

Resources for Michigan's Literacy Programs



Learning Disabilities

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LEARNING DISABILITIES AND THE LITERACY STUDENT



Characteristics of Adults with Learning Disabilities

Reading Characteristics	What it Looks Like in an Adult
Does not read for pleasure.	Engages in leisure activities other than reading magazines or books; prefers more active pursuits. Doesn't read stories to his/her children.
Does not use reading to gather information.	Cannot easily use materials like newspapers and classified ads to obtain information.
Has problems identifying individual sounds in spoken words.	Does not attempt to sound out words in reading or does so incorrectly.
Often needs many repetitions to learn to recognize a new or unused word.	May encounter a newly learned word in a text and not recognize it when it appears later in that text.
Oral reading contains many errors, repetitions and pauses.	Reads slowly and laboriously, if attempts at all. May refuse to read orally.
Efforts in reading are so focused on word recognition that it detracts from reading comprehension.	Loses the meaning of text, but understands the same material when it is read aloud.
Has problems with comprehension that go beyond word recognition. May have limited language skills that affect comprehension.	Does not understand the text when it is read to him/her.
Has limited use of reading strategies. Is an inactive reader; not previewing text, monitoring comprehension or summarizing what is read.	When prompted to do so, does not describe strategies used to assist with decoding and comprehension of text.
Rarely practices reading, which may compound reading difficulties. Lacks complex language and word knowledge.	Recognizes and uses fewer words, expressions and sentence structures than peers.

Writing Characteristics	What it Looks Like in an Adult
Has difficulty communicating through writing.	Rarely writes letters or notes. Needs help completing forms such as job applications
Written output is severely limited.	Struggles to produce a written product. Produces short sentences and text with limited vocabulary.
Writing is disorganized.	Omits critical parts or puts information in the wrong place. Writing lacks transition words.
Lacks a clear purpose for writing.	Does not communicate a clear message. Expresses thoughts that don't contribute to the main idea.
Does not use the appropriate text structures.	Uses sentences that contain errors in syntax or word choice. Fails to clearly indicate the referent of a pronoun.
Shows persistent problems in spelling.	Spells phonetically. Leaves out letters. Refrains from writing words that are difficult to spell.
Has a difficulty with mechanics of written expression.	Omits or misuses sentence markers such as capitals and end punctuation, making it difficult for the reader to understand the text.
Handwriting is sloppy and difficult to read.	Has awkward writing grip or position. Letters, words, and lines are misaligned or not spaced appropriately.
Demonstrates difficulties in revising.	Is reluctant to proofread or does not catch errors. Focuses primarily on the mechanics of writing, not on style and content.

Mathematics Characteristics	What it Looks Like in an Adult
Doesn't remember and/or retrieve math facts.	Uses a calculator or counts on fingers for answers to simple problems; e.g., 2 X 5.
Doesn't use visual imagery effectively.	Can't do math in his/her head and writes down

Mathematics Characteristics	What it Looks Like in an Adult
	even simple problems. Has difficulty making change.
Has visual-spatial deficits.	Confuses math symbols. Misreads numbers. Doesn't interpret graphs or tables accurately. Has trouble maintaining a checkbook.
Becomes confused with math operations, especially multi-step processes.	Leaves out steps in math problem-solving or does them in the wrong order. Can't do long division except with calculator. Has trouble budgeting.
Has difficulties in language processing that affect the ability to do math problem-solving.	Doesn't translate real-life problems into the appropriate mathematical processes. Avoids employment situations that involve this set of skills.

Listening Characteristics	What it Looks Like in an Adult
Has problems perceiving slight distinctions in words.	Misunderstands a message with a word mistaken for a similar word. Might say, "Pick up the grass," instead of, "Pick up the glass."
Has a limited vocabulary.	Recognizes and uses fewer words than peers when engaged in conversation or when gathering information by listening.
Finds abstract words or concepts difficult to understand.	Requests repetitions or more concrete explanations of ideas. Frequently asks for examples.
Has difficulty with figurative language such as metaphors, idioms, and sarcasm.	Does not understand jokes or comic strips.
Confuses the message in complex sentences.	Will eat lunch first if given the direction, "Eat lunch after you take this to the mail room."
Has difficulty with verbal memory.	Doesn't remember directions, phone numbers, jokes, stories, etc.
Has difficulty processing large amounts of spoken language.	Gets lost listening in classroom or large group presentations, complaining that people talk too fast.

