



The
British
Psychological
Society

Dyslexia and Occupational Testing

Practical advice for test users managing the Occupational Testing of candidates who have, or claim to have, dyslexia



Psychological Testing Centre

www.psychtesting.org.uk

The purpose of these notes

These notes are to help Level A trained test users working in an occupational context who need to test someone who says they have dyslexia. They do not relate to the use of tests to diagnose dyslexia; such testing must be carried out by a specialist. The advice given here concerns dealing with a report of dyslexia, particularly in selection situations where it is especially important that all candidates are treated fairly.

Dyslexia and the law

Dyslexia can be a legally recognised disability depending on its severity. Therefore, when applicants or candidates are being assessed, the qualified test user should have due regard to the employment provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995); this makes it unlawful for an employer to treat a disabled person less favourably than a non-disabled person without good reason. Discrimination is outlawed in a wide range of employment activities including selection, promotion and training. Employers have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to selection processes and working conditions so that disabled persons are not placed at a substantial disadvantage.¹

About Dyslexia

There are many theories and hypotheses about what dyslexia is and how it affects an individual. The most commonly recognised effect is that it impacts upon reading and spelling. A working definition is that:

‘Dyslexia is evident when accurate and fluent word reading and/or spelling develops very incompletely or with great difficulty. This focuses on literacy learning at the ‘word’ level and implies that the problem is severe and persistent despite appropriate learning opportunities.’²

The British Dyslexia Association’s definition mentions the impact dyslexia can have on other functions as well as literacy. The Association defines dyslexia as:

‘A combination of abilities and difficulties which affect the learning process in one or more of reading, spelling and writing. Accompanying weaknesses may be identified in areas of speed processing, short-term memory, sequencing, auditory and/or visual perception, spoken language and motor skills. It is particularly related to mastering and using written language, which may include alphabetic, numeric and musical notation.’³

¹ See: Code of Practice for the elimination of discrimination in the field of employment against disabled persons or persons who have had a disability. Stationery Office. www.disability.gov.uk

² The British Psychological Society (1999). *Dyslexia, Literacy and Psychological Assessment: Report by a Working Party of the Division of Educational and Child Psychology*. Leicester: BPS. ISBN 1 85433 310 0.

³ Johnson, M. & Peer, L. (Eds.) (2002). *The Dyslexia Handbook*. The British Dyslexia Association.

In an occupational selection setting the dyslexic person is likely to encounter difficulty with tests of verbal reasoning, spelling and functional literacy. However, the disability can also affect performance on other types of test (for example, numerical and non-verbal) if there is a substantial amount of text to read, and some people with dyslexia have difficulty with numbers. Checking tasks can also be more difficult for people with dyslexia. When testing those with dyslexia the tester should try to select tests that do not have written components that might cause difficulties unrelated to the abilities being tested. Advice about written instructions for non-verbal tests is in the final section of these notes. Much of this is good practice for all testing situations.

Practical advice in advance of the testing session

- Ensure that there is a requirement for verbal reasoning or functional literacy in the job for which the selection is being held and that other tests are also job relevant.
- When inviting candidates to a testing session, ask them to contact you if they have a disability or any condition that might affect their performance on the tests. This allows the test user/administrator to seek advice and prepare for any special needs.
- Provide any practice materials that are supplied with the tests, well in advance of the testing session in order that candidates can check if they would have difficulty with any of the tasks.
- If dyslexia is reported, ask, 'How does it affect you?' Enquire about the reasons for making the claim and any extra support the candidate feels will be required.
- Ask if the condition has been diagnosed and documented. If so enquire about the results and ask 'Could I see the recommendations of the psychologist?' Ensure that information supplied is kept in confidence and only used to provide necessary adjustments for the tests and other parts of the selection procedure.

Making adjustments to tests

The law requires that accommodations are made for disabled people including those with dyslexia to ensure that selection procedures do not disadvantage them. The employer is concerned with eliciting accurate information on abilities to use in making decisions. The standardised nature of psychometric tests is one of the main contributors to their effectiveness and objectivity. Arbitrary modifications to the test or administration procedure are likely to invalidate the results and render standard norm groups and score interpretations meaningless. For instance, adjusting the timing without professional advice will render the test into a work sample or structured exercise. It may show whether the candidate can manage the task, but it would be meaningless to compare scores to a standard norm group or try to interpret them in the usual manner.

