

College Students With Learning Disabilities

A Brief Guide for Instructors

A Learning Disability (LD) is:

- A permanent disorder which affects the manner in which individuals with normal, or above average intelligence take in, retain and express information. Like interference on the radio or a fuzzy TV picture, incoming or outgoing information may become scrambled as it travels between the eye, ear, or skin, and the brain.
- Commonly recognized in LD adults as deficits in one or more of the following areas: reading comprehension, spelling, written expression, math computation, and problem solving. Less frequent, but no less troublesome, are problems in organizational skills, time management, and social skills. Many LD adults may also have language-based and/or perceptual problems.
- Often inconsistent. It may present problems on Mondays, but not on Tuesdays. It may cause problems throughout grade school, seem to disappear during high school, and then resurface again in college. It may manifest itself in only one specific academic area, such as math or foreign language.
- Frustrating! Persons with learning disabilities often have to deal not only with functional limitations, but also with the frustration of having to “prove” that their invisible disabilities may be as handicapping as paraplegia.

A Learning Disability is Not:

A form of mental retardation or an emotional disorder.

Some Common Characteristics of LD College Students

Reading Skills

1. Slow reading rate and/or difficulty in modifying reading rate in accordance with material difficulty.
2. Poor comprehension and retention.
3. Difficulty identifying important points and themes.
4. Poor mastery of phonics, confusion of similar words, difficulty integrating new vocabulary.

Written Language Skills

1. Difficulty with sentence structure (e.g., incomplete sentences, run-ons, poor use of grammar, missing inflectional endings).
2. Frequent spelling errors (e.g., omissions, substitutions, transpositions), especially in specialized and foreign vocabulary.
3. Inability to copy correctly from a book or the blackboard.
4. Slow writer.

5. Poor penmanship (e.g., poorly formed letters, incorrect use of capitalization, trouble with spacing, overly large handwriting).

Mathematical Skills

1. Incomplete mastery of basic facts (e.g., mathematical tables.).
2. Reverses numbers (e.g., mathematical tables).
3. Confuses operational symbols, especially + and x.
4. Difficulty recalling the sequence of operational processes.
5. Inability to understand and retain abstract concepts.
6. Difficulty comprehending word problems. Reasoning deficits.

Organizational and Study Skills

1. Time management difficulties.
2. Slow to start and complete tasks.
3. Repeated inability, on a day-to-day basis, to recall what has been taught.
4. Difficulty following oral and written directions.
5. Lack of overall organization in written notes and compositions.
6. Demonstrates short attention span during lectures.
7. Inefficient use of library reference materials

Social Skills

Some LD adults may have social skills problems due to their inconsistent perceptual abilities. For the same reason that a person with visual perceptual problems may have trouble discriminating between the letters “b” and “d,” he/she may be unable to detect the difference between a joking wink and a disgusted glance. People with auditory perceptual problems might not notice the difference between sincere and sarcastic comments, or be able to recognize other subtle changes in tone of voice. These difficulties in interpreting non-verbal messages may result in lowered self-esteem for some LD adults, and may cause them to have trouble meeting people, working cooperatively with others, and making friends.

Suggestions for Helping Students to Succeed in the Classroom

1. Provide students with a detailed course syllabus. Make it available before registration week.
2. Clearly spell out expectations before course begins (e.g., grading, material to be covered, due dates).
3. Start each lecture with an outline of material to be covered that period. At the conclusion of class, briefly summarize key points.
4. Speak directly to students, and use gestures and natural expressions to convey further meaning.
5. Present new or technical vocabulary on the blackboard or use a student handout. Terms should be used in context to convey greater meaning.
6. Give assignments both orally and in written form to avoid confusion.
7. Announce reading assignments well in advance for students who are using taped materials. It often takes a few weeks to obtain a tape-recorded book.
8. Facilitate use of tape recorders for note taking by allowing students to tape lectures.
9. If necessary, allow LD students to demonstrate mastery of course material using alternative methods.
10. Provide study questions for exams that demonstrate the format, as well as the content of the test.
11. Permit use of simple calculators, scratch paper, and spell checkers during exams.
12. Provide adequate opportunities for questions and answers, including review sessions.