

# Understanding Dyslexia

An Introduction for Dyslexic Students in Higher Education

VISIONARY  
INTUITIVE  
**GIFTED**  
IMAGINATIVE  
INSPIRED  
DIVERGENT  
CREATIVE  
EMOTIONAL  
**ACUTE**  
COGNITIVE  
ABILITIES  
ASSESSMENT  
HOLISTIC  
PERSPECTIVE  
SEQUENCING  
**AWARE**  
DIMENSIONAL  
**PROFILE**  
CONCEPTUAL  
**MEMORY**  
INVENTIVE  
ORIGINAL  
NEUROLOGICAL  
PERCEPTION  
**DYSLEXIC**  
SYNDROME  
CONCEPTUAL  
INTELLIGENCE  
**VISUAL**

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The benefits of knowing that you are dyslexic are talked about in this book. You will find information describing the nature of dyslexia, how this relates to you as an individual and the way in which your assessment report shows that you are dyslexic. There are also sections devoted to making positive use of this information.

The questions you might already have and others you may have not yet thought of asking, are explored. The emphasis is on giving you essential information and providing a starting point for you to find out more. This includes understanding the context in which you are studying.

Knowing that you are dyslexic can mean making changes in the way you study. Included in this book are some useful tips about study skills and explanations about why some of the more traditional ways of studying may not be appropriate for you.


Ultimately, it is hoped that by using this book as a starting point, you will find independence as a learner and enjoy your time studying at college or university.

## Exploring this Book

This book is designed to be explored rather than read cover to cover.

There are initial questions which you may like answered and you will find the first few sections may address these. Do take time to reflect over the contents of this book and how they relate to you. You will have to interpret much of this information in the light of your own experiences, to develop your own awareness of dyslexia and to take action which is appropriate to you. There are quotations from dyslexic students throughout the sections and these are highlighted in red text. Some of their experiences might help you to reflect on your own.

This book has a numbered sequence of sections covering different aspects of being dyslexic. However, there are also other ways in which it can be navigated:

- There is a **contents list** following this section (page 3).
- There is a list of **common questions** with links to the relevant explanations in the book (page 5).
- There is a **glossary** of important words and phrases (page 52).
- Words of importance are highlighted in **bold text**. Many of these are defined in the glossary.
- There are small **icons**  next to written information, they indicate links between different sections of the book.

The **links** mean that you can start at the section which seems to be most important to you and then find related sections.

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## What is dyslexia?

This is a complex question with a number of complex answers.

-  What is Dyslexia? page 9
-  Glossary, (gives a brief definition) page 53





## What makes me dyslexic?

The combination of information in your assessment report and your own experience of difficulties and abilities in your studies, together with day to day life, will help you understand the way in which you are dyslexic. There are many sections of this book which will help you to understand this complicated issue:

-  What is Dyslexia? page 9
-  Experiencing Dyslexia page 21
-  Understanding Your Report page 23
-  Organisation for Life page 44

## Why do I need to know about dyslexia?

Dyslexia is widely known about, but often misunderstood. As a dyslexic person it will be important for you to have an accurate understanding of how dyslexia is for you. Knowing about dyslexia will help you understand your self and how you learn.

-  What is Dyslexia? page 9
-  Telling Other People page 29
-  Strategies for Higher Education page 32
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## How does my report show that I am dyslexic?

-  Understanding Your Report page 23



### When am I 'dyslexic' and when am I not?

The simple answer is that dyslexic people are dyslexic all the time, but we tend to associate being 'dyslexic' with not being able to do things, with our weaknesses and not our strengths.

-  Positive aspects of Dyslexia page 17
-  Experiencing Dyslexia page 21
-  Organisation for Life page 44

### I know other people who are similar to me and they're not dyslexic, so how can I be?

Other people may be similar to you, for instance, everyone forgets things, but it is the frequency with which dyslexic people show these behaviours that is crucial. Alternatively, the 'other people' might be dyslexic too!

-  What is Dyslexia? page 9



### What if I start using dyslexia as an excuse?

Many dyslexic people worry that they will start using dyslexia as an excuse. It is important to discuss your worries with someone who can help you understand more about this worry and where it comes from.

-  Stress and Self-esteem page 46
-  Information and Resources page 58

### I've heard that dyslexic people are creative – is this true?

This is a widely held belief, based partly on the fact that there is such a large number of dyslexic people working successfully within the creative arts. This suggests that dyslexic people have a great potential for creativity. However, in order for the creative potential to be realised, it must be applied and focused.

-  Positive aspects of Dyslexia page 17
-  Strategies for Higher Education page 32







### How do I know if I need help?

'Help' is not just about support when you feel you might be struggling with your academic work, it can also be about contacting someone who can help you to answer this question.

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### What kind of help should I ask for?

This will depend on what your needs are at the moment. Talk to someone who can help you to work this out. It will be helpful to find out what kinds of support are available in your institution.

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### Is dyslexia just about reading and writing?

No. However, difficulties with reading and writing can be evidence of dyslexia.

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### **I know I'm dyslexic and I'm doing fine – what use is the support at my college or university?**

Many dyslexic people do 'fine' at college or university, but find that although their marks are good, it is still a stressful experience. In order to reach your full potential without becoming over-stretched, you may want to make use of the support available in your institution.

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### **Why didn't they know I was dyslexic at school?**

This is another question with many possible answers. A common reason for dyslexia to be overlooked whilst at school is that many dyslexic people develop sufficient strategies to cope with school. It is only when the extra demands of Higher Education are experienced, that the difficulties associated with dyslexia show themselves.

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### Why do you need to know?

By itself 'dyslexia' is often applied as a label without any real understanding of what it means. Some people think that if you are dyslexic it means you can't spell and you might be "a bit thick".

It may seem obvious to say this, but dyslexia has nothing to do with intelligence. Nor is being dyslexic simply about spelling difficulties, or not being able to read and write fluently.

Dyslexia describes a group of different but related factors which affect an individual throughout their life. Although there are many shared experiences, we are all individuals - everyone who experiences dyslexia has differences in their experience. You may find that some of the statements about dyslexia which appear below describe your experiences better than others. Some of the statements may describe aspects of your past experience rather than current understanding. Ultimately, if you are dyslexic, knowing what dyslexia means in both a general and an individual sense is very important because you will need to take ownership of this information.

### What causes dyslexia?

This question can be answered in many different ways. Some of the possible responses to this complex question are given below:

- The dyslexic **brain** is different from ordinary brains. Studies have shown differences in the **anatomy**, **organisation** and **functioning** of the dyslexic brain as compared to the non-dyslexic brain.
- Some people suggest that dyslexic people tend to be more 'right brain thinkers'. The right hemisphere of the brain is associated with lateral, creative and visual thought processes.
- Dyslexia is not related to race, social background or intellectual ability but there is a tendency for dyslexia to run in families and this suggests that the brain differences which cause dyslexia may be **hereditary**.
- These **neurological** differences have the effect of giving the dyslexic person a particular way of thinking and learning. This usually means that the dyslexic person has a pattern of **cognitive** abilities which shows areas of strengths and weaknesses.

*Understanding your Report*



These differences can be problematic in educational, work or cultural systems which are based on the way that the non-dyslexic brain thinks and learns. It can also be

## What is Dyslexia?

an asset, an advantage, in systems and disciplines where a range of strengths and approaches can be appreciated and learning can happen in a variety of ways.



### Positive Aspects

### The Characteristics of the Dyslexic Brain

What are the characteristics of the dyslexic brain which effect thinking and learning? What are the cognitive characteristics of dyslexia?

- An inefficient **short-term memory system**, sometimes also called the **working memory**:

*"The working memory is that part of the memory function which has to hold onto input collected from the senses (either immediate or brought back from long-term memory). This input or information has to be understood and organised (usually in some kind of sequence) before being applied and acted on in some form and then returned to the long-term memory store"*

(Smith, D, 1996, Spotlight on S.E.N.'s, SpLD's, NASEN)

It can help to understand how this happens by thinking of short-term memory as a tape loop which, in the dyslexic person, is shorter and, therefore, less can be recorded at one time, for eventual transfer to storage in long-term memory.

*"For me it's as if I'm making a multi-track recording. The tape loop goes round and round, it fills up and then records more over the top of what's already there, until it all becomes garbled and incomprehensible."*

- A difficulty in processing sounds and making sense of them:

As children we reinforce what we learn by confirming our knowledge through speech. Being dyslexic can inhibit this process by making it more difficult to interpret sounds and, therefore, fix them in **memory**.

- Difficulties with co-ordination and motor skills:

As children dyslexic people are often clumsy and find it harder to acquire good co-ordination. This changes as we become adults, but it does have an effect on the development of hand/eye co-ordination.

- **Difficulties with visual processing:**

This doesn't mean that dyslexic people are bad at seeing things, but it does affect the speed with which visual information is processed, especially where it has to be put into sequences. It can also mean that there is a difficulty in retaining a mental picture of letter or word shapes.

These are the cognitive characteristics which hinder the learning of literacy skills and are responsible for the difficulties dyslexic people experience. Short-term memory isn't only a characteristic in itself, it also influences the other characteristics. For example, if you find it difficult to remember all the items in a list, then it can be difficult to remember the sequence of items in the list. At the same time, if you find it difficult to remember a sequence, that is, the order in which things are linked together, then it is harder to remember the individual items.

Remember that these cognitive weaknesses are weak in relation to your cognitive strengths. These may be strong in comparison to another dyslexic or non-dyslexic person.

### **What are the consequences in practice of these cognitive characteristics?**

What is the effect for you of having a brain which thinks and works in this way in Higher Education? The effect is functional - in Higher Education you will be expected to practise good organisational skills and communicate your learning in written and spoken form.

Remember that not everyone is the same and that people have different experiences of dyslexia. However the following **functional characteristics** are experienced widely by dyslexic people.

*"Dyslexia is recognisable as a measurable discrepancy between cognitive ability and literacy level"*

(NWP Report, Dyslexia in Higher Education, 1999)

*"I know what I want to say, I can talk about it, I know I know it, but when I read what I've written, it's not saying what I want it to."*

Literacy skills are a very important issue. It is difficulties and under-achievement in this area, which are most often associated with dyslexia, however dyslexic people in Higher Education can read and write!

## What is Dyslexia?

*"Because of the development of compensatory strategies, by adulthood, the literacy skills of many dyslexics can appear superficially adequate. A closer investigation, however will often reveal underlying difficulties that can seriously affect learning at the higher education level."*

(NWP Report, Dyslexia in Higher Education, 1999)

It is perhaps worth noting here that some of these 'compensatory' strategies are very helpful and some are not.