Therefore, where a modification is required, advice should be taken from a Chartered Psychologist with expertise in this area or from the test distributor or publisher. They will have knowledge of the type and degree of modification that might be needed. A common modification for dyslexic candidates is to adjust the timing of the test. However, the amount of extra time required will depend on the way the dyslexia manifests itself, its severity, the test(s) being used and their relationship to the job requirements. Only a relevant professional can determine what is appropriate. An arbitrary decision should never be made. Other modifications that can help candidates with dyslexia include administering the test and/or recording the answers via computer, reading out instructions, help with filling in the answer sheet, and in severe cases a reader for the whole test may be appropriate.

Options for assessing functional literacy

- Tests can be administered in the standard fashion to see how the results for a dyslexic individual compare with the norm group. Despite the disability, many candidates with dyslexia may perform well enough to be considered for the role, if competent in other respects. Only if the score is lower than would normally be required is there a need for an alternative assessment approach.
- Consider what types of verbal skills are being measured. If verbal reasoning is being tested think about how this is relevant to the role. On the job, would the candidate be reasoning from written material or would it often be from other sources of information? If reading or spelling are being measured, are these critical to the role, or could the tasks entailing these skills be performed by other members of staff, for example, only one member of a work team might need to read the day's work assignment.

If the skill is critical, it may be preferable to give the dyslexic candidate different but real work based exercises, such as work samples with a timing that is realistic for a novice at the task. In the fire service for example, fire fighters are required to spell out the names of streets and other locations over a radio connection under time critical conditions. This would make the basis of a good exercise.

In such exercises, it is necessary to predetermine what would be an acceptable result (number of acceptable errors, amount completed in the time) and assess to these criteria. A further assessment of these practical exercises will be required post-training to ensure that critical safety requirements can be met. Practical advice during the testing session

Whether adjustments have been made to standard test procedures or not, careful administration can help ensure that dyslexic candidates have a fair opportunity to demonstrate their skills.

- As with many disabilities, stress may exacerbate the impact of dyslexia. Therefore, a calm and understanding approach on the part of the administrator is important. A one-to-one administration can be helpful as it allows a less formal approach and candidates may feel more able to take their time with practice questions and ask for help when no other candidates are present.
- People with dyslexia may have difficulty with test instructions. This can be due to reading difficulties, or to a difficulty with short term memory and/or sequencing which is common with dyslexia. With non-verbal tests such as spatial or numerical reasoning, candidates may do poorly on a test simply because they could not read and understand the instructions, rather than because of a lack of the ability being tested. To ensure fair testing, make sure the candidate has sufficient time to understand the task before starting the test. Offer to read out instructions, or provide a recording of the instructions which can be listened to at the candidate's own pace.
- Indicate non-verbally any materials and places on the answer paper that the instructions refer to. This is good practice in all test administration, but it is even more important if the candidate is unable to read the instructions with ease, or has difficulty differentiating right from left.
- Ensure that all candidates are comfortable with the test instructions and have completed any examples before the timed test begins.
- During the tests, check candidates are marking their responses correctly.
- Note down in the test log any adjustments made, comments by the candidate as well as any other non-standard occurrences.
- If further advice is required in interpreting the results test users may wish to contact the test publisher, consult with a Chartered Occupational Psychologist or a Chartered Psychologist with expertise in dyslexia.

Much of this advice is just good testing practice and contained within the Level A competencies on which test users have been assessed. This requires the test user to proceed in a way that is fair and makes adjustment for a disability.

Useful contacts

The British Dyslexia Association.

98 London Road,
Reading, RG1 5AU.
Helpline: 0118 966 8271.
Tel: 0118 966 2677.
Fax: 0118 935 1927.
E-mail: info@dyslexiahelp-bda.demon.co.uk.
Website: <http://www.bda-dyslexia.org.uk>

Disability Rights Commission.

DRC Helpline
FREEPOST MID02164
Stratford upon Avon, CV37 9BR.
Tel: 08457 622 633
Fax: 08457 778 878
Textphone: 08457 622 644
E-mail: enquiry@drc-gb.org
Website: <http://www.drc-gb.org>

The International Dyslexia Association.

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8600 LaSalle Road,
Baltimore,
Maryland 21286-2044 USA.
Office Tel: 410-296-0232
Office Fax: 410-321-5069
Voice Message Requests for Information: 1-800-ABCD123
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PTC14/10.05