments to a competence standard BUT reasonable adjustments must be made to enable a disabled student to meet the competence standard.

- It is unlikely that performing in a time constrained examination could be justified as a competence standard, so for some severe cases of dyslexia, a reasonable adjustment might be to design an alternative method of assessment for an individual
- In some cases, competence standards may be linked to the actual process of assessment, for example, completing a practical test to demonstrate a skill or ability.
- Key is to determine which requirements are genuine competence standards and which are not.
- When designing methods of assessment and marking criteria, consider the anticipatory nature of the 'reasonable adjustments duty' to make assessment as accessible as possible and to guide staff for marking purposes – **there is a need for clear and transparent marking criteria. The more clarity there is on what is being tested, the less difficult it will be to mark.**

- Students should be made aware of and understand the marking criteria.
- This would allow them to identify areas they need to develop and seek support for.
- Be transparent about competence standards required for a programme of study so that potential students can decide if a particular course is right for them (University of Teesside, 2008).

6. Marking Coursework

- **Mark for content:** consider carefully what the candidate is being marked for: straight facts; knowledge; ability to reason; original thought. To some extent, markers should "look behind the text" (i.e. work out how important basic expression is) and ensure that they do not unwittingly mark a candidate down for lack of skills which they would agree on reflection to be irrelevant.
- **When spelling and grammar are considered an important part of the brief,** it is important to let the students know in advance, to allow them to consider the extent of checking and proof-reading strategies they will have to employ.

Possible challenges	**Reasonable adjustments**
Spelling and grammar	• Unless spelling and grammar are an integral element of the course outcomes, you should ignore the kind of spelling / grammar errors, such as homonyms / homophones that cannot be picked up from spell checkers / grammar checkers. • If poor spelling does not affect the knowledge being shown, a candidate should not be penalised - consider what a good copy editor (or a spell-check) might have made of the text. If, however, spelling is *crucial* to the subject, such as in pharmacology or chemistry, or, for example, the correct presentation of names and dates in history, then errors should be penalised.
Sentence structure	• Sentences may be ungrammatical; they might seem very condensed, or very long. Punctuation may be erratic. Again, the balance between the knowledge which is being offered and the clumsy expression should be considered.
Essay structure	• Essays can be unstructured. • It is likely that showing a structured train of thought is part of the marking criteria, in which case markers could be justified in penalising the student for disjointed work. • If the point of the essay is purely to present an accumulation of facts, this might not be so important.

It is expected that **coursework**, produced without the intense pressure of time constraints, should be better written and presented than work done under exam conditions. Students can use assistive software to edit their work (read-back facility, grammar and spell-checks[1]). Support in developing proof-reading strategies is offered by the Dyslexia Team, but not all students use this. If work is very weak,

[1] See Appendix 1 on the dangers of using a spell checker

students should be encouraged to seek help. There should still be some consideration however for slower working time and difficulties with structure, spelling, grammar and punctuation – **where these are not a specified learning outcome**.

CASE STUDY EXAMPLE:

An example of an 'ideal' text and two examples of work for comparison are set out below:

The first example is an acceptable script from a dyslexic student. The second example illustrates serious weaknesses in expression, clarity and subject knowledge that may result in a loss of marks, or failure.

Traditional definitions of NGOs (Non Government Organizations) describe them as people's grassroots organizations, which are non-profitmaking, non-party-political and voluntary. They have ethical and practical concerns such as poverty, health, education, housing, human rights and environment. They are targeted at, or partners with, youth groups, the elderly, indigenous people, consumers or religious groups. During a preparatory session, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) broadened this traditional definition to include a constellation of organizations.

EXAMPLE A

"**Traditonal** definitions **off** NGOS (Non Government Organisations) **are calling** them people's grassroots organizations which **is** non-**profet** making non party political and **volunteers**. They have **ethcal concern** such as poverty, health, education **home** human rights and the **envirment**. They are targeted at, or **paertner** with, **young** groups, the elderly, indigenous, **consoomers** or religious groups. During preparatory session the United **n**ations **c**onference on Environment and Development (UNCED) **beoadened** this traditional definition to **included** links of organisations".

In this example the spelling, grammar and punctuation are poor (highlighted in bold) but the text is factually correct. The student displays a sound knowledge of the subject area.