 *Strategies for Higher Education, Stress and Self-esteem*

### Functional characteristics - reading and writing:

Students can experience problems with reading. As a dyslexic student you may:

- Need to read something over and over in order to make sense of it and understand what it means
- Read slowly and find reading very time consuming. It may also be difficult for you to remember what you've read
- Find your reading is inaccurate, you might add words or miss them out
- Lose your place and have to start again
- Find that it is very hard to focus on the page, it may look distorted and demand huge concentration and effort. This is very tiring
- Find reading difficult because of unfamiliar or new vocabulary which is hard for you to remember
- Mis-read familiar words or phrases

These difficulties are related to the cognitive characteristics of dyslexia and are not to do with lack of practice or not understanding what the purpose of reading is. The important cognitive characteristics of dyslexia which have the most influence over reading are short-term memory and visual processing. In order to read 'automatically' we have to match the written symbols to their corresponding sounds – difficulties with short-term memory can make this task difficult.

Some dyslexic people have additional difficulty reading text printed on bright white paper – this can be helped by coloured overlays or spectacles.

 *Meares-Irlen Syndrome in Glossary*

Students can experience problems with writing. As a dyslexic student you may:

- Find that spelling is a problem for you, especially small words
- Spell words in the way that they sound
- Confuse words or miss them out
- Write slowly making lots and lots of drafts
- Write very quickly in an attempt to write down your thoughts before you lose them
- Have difficulty making sense of what you have written when you read it back
- Have difficulties in structuring and organising your ideas in writing
- Find it very hard to express yourself accurately in writing

Many Higher Education students are referred by their tutors to a dyslexia specialist because of the difference, the obvious gap, between what the student knows and is capable of and what that student is able to express in writing.

The important cognitive characteristics which affect writing skills are short-term memory and visual processing.

These reading and writing difficulties are directly related to the dyslexic person's cognitive characteristics. They often become noticeable when students are asked to develop their skills and address more complex or longer pieces of reading or writing. When this happens the volume of text or information to be dealt with makes their compensatory strategies less effective or unsustainable. This is the time to seek help in developing new strategies.

*Strategies for Higher Education, Stress & Self-esteem*



### **Other important skills:**

Reading and writing, text based skills are still very important in Higher Education (whatever the subject) but they are not the only skills you need.

The short-term memory configuration of the dyslexic brain also has an impact on other areas which are equally important:

- **Remembering** - information for exams, names, processes and instructions
- **Oral skills** - finding words, mispronunciation, listening, structuring – saying things in the right order
- **Doing more than one thing at a time** - combining two or more activities, for example listening and writing



## What is Dyslexia?

All these activities put your **auditory short-term memory** to hard work. When you are concentrating on speaking or writing or listening, your short-term memory is dealing with the process of using language.

When you are speaking or writing you are remembering words and also putting them in an order so that they make sense, for example, into a sentence. When you are listening you are interpreting sounds and matching those sounds with words in your long-term memory. If the 'tape loop' of your short-term memory is hard at work listening, speaking or writing, then there is less short-term memory available for the 'content' of what you are communicating or hearing.

When we are communicating, we are, in fact, '**multi-tasking**' – we are using our short-term memory to hold in mind 'what' we want to communicate, while also remembering 'how' to communicate.

When we forget specific information, such as names or facts, our ability to communicate fluently is interrupted. If we are in situations which put additional pressure on our short-term memory, for example, when we are combining two different activities or sitting an exam, this can be a particular problem.

**Visual short-term memory** is a factor where information has to be remembered and communicated in writing. For example, you might not remember the sequence of the information you want to communicate, such as a series of historical events. In the same way, when editing what you have written, you may find it hard to remember and locate which paragraph you want to change and how any changes might affect the meaning of your writing.

- **Numeracy**
- **Sequencing and ordering**

The same cognitive characteristics which make reading and writing difficult can also have an effect on using numbers. This is not just remembering and matching the sounds with the **symbols** to write the numbers as numerals or words, but also sequencing numbers to carry out a calculation.

- **Concept of time**
- **Organisation**
- **Time management**

Sequencing information correctly and effectively can also have an effect on our awareness of time – this too relates to short-term memory. Dyslexic people are

thought to develop an awareness of time passing at a later stage than others – as a child you might have been criticised for day-dreaming. Now you might find it difficult to know how long an activity will take and, therefore, find it hard to organise your time.

- Left/right confusion
- Co-ordination
- Seeing and remembering detail until you have a more complete picture

These areas of difficulty are not specifically related to the cognitive characteristics of dyslexia mentioned previously. However, some of the difficulties dyslexic people can experience when reading and writing, moving through or working in space, map reading or communicating ideas verbally or in written form, do relate to these factors. Doing a driving test or following directions can be problematic if you are not always certain of left and right. If you tend to need to see the whole picture, to contextualise, before detailed information makes real sense, it can appear harder to give 'quick' responses when speaking or writing.

- Attention span
- Distractibility
- Concentration

If we take all the characteristics and factors listed above, it is not hard to see why it can be difficult to maintain concentration for long periods and it can take a lot of effort to carry out a task. When concentrating on written work or having an important conversation many dyslexic people complain of being distracted by unexpected noises or visual events. The distraction can break a chain of thought and what you wanted to write or say can be 'lost'.

*"When people are talking to me it takes a lot longer than it should for the words to compute. My brain's like a traffic jam, you know – it's not flowing freely, it's totally confused and muddled up and not really knowing where it's going."*

It is very important that you have a sense of your abilities in the areas above. These are skills which have always been valuable in Higher Education but are now becoming more and more evident, not least because courses are eager to teach and assess people in as many ways as possible. This has helped to make some courses more accessible, but be sure you don't assume that less written work means that the rest of your curriculum is going to be unchallenging.

## What is Dyslexia?

### What are the secondary characteristics of dyslexia?

This section has so far dealt with what are known as the **primary effects** of the dyslexic brain on the functioning of the dyslexic person. We have also seen how these cognitive characteristics affect reading and writing and general tasks which rely on short-term memory.

However, there are also characteristics associated with being dyslexic which develop as a consequence of our experiences. In education, for example, there is an emphasis on the use of short-term memory and its associated functions. This has an impact on our emotional responses to learning.



*What is Dyslexia? (Short-term memory)*

*“We started a computer induction project two weeks ago and I sat down there and it was just too much information going in - I just felt really stressed out. I went to my tutor and told him I felt I'd really learnt nothing, I was really angry with myself – a feeling of failure. However, I knew what I had to do was just go in and have a fiddle and break it up into segments – don't look at the whole thing, just look at what you have learnt; what did you learn yesterday? Well, I can switch it on now, now that's a start!”*

These **secondary characteristics** can be disabling and usually arise because the primary effects of dyslexia were not addressed or understood.

These **secondary** characteristics are typically:

Anxiety

Stress

Panic

*“If someone is not being coherent – adding ten more equations into the one thing you want to talk about – you've got all these images coming up, it's like a balloon with a whole load of balls inside it and they're all just bouncing off each other and you don't know which ball you want to take out and there's only about two that you need to work with. If there's too many balls in the bag, well, you can juggle, but it's not conducive to what I really want.”*

Lack of confidence

Not liking or valuing self

*"When I try to say something I'm always worried it will come out wrong, 'cos it always does, so I never say it."*

Tiredness

Fatigue

Burn out

*"I say to myself: 'Look, I've been taught – I can read, I can write, I can spell.' But when I get tired, at the end of the day it's too much – it takes so much longer when I'm tired."*

Frustration

Anger

*"It would be nice if everyone knew how frustrating it is – if they could be dyslexic just for three weeks, find out how much harder it is, what you go through to get anywhere."*

*Stress and Self-esteem, Organisation for Life*



### Positive aspects of dyslexia

Most of the literature on dyslexia focuses on the difficulties associated with reading, writing and memory tasks. However, there are suggestions that the dyslexic brain also demonstrates positive aptitudes, which are also primary characteristics of dyslexia, and, therefore, cognitive. These aptitudes can be advantageous in certain careers or courses.

*Understanding your Report*



As a dyslexic student you may:

- **Be creative**

Although this is a difficult ability to define, it shouldn't be underestimated. We tend to associate creativity with skills in the visual, literary and performing arts. However, not only do other professions, such as science and engineering, demand people with good creative thinking skills, but creative thought can be a useful ability in apparently unrelated areas, such as business. You may:

## What is Dyslexia?

- Have good visual-spatial skills – be able to easily think in 3D
- Be able to see the whole picture or the ‘big picture’
- Be an effective visual thinker

It is easy to see how these abilities could be an advantage in the visual arts, however they also describe the ways in which dyslexic people often explain the way they think:

*“I’ve always been able to visualise things and remember things by images and not by words . . . my brain just seems to work more by 3-dimensions and not by remembering facts – it’s about the connections between things.”*

Thinking in this way links to other abilities, which are attributed to dyslexic people. It is easier to ‘see’ how the following abilities are useful in a range of tasks or professions:

- Being a **divergent thinker**
- Being able to make unexpected connections

These ways of thinking can enable the dyslexic person to be insightful and innovative.

*“I can see connections between things which maybe seem unrelated to someone who thought in a linear way. If I fight for the word ‘belief’ and come up with ‘feather’, I’ve made a connection.”*

In some situations this new perspective will not be appreciated until it is given a form or context. Being able to, “look at things in a new light”, is an important ability and it often leads to the following:

- Being good at creating new knowledge
- Having good problem solving skills

It is true that these abilities are not exclusive to dyslexic people, but they are key strengths which are often associated with dyslexic people. Dyslexic people often talk about getting ‘straight to the point’ and having to ‘work back’ from the solution in order to explain it to others. While this can sometimes appear to be doing things ‘back to front’ or ‘out of sequence’, explaining your way of thinking to others can deepen your understanding of your thought process. Perhaps as a consequence, dyslexic people do find that they are good at the following:

- Creative writing or poetry
- Emotional intelligence
- Being articulate

There are many successful dyslexic people in the kinds of professions, which are often considered to be inappropriate, or 'too difficult' if you are dyslexic. Writing, acting, politics, science, law, teaching and business are examples of professions in which dyslexic people have established themselves successfully.

*Suggested Reading: In the Mind's Eye*



Of course, we must remember that whether something is experienced as a strength or a weakness is context specific. What we can do is use our strengths to support our learning. This is also true in the area of the 'secondary' characteristics of dyslexia, where our experiences can make us:

- Determined
- Resilient
- Motivated

These attributes can develop from the experience of having to work longer and sometimes harder than others to achieve our goals, particularly in the education system.

