

UNDERSTANDING THE REVISED IDA DEFINITION OF **DYSLEXIA**

A Companion Guide



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I serve on the Steering Committee for the International Dyslexia Association's (IDA) Dyslexia Definition Project. The explanations, interpretations, and examples in this document reflect my own understanding and synthesis of the research, informed by my professional work, judgment, and lived experience. These reflections have not been reviewed or endorsed by the IDA Board and should not be interpreted as official IDA positions.

WHY I CREATED THIS GUIDE

Each time I present the revised definition of dyslexia, I am struck by how much people want clarity and reassurance. They want to understand what has changed, why it has changed, and what it means for them, their families, or the students they serve. But definitions are formal and compressed by design. People often tell me that, after reading it, they still cannot quite grasp the “so what” or the “what does it really mean.” A definition on its own cannot carry all the weight of explanation that people need.

I also know that people want guidance on the practical questions: *How does this definition support identification? How should I explain dyslexia to a parent or teacher? What does this mean for screening or instruction?* These questions matter. They deserve careful treatment. But they are not the purpose of this document.

This guide is meant to do something more foundational and essential. It aims to build awareness and understanding of the revised definition itself. It invites readers to reflect on what has changed, why those changes were needed, and what they reveal about how far the science exploring dyslexia has come. It is the first step in a broader effort to support translation and application, not the final step. Those applied questions, such as how to communicate the definition, how to support identification, how to use it in practice, will be addressed in separate documents and resources.

My hope is that this guide helps readers understand the motivation for the updated definition, the research that grounds it, and the expanded components it now includes. With that shared understanding in place, we can move together toward the next steps: translating the definition into practice, strengthening identification, improving communication, and supporting implementation grounded in science and informed by lived experience.

WHY A REVISED DEFINITION

The 2002 IDA consensus definition marked a significant milestone for the field. For many families, it was the first time they saw a definition that validated what they had long observed. Dyslexia is a real learning disability characterized by word reading and spelling difficulties that is not about a lack of effort, intelligence, or motivation. That definition helped advance policy work in many states across the United States, informed the development of screening laws, and provided a shared foundation for schools, clinicians, and advocates.

But science evolves, and importantly, the authors of the 2002 definition described it as a working definition. They knew it would need to be updated as scientific knowledge advanced and our understanding of dyslexia deepened. In the more than two decades since that definition was crafted, our understanding has grown in profound ways. We now have a deeper understanding of the early developmental pathways that precede reading, the foundational role of oral language, the variability across writing systems, the interaction of genetics and neurobiology, and how these developmental processes are shaped (not caused) by environmental influences. We also have a clearer picture of the long-term persistence of dyslexia and of the broader consequences that extend well beyond the classroom.

When I edited the October 2024 special issue of the *Annals of Dyslexia* that focused on the 2002 definition, the commentators made one thing unmistakably clear: *the field had outgrown that earlier definition*. The definition itself, and the ways it was often interpreted in practice, were no longer serving members of the dyslexia community as well as they could. The 2002 definition was not wrong, but it was incomplete. It captured a snapshot of what the field understood at the time. Today, that snapshot no longer fully reflects our scientific understanding, and it has never fully captured the lived reality of dyslexia. No definition likely ever will, as so many of us with dyslexia know all too well. The 2002 definition also fails to outline where implementation should focus, considering all that has been learned over the past two decades.



The revised 2025 definition expands, clarifies, and updates our understanding. Just as important, it does so in ways that remain grounded in evidence while better honoring the totality of the human experience of dyslexia.

THE 2002 IDA DEFINITION OF DYSLEXIA

"Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede the growth of vocabulary and background knowledge."

THE 2025 IDA DEFINITION OF DYSLEXIA

"Dyslexia is a specific learning disability characterized by difficulties in word reading and/or spelling that involve accuracy, speed, or both and vary depending on the orthography. These difficulties occur along a continuum of severity and persist even with instruction that is effective for the individual's peers. The causes of dyslexia are complex and involve combinations of genetic, neurobiological, and environmental influences that interact throughout development. Underlying difficulties with phonological and morphological processing are common but not universal, and early oral language weaknesses often foreshadow literacy challenges. Secondary consequences include reading comprehension problems and reduced reading and writing experience that can impede growth in language, knowledge, written expression, and overall academic achievement. Psychological well-being and employment opportunities also may be affected. Although identification and targeted instruction are important at any age, language and literacy support before and during the early years of education is particularly effective."

