

Guide for Australian Educators

Understanding Dyslexia

Unlocking potential in
dyslexic students

 texthelp[®]



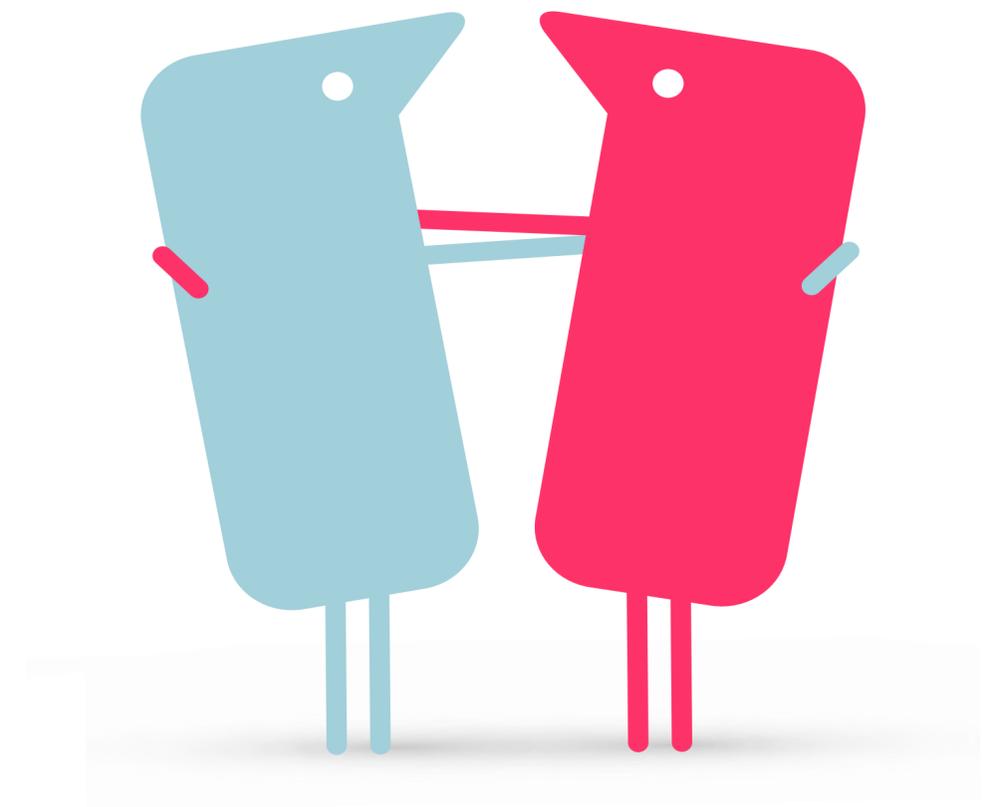
Our partner

Thank you to ADCET for providing input into the creation of this guide.



The Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ADCET) is Australia's leading resource on disability in tertiary education for disability practitioners, educators and students. ADCET leads systemic change through sector-led and evidence-based collaborations which provide strategic and practical support to improve outcomes for students with disability in post-secondary education.

ADCET provides national leadership in the inclusion of people with disability in tertiary education through providing information and professional development for educators and support staff. <https://www.adcet.edu.au/>



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Texthelp's range of products are the cornerstone in supporting neurodivergent learners in education across Australia. With a range of easy-to-use solutions for students, and for staff to deploy, they are a part of every good assistive technology toolkit.