- Resourceful

We can develop sophisticated strategies to ensure our success and effectiveness in all aspects of life and work.

- Vocal

It is not uncommon for the dyslexic person to have a finely tuned sense of justice and be prepared to protest when a situation is un-just.

- Confident

When a dyslexic person knows something they truly and thoroughly know it. This can be a firm basis for confidence.

## What is Dyslexia?

*"I just tell tutors, look, I'm dyslexic, I need to have things put a bit more simply, otherwise too many things come into the equation and my short-term memory is gonna get full up and I'm not going to pick up on the point."*

Awareness of our strengths and weaknesses and developing strategies to use them to our advantage helps us to access our talents and allows them to flourish in environments where they are valued.

It is important to remember that dyslexia is always experienced in two contexts at the same time. The first is our own internal awareness and attitudes and the second the awareness, attitudes and responses of the world in which we live, work and study.



*Strategies for Higher Education, Organisation for Life, Stress and Self-esteem*

### 3. Experiencing Dyslexia

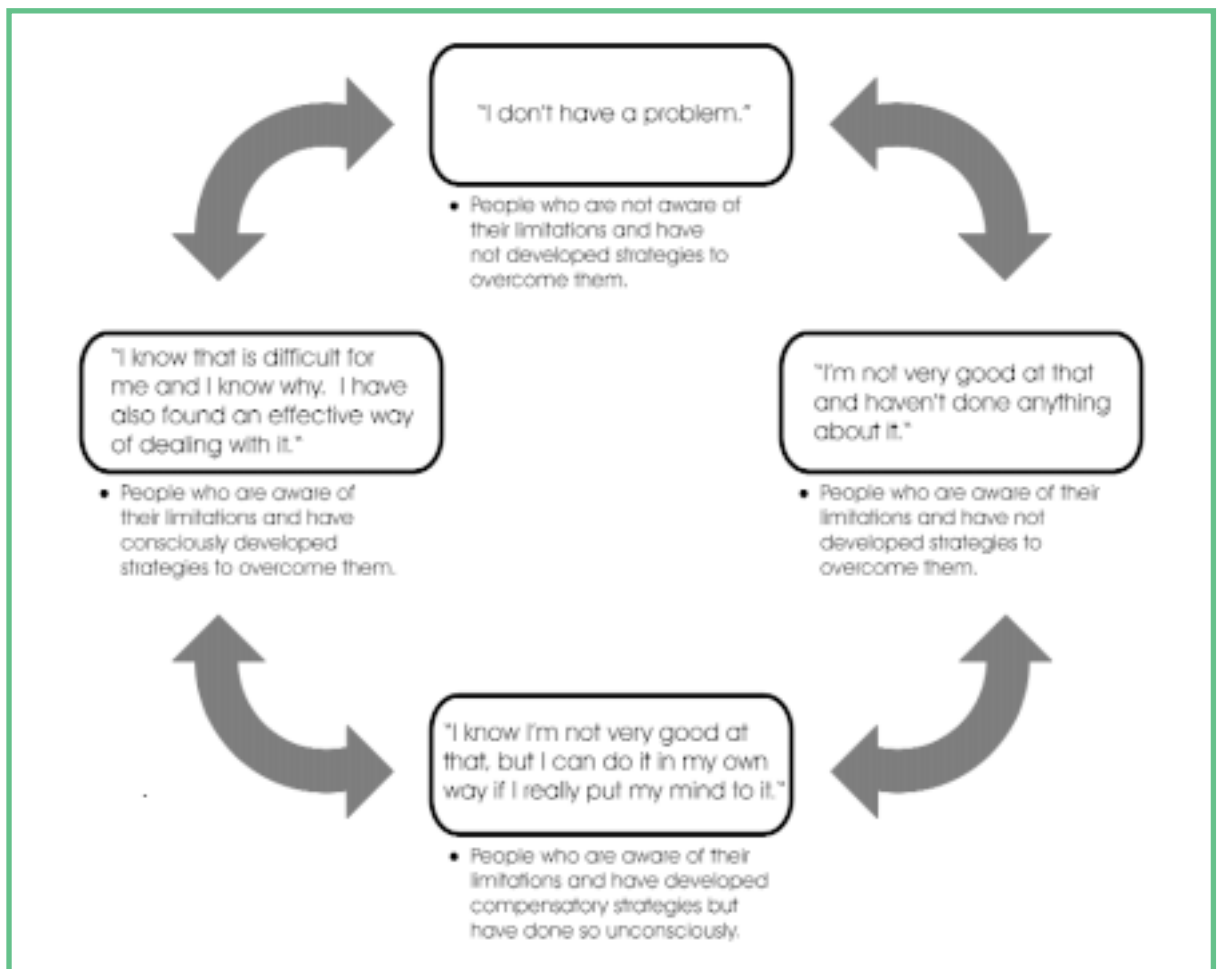
You probably recognised some of the areas in which you experience or have experienced problems in the previous section and some of the issues may seem irrelevant to you. This might be because:

- You do not have difficulties in a particular area. Dyslexic people do not all have the same experiences or abilities.
- You haven't been in a situation where a particular difficulty has been brought to your attention so you are not aware of that potential problem.
- You have, without knowing it found ways of dealing with that particular demand and do not therefore experience a problem.

How aware are you of your strengths and weaknesses? This is a key issue in understanding and dealing with dyslexia and what it means for you as a student in Higher Education.

*Using your Report* 

David McLoughlin, in his book 'Adult Dyslexia', talks about different levels of awareness and understanding, these are represented in the diagram below. You might see that you are in one of these positions most of the time or you might see yourself in different positions depending on what you are doing.





## Experiencing Dyslexia

The position you are in will have an effect on how you experience your dyslexia in a given situation. It will be different in different situations and at different times depending on a number of things, including your awareness, your motivation or interest and whether you have an appropriate and effective strategy with which to approach the task.



*Suggested Reading: Adult Dyslexia*

Being consciously aware of your difficulties means you can develop strategies to deal with them. These are strategies which work and are relevant to you and your current situation. It is important to realise that strategies need to be flexible rather than fixed and that different situations and contexts will require you to choose an appropriate strategy.

As the demands on your skills and your strategies increase there is an ongoing need for you to develop and learn new strategies to add to your collection.

*“Because reading and writing is more difficult for me, I have to be more discerning about what I take in and what I leave out. If you’re putting in twice as much effort to learn something, you have to make sure it’s definitely worth making space in your brain for it.”*

Recognising what you need to do to be able to reach your goals, and doing it, is primarily what a strategy is about. You gather as much information as possible about yourself in order to learn how best to support yourself in achieving your objectives.



*Strategies for Higher Education, Stress and Self-esteem*

## 4. Understanding your Report

If you have had more than one **diagnostic assessment** in your life, you are probably a bit fed up by now. Sometimes **assessments** for dyslexia are required for formal reasons, such as extra time in school or college exams. Assessments for these purposes may not feel as if they have much relevance to you. This can be because the results and process of the assessment have not been discussed with you.

Even if you do not have the opportunity to talk with the person who carried out the assessment, the information it contains can still be useful to your understanding of what makes you dyslexic.

One way to describe this kind of assessment would be 'diagnostic'. This means that the results of the assessment should prove that you are dyslexic. This will be very much a snapshot of your personal **cognitive** and **functional** strengths and weaknesses.

*To 'What is dyslexia?' and 'Glossary'*



There will be many aspects of what makes you who you are, which will not appear in the assessment. This is partly because they do not help to reveal the presence of dyslexia.

### How does the Assessment Report Prove that you are Dyslexic?

The basis for the assessment is traditionally an **I.Q. 'test'**, which must be conducted by a fully qualified person, usually an **educational psychologist**. An I.Q. test does not show the whole of an individual's **intelligence** or range of ability. However, it has for many years been considered the best available tool for the purpose of finding out whether someone is dyslexic or not. What your report indicates is not how intelligent you are, but whether you find certain tasks more difficult than others.

You may remember that during the assessment you were given a number of different tasks to do. These tasks, are thought to measure an individual's ability in:

- Short-term memory
- Long-term memory
- **Sequencing** and organising information
- Common sense and practical reasoning
- Communicating ideas in speech
- **Visual-spatial reasoning**

Some of the tasks look at these abilities in the context of your verbal skills, some require you to work visually. What is being assessed is your cognitive ability.

*To 'What is Dyslexia' and glossary*



## Understanding your Report

An assessment also involves a second series of tasks which will identify the level of your functioning in your reading, writing and spelling skills. It is important to realise that these literacy skills will improve with practice and will not remain as they were at the time of your assessment. In your report these skills are written down as the level of your **attainment** and may be expressed in terms of age, although this is not particularly helpful for adults!

### How does it relate to you?

The report you have received is a 'snapshot' of your **abilities and attainments**. Remember that it is the difference between the results of each of the tasks you did, and how they compare with each other, that is important.

Your results produce a pattern. This pattern is individual to you. It probably shows that you had some difficulty with the tasks which put demands on your short-term memory. In comparison you may have done considerably better in other areas. You may hear this described as a 'pattern of strengths and weaknesses'.

There is another important comparison made in the report; this is between your **cognitive abilities** and your **functional attainments**. It is often the case that your competency in literacy skills is less than would be expected for someone of your overall cognitive ability. Your literacy skills will have been assessed under test conditions. You will, therefore, not have had the time to edit or check your writing as you might do normally. Under test conditions your short-term memory will also be under greater pressure. Any difficulties you have will be made more apparent during the assessment because of these factors.



*What is Dyslexia?*

### What does it tell you?

*" The purpose of educational psychology assessment is to piece together the puzzle of dyslexia within a particular educational and social context. This involves understanding of the literacy learning process, and the reciprocal effects of educational achievements, cognitive processes, and the instructional circumstances and the learners perceptions, strategies and experiences. To be useful the assessment needs to lead to workable plans of action that promote learning."*

Dyslexia, Learning and Psychological Assessment.  
BPS Report (1999) p63.

The report will tell you nothing about yourself unless you take time to understand its contents. If you do it will help you to understand the details as well as the general reasons for you being identified as dyslexic. It will not, in fact, tell you anything you don't already 'know'. It should make sense in terms of your experience and it will help to give that experience meaning.

After an assessment people often find that they can start to make real sense of experiences they have had throughout their lives. Even if the only assessment you have had was as a child there will still be useful information in the report. This knowledge really can be used to your advantage in learning more about how you learn.

*Strategies for Higher Education* 

### The Language of the Assessment

Some of the words and phrases used in your report can be found in the **Glossary**. But you may want to look at your report in the light of the information in this section.

