



Literacy tips for students with learning difficulties and disabilities

SUPPORT AND STRATEGIES FOR E-LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Most secondary school students will adapt well to online learning as a result of COVID-19. However, for young people with learning difficulties the changed circumstances may lead to some initial anxiety and it may take time and trial and error, along with patience and flexible problem solving, to get these students into a productive routine. This information sheet has been prepared to provide parents, carers and students with some tools to manage online learning from home.

Literacy challenges

The majority of students with learning difficulties and disabilities are identified when in primary school and will often have ongoing issues that might include:

- Difficulties decoding or sounding out unknown words.
- Lack of fluency or slowness in reading, with a reliance on sounding out and poor recognition of words from one page to the next.
- Difficulties with both sounding out and fast word recognition.
- Difficulties reading accurately impacting on a student's understanding of text – at the secondary level, reading comprehension is essential.
- Difficulties with spelling.
- Slowed speed of handwriting often leading to frustration.
- Difficulties getting thoughts down on paper.

Ideally the school will already be aware of a student's problem and the work demands will be modified. Parents can help by:

1. Going back to the basics (see tip sheet for primary school literacy) but use materials that are age appropriate.
2. Using tools to support and minimise the impact of a student's learning difficulties. The following ideas can help.
 - Use online tools such as dictionary and/or thesaurus, text to voice, voice to text, spell checkers.

- It may be important for a student to have access to a laptop for note-taking, and to master touch-typing rather than rely on slow, illegible handwriting.
- Allow more time to read material or support reading of instructions to ensure they understand what is required.
- Modify the amount of work to be completed so they are able to experience the satisfaction of finishing.
- Provide an outline for writing essays (Intro, argument, discussion, conclusion). These structured plans can be downloaded from the internet for each type of written task.
- Provide an example of a good written response, and a clear explanation for how essays will be marked. See direct instruction approaches to writing such as SRA Essentials for Writing.
- Make sure the student has a balanced curriculum. While they need to take part in the core curriculum they also need to have access to subject areas where they can excel.
- Remember that literacy tasks require a high level of effort for a student with a learning difficulty, and they will require more frequent rests in learning and support to break tasks down into more achievable steps.
- Difficulties reading exam questions, and providing a written response will have implications for most written assessments. Consideration should be given

to alternative options such as oral examinations, using someone to act as a scribe, or the use of dictation packages such as Dragon Naturally Speaking. If these options are not possible, special arrangements such as extra writing time, supported reading time, and rest breaks may be required.

3. Many older students are able to work independently if parents help to structure a healthy routine, with breaks and a balanced learning approach. Remember to schedule time for fun.
4. Having to make written comments in an online class forum during home learning can be confronting for young people with spelling difficulties. Speak to the teacher about an alternative means for communication.
5. It is hard to tutor an adolescent student, and it may be better for some families to hire a tutor. See www.ldaustralia.org or www.ldonline.org.

Set realistic goals and anticipate roadblocks

- Make sure that expectations are realistic.
- Don't expect too much at once.
- Set goals for each task.
- Encourage the student to write a list of potential roadblocks and to problem solve these in advance. *For example, a **distraction** roadblock might be problem solved by:*
 1. Working in a clear and quiet space which minimises potential distractions.
 2. Turning off phone and email when working.
 3. Allocating a specific time each day when the student decides they are allowed to check phone messages or emails and respond. It is important to stay connected with friends, but this needs to be managed.
 4. Setting an alarm so that they don't get too absorbed when responding to messages.

Reduce procrastination and enhance motivation

Older students may need help with procrastination.

- Work on difficult tasks when they feel fresh, and break tasks down into smaller tasks/checklists that can be ticked off as they are completed.
- Try labelling hated tasks as 'ugly toads' and get the student to skewer the ugly toads, before completing tasks they enjoy more.
- Keep activities simple.
- Declutter the physical environment.



- Include structure so that the steps associated with tasks are clear.
- Reward success.
- Develop good habits by keeping a routine.
- Get more organised by planning the day upfront.
- Focus on what matters and don't stress too much about everything going to plan.



Tips to minimise procrastination

Assist the student to learn the following skills

- **Thought challenging:** Watch for unhelpful thoughts and challenge them – then act.
- **Study grazing:** Start by studying for 10 minutes at a time with a break in between. This will help the student get started and get into the pattern of study, before being ready for longer stretches.
- **Use other people:** Ask a parent or sibling for prompts at various time intervals to stay on track, and/or reward with a snack or activity.
- **Writing drafts:** Start working on a draft. This can be less confronting as it does not have to be perfect.
- **Switch tasks:** If one study task is causing a lot of problems in concentration or difficulty level, leave it for now and move onto a more manageable one.
- **Make a deal with yourself:** Commit to a set study time each day and DO IT. Give yourself a deadline.

The APS has other information sheets in this series to support children and teens with learning difficulties and disabilities. To access, visit: psychology.org.au for more.

Finding extra support

If your child needs clarity and assistance as regards their learning challenges referral to an appropriate psychologist for a detailed assessment and advice may be warranted. For example, a paediatric neuropsychologist can provide a differential diagnosis and strategies, and direct you to an appropriate special education tutor or any other healthcare specialist that may be required.

Acknowledgments

This resource was prepared by the:






A clinical neuropsychologist is a psychologist who is trained to understand brain-behaviour relationships (across the lifespan):

- To assess thinking/brain abilities and difficulties to clarify diagnosis and identify the client's care needs and priorities
- To provide targeted intervention or rehabilitation for people with thinking/brain-related difficulties or disorders
- To adapt or modify treatments to take into account the effects of thinking/brain difficulties

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