

The Disability Service

Marking Guidelines for Students with Specific Learning Difficulties

What are Specific Learning Difficulties?

Specific Learning Difficulties (known as SpLD) are difficulties that relate to the processes of learning and literacy. This might be specific to one area of learning, such as working memory and may be referred to as a SpLD, or it could be a problem that affects more than one process of learning and may be referred to as Dyslexia or Dyspraxia. Around half of people with specific learning difficulties also experience Irlen Syndrome or visual stress visual discomfort when reading that makes the words appear to move or blur. Symptoms can sometimes be reduced by using a colour overlay or coloured paper.

Many people use “Dyslexia” to mean any type of SpLD as it is a term more readily understood. It is now generally accepted that Dyslexia is only one of a group of difficulties that may include:

- Dysgraphia: writing difficulty
- Dyspraxia: motor difficulties
- Dyscalculia: a difficulty performing mathematical calculations
- Attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADD or ADHD): concentration difficulties with heightened activity levels and impulsiveness
- Aspergers syndrome and autism: emotional behaviour and/or social communication difficulties (The DfES working group guidelines 2005 did not include Aspergers syndrome, however students with Aspergers syndrome may display many of the described characteristics). Where these characteristics have been identified by a suitably qualified person, the Disability Service will take account of this by recommending that these marking guidelines should be used accordingly.

In this section, SpLD is used as an umbrella term that incorporates specific areas of difficulty, such as Dyslexia and Dyspraxia and those mentioned above.

SpLD is categorised as a specific learning difficulty which varies from one individual to another. It is important to be aware of this variation as this can explain why students with a SpLD may make a range of mistakes.

Common errors in the written work of students with SPLDs:

- Inconsistencies in spelling
- A specific word misspelled in many different ways on one page
- Simple, high frequency words such as 'who' and 'how' misspelled and muddled
- Parts of multi-syllabic words in an incorrect order
- Letters within words out of sequence e.g. flied/field for field
- A tendency to use phonetic spelling
- Capital letters used in the wrong place
- Substituting less effective words because of worry about spelling

Weak sentence construction

- Words missed out of sentences
- Phrases not in the correct order
- Meandering construction - too many ideas telescoped together
- Lack of sophisticated use of punctuation
- Punctuation muddled e.g. the boys hats' for the boys' hats
- Lack of sound, grammatical construction
- Inconsistent use of tenses

Poor essay structure

- Weak sequencing of ideas, paragraphs, sentences
- Unclear expression of cause and effect
- Lack of confidence in using abstract language
- Lack of awareness of writing genre

The above points are not intended to be an exhaustive checklist but rather to give tutors examples of typical difficulties which are observable when marking written work.

It is important to understand that the nature and severity of these difficulties can vary considerably, as can the coping strategies that students develop to accommodate them. Other factors, such as their learning environment and self-esteem, also make a significant contribution to their ability to cope. In order to ensure students are not disadvantaged by these learning barriers, marking arrangements for students with a SpLD have been agreed with the University.

Legal Rationale:

In October 2010 the Equality Act became law. This follows previous legislation, SENDA (2002) and the DDA (1995), which required Higher Education Institutions to provide reasonable adjustments to enable disabled students, including students with SpLDs, to access the curriculum.

This applies to marking as well as curriculum delivery and all aspects of learning, teaching and assessment within the University including exams.

When should these guidelines be applied?

- You have been notified by the Disability Service that the student has a SpLD
- The student has affixed an appropriate sticker to their work.

The sticker system

- A printed sticker system to be used by all students, for written assignments and examination scripts, who provide the Disability Service with acceptable evidence of SpLD. Students should put the sticker in a prominent place.
- For electronic submissions such as through *turnitin* an electronic version will be available
- It will be the student's responsibility to use the sticker system to identify their work as requiring marking under the SpLD marking guidelines.
- In all cases it is important that the SpLD sticker is removed from the student's work by the person who is reviewing it before its return. This shows the student that you have acknowledged their SpLD and prevents its unauthorised disclosure to other people.