Alongside the outcomes of the individual tests which make up the assessment and the results which make up your attainments, the report will also have a written section which will explain what this information means. This will be a **profile** of your areas of strength and weakness and how this explains that you are dyslexic. The language used will be unfamiliar to you unless someone has already discussed your report with you and made sure that you understand it. This book will help you with this to some extent, but it is important to ask your Disability Co-ordinator if there is anything you are unsure of.

*Glossary* 

### Responses to having a diagnostic assessment

People have a wide range of responses to finding out that they are dyslexic. Everyone has an emotional response.

Finding out that you are dyslexic might simply be a relief. It can help explain things that you have wondered about for a long time. You may find yourself re-thinking a lot of your previous experiences.

*"I remember the day I was told I was dyslexic, I opened my twelfth floor window and I shouted at the top of my voice: 'I'm dyslexic!' It just felt so good because it just explained so much*

## Understanding your Report

*about the person I am. The way I tackle things, the way I get stressed by things, like things are frustrated. But also the way I can get elated by certain areas and excited – it just felt so good just understanding after all these years of not knowing."*

Many people use their new understanding to break through limiting ideas to view themselves more positively.

*"It caused huge problems, huge frustrations – where as now, because I know I'm dyslexic and its going to take a little bit longer, I can either work at strategies and just know in myself that I will get it all in eventually; I can work at it a little bit harder or just try and relax a little as well and not get too stressed out at the start of things."*

Some people are sad or angry about what has been lost or suffered earlier in their lives because their difficulties and strengths were not understood. It can be painful to realise that our experiences might have been different if someone had noticed.

*"I remember praying, 'Please don't let me be dyslexic'. And then I found out I was and it didn't really bother me and, then, the teacher at school was really nice to me. And she was really understanding and stuff. But then, when I progressed to secondary school they weren't so understanding. No one used to give a shit really, they just scooped you along with everyone else."*

Sometimes people are angry because this new information means changing both the way they think about themselves and what they do. This isn't always comfortable.

*"I always thought I was lazy and not very intelligent but if I worked hard I could be successful. Finding out I am dyslexic made me feel like I wouldn't be able to succeed no matter how hard I tried. There was no chance of getting better."*

Other people can feel hopeless and demotivated for a little while until they have time to understand how they can use the new information they have.

*"I thought I would have to change everything I do and learn everything again from scratch."*

Whatever your feelings or thoughts are it is important to talk with someone who understands dyslexia and give yourself time to think about and absorb your experience of discovering that you are dyslexic.

*"I've just not been able to help talking to lot's of people about this. It has been so important and I keep thinking about how things might have been and feel angry and then sad and then excited because I don't have to believe that I'm stupid any more."*

Knowing what might be of help to you at this stage and at future stages is essential. Sometimes, help is something you ask for immediately. Sometimes, the most important thing is to know that it is available.

*Telling other people, Information and Resources*



### Some Considerations about using your report

A diagnostic assessment puts a name to your experience. This label is essential for accessing help and resources. Indeed, even if you have been assessed before it is often necessary to be assessed again in Higher Education so that your current needs can be established. A recent assessment is essential if you want to apply for funding through the **Disabled Students Allowance** scheme.

*Information and Resources, Glossary*



Even though your report can be helpful in accessing resources it is not a 'certificate' that you have to keep producing to prove your dyslexia to others. It contains private and personal information. You may not wish to show anyone your report unless you are sure it will be treated confidentially and with respect.

*Telling other people*



## Understanding your Report

*"I was assessed at School. I had loads of tests but nobody explained it to me. The reports were always things that belonged to the teachers not to me."*

Make sure you know what your report means. It will help you understand your pattern of abilities and develop the self-awareness which is essential for effective learning. Just as importantly, really understanding your report will help you discuss your difficulties and abilities with other people.

Other people will often have the same questions you had or have about dyslexia. They may know very little about it.

### Tutors

You will need to be able to communicate about your difficulties. Even if you informed your institution that you are dyslexic on your application form you will need to speak to someone about what your support needs are. These are also likely to change as you progress through your course. It is very important to think about informing people as more than a 'one off' event.

It is helpful to think in terms of creating and maintaining a dialogue between yourself and the people that can help you, particularly your course tutors. A dialogue will help to ensure that you are treated as a person not a label.

*Information and Resources, Ways that other people can help*



These are some ideas about doing this:

- Make an appointment in advance and tell your tutor what you want to talk about so that they can be prepared.
- Ask your disability co-ordinator or dyslexia co-ordinator to meet with you and your tutor. This can be especially helpful if you are just learning about dyslexia too.
- Tell your tutor what you are finding difficult in the context of your course. This is quite different from just announcing that you are dyslexic.
- If possible have some ideas about what would help you, how your tutor may be able to help.
- Ask for help when you need it - find out what you can reasonably expect.
- Use your tutorials to keep your tutor informed about how things are going.



### Parents, Partners and Family

If you were assessed before entering Higher Education your family will know that you are dyslexic and know what this means for you. In this situation they are usually a source of strength and support when you need some encouragement or someone to talk to!

If you have been assessed whilst at college or university it might be just as much a surprise to your family as it has been to you. You will all need time to think about the issues and discuss them.

Things to consider:

- Your parents may feel responsible for not having 'spotted' your dyslexia at an earlier age – you must all remind yourselves that it can often be quite difficult to identify dyslexia in individuals whose hard work at school often 'covers up' their difficulties.
- You and your family may feel anger towards your school for not having recognised that, although you may have been doing well, you were having to work harder to compensate for your dyslexia – there is no easy way to deal with this feeling. However, talking with each other about how you feel is very important.
- Dyslexia is currently thought of as being genetic in origin – this does not mean that one or both of your parents will be dyslexic as well, but it is likely. You may also have brothers and sisters who might be dyslexic. You must handle this idea with care – if you have only just found out about your dyslexia, at such a late stage in your education, consider how it will affect others.
- You may want to use some or all of the information about dyslexia in this book to help your family understand what it means.
- Parents sometimes need to talk with someone about what your assessment means. They may have concerns or fears about you. You might want to give your permission for the educational psychologist who did your assessment or your Disability Co-ordinator to talk with them.

### Friends

You will of course want to talk to your close friends about being dyslexic. For most of us this will be a positive experience. Friends are people we can trust and rely upon. However, some 'friends' will find it hard to understand, for all kinds of reasons which may not be obvious to you at the time.

You may find that some people you know will think that you are using dyslexia as an excuse, whether you are doing well on your course or not. Others may be understanding, but will annoy you with jokes about being dyslexic and other people might over-react as if you have told them you have a "terrible illness"! Most of these reactions are based on ignorance. Sometimes, however, a friend might have a strong reaction because they might well have suspected that they themselves are dyslexic, but have never had the courage or opportunity to find out.

### Why you might keep the findings of your report confidential

There are many issues about the disclosure of personal information which go beyond telling other people that you are dyslexic. Even though you might tell some people that you are dyslexic, you may not want to let them read your report. You will have taken time to understand it, whereas they may find that it confuses the issue for them.

There might be situations where it is beneficial for you not to disclose yourself as being a dyslexic person. This should not be the case when you are telling people who should be able to advise you and offer support. However, it is important that you find out if the wider disclosure of your dyslexia could be a barrier to you achieving your professional aims in the subject area in which you are studying. Talk this over with your Disability Co-ordinator.

## 6. Strategies for Higher Education

### What is the Higher Education context?

Entering Higher Education is a new experience for everyone. We have a sense of achievement when arriving on our course of choice – we have earned the right to be there. However, we are not always prepared for how different an experience studying in Higher Education is compared to what has come before, whether it is employment, school or another course. The new ways in which we are taught and expected to learn, can cause us difficulty.

### Learning about learning!

Learning about how to learn is a fundamental activity for all. For a dyslexic person there can often be an even more pressing need to understand the learning process. This is often because the ways in which we have been taught to learn in the past are either unsuitable for Higher Education, or do not play to our strengths.

### Why do you need strategies for learning?

We all have strategies for learning; without them we don't learn! However, we are often unaware of the fact that we are using them and what they are, because the process has become 'automatic' through use. It is easy to forget that as infants we have all had to learn to walk, just as we have had to learn to read and write.



#### *Experiencing Dyslexia*

Becoming aware of our existing strategies may help us realise that some of them are no longer appropriate or helpful and that another approach is necessary.



#### *Stress and Self-esteem*

Anyone studying in Higher Education needs to develop methods of learning which suit them and are appropriate to the subject that they are studying. Your methods of learning will also have to be appropriate to the ways in which you are taught. In Higher Education most students are expected to attend lectures and seminars, use the library and may do practical work. Some of your strategies will support you when you are being taught and others will help when you are working independently in your studies.

You will also need to be adaptable to these changing demands during the day. Knowing what is being demanded of you and which strategy is most appropriate at a given time is a strategy in its own right.

### What is a Strategy?

A strategy, in the context of learning, is best described as a flexible plan of action which aids your learning process by using your strengths. As we have said before, being aware of how you learn and applying that knowledge, is an essential part of the process. This includes understanding how your dyslexia can both advantage and disadvantage your learning process.

*Understanding your Report*



### Combining and overlapping strategies

Strategies involve a flexible approach to learning tasks. Whereas a 'plan' is fixed, a strategy can respond to changing needs and circumstances. We all have 'plans of action' for the different learning situations we might face, for example, how we approach writing an essay. Writing an essay for coursework is quite a different process to writing one under exam conditions. The strategies you choose to use should take this into account.

What this means in practice is that you will probably use strategies in combination with each other. Sometimes this means that the strategies will overlap and influence each other. You will find that this forms 'expanded' strategies – for example, your strategy for doing project work might involve many smaller strategies.

### So, what might be expected in Higher Education?

There are many aspects of studying in Higher Education with which you will need to be familiar. These are some of the areas where strategies for learning in Higher Education will be helpful:

- **Research and study skills:**

How we access information and how we use it in practice. For example, attending lectures and gathering information from library research for the purpose of writing an essay.

- **Remembering:**

How we store information for future use. For example, keeping a record of the information gathered during a whole academic year for the purpose of revising before an exam.

- **Organising:**

How we co-ordinate our work at college or university with the rest of our needs. This is not just about the timetable we are given for our course, but also about what our responsibilities are around that timetable. For example, knowing when to 'work' and when to 'rest', or how to manage deadlines.



