



TIPS FOR TEACHERS AND CLASSROOM RESOURCES

# Understanding Literacy Difficulties vs. Disabilities

By The Editorial Team

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The United States is facing a [literacy crisis](#). According to [ProLiteracy](#), more than 36 million adults in the United States cannot read, write, or do basic math above a third grade level. The [One World Literacy Foundation](#) has found that two thirds of students who cannot read proficiently by the end of 4th grade will end up in jail or on welfare. As educators, we are on the frontlines of guiding the next generation to be literate, informed, active citizens.

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We know there are many students who struggle with oral reading, reading comprehension, and fluency. But how can we understand the difference between a *difficulty* vs. *disability*, and what can be done to help students who struggle in these different ways? Here's an in-depth look at the differences and what each entails.

may need extra help, remediation, or more time to learn reading skills. But it's conceivable that, with proper support, the student will be able to catch up and eventually achieve mastery.

Some students, however, are formally diagnosed with a learning disability. "These students can receive special education under a federal law called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). To outline the educational goals and services that the student needs to be successful, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is developed," according to [Reading Rockets](#), a national, multimedia literacy initiative. "For students with a learning disability who struggle with reading, reading-related services can be included in the student's IEP goals." For some disabilities, there is no "cure" and a student must continuously work with support services throughout the duration of their education.

According to [Patricia W. Newhall](#), former Associate Director of [Landmark School Outreach Program](#) and learning disability expert, "a diagnosis of a specific learning disability means the student's difficulties are *not* the result of:

- environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage
- difficulty acquiring English as a second language
- a motor disability
- a visual or hearing acuity problem
- impaired cognitive function (though severe forms of LBLD can affect performance on assessments of cognitive function)"

Literacy experts divide reading disabilities into three categories: phonological deficit (speech sounds), processing speed/orthographic processing deficit (letter and word recognition), and comprehension deficit (understanding what is read).

## Understanding dyslexia

"Dyslexia is very common, affecting 20% of the population and representing 80–90% of all those with learning disabilities," according to Yale Professor Sally Shaywitz in her book [Overcoming Dyslexia](#). "Scientific research shows differences in brain connectivity between dyslexic and typical reading children, providing a neurological basis for why reading fluently is a struggle for those with dyslexia." ([This is what reading is like if you have dyslexia.](#))

Dyslexic readers have trouble matching the letters in a text with the sounds those letters make. "Dyslexic children and adults struggle to read fluently, spell words correctly, and learn a second language, among other challenges," Shaywitz says. Dyslexia impairs reading skills like decoding, fluency, and comprehension because a dyslexic student spends so much energy trying to get through the letters and sounds.

"Students with weak orthographic processing rely very heavily on sounding out common words that should be in memory, leading to a choppy and laborious style of decoding," according to the [The Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation](#). "These students are also more likely to have difficulty applying knowledge of root words in order to decode a variation of a word and confuse simple words like 'on' and 'to' when reading.

Dyslexia is *not* connected to intelligence, and it has no cure. But there are many successful people who have dyslexia and learned to cope with it by utilizing different reading and memorization strategies and focusing on their strengths. For more on this, check out: [Jamie Oliver is right: people with dyslexia really do look at things differently.](#)

## Specific comprehension deficit or hyperlexia

There is debate about whether hyperlexia is a *disability* or a *superability*. But the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), describes hyperlexia as a developmental disorder in which young readers possess skills of advanced word recognition and advanced reading comprehension skills, but may have trouble understanding speech. Many people with hyperlexia are on the Autism spectrum.

The [Center for Speech and Language Disorders](#) in Chicago notes that children with hyperlexia read far above what would be expected at their age, but have significant difficulty understanding and using verbal language. "Identification of hyperlexia is most important when children are young because early intervention increases children's chances for success, and since reading is a



# Dysgraphia

The National Center for Learning Disabilities defines dysgraphia as “a learning disability that affects *writing* abilities. This can manifest itself as difficulties with spelling, poor handwriting, and trouble putting thoughts on paper.”

While dysgraphia and dyslexia are separate issues, they *can* overlap, creating intense reading and writing struggles in the classroom. Difficulty with writing affects fine motor control, visual processing, and planning and organization, and can generally impact a student’s self-efficacy and emotions in the classroom due to frustration and stress.

## Literacy *difficulty*

Students without a disability who merely struggle to learn to read benefit from vocabulary-building, reading out loud, a teacher modeling fluent reading, the learning of literacy strategies, and reading practice. But one of the most impactful ways to inspire students is to help them develop a passion for reading.

Carrie Kondor, Associate Professor and Reading Endorsement Chair, says, “one common challenge for struggling readers is engagement. We naturally tend to not want to engage in something we don’t feel good at. Helping struggling readers learn to enjoy reading is critical, yet oftentimes takes a backseat to explicit skill instruction. Teachers should spend instructional time sharing their own reading habits, helping students set reading goals and learn how to select texts that interest them. Finding high interest books for readers who struggle can be challenging. Some resources for [high interest-low level books](#) include graphic novels and series books.”



## Additional resources

- [Reading Disabilities, Learning Disabilities, and Reading Difficulties](#)
- [3 Great Projects to Get Kids Excited About Summer Reading](#)
- [Effective Strategies to Motivate Reluctant Readers](#)
- [What is Intellectual Disability?](#)

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