- Darren Britten,
National Assistive Technology Officer, ADCET

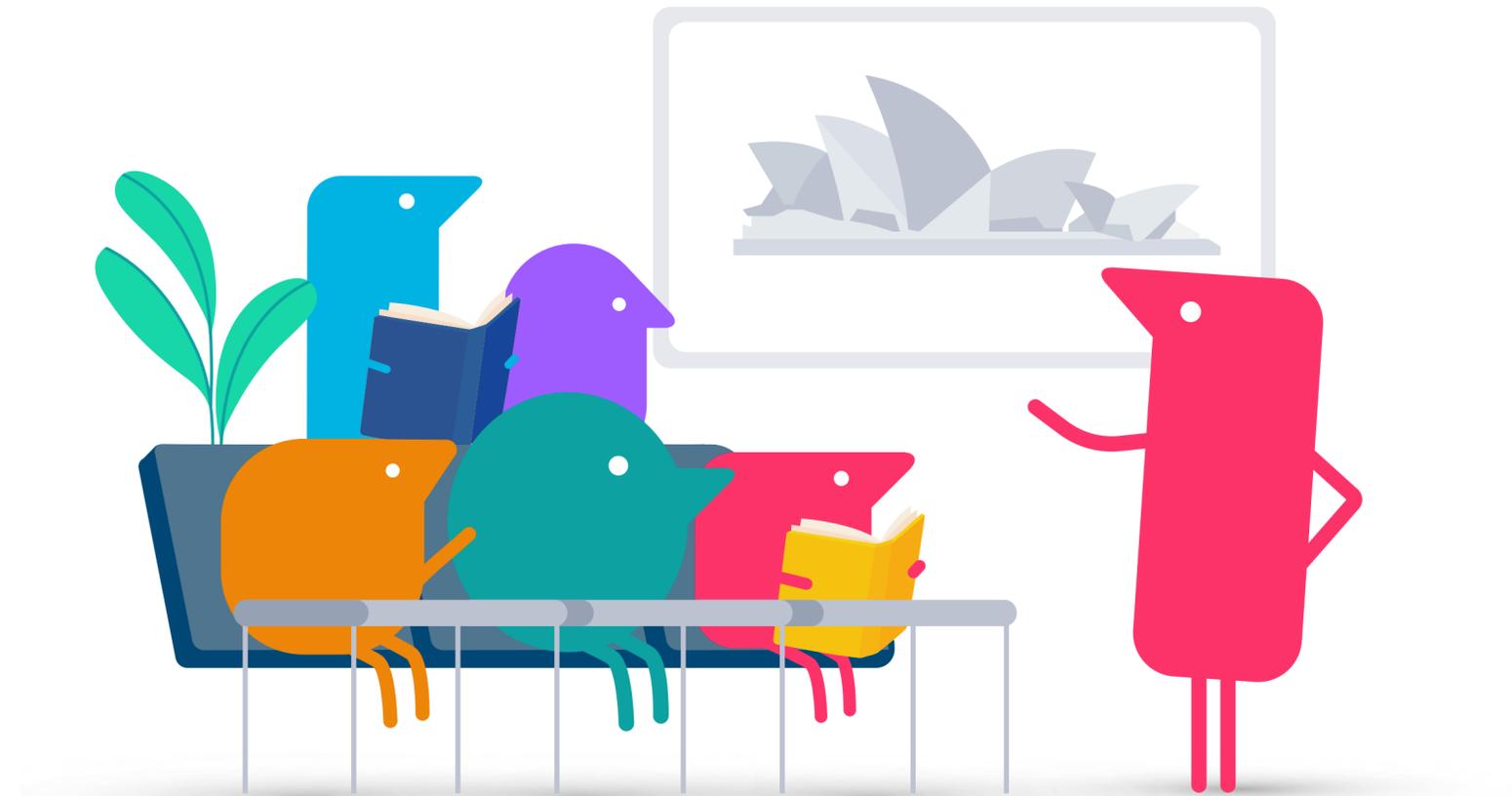


About this guide

Reading and writing aren't just for the English classroom. These are key skills that can have a lifelong impact on how we learn and engage with the world around us.

For people with dyslexia, this can be an isolating experience. They may feel different from their peers, or unable to ask for help. But with the right support, they can achieve amazing things.

In this guide, you'll find resources to help you remove barriers and unleash your dyslexic learners' potential.



Did you know that dyslexia played a role in building Australia's most iconic landmark? Find out more on page 10.

A note about language

As with all specific learning needs or disabilities, there is debate over the best terminology to use, with some favouring **identity-first** language ('dyslexic student') while others **prefer person-first** language ('person with dyslexia').

In this guide, we will alternate between both terms. We encourage you to ask individuals what they prefer.



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Literacy rates in Australia

Before we take a look at dyslexia, it's helpful to understand the wider context of literacy rates in Australia.

In 2022, Texthelp partnered with global research company, Censuswide to survey 2,000 Australian adults about their literacy ability.

56% said they had difficulties with literacy during their education.

27% of those surveyed didn't seek help with their literacy challenges because they **feared being judged or bullied.**

23% of people said they don't find it easy reading books aloud to a preschooler or primary-aged child.



These results tell us a number of things:

- They suggest that literacy challenges affect far more people than just those with a dyslexia diagnosis
- Literacy problems tend to emerge in early education, and if they aren't addressed they can stay with a person throughout their adult life
- Many people feel ashamed to ask for help. They may struggle with everyday tasks, or exclude themselves from opportunities

However, our research also provided a hopeful message:

- The majority of people felt **technology could have helped them during their education**, and we know that access to technology is constantly improving
- The earlier people receive the support they need, the better their outcomes for lifelong learning and working

Being mindful of literacy difficulties and making the appropriate support available will not only benefit students with dyslexia. It can make a big difference to a wide range of students.



What is dyslexia?

Dyslexia is a specific learning difference related to language. It affects how a person understands the relationship between speech sounds, letters, words and meaning. It is estimated that **10% of Australians have dyslexia**, though many more may be undiagnosed.