*Organisation for Life*

### Understanding the learning process

Most of the tasks you will have to undertake as part of your learning will involve four essential processes:

- **Synthesising** (bringing together information internally)
- **Organising** (making sense and ordering this information)
- **Memorising** (holding on to this information in order to use it at will)
- **Communicating** (making your ideas available to others)

All these processes overlap in terms of being common to most tasks. There is another overlap in that these processes will be in evidence as you learn, as you are taught and as you are assessed.

Most dyslexic students experience difficulties with short-term memory. This, as you probably already know, can be quite frustrating. When it comes to the processes listed above, difficulties with short-term memory can affect our ability to carry out tasks as effectively as we might. Even more importantly, the ways we may have been taught to study or have used at an earlier stage might actually work against us, by putting too much stress on our short-term memory. When this happens it can often make it much harder to feel successful about the fourth of the processes listed above: 'Communication'.



*What is Dyslexia*

Strategies for learning will extend your learning experience, because they can help you to take in new information and help to reinforce it in your memory.

If we employ strategies to strengthen our ability to remember relevant information, the 'global' or 'bigger picture' in our heads, the 'detail' recorded for easy reference, we can concentrate on the process in hand and develop our communication skills.

It is important to be realistic about the difference new strategies are going to make. We often feel that people who are not dyslexic have no problems when writing. They may not in the sense that dyslexic people do, but 'synthesising', 'organising', 'memorising' and 'communicating' are all processes which often require hard work and a great deal of concentration.

If we are used to working in a particular way, learning a new strategy can, at first, involve a certain amount of 'unlearning'. It also takes a while before we feel completely comfortable with a new way of working. However, the strategies described below would not be worth mentioning if it wasn't known that they can make an enormous difference to many dyslexic students' experience of learning.

*"I started using highlighter pens on my MPhil course to mark up the handouts we were given in seminars, I found that I would retain much more that way – especially new terminology."*

Finding out which strategies will work for us and which won't, often involves a certain amount of trial and error. The process of trying out new ideas and adapting them to suit your own needs is, in itself, a natural part of the learning process. Understanding the process of learning means that you can take ownership of the process. By so doing you will be able to make use of strategies as tools in this process.

### Cramming and Chunking

There are obviously **positive** and **negative** strategies. Negative strategies can take up just as much time but will not be very useful at all. An example of this is **cramming**. Trying to 'learn' a whole year's coursework in a few days leading up to an exam, is not a strategy which most dyslexic people or anyone else would benefit from using, because it relies on using short-term memory to 'ingest' large amounts of information in a relatively short timespan.

Cramming information might help you to remember it for a very short period of time. However, it would be too short a period of time to apply the information to good use. Being able to **synthesise**, **organise** and then communicate the information effectively will mean that you need to truly understand the information in your own terms. Knowing facts for a short period of time doesn't allow you to truly understand and apply your knowledge.

If you try and write a coursework essay in a single 'sitting' it could be said that you are 'cramming' the process. The opposite of **cramming** is '**chunking**'. You can describe **chunking** as a 'global' strategy, one that is useful in many different scenarios. It involves breaking down a task, such as revision or writing an essay, into its component parts, rather than trying to tackle them all at once. As you will see, this 'chunking' strategy has been used in the example below, to help explain how strategies **combine** and **overlap**.

Whatever strategies you choose to use, the following example is intended to help you to see the process involved. Don't be put off by the detail, it might seem to be more work than you thought, but this is learning about learning and the final stage will be to personalise the strategies so that they belong to you.

### Mind Mapping

Mind mapping is a means of handling information in a multi-sensory, non-linear way. It can help us record information quickly, almost like **brainstorming** an idea, so that we can see the **patterns** and **links** within the topic. It is a good example of an 'expanded' learning strategy, which **combines** and **overlaps** a group of strategies.

Many of us have been taught to record information in a linear way, for note taking or for writing an essay. However, what happens when you leave something off a list or write down information in an incorrect order? Even more importantly, what happens when you find that two ideas are closely linked but are far apart on your list?

Mind mapping does not depend on you writing down information in the 'correct' order from the beginning, but it does involve you in being selective. It does not depend on you knowing the hierarchy of your ideas at the beginning, but it does involve you looking for the links between them. Spider diagrams and brainstorming sheets are not mind maps, but they can be a stage towards them.

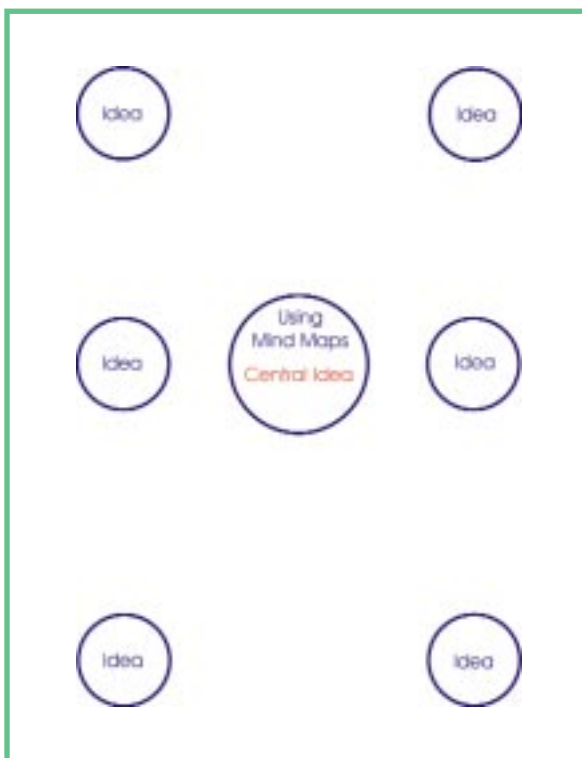
Mind mapping combines the four essential processes, 'Synthesising, Organising, Memorising, Communicating', in a single multi-faceted strategy.

How to make a **mind map**:

- Assemble your materials: 'poster-sized' sheet of paper, felt-tip pens, post-it notes, highlighter pens and something to stick the paper to the wall.
- You can start with a central idea in the middle of the page, adding key points as 'satellites' around the page.
- Start to add some details to these key points, but stick to key words or phrases.
- Now think about the concepts which link the satellites to the central idea – add some linking arrows and write the linking concept along the arrows.
- Repeat this for the links, if any, between the satellites.
- Use different coloured pens, symbols, cartoon drawings, pictures to emphasise and clarify what the information means to you.

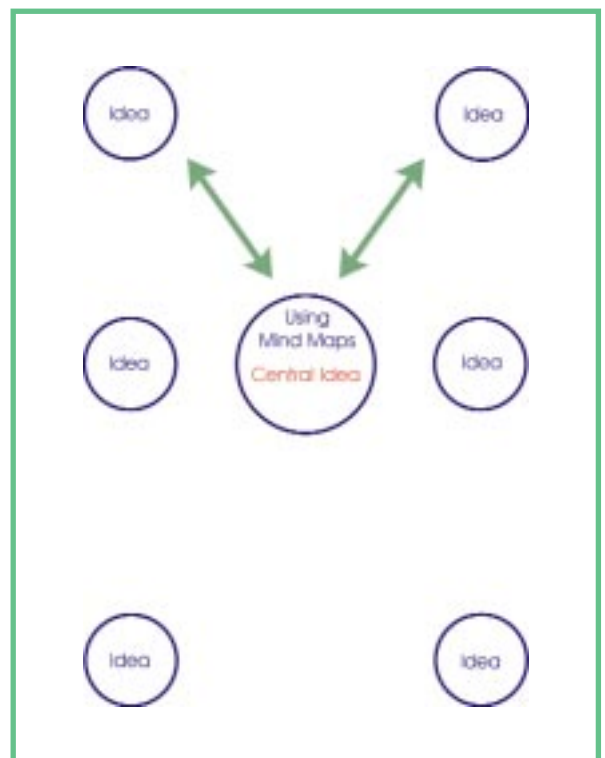
- Remember, this is not an activity that you need to be too cautious about, your mind map may end up looking quite 'messy', but this is very much part of the process – with your next mind map you can reorganise the previous map to clarify the links.
- Re-organising your map can help you find the pattern and structure of your ideas in order to prepare for: an essay, a presentation, a thesis or dissertation, an experiment report, a workshop, a crit or tutorial, a group work session, exam revision.
- Your map will contain all your important ideas in short, concise statements, visual and written, but with all the complexity that goes into the structure.

Here are four schematic diagrams of how a mind map might develop:



### Stage 1:

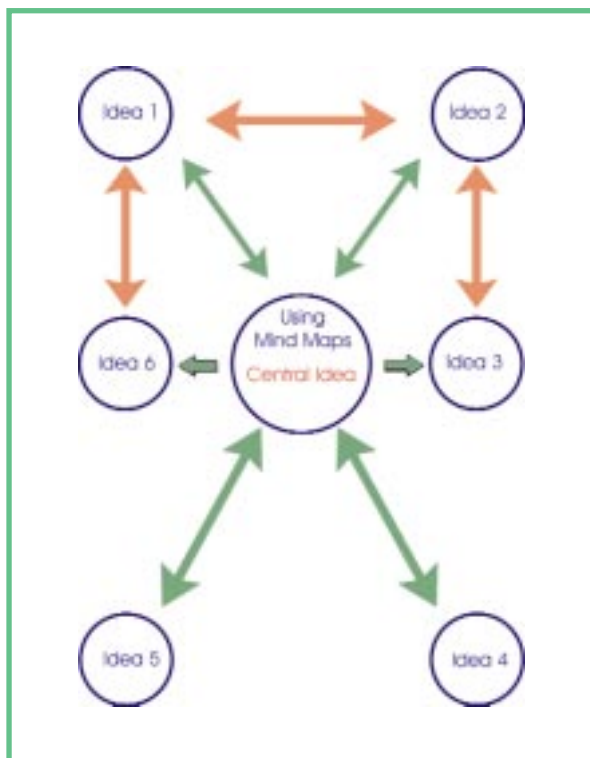
Start by putting your main 'idea' in the centre of your map - this might change as your map grows. Add 'satellite' ideas around the page.