Speaking Characteristics	What it Looks Like in an Adult
Mispronounces words.	Adds, substitutes or rearranges sounds in words, as in <i>phemomenon</i> for <i>phenomenon</i> or <i>Pacific</i> for <i>specific</i> .
Uses wrong word, usually with similar sounds.	Uses a similar-sounding word, like <i>generic</i> instead of <i>genetic</i> .
Confuses the morphology, or structure, of words.	Uses the wrong form of a word, such as calling the <i>Declaration of Independence</i> the <i>Declaring of Independence</i> .
Has a limited vocabulary.	Uses the same words over and over in giving information and explaining ideas. Has difficulty conveying ideas.
Makes grammatical errors.	Omits or uses grammatical markers incorrectly, such as tense, number, possession and negation.
Speaks with a limited repertoire of phrase and sentence structure.	Uses mostly simple sentence construction. Overuses <i>and</i> to connect thoughts.
Has difficulty organizing what to say.	Has problems giving directions or explaining a recipe; talks around the topic (circumlocutes), but doesn't get to the point.
Has trouble maintaining a topic.	Interjects irrelevant information into story. Starts out discussing one thing and then goes off in another direction without making the connection.
Has difficulty with word retrieval.	Can't recall a known word when it is needed and may use fillers, such as "ummm," and "You know." May substitute a word related in meaning or sound, as in <i>boat</i> for <i>submarine</i> or <i>selfish</i> for <i>bashful</i> . May use an "empty word," such as <i>stuff</i> . May describe rather than name, as in <i>a boat that goes underwater</i> .
Has trouble with the pragmatic or social use of language.	Does not follow rules of conversation like turn-taking. Does not switch styles of speaking when addressing different people.

Thinking Characteristics	What it Looks Like in an Adult
Has problems with abstract reasoning.	Asks to see ideas on paper. Prefers hands-on ways of learning new ideas.
Shows marked rigidity in thinking.	Resists new ideas or ways of doing things and may have difficulty adjusting to changes on the job.
Thinking is random as opposed to orderly, either in logic or chronology.	May have good ideas that seem disjointed, unrelated or out of sequence.
Has difficulty synthesizing ideas.	Pays too much attention to detail and misses the big picture or idea when encountering specific situations at home or at work.
Makes impulsive decisions and judgments.	“Shoots from the hip” when arriving at conclusions or decisions. Doesn’t use a structured approach to weigh options.
Has difficulty generating strategies to acquire/use information and solve problems.	Approaches situations without a game plan, acting without a guiding set of principles.

“Other Difficulties” Characteristics	What it Looks Like in an Adult
Has problems with attention, which may be accompanied by hyperactivity, distractibility, or passivity.	Doesn’t focus for an appropriate timeframe. Can’t seem to get things done. Does better with short tasks.
Displays poor organizational skills.	Doesn’t know where to begin tasks or how to proceed. Doesn’t work within time limits, failing to meet deadlines. Work space and personal space are messy.
Has eye-hand coordination problems.	Omits or substitutes elements when copying information from one place to another, as in invoices or schedules.
Demonstrates poor fine motor control, usually accompanied by poor handwriting.	Avoids jobs requiring manipulation of small items. Becomes frustrated when putting together toys.

“Other Difficulties” Characteristics	What it Looks Like in an Adult
Lacks social perception.	Stands too close to people when conversing. Doesn't perceive situations accurately. May laugh when something serious is happening or slap an unreceptive boss on the back as a friendly gesture.
Has problems establishing social relationships. Problems may be related to spoken language disorders.	Does not seem to know how to act and what to say to people in specific social situations and may withdraw from socializing.
Lacks “executive functions,” including self-motivation, self-reliance, self-advocacy, and goal-setting.	Demonstrates over reliance on others for assistance or fails to ask for help when appropriate. Blames external factors on lack of success. Doesn't set personal goals and work deliberately to achieve them. Expresses helplessness.

Adapting Instruction - Strategies for the Classroom

Learning Disabilities (LD) Adaptations/Accommodations Guide

Bridges to Practice: A Research-Based Guide for Literacy Practitioners Serving Adults With Learning Disabilities, National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center, 1999.

Adapting Instruction

A Potpourri of Strategies for Teaching Reading

Reading is a complex activity that requires the use and coordination of many skills simultaneously. Difficulty with any of these abilities may result in a reading problem. The lists below do not differentiate between various causes or types of reading problems. You should choose strategies that are appropriate to individual learner's specific and unique characteristics. Remember to **work with their strengths** to bypass disabilities or develop their abilities in weaker areas.

Strategies for Reading Instruction

- **Discuss** the purpose of every reading activity.
- Teach and provide practice **with “authentic” reading tasks, using material from work or home and family.**
- Focus **all reading activities** on getting the meaning—**on understanding, not just “word calling.”**
- Teach new words and sounds using multi-sensory strategies: the learner hears it, sees it, says it, traces it, and writes it.
 - Build words using cards, tiles, or cubes printed with letters, letter combinations, or syllables; then spell and read aloud before writing
 - Have learner trace words with finger on sand paper, read aloud, and then write it
 - Create raised letters by writing with white glue and ask learner to trace letters with finger, read aloud, then write while saying letters
 - Have the learner practice new vocabulary words in his reading by writing and re-writing them, while saying the sounds
- **Work on building phoneme awareness** (recognition of sounds within words) with listening exercises.