People with dyslexia can face challenges with:

- spelling and writing
- reading and word recognition
- pronunciation and 'sounding out' unfamiliar words
- processing and recalling information

What's behind dyslexia?



Brain imaging shows that the brains of people with dyslexia develop and function differently than in other people.

Dyslexia can vary in symptoms and severity. One of the most common symptoms is understanding the relationship between written and spoken language, also known as phonics.

As a result, learners with dyslexia may feel less confident approaching new words. They may struggle to decode words when reading.

It's important to note that dyslexia does not impact intelligence, and with the right support, students with dyslexia can excel and even outperform their peers.

Dyslexia is not the only specific learning difficulty to affect literacy. Dysgraphia can impair processes associated with writing, including spelling and handwriting. Dyslexia and dysgraphia can occur alone or together. You can find more information on dysgraphia in the resources section.

Some students with dyslexia may benefit from special accommodations or one-to-one support with a learning assistant. There are also practical steps you can take to embed dyslexia-friendly teaching methods into your practice. We'll take a look at these in more detail in Chapter 5.

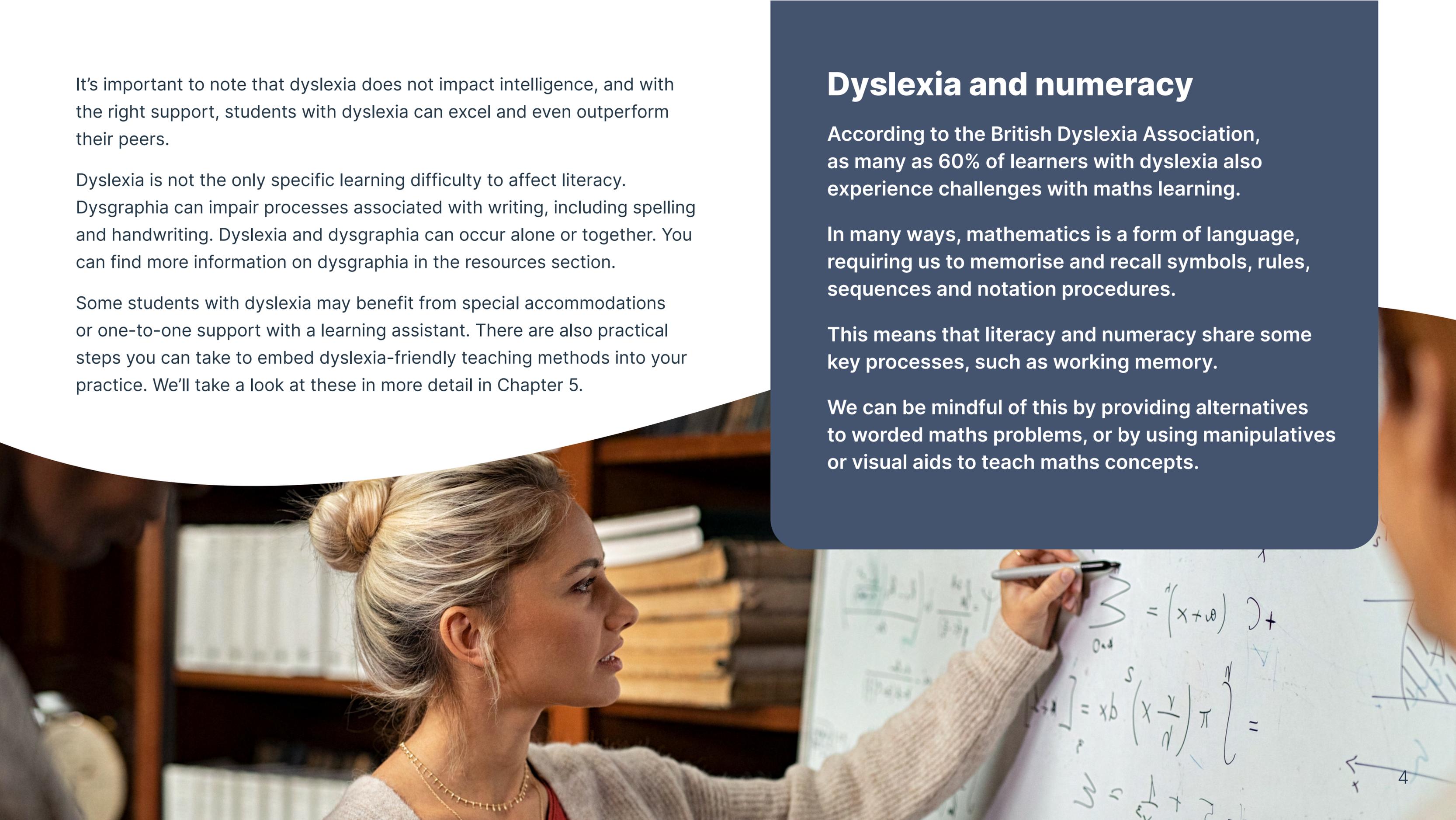
Dyslexia and numeracy

According to the British Dyslexia Association, as many as 60% of learners with dyslexia also experience challenges with maths learning.