### Stage 2:

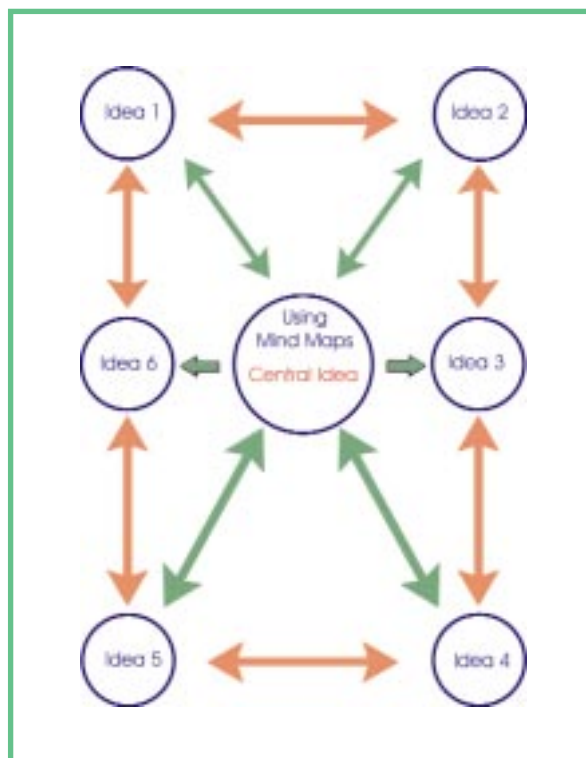
Now begin to join your ideas together. You might work out from the centre or in towards the middle. Remember, this is a diagram and makes this process look 'neat' and ordered. Real mind maps can go through many changes.





### Stage 3:

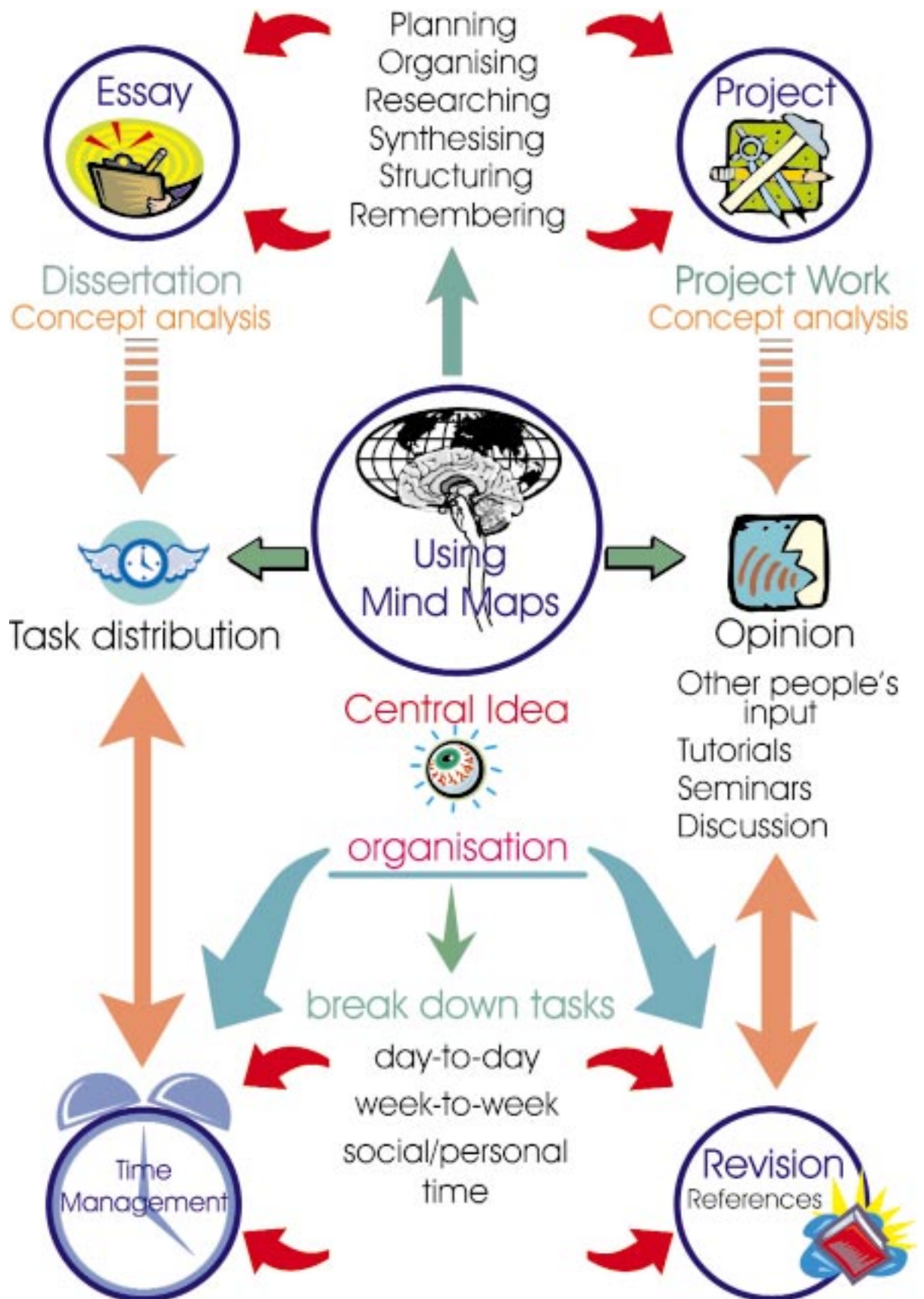
Now that your satellite ideas are linked to the central idea of your map you can look for other links between them. You might number your ideas if you can see a sequence emerging or give them a modified title. At this stage, you may want to start to write on the arrows to describe how the ideas are linked.



### Stage 4:

You now have a busy map! You will already have a lot of information in your map, but you may have some more detail to add to this. You may find that you need to go over some of the links in a strong colour to clarify the connections. In this diagram the map is symmetrical, but this is not the rule to making a good mind map.

Have a look at the mind map on the opposite page and see how a map can appear to be very simple, yet contain a large amount of information – the visual information works in conjunction with the written information and the ‘spacing’ of the ideas to communicate complex statements and ideas. This mind map was the third attempt! It aims to combine all the essential elements of the process of mind mapping:



### Equipment

A strategy can simply involve using the right 'tool' for you to complete a given task. For example, writing an essay on a computer instead of handwriting it. Useful equipment can be low or high tech. A diary is just as essential a 'tool' for studying as using a computer might be for writing. Here are three key kinds of equipment which can help:

- **Computers**
- **Tape Recorder**
- **Stationery**

These kinds of tools can be very useful as part of a wider strategy as well as a strategy in themselves.

### Computers

Computers can help with writing, researching, organising/storing information, organising time and calculating figures. However, in order to get the most out of any equipment you will need to invest time and effort. How can computers help?

*"Computers make sense to me, 'cos it's like a visual tray – one you can see! One file leads into the next file, it's all icons and pictures rather than words."*

- **Writing** – word-processing software can make an extraordinary difference to the way we write. It can help us input text, edit what we have written and proof the spelling and grammar. The facility to allow us to change the way we view text on the screen can also be important.
- **Reading** – with a scanner and the appropriate software you can use a computer to 'read' text aloud to you.
- **Researching** – software, which allows us to search through large amounts of information quickly, can be incredibly useful. The information you will find will already be in an electronic format. A good example of this is the Internet.
- **Organising time** – you can use your computer as an electronic diary. You can enter regular appointments and colour-code them, enter 'alarms' for important dates and print out your own timetables. The software also has the facility for you to store names, addresses and phone numbers. You might even use a 'palmtop computer' or 'Personal Digital Assistant', so that this information is with you on the move. You will be able to synchronise the information on your palm top with your desktop computer.

- **Working with numbers** – all computers have a calculator built into the system, but you can also obtain specific software to help you do more sophisticated work.
- **Working with images** – Although we are now so accustomed to using computers for writing we often forget how well they handle images. You may want to use this facility to illustrate an essay with a photograph, a diagram or a graph. You may have access to software which allows you to make a computer generated presentation, in which case images are a clear advantage in getting your message across.

### Tape Recorders

Being able to record spoken information easily, so that you can review it at a later date, is fundamental. You can use the tape recorder to good effect in the following situations:

- **Seminars** – you can record the replies to your questions.
- **Lectures** – you can concentrate on what is being said, rather than writing notes.
- **Workshops** – the workshop may be ‘hands-on’ but there may be specific vocabulary which you will need to remember.
- **Tutorials** – it is often hard to remember everything useful that has been said in a tutorial; you will be able to reflect on the discussion.
- **Ideas** – we have ideas at the most inconvenient times! Using the tape recorder to ‘note’ your ideas quickly and conveniently can make a real difference.
- **Writing** – writing doesn’t start and stop the moment you pick up a pen! Some of us find it easier to ‘think aloud’ and write it down later.
- **Proof your writing** - revise and prepare for a talk or presentation. You can record what you have written and then play it back as you re-read your text. Think about how it ‘sounds’.
- **Reading** – reading an important text into a tape recorder and playing it back as you re-read it, can really help you to deepen your understanding of the text. You will be able to hear the rhythm and pace of the words and concentrate on ‘seeing’ the content.

### Stationery

We are all used to the idea of buying cardboard folders, refill pads and pens for college, but we often resent having to do this because of the cost! Take a deep breath, this section will encourage you to spend more!

Here is a list of useful items:

- **A4 coloured paper** – you can use this to print and photocopy onto. This can make your work much easier to read if you experience the effects of Meares-Irlen Syndrome.
- **'Ringbinder'** folders, plastic pockets and dividers – colour-coded dividers can keep your notes in sections.
- **Post-it notes** – these are indispensable! Use them to mark out important sections in a book, to add quick references to the draft of an essay or to place reminders in your diary.
- **Writing tools** – don't just use any old pen, find one that you prefer writing with. If you will have to do a lot of writing in an exam, choose a pen with a comfortable 'rubber' grip.
- **Highlighter pens** – these can make note-taking and text proofing a lot easier. Instead of copying down quotations from a book, photocopy the relevant page or pages and then highlight the important text.
- **Diary** – you may already 'keep' a diary or own one in which you write appointments, but do you use a diary for planning your time. Your course might have a large number of different demands on your time. Being able to look ahead and plan your time can make a real difference. Choose a diary which shows you a whole week at a time and has enough space for you to write in more than just 'when, where and who'.

These strategies might all seem to involve too much 'extra' work. Bear in mind that any new strategy will seem to take longer than those with which you are already familiar. The most important thing to remember is that these strategies will be less frustrating and that cutting out those feelings of frustration will save you time and effort.

### Ways that Other People can Help

Most of this information is about how you can help yourself and increase your awareness and competence in learning. It can also be helpful to have some ideas about the ways in which tutors are able to support you by teaching in ways that support you in your ways of learning. Most of the following would be appreciated by any student and constitute good teaching practice.

