

PLuS Perspectives

Information about College Students with LD

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Meeting the Challenge:

Reading Disabilities

Part I : Decoding

Reading is typically understood as having two components: decoding and comprehension. This issue of *PLuS Perspectives* will focus on decoding which is the process of identifying what each word “says”. Students with adequate decoding skills can read with fluency and without a conscious, deliberate effort.¹ The popular conception of decoding problems (dyslexia) is that letters and words are reversed, but reversals are not common among college-age students (see Alison May, below).

College students with learning disabilities (LD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may experience difficulties with decoding words. These difficulties are often subtle, but nevertheless can have a significant impact on learning in college because they affect the pace of reading.

Not all students with LD or ADHD have decoding problems, but those who do *can* be successful in college. They often require more time to read assignments. Students learn pre-reading strategies to prepare them for reading and use technology to help them quickly identify unknown words.

¹http://www.idaamerica.org/aboutld/teachers/teaching_reading/reading_methods.asp

Characteristics of Students with Reading/Decoding Difficulties

Students with LD may experience the following subtle difficulties:

- ◆ Difficulty sounding out unknown words
- ◆ May add or omit words or skip a line while reading
- ◆ Difficulty decoding technical or discipline-specific terminology
- ◆ Difficulty decoding foreign words or learning a foreign language
- ◆ Difficulty decoding multi-syllable words
- ◆ Need to read and reread material several times
- ◆ Problems reading quickly

Students with ADHD may experience:

- ◆ Difficulty with accuracy of decoding due to reading too quickly
- ◆ Misreading words that look similar due to reading too superficially

Students who have difficulty with decoding may also experience reading comprehension problems. They may misinterpret material because they misidentify or can't decode important words or they may forget what they've just read because they need so much time to decode the words.

...though I have a vocabulary in the 99th percentile, I hesitate each time I look at a word. The word is not backwards or scrambled, but I have a lag between seeing and recognizing familiar words in the context of the sentence. Sometimes, reading out loud helps to eliminate some of the difficulties, but because of my auditory dyslexia, the benefits are often minimal. No matter what strategies I try, reading is laborious and physically exhausting. Yet despite my hardships, I love to read: With each word I understand, I feel I reaffirm my parents' faith in me, and prove wrong all the doctors and psychologists who gave up on me.

-Alison May (Source: *Learning Disabilities and Life Stories*, Page 149)



PLuS Perspectives Continued

Technology to Aid in Reading

The Quicktionary Reading Pen:

When a student comes across a difficult word while reading, the portable pen scanner reads the word aloud and a definition is displayed on a small screen.

<http://www.dyslexia-parent.com/books1.html>

The Franklin Speller

This is a hand-held tool for reading when a student may not know a difficult word. The word can be typed into the device, the word is pronounced aloud, and a definition is provided on a small screen.

<http://www.franklin.com/estore/handhelds/>

Text-to-Voice Software

This software can convert any electronic text such as MS Word, webpages, PDF files, and emails into spoken words. There are different types of software available and many can be accessed online and downloaded for free. <http://www.naturalreaders.com/>

BookCourier

Any electronic file, such as a book on CD, that can be uploaded onto a computer can then be transferred to this portable listening device. This device frees students from being confined to their computers, so that they can be in a study environment they choose. It also spells words at any point where the reader may be unfamiliar with the word being used.

<http://www.bookcourier.com/index.htm>

How Staff and Faculty Can Help in the Classroom

- ◇ Make reading list available in advance to give students the opportunity to obtain taped or digital books, and/or get a head start on readings.
- ◇ Put readings and handouts online, perhaps on e-reserve, so they are accessible by text-to-voice screen readers.
- ◇ Give advance notice of reading assignments and due dates.
- ◇ Create strategic placement of heavy reading assignments.
- ◇ Indicate what students should pay close attention to while reading an assignment
- ◇ Provide lists of discipline-specific vocabulary in advance, and use the vocabulary list in class, on handouts, and in PowerPoints.

How Staff and Faculty Can Help in the Office

- ◇ Make forms, pamphlets, and handouts available online so they are accessible by text-to-voice screen readers.
- ◇ Provide forms, pamphlets, and handouts in advance of appointment so students can have ample time to read them.
- ◇ Avoid using small type size or italic or unusual fonts in forms and pamphlets, which make decoding even harder.
- ◇ Create audio (taped or CD) instructions for completing complex forms.

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