WHAT HAS EXPANDED IN THE 2025 DEFINITION

When I speak about the revised definition, I describe it as an expansion in several meaningful ways. These expansions matter scientifically, but they also matter practically and personally. They reflect where the field has moved and where people with dyslexia have been asking us to go for a long time. This is something I hear consistently in my conversations with individuals with dyslexia.

A Lifespan Perspective

One of the most significant expansions in the revised definition is its clear lifespan perspective. For decades, formal definitions have focused almost exclusively on dyslexia as it appears in children learning to read. However, the developmental pathways associated with dyslexia (i.e., intrinsic risk factors) do not begin in first grade. Rather, they emerge well before that point, and the impact of dyslexia persists well beyond third grade—and even beyond formal schooling, for that matter. It is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects individuals throughout their lives. This is a reality that is often treated as an afterthought by many, but not by those of us who live with dyslexia or care for a loved one who does.



This does not mean that people with dyslexia cannot learn to read or that intervention is ineffective. On the contrary, we have strong evidence that high-quality instruction and intervention can significantly improve literacy skills and profoundly influence life outcomes. However, even when people achieve these gains, certain aspects of dyslexia often persist, including difficulties with efficient word reading and accurate spelling.

Naming this persistence is essential. It helps ensure that students do not lose services simply because their word-reading accuracy improves. It helps colleges understand why accommodations remain necessary. It helps employers recognize why adults may require accessible formats, extended time, or assistive technologies. And it helps individuals with dyslexia make sense of their own experiences across their lives.

A definition that acknowledges persistence is not discouraging. It is honest. And honesty is what allows people to access the support and understanding they deserve.

Recognition of Early Risk Indicators and Prevention

Another major expansion is the definition's recognition of early childhood risk indicators. Over the last twenty plus years, research has made it clear that many of the factors that increase the likelihood of dyslexia are present well before formal reading instruction begins. Oral language skills (e.g., vocabulary, syntax, and listening comprehension) play a foundational role in literacy development. Many children who go on to be diagnosed with dyslexia demonstrate weaknesses in these areas early in life.

This knowledge has changed how we think about dyslexia. It has allowed us to move away from a "wait to fail" approach and toward a prevention model, where children at heightened risk can be identified early and provided targeted support. When children receive early intervention, the trajectory of their reading development changes. The behavioral profile of dyslexia often looks different when we intervene early. It can look less severe, less entrenched, and far more responsive to instruction and intervention.

The revised definition honors these advances by explicitly acknowledging the importance of early risk indicators and the effectiveness of early support.

An Expanded View of Secondary Consequences

For many people with dyslexia, the most profound impacts are not found in the technical aspects of word reading. They are found in the day-to-day emotional, academic, and occupational experiences that accumulate and compound over time. Difficulty accessing print restricts exposure to knowledge, limits writing development, and makes it harder to demonstrate understanding in school and at work. Over time, these challenges can take a real toll on confidence, identity, and mental health.

Many individuals with dyslexia describe increased anxiety, depression, diminished self-esteem, or persistent feelings of inadequacy. These very real experiences that are not captured by a narrow set of academic measures, literacy assessments, or measures of phonological processing skills. Others describe how reading and writing challenges have shaped their educational pathways and career opportunities. A definition that does not acknowledge this broader range of consequences impacting mental health and life outcomes, focusing instead solely on literacy skills and academics, fails to reflect the lived reality of dyslexia.

The revised definition addresses this by expanding its description of secondary consequences, including mental health impacts and challenges related to employment in addition to academic achievement. This is not pathologizing. It is validating. It ensures that the definition speaks to the whole experience of dyslexia for many of us not just the part that shows up on a reading assessment or in our grades.



A MORE COMPLETE SET OF COMPONENTS

Finally, the revised definition expands the structure of what a definition of dyslexia includes. The 2002 definition primarily listed defining characteristics and a small set of secondary consequences. The 2025 definition retains these components but adds several new elements, including a clearer description of the causal mechanisms rooted in genetics and neurobiology, the underlying processing differences associated with dyslexia, early language considerations, orthographic variation across writing systems, and an explicit acknowledgment of how dyslexia persists over time.

By incorporating these elements, the definition moves beyond being a diagnostic description. It becomes a concise yet comprehensive framework that reflects a modern understanding of dyslexia across development and writing systems and more accurately captures the lived realities of individuals with dyslexia.