- Making notes available before a lecture
- Displaying the main points to be covered
- Explaining the purpose of what is being required or done
- Presenting material in a structured way
- Using visual aids
- Giving examples to illustrate a point
- Clarifying new language
- Making sure that the workload is manageable and realistic
- Making 'short cuts' available – an annotated reading list
- Encouraging you in your ways of learning
- Giving constructive and relevant feedback
- Checking that you understand
- Giving you time to think before you answer a question
- Making sure that your coursework involves learning the skills you need to complete the course successfully
- Giving you enough time to read information before you are expected to use it

There are many people in your institution who are able to help you become an effective, independent learner, equipped with the knowledge and experience you need to be successful.

*Information and Resources*



### **Responsibility for your learning**

The combination of factors described in this whole section, will help you to develop independence as a learner. Remember that this process requires you to take responsibility for your learning. Part of that responsibility means finding out things for yourself, but it also means asking for help when you need it. It also means giving feedback to your tutors so that they know what works for you and what doesn't. This will help them to give you even better advice in the future.

It is important to enjoy this process. Experimenting with the ideas in this section will involve 'trial and error', but this very factor will help you to understand the ways in which you learn. We remember far more through the activity of doing, of working in a multi-layered, multi-sensory approach to learning. It means that we can be active learners, exploring our chosen subject through audio, visual and tactile feedback from our strategies – knowing not just what we have learnt, but how we have learnt it.

## 7. Organisation for Life

Dyslexia affects the whole person and, at the same time, it is not the only thing which describes the person you are. The issues we have already discussed have related largely to your studies, but you will understand it in terms of the whole of your day-to-day experience.

As you probably know, some of the most ordinary events in your life can have an impact on how you feel and function. This can have a knock-on effect on how you function in your course. The strategies you can use for learning are transferable to the rest of your life now, and will help you enjoy the challenges you will face after college or university. You might recognise some of the following:

### Time Keeping

#### Missing appointments Forgetting birthdays Turning up on the wrong day

These can all be very frustrating experiences in our lives, they might make us feel unsuccessful away from our studies. Using a diary to plan ahead, rather than just write down appointments, can make a real difference.

It's worth taking the time to make it a habit – your diary will help you take off some of the pressure of always having to remember what you need to do in your head.

### Concentration

#### Losing your diary Or your keys Or your list

We all lose things - it can seem to happen more often if you are dyslexic, especially if you are under pressure and finding it difficult to concentrate.

Sometimes we need to have methodical ways of keeping important items. We need routines.

*"That was maybe a problem I didn't previously associate with being dyslexic'. I just thought it was this thing that just kept happening to me."*

Meeting new people Not 'getting' jokes Not remembering names

Sometimes difficulties with short-term memory can make you feel embarrassed in social situations.

*"This whole thing about being made to feel stupid in social situations. I just assumed that dyslexia was to do with reading and writing and not to do with the general intake of information – I didn't know it was to do with this and your brain processes. It can have an effect in social situations, which is what I have a problem with sometimes – that's the most important aspect for me, I think; losing the thread of a conversation. And, if that happens, your response can be completely unexpected to others – they give you a look, as if to say ..."*

Learning to be kind to yourself is important as is having time off with friends you can trust to understand you.

Writing a cheque Application forms

Getting the right information in the right place can take time as you are making sure of what is being asked of you on the form.

You can ask for help in the bank or from administrative personnel – perhaps have a checklist inside your chequebook. It's okay to take your time.

*"Knowing I was dyslexic, allowed me to feel a bit more confused, do you know what I mean. Instead of denying it, or something, just allowing myself to feel confused and then just dealing with it."*

Not relaxing Not eating well Being exhausted

Remembering to be good to your self is very important. Being well and healthy is also about taking control of your life. Get into a routine and use all your strategies to remind you to relax, eat and rest.

*"Going back over your notes, in your own space and you'll just be sat in your bed, going over your notes, before you go to sleep, you're relaxed – it's quite a nice time to be going over your notes. You're relaxed, you haven't got anything else to do, yer pals aren't around, the bar's shut, you haven't any shopping to do – you focus better: that's my creative time."*



## 8. Stress and Self-esteem

This section is about stress and self-esteem. It is intended to help you reflect on and become more aware of your own response to stress.

### Stress

Stress is a word which is used in many different ways. It can be understood as a way of describing what can be quite complex physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses to the demands made of us by our environment. This includes the demands made by people around us and by our own expectations.

Being 'stressed' is therefore a **response** to what is happening, or, just as importantly to what we **think** is happening or **expect** to happen. What is intensely stressful to one person may seem exciting and motivating to another.

A useful way of understanding stress is to think in terms of how we deal with challenge. Challenge is good for us and together with change is an inevitable part of life as a student. Both are essential to the process of learning. When challenge is at the right level for us we feel excited, stimulated, competent, creative and generally equipped, good enough to deal with what is being expected.

However, when the challenge feels too little or too much our experience can be very different and result in stress which if prolonged and unrelieved can commonly have the following effects.

<b>Physical Body</b>	sleep problems, headaches, sweating, shaking, fatigue exhaustion, indigestion, nausea
<b>Emotions Feelings</b>	irritable, frightened, apathetic, angry, depressed, anxious panic, worthless, frustrated, lowered self esteem, overwhelmed, out of control, boredom
<b>Cognitive Thinking</b>	rigidity, difficulty in concentrating, forgetfulness, difficulty making decisions and setting priorities
<b>Behaviour Action</b>	withdrawal, avoidance, pretend nothing wrong, eating disturbances, excessive drinking or smoking, hostility, doing nothing

If you think about these responses to challenge you can see that they happen when there is an imbalance between the demand made on you and your capacity, as you see it, to meet that demand. How stressed you become and how long you stay that way also depends on how you assess and make sense of the experience and how important it is to you. How you make sense of your world now has a direct relationship with your previous experiences and how others have understood you.

We get stressed when something matters and when we feel that what we care about is threatened. Feeling stressed is a sure indication that some sort of change is necessary either in the way we deal with our environment or in the way our environment deals with us.

### **Self-esteem**

The perception you have of your own value and competence is crucial to how you deal with challenge and your capacity to handle stress.

If you value yourself and have a realistic sense of your own abilities and competence you are likely to feel good about yourself. This will help you deal with stress in a confident way. It also means that you have had previous experience of other people valuing you and your abilities so that you have learned to do this for yourself.

If you feel worthless and incompetent you will have less confidence in your ability to deal with challenge in a productive way and have a tendency to stress. Unfortunately this probably also means that you have had experience of other people dismissing you and not recognising your abilities.

Learning always involves a period of feeling, and being aware of our incompetence. Not knowing is a necessary part of the learning process. Your capacity to tolerate not knowing and be confident enough to learn has connections with your previous experiences of learning and other peoples responses to you. This is an ongoing process in which we develop beliefs about our own value and competence in many different areas.

These beliefs about ourselves can be either enabling or disabling and most of us have a mixture of both.

### Stress and the Dyslexic Student

Student life should be challenging and it is often stressful. However, the student who is also dyslexic can be particularly susceptible to stress. You have probably made some connections for yourself between the ideas about stress in the previous section and how these might relate to being dyslexic in Higher Education.

The challenge of meeting the demands of student life and learning may be harder in some areas because of the primary characteristics of dyslexia.



*What is dyslexia?*

However, your way of responding to these very real challenges is usually based on what you have learned about yourself in other learning situations. It may be that you are reminded about the conclusions you came to about yourself as a result of situations at home, school or work which were humiliating, confusing or frightening. Where you were misunderstood or unfairly treated and as a result developed some disabling beliefs and ideas about yourself, these feelings may still operate in certain situations and effect your self-esteem and ability to deal with the challenge at hand.

For many dyslexic students learning and education is littered with difficult and painful memories.

*“You feel isolated, you know what you’re on about and what you’re about, but I wonder how much of me is getting through to the outside world.”*

The ways we learned to deal with these kinds of situations is often the basis of our current learning strategies, such as:

- **Working all the time:**  
in the short term this can be effective, but will eventually lead to ‘burn out’ and reinforce our sense of being incompetent.
- **Avoiding learning:**  
we can avoid learning by only doing what we know already and making sure that we avoid situations of challenge.
- **Finding ways of passing as opposed to learning:**  
*“My mum has always helped with my essays but she was on holiday when I did the last one and that’s when my tutor said I might have a problem.”*

- **Hiding how we learn:**

we often do this because we feel ashamed in some way of how we do things:

*“I had to write two hundred words, I had to write it out 9 times and even then it wasn't quite right. I get good marks but people don't realise how long it takes.”*

- **Finding situations where we can use our strengths:**

this is good but if we only do what we're good at, we can stop ourselves from exploring and developing new skills.

These can be successful strategies which get you to where you want to be, however they are often accompanied by feelings of self-doubt or the sense of being in some way a fraud. This happens because these ways of coping don't help you understand the difficulties you have and therefore you continue to see yourself through the eyes of other people who have not understood or been able to support you.

*“It was a feeling of relief – finding out I was dyslexic – in the sense that I wasn't mad or anything. I had been made to feel a bit stupid sometimes because it can be hard to take everything in – everything someone is saying. You are made to feel a bit stupid by others.”*

There is some evidence that students who were assessed and found to be dyslexic at school and whose difficulties were understood by others in that context are less prone to stress. It is also the experience of many students that understanding their difficulties is a very important step in the process of improving self-esteem and dealing with stress.

*Understanding your Report  
Strategies for Higher Education*



### Managing Stress in the Context of Dyslexia

There are many ways of managing stress and most of them involve the sort of things which will help you deal with the challenges of dyslexia in Higher Education. Give yourself permission to try out some of the following ideas:

- Learn to recognise what causes you stress
- Learn to recognise your strengths and find ways to use them
- Build a support network
- Ask for help
- Take care of yourself physically and emotionally
- Learn to relax and play
- Take time off - have fun
- Learn to assert yourself - say 'no', let others know what you need
- Learn to use criticism productively
- Build on your successes
- Ask questions - get the information you need
- Learn how to allow yourself to make mistakes and learn from them
- Learn how to manage your time
- Learn how to be more organised

Learn more about how you can use stress to help you. Being stressed is information for you and the symptoms of your stress will often offer you clues about what you need to do, for example: if you feel overwhelmed you are probably trying to absorb too much or do too much at once. Break it down into smaller chunks so that you can regain some control.



#### *Cramming and Chunking*

*"I write a lot more when I wouldn't have. Just even, sort of, materialising it on paper suddenly makes it - I guess you don't forget about it then. I mean there's so many things that you can think, but then they'll be gone again and you might think about them two weeks later, but that's no good! So, I have to write things down in an organised manner, in a way to visually see what something is on a bit of paper and stuff. I think even just the way my brain thinks through things these days is different."*

Stress can be devastating and will always make your dyslexic difficulties more pronounced. You can learn to manage both. If you need help with this make sure you get it.

