



The information in this section is adapted from: 'Practical ideas for teachers of students with disabilities', NSW TAFE Commission, 1998.

What's in this section?

- Visually impaired students
- Hearing impaired students
- Students with an intellectual disability
- Students with a learning disability
- Students with a neurological disability
- Students with a psychiatric disability

Who is this section for?

Do not assume that, just because your student has literacy problems, they have a 'disability' as we normally understand it. Many extremely capable people have just never got the hang of reading and writing for a variety of reasons.

However, some adults with a disability do ask for literacy help and your student may be one of these. For example, if your student went to a special school or is on a disability pension or in sheltered accommodation then it is possible that they have a disability which will effect their literacy development.



Even if your student does have a disability, most of the strategies suggested elsewhere in this resource will be appropriate. However, there may be a number of other issues which you should be aware of. Below is a very brief overview of some of these considerations. If your student does fall into one of these categories, then you should try to seek further professional advice and make sure your student has had an assessment by a professional teacher of adult literacy.

Visually impaired students

- Ask your student what's the best position in terms of light.
- Think about the size of print that you use.
- Use a felt tipped pen rather than a biro as contrast on the page is important.
- Your local library will most likely be a good source of large print books.
- A magnifying glass or other low vision aid may help.
- The Royal Blind Society in your state may have some suggestions.

Hearing impaired students

Many deaf or hearing impaired people have difficulty with language skills and may have a restricted vocabulary. The main problem with developing literacy however will be that they will have problems with the possible sound/letter correspondence in words.

- Concentrate on helping to develop a visual memory for words.
- Make sure that you sit facing the student to maximize lip reading ability. Keep your hands etc. away from your face and make sure your face is well lit.
- Speak slowly and clearly, pronouncing each word carefully, but without over-pronouncing as overemphasis distorts lip movements, making lip reading more difficult.
- Try to use short sentences as they are easier to understand than long ones.
- Cut down background noise.

Students with an intellectual disability

Appropriateness of material

It is possible that your student has had limited experiences of life. If this is so, take great care that the material offered is within the scope of their experience. To start with concentrate on the immediate life experiences and needs. Do they need help shopping or cooking? Start with those areas.

Avoid abstract concepts

Students with an intellectual disability may experience difficulty with abstract concepts and complex language structures. With such students it is particularly important that you remember that concepts such as 'sounds' and 'letters' are very abstract notions. They should not be taught in isolation from whole language in real, concrete contexts. That is, in signs, magazines, advertising fliers etc. For example, if the student is learning to write their name and address, give them plenty of practice writing it on a variety of forms (which is where we usually have to write it in real life.) If shopping is an immediate need, then use supermarket ads - and go shopping.

Make use of the concrete and visual

Because your student will have trouble with abstract concepts, their memory for information which is presented visually and graphically will be better than their rational, logical memory. You will need to stress the importance of strategies such as mind maps when trying to memorise material, or the importance of the visual memory for a word when learning to spell.

Repetition

Your student will probably have difficulty retaining information for any length of time. You may find that you need to review the same material over and over in different ways. A word learnt today may not be remembered tomorrow and it is very important that you don't become frustrated with the slow pace. For this reason it is better, for example, to set one or two spelling words to be learnt a week than a long list which will undoubtedly be forgotten.

Direct teaching

Some of the teaching/learning strategies suggested in this resource rely partly on the ability of the students to make their own deductions about the language. For some students this is more difficult than others. For example, many students manage to develop quite good spelling strategies just by being encouraged to do a lot of writing and 'give it a go' with the difficult words. Your student however, may need much more systematic attention to the sounds/letters in the words (still using whole language in context.)

Consistency and routine

Make sure you are consistent with issues such as ... which book to write in ... where to write personal spelling words ... which activity you start or end the lesson with ... a routine for learning spelling words ... reviewing homework ... etc.