UNDERSTANDING THE KEY COMPONENTS OF THE REVISED DEFINITION

Now, let me walk through the five core components of the revised definition in the order they naturally flow, but with a richer narrative explanation.

1. Defining Characteristics of Dyslexia

"Dyslexia is a specific learning disability characterized by difficulties in word reading and/or spelling that involve accuracy, speed, or both and vary depending on the orthography. These difficulties occur along a continuum of severity and persist even with instruction that is effective for the individual's peers."

This section represents the heart of any definition of dyslexia, and for identification and diagnostic purposes, these are the key components. The revised definition begins by describing dyslexia as a specific learning disability characterized by difficulties with word reading and/or spelling. These difficulties may manifest as problems with accuracy, speed/efficiency, or both. This opening is important because it centers dyslexia firmly at the word level, which is where the core challenges consistently reside across more than a century of research.

It also reflects an essential truth that has sometimes been overlooked or artificially separated. Spelling is not incidental, and it is not a different form of learning disability. In the English writing system in particular, spelling is a central and enduring part of how dyslexia presents. It draws on the same underlying processes that support accurate word reading, and in English it is even more difficult to remediate.

Many individuals with dyslexia can, with appropriate intervention, learn to read words accurately. Word-reading accuracy in particular can and does improve. However, the efficiency of word reading, meaning how quickly and effortlessly someone reads words, often lags behind the gains made in accuracy and remains slow and effortful. Spelling also frequently remains one of the most persistent challenges across the lifespan. Inefficient word reading and persistent spelling difficulties are two of the clearest and most reliable hallmarks of dyslexia, and they often remain even when accuracy shows substantial gains.

This matters in very practical and human terms. Slow and effortful reading affects a student's ability to access content, complete assignments within the allotted time, and keep pace with increasing literacy demands in upper grades. Spelling challenges affect written expression, note-taking, and the ability to communicate



clearly in writing. These difficulties often persist into adulthood. In advanced training programs and higher education, heavy reading loads and extensive writing expectations can amplify these challenges. In the workplace, efficient reading and accurate writing are often silently assumed skills. Individuals with dyslexia can find themselves misunderstood or unfairly judged when these expectations are not met.

When definitions, policies, or school practices focus narrowly on whether a person can read words accurately they overlook the full constellation of characteristics that define dyslexia. A student who reads words accurately but reads slowly, or who continues to struggle with spelling, is still experiencing dyslexia in meaningful and daily ways. Ignoring these persistent features risks denying individuals the services, accommodations, and supports they need. It also risks misrepresenting the nature of dyslexia itself.

By explicitly naming word-reading accuracy, word-reading efficiency, and/or spelling as defining characteristics, the revised definition provides a comprehensive and scientifically grounded picture of dyslexia. It aligns with the extensive research evidence and with the lived experiences of individuals across the lifespan. It also remains consistent with the core defining features and wording included in the 2002 definition.

The revised 2025 definition clarifies that these difficulties occur along a continuum of severity rather than forming a strict diagnostic category. This shift away from an all-or-nothing conceptualization reflects modern developmental science. Some individuals face profound challenges, while others experience milder but still significant difficulties. Understanding dyslexia as a continuum helps us avoid reducing it to the razor's edge of a single cut score or a rigid set of thresholds for eligibility.

The definition also emphasizes persistence, which reinforces the lifespan perspective I discussed earlier. Intervention can remediate aspects of dyslexia in meaningful ways, but persistent struggles remain a defining feature. Including this element ensures that students, adolescents, and adults continue to have access to the supports and accommodations they need across contexts.

Finally, the definition situates these characteristics within context, specifically the writing system and the instructional environment. These contexts help us understand that how dyslexia manifests can vary across different languages and that it persists even when students receive instruction. However, these contexts are not defining features themselves. They provide background rather than criteria. This distinction matters because it prevents contextual variation from being mistaken for differences in the underlying nature of dyslexia.

2. Etiology: Causal Mechanisms of Dyslexia

"The causes of dyslexia are complex and involve combinations of genetic, neurobiological, and environmental influences that interact throughout development."