*Telling Other People*



### Stress in Context

Stress is not always a personal problem with personal solutions. Sometimes despite our very best efforts we can't change how we respond or make things different. This stress can be an individual response to what is a wider issue. There is a 'political' aspect to stress. Some demands are unrealistic and we need to ask the environment to change or alter its demands in some way. You can do this individually or as part of a group:

- Draw attention to the problem
- Find out whether other students have the same problem
- Talk to other students who are dyslexic
- Talk to your tutor/head of department/advisor of studies about what needs to change
- Complain
- Ask your class or student representative to take up the issue
- Get involved in your Course Committee
- Talk to other people about dyslexia and help them to understand what would help
- Talk to your Disability Co-ordinator

## 9. Glossary

- A**     **abilities**  
what you are capable of as measured by an I.Q. test.
- B**
- C**     **anatomy**  
the physical structure of the whole or part of the human body, in this instance, the brain.
- D**
- E**     **assessment**  
the process of determining information about an individual using tests, observations, interviews, etc.
- F**
- G**
- H**     **attainment**  
what you actually achieve or accomplish in the part of a diagnostic assessment devoted to literacy skills.
- I**
- J**     **Attention Deficit Disorder**  
a difficulty in maintaining concentration for more than a short period of time often overlapping with dyslexia.
- K**
- L**     **auditory (short-term memory)**  
relating to hearing. For example, auditory short-term memory is concerned with remembering what you hear and reproducing it.
- M**
- N**
- O**     **brainstorming**  
a way of generating ideas in which nothing is excluded. A technique which is often used in 'teams' to assist creative thinking.
- P**
- Q**     **cognitive**  
a term used to refer to 'higher' mental processes like thinking, perceiving and remembering.
- R**
- S**     **compensatory (strategies)**  
ways of doing things which offset or counterbalance the undesired effects of dyslexia.
- T**
- U**
- V**     **diagnostic assessment**  
an assessment which identifies a person's underlying strengths and needs in a particular area. It may be able to explain why an individual is experiencing a specific learning difficulty and can help to evaluate the severity of the problem.
- W**
- X**
- Y**     **Disabled Student's Allowance**  
an allowance available to 'home' students who are eligible for funding from
- Z**

their Local Education Authority (LEA) in England and Wales, Library Boards in Northern Ireland or the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS). This allowance is intended to help disabled students with any additional costs they have in their studies which are directly related to their disability. Further information is available from your LEA, Library Board, SAAS or Disability Co-ordinator.

**divergent thinker**

someone who is able to generate many different ideas or solutions to a single idea or problem. Brainstorming is a good example of a situation where divergent thinking would be useful. The thought processes involved might be unorthodox or apparently illogical and are, therefore, very close to what we understand by lateral thinking.

**dysgraphia**

a term used to describe difficulty in writing. In other words, it just means "writing difficulty". It is generally used to refer to extremely poor handwriting.

**dyslexia**

dyslexia is a neurological difference, the primary effects of which are on auditory and visual short-term memory and visual/motor processing speed.

**dysphasia**

a difficulty in co-ordinating speech, often overlapping with dyslexia and resulting in difficulties in word order and pronunciation.

**dyspraxia**

a difficulty controlling movement often overlapping with dyslexia and resulting in clumsiness and speech difficulties.

**educational psychologist**

a professionally qualified person who is trained and experienced in psychometric testing (measuring aspects of abilities and performance) and has access to the tests which are necessary for carrying out a diagnostic assessment.

**emotional intelligence**

a term which refers to the ability to be self-aware, manage feelings appropriately, motivated, empathic and effective in relationships of all kinds. These abilities are increasingly recognised as crucial to success. They are not measured in I.Q. tests.



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### **functional characteristics**

the consequences of the primary characteristics of dyslexia on the learning process.

### **hereditary**

something which is passed genetically from one generation of a family to another, for example, eye colour.

### **intelligence**

refers to a wide sample of the basic behavioural skills a person has acquired which are important to the acquisition of further skilled behaviours.

### **I.Q. test (Intelligence Quotient test)**

a systematic procedure which gives an arithmetic average of a person's ability in the specific areas which are being tested.

### **Meares-Irlen Syndrome**

the experience of visual discomfort caused by a strong visual contrast, such as black text on white paper. It can make the text blur or appear unstable. This can make reading for any length of time difficult because it prevents comfortable scanning. Coloured lenses and overlays can be used to reduce the contrast and coloured or off-white paper can also help.

### **memory**

the whole process of taking in information in such a way that it can be represented mentally, stored for a period of time and then retrieved on a subsequent occasion.

### **mind map**

a way of representing information, ideas and the connections between them in a visual/spatial format. This format is thought to replicate the cognitive functioning of the brain. With specialist software, computers are an excellent tool for mind mapping.

### **neurological**

relating to the structure and functioning of the nervous system and brain.

### **numeracy**

ability to use numbers.

### **perception**

the process of interpreting and making understandable information which is received through the sensory organs.

**primary characteristics/effects**

the characteristics or effects of dyslexia which arise as a direct result of the deficit in short-term working memory.

**profile**

the results of an assessment which enables strengths and weaknesses to be easily identified and made apparent by contrasts within the individual's pattern of responses.

**secondary characteristics/effects**

complications, often psychological, which result from the long-term responses of the environment to the dyslexic person's difficulties.

**sequencing**

arranging things in order according to a given structure or a set of formal criteria.

**short-term memory/working memory**

part of the memory storage system which is capable of storing material for a brief period of time, in order that it can be utilised or transferred into long-term memory. It is also concerned with the interpretation and integration of new information and previously stored information.

**specific learning difficulty**

a problem with particular aspects of learning. Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty.

**symbol**

something which visually represents or stands for something else.

**visual (short-term memory)**

relating to vision. For example, visual short-term memory is concerned with what you perceive through your vision and how you are able to recognise it later.

**visual processing**

the cognitive process by which we assimilate, recognise and record symbolic information.

**visual/spatial reasoning**

the ability to perceive, organise and analyse forms and patterns in 2 and 3D.

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## 10. Suggested Reading

### Books

#### **Adult Dyslexia**

Assessment, Counselling and Training

(1994) by David McLoughlin, published by Whurr

#### **Dyslexia in Higher Education**

Policy, Provision and Practice.

Report of the National Working Party on Dyslexia in Higher Education.

January 1999, published by University of Hull

#### **Dyslexia at College**

(1996) by Dorothy Gilroy and Tim Miles,

published by London: Routledge

#### **The Reality of Dyslexia**

(1993) by John Osmond, published by Cassell for Channel 4

#### **In the Minds Eye**

Visual Thinkers, Gifted People with Learning Difficulties,

Computer Images and the Ironies of Creativity

(1997) by Thomas West, published by Prometheus

#### **Intelligence Reframed**

Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century

(1999) by Howard Gardner,

published by Cambridge Distributors, Perseus Books

#### **Dyslexia and Stress**

(1995) by Miles and Varma (Eds), published by Whurr

#### **Code of Practise**

for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards

in Higher Education. Section 3: Students with Disabilities,

(October 1999), published by Quality Assurance Agency

### **Study Skills**

**'Use Your Head', 'Use Your Memory', 'The Mind Map Book',**  
all by Tony Buzan, published by BBC Books

### **The Student Skills Guide**

(1997) by Sue Drew and Rosie Bingham, published by Gower

### **A Student's Guide to Coursework Writing**

(1995) by Mary Coles, published by The University of Stirling

### **Booklets:**

**How to Cope with the Stress of Student Life**

**MIND Guide to Managing Stress**

**How to . . . Assert Yourself**

All available from MIND (National Association for Mental Health), Granta House,  
15-19 Broadway, London E15 4BQ, Tel: 0208 519 2122

## 11. Information and Resources

### Sources of Advice and Support:

#### **British Dyslexia Association**

98 London Road, Reading, RG2 5AU

Web: [www.bda-dyslexia.org.uk](http://www.bda-dyslexia.org.uk)

**Helpline: 0118 966 8271**

#### **Adult Dyslexia Organisation**

336 Brixton Road, London, SW9 7AA

Web: [www.futurenet.co.uk/charity/ado/index.htm](http://www.futurenet.co.uk/charity/ado/index.htm)

**Tel: 0207 7924 9559**

#### **Arts Dyslexia Trust**

Lodge Cottage, Brabourne Lees, Ashford, Kent, TN25 6Q2

Web: [HYPERLINK http://www.sniffout.net/home/adt/default.htm](http://www.sniffout.net/home/adt/default.htm)

[www.sniffout.net/home/adt/default.htm](http://www.sniffout.net/home/adt/default.htm)

**Tel: 01303 813 221**

#### **Dyslexia Institute (Scotland)**

74 Victoria Crescent Road, Dowanhill, Glasgow, G11 9JN

Web: [www.dyslexia-inst.org.uk](http://www.dyslexia-inst.org.uk)

**Tel: 0141 334 4549**

#### **Scottish Dyslexia Association**

Stirling Business Centre, Wellgreen, Stirling, FK8 2D2

**Tel: 01786 446 650**

#### **SKILL (National Bureau for Students with Disabilities)**

Chapter House, 18-20 Crucifix Lane, London, SE1 3UW

Web: [www.skill.org.uk](http://www.skill.org.uk)

**Tel: 0800 328 5050**

#### **SKILL in Scotland**

Norton Park, 57 Albion Street, Edinburgh, EH7 5QY

Web: [www.skill.org.uk](http://www.skill.org.uk)

**Tel: 0131 475 2348**

### People in your Institution

- The Disability Co-ordinator – probably your first contact who will be able to put you in touch with all the people that follow and will be an invaluable source of information:
- Your personal tutor.
- Learning Support Service.
- Co-ordinator for Dyslexic Students or Dyslexia Support Service.
- Counselling Service – great if you need to talk through any issues or feelings in confidence.
- I.T./computer support.
- Student Union.
- Other Dyslexic Students – many universities and colleges have a dyslexic student group. If yours doesn't, start one!

### Information you need from your Institution

These will usually be available from the Registry:

- Your Course Book
- The Disability Statement
- Policy on Disability
- Policy on Dyslexia
- Equal Opportunities Policy
- Complaints Procedure
- Examinations Policy

## 12. information Specific to Your Institution

**Disability Co-ordinator** \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Tel: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

**Personal Tutor** \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Tel: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

**Other useful contacts**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Tel: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

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Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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