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Supporting dyslexia at A level

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**Dyslexia can hit A level students hard as both the difficulty and extent of academic work increases. Kristina Symons offers practical strategies to support the dyslexic A level learner**

"He’s not even that dyslexic and it would help if he stopped talking and did some work."

These are the kind of comments that I have heard often throughout my teaching career with regards to high-achieving dyslexic learners.

As a teacher, it is easy to overlook the needs of the dyslexic student once they have begun their A level courses. Surely if they achieved so highly at GCSE they are able to achieve the same top grades at A level? Don’t they just need to work a bit harder and organise themselves?

Research has shown that dyslexic learners with a high underlying ability are most likely to display learning difficulties for the first time when working at an advanced level. Up until GCSE level, their above-average intelligence enabled to them to provide their own strategies to overcome specific learning difficulties, but at A level, a new range of difficulties come to light.

Working at a selective school has enabled me to see a common pattern in the struggles of a dyslexic learner at the beginning of year 12. Encouraged by excellent GCSE results, they begin their courses with great energy and enthusiasm. They are thrilled that they have dropped the subjects they struggled with at GCSE and are able to pursue what they perceive to be their academic strengths.

By half-term, however, the cracks begin to appear. “Low” essay grades have been returned (C to E grades being common) and the volume of note-taking and independent learning tasks has become overwhelming.

Many teachers work at a very fast pace when delivering A level lessons. The dyslexic student with slow processing speeds cannot process the spoken language in these lessons, or keep up with the speed of reading.

They do not necessarily understand the subject-specific vocabulary. Rushed notes in class time become incomplete, illegible and often lost. Texts are read quickly and not processed or understood. Essays or homework tasks do not answer the question and lack of detail and development of answers is a difficulty they find impossible to overcome.

It is incredible how quickly these learners slip into a downward spiral of missed deadlines, lack of organisation and crippling low self-esteem. There is much talk about “dropping” subjects and regretting choices and students feel that their situation is hopeless. This is when intervention is needed.

A fellow SENCO at an outstanding state school I know confessed that it is her school’s policy to keep teaching assistants out of the A level classroom. She told me: “Most teaching assistants don’t have A levels themselves, how could they possibly support a dyslexic student working at that level?”

Admittedly, much of the advice available to teachers and teaching assistants focuses on the needs of younger dyslexic learners and strategies for intervention are mostly targeted to key stages 1 to 3. There are many tips for spelling and reading strategies, sequencing and working memory difficulties. Writing frames, word banks and sentence starters are common strategies, as are the use of multi-sensory teaching, ICT games and visual resources. However, these strategies are not always applicable at A level and do not meet the new range of difficulties presented.

Older dyslexic students need someone to work with them on a one-to-one basis. In many cases just one hour will put them back on track. Any teacher, teaching assistant or even student mentor who has strong literacy skills can help the older dyslexic learner. It is not necessary for the mentor to know the A level content. In fact, it is beneficial to the dyslexic learner if they are the subject specialist, as they will have to explain the content, thereby illustrating their understanding and empowering them as a learner.

Below are 10 tips for supporting the older dyslexic learner, which can be offered by a teacher, teaching assistant or mentor.

Laptops or devices

Many dyslexic students are notoriously disorganised and forgetful. Allow them to take notes on a laptop in class. Alternatively, allow them to use a device to take photos of the board which can be saved in organised files. This is a great time-saving and organisation tip.

Extra time

Ask subject teachers to allow the student extra time to take notes, read and answer questions both orally and in written work. Many A level teachers are unaware that their delivery is too quick. Alternatively, ask the student to speak politely about this issue to their teacher.

Pre-read

Encourage the student to ask their teachers for materials to pre-read before the next lesson. Even if they scan the text quickly, they will have a much better understanding of the content when they read it in class a second time.

Teach directives

Many A level students do not understand directives such as “explain, discuss, define and argue”. A list of directives can easily be downloaded and taught. Look at the directives in their exam questions. Do they understand what the question is asking and how to answer it?

Use colour

Highlight key words and directives in exam questions – use one colour for the directive, another colour for the content. Studies have shown that dyslexic learners are visual learners, who will remember and understand colour over black and white print.

Encourage them to speak

Ask the student to explain orally how she or he would answer the question or their understanding of it. Immediately get the student to note down those ideas.

Beginning the piece of work

Dyslexic students have lots of ideas, but struggle with getting them down on paper. A level students still need to be taught how to begin an essay. Often they just need half a sentence, then they are able to begin. Look at exemplar answers, how have students in the past begun their essays and written answers? Learn these beginnings.

Developing written work

Dyslexic students struggle with developing written responses and this is where they lose most of their marks at A level. Look at exemplar answers, how have students in the past developed their ideas? Highlight these developed responses. Make the length of these responses explicit to the student. It is not enough to write the bare minimum.

Proof-read with them

Ask them to read their written responses aloud. Does it make sense when they hear their own work? Are they answering the question or have they wandered off on to another tangent? Have they used punctuation? Look carefully at every line. Are there full stops and commas? Have they used capital letters consistently? If they haven’t it will be very difficult for an examiner to understand their work and again, they will lose marks.

Remind students of revision/study skills

When preparing for tests and exams there is no point in mindlessly copying out great chunks of text. Remind them to read the text twice, highlight key words and create a revision product such as flashcards, mind-maps or “trident” notes. Remind students of the importance of revisiting these products frequently. Encourage them to apply their learning to past papers. Show them how to access past papers and mark schemes.

Conclusion

When dyslexic students begin to flounder at A level at my current school, it does not take long to put them back on track. Early intervention is best, as the student learns that they are in an environment that will support and foster their learning.   
Remind them that dyslexia is a gift. Dyslexic learners are highly intelligent, creative and perceptive thinkers and will go on to be our most celebrated artists, musicians, actors, chefs, dancers, writers – the list is endless. With support and intervention, our dyslexic learners can go on to become our highest achievers. With a little time and attention, they will flourish.

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