

UNDERSTANDING DYSLEXIA

THE IDA DEFINITION OF DYSLEXIA (2025)

This brief document is designed to help families, educators, and individuals with dyslexia understand the key points of the revised 2025 IDA definition. It offers a clear and accessible summary of what dyslexia is, what the definition updates, and why these changes matter. The goal is to make the science and lived realities behind the definition understandable at a glance, while supporting conversations about key aspects of the IDA definition of dyslexia.

What is Dyslexia?

Dyslexia is a word-level learning disability that affects a person's ability to read and spell words. It is not about intelligence, effort, or motivation. People with dyslexia work hard and often harder than their peers. However, reading and writing can still feel slow, effortful, or inconsistent.

What Does Dyslexia Looks Like?

The revised definition makes clear that difficulties may show up as problems with:

- Word-reading accuracy
- Word-reading speed/efficiency
- Spelling (especially in English and similar orthographies)

Many individuals improve word reading accuracy with intervention. However, two difficulties often persist across the lifespan:

- Inefficient (slow, effortful) word reading
- Spelling difficulties

These persistent features are meaningful. They affect schoolwork, note-taking, writing, exams, and many adult workplace tasks.

ASPECTS OF THE DEFINITION WERE EXPANDED

The 2025 IDA definition expands several key elements of the 2002 definition. These updates clarify how dyslexia presents across different languages (i.e., writing systems), describe the causal mechanisms that contribute to it, incorporate early indicators that predict risk, acknowledge additional secondary consequences, and more clearly reflect its persistent nature across the lifespan.

Presentation Across Writing Systems

Dyslexia looks different depending on the writing system a person is learning to read. But across languages, one thing remains true:

- Dyslexia is always a word-level learning disability.
- Word-reading efficiency is the most consistently persistent challenge across writing systems, and spelling is a common persistent challenge in English.

What Causes Dyslexia

Dyslexia develops through the interaction of genetics and neurobiology as the brain and language systems form. It is:

- Not caused by the environment
- Not caused by poor teaching or parenting
- Not something a child will outgrow

At the same time, the environment shapes development. Strong oral language experiences and high-quality instruction can reduce risk and improve outcomes, while inadequate instruction can worsen existing vulnerabilities.

Early Indicators Matter

Research now shows that many risk factors emerge well before formal literacy instruction, including:

- Weak phonological awareness
- Weak letter knowledge
- Early oral language weaknesses
- Family history of dyslexia

This knowledge allows us to move away from a “*wait to fail*” approach and toward prevention and early intervention, which can significantly change a child’s developmental trajectory.

Dyslexia Has Secondary Consequences

Dyslexia is not just about reading. Over time, the challenges associated with dyslexia can affect:

- Vocabulary and knowledge growth
- Writing development
- Confidence, identity, and mental health
- Employment opportunities

Not everyone with dyslexia experiences all of these consequences, but acknowledging them helps validate lived experience.

A Lifelong Perspective

Dyslexia does not end in childhood. Teens and adults may continue to experience:

- Slow, effortful reading
- Difficulty with spelling
- Fatigue when reading large amounts of text
- Challenges expressing ideas in writing

Recognizing persistence ensures individuals maintain access to accommodations, support, and understanding throughout their lives.

WHAT THIS UPDATED DEFINITION HELPS US DO

The 2025 definition gives us language that:

- Better reflects the science
- Supports clearer identification
- Encourages earlier screening and prevention
- Validates the need for ongoing support and accommodations
- Honors the voices and realities of individuals with dyslexia

For a deeper explanation of the research and reasoning behind these updates, please refer to the extended companion guide.