- Listen to these words. They all begin with the /b/ sound: bird, bank, book. What sound do they begin with? Does this word begin with the /b/ sound? Bat, bake, baby, bowl, car.”
 - Show visually how sounds are blended to form words, by writing and sounding the letters one at a time, then “sliding them together” with a finger or pencil (or use letter tiles and slide them together).
 - Teach word patterns (at, bat, cat) and letter clusters rather than isolated letters and sounds.
- Teach how to use context clues to identify and guess at the meaning of unfamiliar words. Demonstrate how you do this by thinking aloud. Then ask the learner to explain the context clues he/she uses.
 - Use reading material with pictures and predictable stories to teach the use of these clues. Then direct the learner to look for picture clues and make predictions when reading other kinds of materials.
 - Suggest that the learner visualize the scene or events described to improve comprehension. Model the strategy by “thinking aloud”—reading aloud and stopping to describe your own mental images.
 - **Make an audiotape** of the learner telling a personal story or experience, and then have the story transcribed to use as a reading text (a variation on the language experience approach).
 - **Teach specific comprehension strategies** and demonstrate how and when to use them.
 - Underline or highlight important ideas or facts for later review
 - Read titles and subheadings first and think about prior knowledge of the subject before reading
 - Read the chapter summary before starting the chapter and/or read the end-of-chapter questions to identify important information to look for
 - Write shorthand notes or symbols in text to identify definitions, respond to information, and note areas of confusion or questions
 - Teach the learner to notice and understand **features of text**, like titles, chapter summaries, subheadings, and other text organizers, such as questions followed by bulleted lists.
 - Teach the meaning of “**signal**” **words**—first, next, for example, therefore, in conclusion—and demonstrate (by thinking aloud) how such words provide clues for understanding.

- Encourage the learner to **read** a paragraph once **for a general sense of the content** and then **reread for details**.
- Teach the learner to **break lengthy text into smaller chunks**, stopping after two or three paragraphs and asking questions to check comprehension before reading further. Encourage re-reading when necessary.

Retrieved from the World Wide Web at: <http://www.aelweb.vcu.edu/publications/LDGuide/toc.htm>.

Does Color Matter to Students? Using Colors to Meet Special Needs

Don Johnston

Improving Attention

PROBLEM A lack of sustained attention (ADD).

SUGGESTION Most vivid complimentary colors to aid stimulation.

Recommended: Magenta and green. Red and yellow.

PROBLEM A lack of sustained attention (ADD).

SUGGESTION Select secondary colors that contain yellow, for more intensity.

Recommended: Goldenrod or yellow-green background.

PROBLEM Confuse similar words.

SUGGESTION Try various colors.

Recommended: Rose (light red) or red background.

PROBLEM Uneven arousal state (tend to "drift").

SUGGESTION Stimulate with bright colors to focus attention.

Recommended: Bright yellow background.

Learning Disabled

PROBLEM Dyslexia (perceive letter omissions, reversals, jumping letters)

SUGGESTION Dark colors.

Recommended: Black text on dark blue background.

PROBLEM Learning disability

SUGGESTION Select preferred colors.

Often selected: Blues and greens.

PROBLEM Learning disability with attention deficit

SUGGESTION Colored light stimulation.

Recommended: Green and red.

Light Sensitivity / Low Vision

PROBLEM Inadequate background accommodation. (White background overpowers text and letters lose distinctive shapes.)

SUGGESTION Inverted text (light text on dark background) or monochromatic color scheme

Recommended: Pale yellow text on dark blue background. Light blue text on dark blue background. Light grey text on dark grey background.

PROBLEM Low vision.

SUGGESTION High contrast, with restful background color. Bright cursor for locating ease.

Recommended: Black text on light blue background with red cursor. Navy text on peach or soft yellow background with cobalt cursor.

PROBLEM Low vision, bothered by glare or brightness.

SUGGESTION Inverted text (light text on dark background), with bright cursor for locating ease.

Recommended: Soft yellow text on black or navy background with bright blue cursor. Peach text on dark blue-green background with bright yellow cursor.

PROBLEM Low vision, bothered by glare or brightness, but prefer dark text on light background

SUGGESTION Tone down background brightness with pale colors; use dark text.

Recommended: Black or navy text on peach, light blue, or soft yellow background, with red cursor.

PROBLEM Sensory defensive (sensitive to brightness, glare, high contrast, or fluorescent lighting).

SUGGESTION Low contrast, soft colors, monochromatic scheme.

Recommended: Medium blue text on navy or dark blue background with blue-green cursor. Blue-green text on dark blue-grey background with grey cursor. Light or medium grey text on dark grey background with dark blue-gray cursor.

Retrieved from the World Wide Web at:
<http://www.donjohnston.com/about/searchfrm.htm>.