Next, the definition turns to the causal mechanisms underlying dyslexia, describing it as arising from the interaction of genetic and neurobiological factors that unfold over time and are influenced, but not caused, by environmental conditions. This reflects what decades of research now make clear: dyslexia does not stem from a single causal factor. There is no single "dyslexia gene," and no single language difference causes dyslexia. Instead, dyslexia reflects a complex, probabilistic set of influences that shape early brain and language development. I know this is not always easy to grasp. Yet it represents what has consistently emerged across research on complex neurodevelopmental conditions, of which dyslexia is one.

Let's start by considering the genetic component. Research has long shown that dyslexia clusters in families, and newer molecular genetic studies have begun to identify the many genetic variations that may contribute to risk. These genes function as part of the basic blueprint for how the brain organizes itself. As with other complex neurodevelopmental conditions, it is the combined influence of many genes, rather than any single one, that creates vulnerability. Dyslexia is associated with a broad set of genes involved in brain development, oral language development, and the formation of the neural systems that support reading.

Neurobiologically, these genetic influences shape the development of the neural networks that support



phonological processing, orthographic learning, and efficient word recognition. These networks begin forming early in life, well before formal reading instruction, and continue to develop across childhood and adolescence. Brain-imaging research conducted by myself and others since the 2002 definition has further refined our understanding of the brain regions and systems associated with dyslexia.

The revised definition also acknowledges the role of the environment in shaping development, just as it does in all complex neurodevelopmental conditions. The environment does not cause dyslexia, but it does influence how these developmental pathways unfold. Supportive environments, early exposure to oral language, and high-quality instruction can mitigate risk and help children make meaningful progress. Conversely, limited literacy experiences or inadequate instruction can amplify existing vulnerabilities. The revised definition aims to strike a careful balance by recognizing this interaction without oversimplifying it or implying that dyslexia can be caused or prevented solely through environmental factors.

3. Intrinsic Risk Factors

"Underlying difficulties with phonological and morphological processing are common but not universal, and early oral language weaknesses often foreshadow literacy challenges."

The definition then highlights several intrinsic risk factors. Those named include underlying differences in early cognitive and linguistic processing that increase the likelihood that a child will develop dyslexia. These intrinsic factors emerge early in development, well before formal reading instruction begins, and they help explain why some children struggle with learning to read even when they have access to appropriate instruction and supportive environments. Calling these factors *"intrinsic"* simply means that they arise from within the child's own developmental profile and are tied to the genetic and neurobiological influences discussed earlier.

One of the most well-established intrinsic risk factors is phonological processing. Difficulties in perceiving, storing, retrieving, or manipulating the sound structure of language are among the most consistent predictors of later word-reading challenges in alphabetic writing systems such as English. These phonological vulnerabilities can often be observed in the preschool years and form part of the developmental pathway associated with dyslexia.

The definition also includes morphological processing as a potential risk factor, but it is essential to clarify what this means in context. The research on morphological processing and dyslexia is strongest in writing systems where morphology plays a central organizational role. In those contexts, morphological processing appears to be a core and reliable risk factor. In English, however, the picture is still emerging. Morphological skills clearly support oral and written language development, and they contribute to reading and spelling growth, especially as children progress through the grades. But at this time, the evidence base is not strong enough to identify morphological processing as a dyslexia-specific risk factor in English. This is an area where the field will benefit from continued research to clarify the role of morphological processing in English.

This is a good reminder that the revised 2025 definition, like the 2002 definition before it, remains a working definition grounded in current understanding but open to refinement as science advances. Morphological processing in English is a perfect example of where the field is moving, but where we still need more clarity before drawing firm conclusions.

Finally, the definition acknowledges that many children with dyslexia show early oral language weaknesses, including difficulties with vocabulary, grammar, and broader language comprehension. These early language differences (around 2–3 years) are among the strongest early predictors of later reading difficulties and help explain why early screening and intervention are both possible and essential.

By identifying intrinsic risk factors that emerge long before reading begins, the definition aligns itself with



what we now know about the developmental pathways that lead to dyslexia—pathways that begin early, shape later learning, and highlight the importance of proactive support rather than reactive response.

4. Secondary Consequences

"Secondary consequences include reading comprehension problems and reduced reading and writing experience that can impede growth in language, knowledge, written expression, and overall academic achievement. Psychological well-being and employment opportunities also may be affected."

The revised definition expands the description of secondary consequences in a way that reflects both the research base and the lived experience of individuals with dyslexia. For many children, adolescents, and adults, the most profound impacts of dyslexia are not limited to the technical aspects of word reading. They emerge over time, through reduced access to print, repeated academic struggles, and the emotional toll that comes from working harder than peers to achieve the same outcomes.