EXAMPLE B

"NGOs **in defining** are *Government bodies* and **they four** the people. They are run by **volunteer** *and make large amounts of money.* Practical **comncerns**, *always and above such factual poorness.* Health is also involved. *Targeted at ethcal and the concerns of practicable such as*

poverty, human ***rites,*** *food nutrition and the environment.* There was a conference recently and it made more organizations involved."

In this example the spelling grammar and punctuation are poor (highlighted in bold) but there are also factual omissions, misinterpretations and indecipherable text that show a lack of subject knowledge and understanding (italicised).

(Example sourced from: London South Bank University (2014)).

7. Marking Examinations

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Difficulties with the written word may show up much more clearly in exams than in coursework as students may be unable to spot any errors of grammar or spelling. The allowance of extra time is helpful for students, although this will not necessarily enable students to overcome reading and writing difficulties. For most students, despite the allowance granted, the stress of examination pressure exacerbates difficulties.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Possible challenges</td><td>Reasonable adjustments</td></tr>
<tr><td>Slowness in reading the rubric and questions. Exam papers with dense text may be difficult to decipher and multiple choice question papers are particularly difficult for some students.</td><td>• Extra time of 25% (this is a standard adjustment for students registered with the Dyslexia Team), but can be more if adjustment is underpinned by evidence (for example, diagnostic report).</td></tr>
<tr><td>Slow awkward handwriting, for example, p's and b's, b's and d's, may be confused and certain letter combinations written back-to-front.</td><td>• Accept that the script may be awkward to read, and thus avoid irritation.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Spelling and grammar difficulties which slow writing down.</td><td>• Take time to unravel meaning. This may involve some re-reading where spelling, punctuation and grammar are awkward.
• Do not penalise for spelling errors or awkward grammar.
• Clarify the extent to which marking criteria allow for awkward language to be ignored.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Structure – answers may be poorly structured; for some students, planning to a sequence is difficult.
There may appear to be no clear flow to an essay answer, as 'signalling' language may be sparse.</td><td>• Take time to identify a bright idea, or piece of information, that might crop up out of sequence.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Feedback:
• Feedback is important so that students with SpLD can realise the extent to which their low marks are due to a lack of detailed knowledge or to an inability to reflect their knowledge adequately in writing.
• Where a student under performs greatly, then an oral assessment could be an appropriate checking mechanism. This could help ascertain if it is the grasp of the subject itself or is the effects of the SpLD.</td></tr>
</table>

Adapted from Carter and Kirkham (1996)

8. Marking Oral Presentations

Some dyslexic students may prefer oral presentations to written work, however, this method of assessment is equally challenging. It is also a common perception that students with dyslexia have difficulty with written language but are fluent orally. However, some students with dyslexia also experience spoken language difficulties. These can include word finding, hesitations, mispronounced and incomplete sentences. They may also experience difficulties with organisation of their ideas orally, in exactly the same way as with their written work (University of Bournemouth, 2003).

Possible challenges	**Reasonable adjustments**
Fluency	Ignore aspect of delivery that affect fluency; e.g. hesitation and mispronunciation.
Stress and anxiety	Ignore apparent stress and anxiety and consider the presentation environment to try to reduce stress (University of Bournemouth, 2003).
Audience	Create a calm environment; e.g. fewer people watching.
Time	Allow extra time to set up before the presentation and to gather thoughts during the presentation, if requested (University of Bournemouth, 2003).
Presentational skills	Ignore similar difficulties apparent in the presentation of written work, such as organisation and sequencing.
Reading out loud	Take account of difficulties reading out loud from notes.
Questions	Questions should be presented clearly and repeated where necessary, if they are part of the process.
Thinking time	Allow thinking time for responses.