Guide to marking written assessments and exam scripts of students with Specific Learning Difficulties:

General guidelines

It must be remembered that the difficulties described above vary from person to person. These guidelines concentrate on the written work of students, but it is important to remember that SpLDs can affect many aspects of academic performance.

Errors made by the student might not be the result of laziness, inattention or carelessness, as it is unlikely that a student with SpLD will be able to recognise their errors, despite repeated proofreading. Sometimes even when an error has been identified, the student is unable to correct it. It is therefore of little use to simply highlight the errors made by students without providing some explanation of the nature of the error.

Marking the work of a student with SpLD is not very different to marking the work of any other student. Marking should always follow University guidelines and relate to the learning outcomes of the module being studied. Having SpLD does not in itself qualify the student for an extension of the submission date for their written work.

1. Overview of the script

It is recommended when reviewing a script for a student with SpLD is to firstly read through the work to identify what the student intended to write rather than what they actually wrote; in other words listen to what they mean rather than what they say. It is often possible to understand a piece of writing by a student with SpLD despite its surface errors or structural flaws. This method should reveal the student's underlying understanding of the subject and allow you to relate that to the specified learning outcomes for the module.

You should avoid penalising for lack of structure. If a student has produced work which appears to contain all the right elements but does not introduce them in a clear logical order, read for the underlying message to judge the student's understanding and assess their performance against the learning outcomes.

2. Evaluating the script.

You should award a mark for the work, which reflects the level of knowledge the student has about the subject and the way that they have engaged with the issues on which they are being assessed and not for surface errors made.

Remember, it may be that applying these marking guidelines does not make a significant difference to the overall mark awarded to the student, for instance not all modules have an allocation of marks for spelling and grammar.

3. Giving Feedback (if the script is to be returned to the student).

It is important that the feedback given to students with SpLD is accessible and meaningful so that they can develop their skills and make them aware of your usual feedback style eg if you don't usually highlight spelling or grammatical errors as you mark, it is important to let the student know this, otherwise they may think that their work does not contain any errors of this type.

If you are commenting on spelling, grammar and punctuation select a sample section rather than correcting the entire piece of work and inform the student that this is your approach. This would be time consuming and wasteful, not to mention demoralising for the student.

All feedback should be constructive and positive and you should explain your comments in a straightforward and accessible way, using short, clear sentences with simple vocabulary. The feedback should also be legible, ideally Word-processed.

In all cases it is important that the SpLD sticker is removed from the student's work before it is returned to them. This shows the student that you have acknowledged their SpLD and prevents its unauthorised disclosure to other people.

4. A student must demonstrate that they have met the learning outcomes of their course and therefore there may be instances where the guidelines are not appropriate.

You may not always be able to apply all of these guidelines all of the time, for example where a student's ability to manipulate language is being tested. For instance, a student of Journalism producing a newspaper article, rather than a more academic piece of work. The reasons for this must be made clear to the student and feedback given as outlined above.

If a student's errors make a material difference to the meaning of their work, it may not be possible to overlook them eg, if a student of Nursing writes *hypoglycaemic* instead of *hyperglycaemic*, this might affect the mark awarded depending on the context in which it is written.

Another example would be if the surface errors or structural flaws make the student's work so ambiguous that it is impossible to understand the meaning, then this might reflect on their ability to demonstrate that they have met the learning expectations of the module and this would be reflected in the mark awarded. If appropriate in some circumstances, discussion with the student might help to clarify the level of their understanding or perhaps another method of assessing their learning might be more appropriate, however you must be very clear about the marking criteria especially in terms of knowledge and understanding.

Further Guidance:

For further information and guidance please contact the Disability Service, student services.

Find further information on the following websites:

<http://training.dyslexiaaction.org.uk/>

<http://adshe.org.uk/>