

Guidelines for Marking Work of Students with Specific Learning Difficulties (including Dyslexia, Autistic Spectrum Conditions, ADHD, Dyspraxia and Dyscalculia)

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N.B. The term Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) is used throughout these guidelines to describe all students in the categories stated above.

1. Introduction

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 dyslexic students, to access the curriculum.

The Equality Act extends and strengthens the previous legislation with regard to disability. The legislation states that it is “illegal to treat a disabled person less favourably than others for a reason that relates to their disability without justification, and in some cases, it may be legitimate to treat a disabled person **more favourably**’. If a student is at a **substantial disadvantage**, the educational provider is required to make **reasonable adjustments**. The UK Quality Code for Higher Education advises that:

“Equality of opportunity involves enabling access for people who have differing individual requirements as well as eliminating arbitrary and unnecessary barriers to learning. In addition, disabled students and non-disabled students are offered learning opportunities that are equally accessible to them, by means of inclusive design wherever possible and by means of reasonable individual adjustments wherever necessary.” (Part B, Chapter B3, 2015)

This applies to marking as well as curriculum delivery.

2. What kinds of ‘substantial disadvantage’ may students with SpLD experience?

Dyslexia	Difficulties with handwriting, spelling, sentence structure, grammar.
Autistic Spectrum Condition	Narrow focus, language issues including difficulty interpreting ambiguous language and instructions,

	poor nonverbal skills, attention and organisation difficulties.
Attention Deficit Disorder (with or without Hyperactivity)	Poor concentration, difficulties finishing work, poor time management, impulsivity.
Dyspraxia	Poor or slow handwriting, poor structure in written work, difficulties organising paragraphs
Dyscalculia	Problems with understanding basic number concepts and relationships.

3. Marking guidelines

Marking guidelines should stipulate the knowledge that needs to be demonstrated for grades to be awarded. It is rare for spelling to be included as a marking criterion and therefore students, whether with a SpLD or not, should not be penalised for spelling errors. The same applies to minor inaccuracies and errors in punctuation and grammar. „Minor inaccuracies“ mean errors which do not interfere with the reader’s ability to understand what is written. There should be no need to differentiate between the scripts of students with SpLDs and non-SpLD students on the basis of these features of their writing unless these are being assessed explicitly.

Nonetheless, assessors should be aware that, as a result of difficulties with spelling, grammar and sentence structure, SpLD students’ written assignments may lack the “polish” demonstrated by their peers. Errors, in some cases, may persist despite extensive proofreading. Assessors might reasonably, in normal circumstances, consider such work “shoddy” or careless, and deduct marks for poor presentation. However, in the case of SpLD students, such errors should be understood and taken into account. Students registered with the Disability and Dyslexia/SpLD Service will have, and should attach to all written work, a **Blue Card** to alert the marker.

Although students often receive support through assistive technology or specialist tutor support sessions, they may still need marking adjustments.

In subjects where correct spelling and grammar, technical and/or specialist language **are deemed** to be important, the number of marks that can be lost for poor spelling (usually a small percentage) should be stipulated. Applications for exemption from the **Blue Card** system need to be made, using the recognised procedure, through programme leads and subject coordinators. The exemption form is available at:

4. Academic standards

Assessors in Higher Education are naturally concerned about maintaining academic standards when making allowances for SpLD in the marking of coursework or examination

scripts. They should be reassured that according to disability legislation, the need to maintain academic standards is a fundamental premise within the law. “Offering an equal opportunity to learn is distinguished from offering an equal chance of success.” (UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Part B, Chapter B3, 2015)

If, when reasonable adjustments have been made, a SpLD student is not able to demonstrate academic competence as prescribed by the course requirements, he or she will not be able to complete the course successfully. Reasonable adjustments cannot extend to overlooking a lack of knowledge.

5. Marker’s Guide when marking the work of students with SpLDs

- Read the work looking for ideas, understanding and knowledge
- Be very clear about the marking criteria especially in terms of knowledge and understanding
- Make constructive and positive comments.
- Explain your comments in a straightforward and accessible way
- Word–process feedback if possible
- If you are commenting on spelling, grammar and punctuation, select a sample section rather than correcting the entire essay and inform the student that this is your approach.

For more information and guidance, please contact the Disability and Dyslexia/SpLD Service at dyslexiaspld@brookes.ac.uk.

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2015) UK Quality Code for Higher Education Part B: Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Gloucester