Adapted from University of Teesside, (2008)

9. Giving Feedback

What to do	Rationale
Comment on where the student has done well and explain why a particular aspect of the work is good rather than / as well as being critical.	Models of good practice and correct usage are easier to retain and replicate; students with SpLD find it difficult to "read between the lines".
Explain what is required and what went wrong; use clear explicit English avoiding innuendo, sarcasm and complex sentences; avoid using grammatical terms.	A student with SpLD is unlikely to know how to correct an error without some guidance or explanation; they are often unfamiliar with grammatical terms / rules.
Inform the student if you are marking for ideas, understanding and knowledge and ignoring spelling, punctuation and grammar.	Absence of lots of corrections (they are used to a lot!) may create a false impression of improvement and can be demoralising when re-appraisal occurs.
If you decide to mark for spelling, grammar and punctuation; avoid marking **every** error – select and indicate about **four types** of error.	Numerous corrections can be demoralising; simply correcting spelling and grammar will not lead to improvement – helping the student identify types of error together with models of correct usage will help.
Use one colour pen to comment on ideas, understanding and knowledge and a different colour for spelling, punctuation and grammar. **Avoid using red pens.** If you are working on-line you can utilise the text highlighter.	Anything which helps to differentiate functions of words is useful for the student with SpLD. Red often has negative associations from school days and can be demoralising.
Use highlighter pens / or computer highlighter to indicate which areas of text "belong together" if you want to indicate where changes in structure or organisation are necessary.	Anything which aids differentiation of text is helpful; colour is instantly recognisable and will give the student an additional sense of control over the text.

Sourced from the University of Northampton (2008)

10. Frequently Asked Questions

- ***If allowances are made for dyslexia in the marking of coursework or examination scripts, are academic standards compromised?***

The need to maintain academic standards is a fundamental premise within the law (Equality Act 2010). What is crucial is the way that learning outcomes are defined and assessed. The QAA argue that disabled students must be given the opportunity to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes and competence standards and further that whilst there is no duty to make any adjustment to a competence standard itself, the duty is applicable to the assessment of that standard. So for example, reasonable adjustments such as extra time, using a word processor or a scribe can be applied to a process and alternative assessments can be devised to permit demonstration of attainment of the learning outcome (Conway and Turner, 2011) (see also Bangor University's Rules and Procedures and Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students on Undergraduate and Taught Postgraduate Programmes for further information).

- ***How do I consider the manifestations of dyslexia in terms of their impact on the work of Higher Education Students?***

Students with SpLD should not be treated less favourably than other students for reasons of their disability. If assessors are aware of the manifestations of dyslexia in HE then they will be able to give due consideration to SpLD related factors when marking coursework or examination scripts. Students with dyslexia typically experience difficulties with producing written work as quickly as other students; they are more likely to make spelling errors, **even in word processed work**. Their punctuation and grammar may be weak and they can often leave out, repeat or introduce small function words or word endings. Written assignments may lack 'polish' and assessors may think that such work is 'shoddy' or careless and deduct marks for poor presentation. However, in the case of dyslexic students such errors should be understood and overlooked unless accuracy is of vital important in the subject being assessed (Conway and Turner, 2011).

- ***What about marking in certain subject areas such as languages?***

In certain subject areas such as languages, there may be explicit assessment of competence with grammar, spelling and written expression. In other areas such as law, education and medicine there may be professional considerations where accrediting bodies external to the institution have expectations as to standards and formats of written expression. Competency standards must not be compromised but the way they are assessed should be differentiated (Conway and Turner, 2011).

- ***Is it an individual lecturer's decision regarding competence standard?***

No, each programme needs to have clear aims and objectives and take into consideration professional considerations. Degree programmes and individual modules

should be designed with the learning differences of students with SpLD in mind. For example, learning outcomes should give weighting to the importance of written language skills and consider the extent to which dyslexia, and any other disability, can be taken into consideration and the type of accommodation that can be allowed. **Marking criteria needs to be made explicit to all applicants to the course or programme** (Conway and Turner, 2011).

- ***Should coursework and examinations be differentiated?***

There are differing views on whether coursework and examinations undertaken by dyslexic students should be treated in a similar way. Extra time and other adjustments such as a reader and scribe that dyslexic students may be granted in an examination are thought by one school of thought to be sufficient. However, extra time allows for slower processing or memory recall, or even slower handwriting. What it does not do is allow for spelling, grammar and punctuation and difficulties with written expression that are likely to still exist. The Singleton Report (1999 ct in Conway and Turner, 2011) argues that examiners marking the work of dyslexic students should be alerted to their difficulties and take them into consideration when marking.