Because concentration will be difficult, you will need to provide short periods of learning, with breaks and an opportunity for a stretch. Where possible, establish a routine for this also. *First we revise what we did last week and do some reading ... then a short break ... then some writing ... and a short break ... and some spelling ... etc.*

Distraction-free environment

A student with an intellectual disability will usually be more easily distracted for a number of reasons. They will also probably have trouble focusing their attention on what is relevant to the task. It is important therefore that you choose somewhere for your lessons which is free from the distractions of noise, other people and other activity.

Positive feedback

While praise and positive feedback are important for all students, it is particularly important if your student has an intellectual disability. If you praise a response, it is much more likely that the student will remember it. This reinforcement should be given frequently in a variety of forms. You should praise much more often than you correct. If you find you are correcting the student often, then the task is too difficult.

Students with a learning disability

The term 'learning disability' is used to describe people who have problems processing information or who learn differently from the norm. People who have been diagnosed with dyslexia fall into this category. However, do not assume that your student necessarily has some sort of learning disability even though they may have been 'diagnosed' with dyslexia. The problem has very often arisen from educational issues in childhood such as moving schools often, illness, undiagnosed hearing problems etc.

However it is important that students who have a learning disability realise that they can learn to read and write just as well as anyone else – it may just take a little longer. As the tutor, it is also important that you help your student identify their learning strengths and weaknesses. These are sometimes called learning styles. Are they auditory or visual learners? You can then use the strengths to work on the weaknesses.

Make use of the concrete and visual

It is likely however, that your student's memory for information which is presented visually and graphically may be better than their rational, logical memory. You will need to stress the importance of strategies such as mind maps and using colour when trying to memorise material, or the importance of the visual memory of a word when learning to spell.

You may also have to deal with a self concept which tells your student that they can't do this reading and writing stuff because they have dyslexia. Lots of praise and encouragement and early success are needed.

Students with a neurological disability

People with a neurological disability include those with 'acquired brain injury'; that is, brain injury as a result of accident or trauma.

Avoid abstract concepts

Such students may present with a range of learning issues, depending on the region of the brain that is affected. For example, they may have difficulty with complex language structures and abstract concepts. With such students it is particularly important that you remember that concepts such as 'sounds' and 'letters' are very abstract notions. They should not be taught in isolation from whole language in real, concrete contexts. That is, in signs, magazines, advertising fliers etc. If your student is working on writing their name and address give them plenty of practice writing it on a variety of forms (which is where we usually have to write it in real life.)

Make use of the concrete and visual

It is likely that the student's memory for information which is presented visually and graphically may be better than their rational, logical memory. You will need to stress the importance of strategies such as mind maps when trying to memorise material, or the importance of the visual memory for a word when learning to spell.

Slow and logical

Students with a neurological disability may also have trouble following complex instructions. You may need to be very explicit, clear and logical in your instructions and to break tasks down into small achievable parts. You may need to slow down the pace of the lesson and provide plenty of opportunity to review and revise. You may also need to provide some short breaks between learning activities.

Medication

These students may also need to take medication which could have a number of side effects including drowsiness. Discuss this with your student as you may need to arrange the time for your tutoring sessions to take advantage of the time of day when they are usually most mentally alert.

Students with a psychiatric disability

As with other types of disability, there is a very wide range of effects of psychiatric disabilities. There are however, a number of issues which are most likely to affect such students.

Medication

The first one is medication which could have a number of side effects including drowsiness or inattention. Discuss this with your student as you may be able to arrange your lesson times to coincide with their best periods.

Slow and logical

Either as a result of the medication or the disability itself, the student may experience difficulty in thinking in clear logical ways or their responses may be slow. You will need to ensure that you give instructions and information clearly and in a logical way and that you break tasks down to small achievable parts and slow the pace of the lesson.

Review and revise

The student may also have problems with short term memory or with recall of information. You will need to provide plenty of opportunity to review and revise.

Make use of the concrete and visual

If short term memory is impaired, it is likely that the student's memory for information which is presented visually and graphically may be better than their rational, logical memory. You will need to stress the importance of strategies such as mind maps when trying to memorise material, or the importance of the visual memory of a word when learning to spell.