Reduced reading and writing experience limits exposure to new vocabulary, background knowledge, and increasingly complex language structures. These constraints accumulate over time and can influence language development, written expression, and overall academic achievement. For many students, the gap is a consequence of limited access to text and not due to an inherent language disability (i.e., Developmental Language Disability).

The definition also acknowledges the emotional realities that accompany dyslexia. Many children, adolescents, and adults describe anxiety, depression, diminished self-esteem, or a sense of inadequacy that has been reinforced by years of struggle. These psychological impacts are not inevitable, but they are common enough to warrant inclusion in the definition. They help validate the experiences of individuals who have carried these burdens silently, often believing that they reflect personal failure rather than the predictable consequences of an unrecognized or unsupported learning difference.

The revised definition goes further by identifying consequences that extend into adulthood, including the potential impact on employment opportunities. Slow or effortful reading, spelling challenges, and difficulty expressing ideas in writing can affect how individuals are perceived in the workplace, regardless of their intelligence, creativity, or expertise. These barriers are often invisible to those without dyslexia, which makes explicit acknowledgment in the definition even more important.

It is equally important to note that not everyone with dyslexia experiences all of these secondary consequences. They vary widely depending on early identification, access to effective intervention, environmental supports, and individual resilience. But naming them in the definition helps ensure that the full reality of dyslexia is recognized, not just the aspects that show up on standardized tests. It honors the lived experience of children and adults with dyslexia and supports a more compassionate and informed approach to education, mental health, and employment.

5. Early Risk Identification and Prevention

"Although identification and targeted instruction are important at any age, language and literacy support before and during the early years of education is particularly effective."

One of the most forward-looking expansions in the revised definition is its explicit emphasis on early identification and prevention. The science is now clear: the developmental pathways associated with dyslexia begin well before formal reading instruction, and early language and literacy supports can change outcomes in profound ways. This represents a major shift from older models that waited for reading failure to occur



before identifying risk and providing help.

We are now much better equipped to identify early risk factors that increase the likelihood that a child will struggle with learning to read and spell. Weaknesses in phonological processing, limited oral language skills, and a family history of dyslexia can all serve as early indicators. These signs often appear in the preschool years, long before a child encounters print in a structured way. Recognizing these early developmental markers allows us to provide support earlier, when the brain is most malleable and responsive to intervention.

Just as importantly, we now know how to intervene effectively at these early stages. Evidence-based oral language enrichment, explicit instruction in foundational literacy skills, and targeted support for children showing early vulnerabilities can mitigate risk and, in many cases, alter their developmental trajectory. This is not about "preventing dyslexia" in the sense of eliminating it. Instead, it is about reducing the severity of later reading and spelling difficulties and supporting better long-term outcomes.

The inclusion of early identification and prevention in the definition reflects the risk-and-resilience framework that now guides much of our understanding of dyslexia. Risk factors and protective factors interact over time, influencing the development and manifestation of dyslexia. When we wait until children fail, we not only miss a critical window for support, but we also increase the likelihood of the secondary consequences described earlier.

By highlighting the importance of early identification, the revised definition underscores a more hopeful and scientifically grounded reality: we can change developmental trajectories. We can support children before the weight of repeated failure takes hold. And we can build systems that respond to early signs of vulnerability with care, not delay.

This forward-looking perspective directly connects with the daily experiences of families and educators. It validates the importance of early screening efforts, supports risk-prevention models in schools, and affirms the need for sustained, high-quality instruction and intervention. And, perhaps most importantly, it reflects a commitment to ensuring that children with dyslexia receive the support they need as early as possible, so that their strengths instead of their struggles define their learning journey.

WHAT THIS MEANS MOVING FORWARD

The 2025 definition is not simply an update. It reflects how far the field has come and how much more we now know about literacy (i.e., reading and writing) development and individual differences. It acknowledges the complexity of dyslexia and the ways it presents across development and across contexts. It also emphasizes the importance of timely support, evidence-based practices, and ongoing accommodations throughout the lifespan.

Most importantly, it provides us with language that better honors and validates the real experiences of individuals with dyslexia. Those children, adolescents, adults, and the families who live with it every day.

My hope is that this guide helps make the revised definition more accessible and meaningful, and that it supports a deeper and more accurate understanding of dyslexia in the years to come.