In coursework some HEIs do not flag up the work of SpLD students as it is assumed that, without the time constraints of an exam, then students are able to spend more time and use assistive technology to 'proof read' their own work, or to access support from specialist dyslexia tutors. So, all students should have access to these opportunities through the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) or through the institution's obligation to provide accessible and inclusive learning.

- ***What about SpLD students having 'double support'?***

Some staff have commented that they are concerned that students might get 'double support' if they have specialist software and dyslexia tuition available to them to assist them to present academic work at a good standard and are also getting marked to take account of their difficulties.

However, a student can be receiving tuition and / or using specialist software to assist them to enhance their skills of for example, structuring an essay. But this does not mean that their differences will be 'cured', simply that they are more likely to present a more logically structured piece of work. Further, notably, the length of time it can take for an individual to begin to use these strategies can vary (University of Teesside, 2008).

Appendix 1: The dangers of using a spell checker

Candidate for a
Pullet Surprise

I have a spelling checker,
It came with my PC.
It plane lee marks four my revue
Miss steaks aye can knot sea.

Eye ran this poem threw it,
Your sure reel glad two no.
Its vary polished in it's weigh.
My checker tolled me sew.

A checker is a bless sing,
It freeze yew lodes of thyme.
It helps me right awl stiles two reed,
And aides me when eye rime.

Each frays come posed up on my screen
Eye trussed too bee a joule.
The checker pours or every word
Too cheque sum spelling rule.

Bee fore a veiling checker's
Hour spelling mite decline,
And if we're lacks oar have a laps,
We wood bee maid too wine.

Butt now bee cause my spelling
Is checked with such grate flare,
Their are know fault's with in my cite,
Of nun eye am a wear.

Now spelling does knot phase me,
It does knot bring a tier.
My pay purrs awl due glad den
With wrapped word's fare as hear.

Too rite with care is quite a feet
Of witch won should bee proud,
And wee mussed dew the best wee can,
Sew flaw's are knot aloud.

Sow ewe can sea why aye dew prays
Such soft wear four pea seas,
And why eye brake in two averse
Buy righting want too pleas.

Jerrold H. Zar

First published in *The Journal of Irreproducible Results*, January/February 1994, page 13. Reprinted ("by popular demand") in *The Journal of Irreproducible Results*, Vol. 45, No. 5/6, 2000, page 20. See www.jir.com/pullet.html.

(With thanks to a colleague / student of the PGCertHE cohort 2014 in pointing me in the direction of this poem).

Appendix 2

Yellow Slips

Bangor University students registered with the Dyslexia Team are offered the reasonable adjustment of asking markers to take their difficulties into account when grading their work.

This means that markers will mark according to content and ideas, and not deduct marks for spelling and structure, **except** when these form part of the marking guidelines / learning outcomes

Students can request this adjustment by using a yellow slip.

- For **paper** submissions , **paper** yellow slips should be used. These contain guidelines for markers, and are available from the Disability Services General Office on lower- ground floor Rathbone

- For **electronic** submission there is an **electronic** version of the yellow slip that you can copy and paste onto your front cover/submission documents.

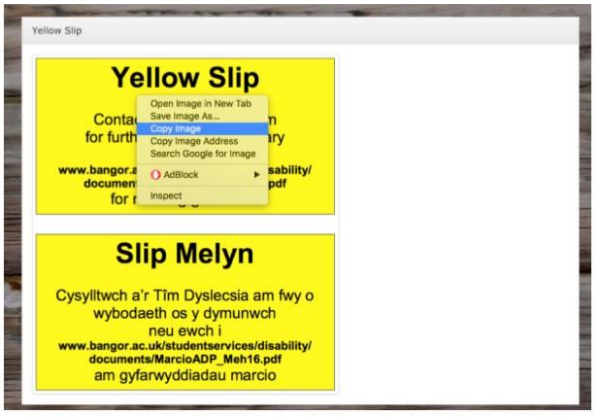
How do I get an electronic yellow slip?

1: Go to your PLSP page (https://apps.bangor.ac.uk/plsp/student/)

2: Right click on the 'Yellow Slip' image.

3: Click on copy image (see attached).

4. Paste image into word document.



Alternatively the image can be dragged from the PLSP page straight into a word document.

Fiona Zinovieff, Dyslexia Team (2016)

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