In many ways, mathematics is a form of language, requiring us to memorise and recall symbols, rules, sequences and notation procedures.

This means that literacy and numeracy share some key processes, such as working memory.

We can be mindful of this by providing alternatives to worded maths problems, or by using manipulatives or visual aids to teach maths concepts.

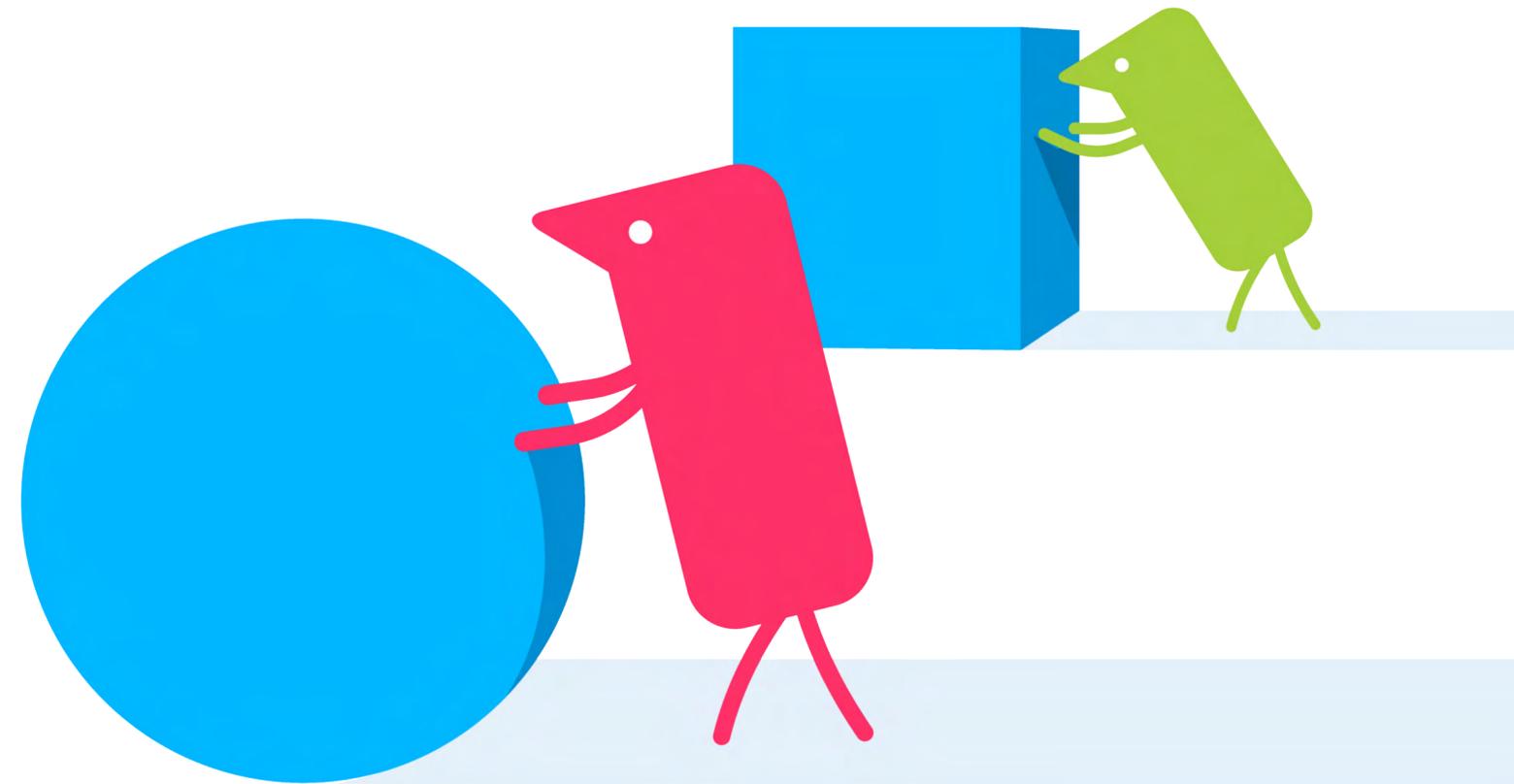


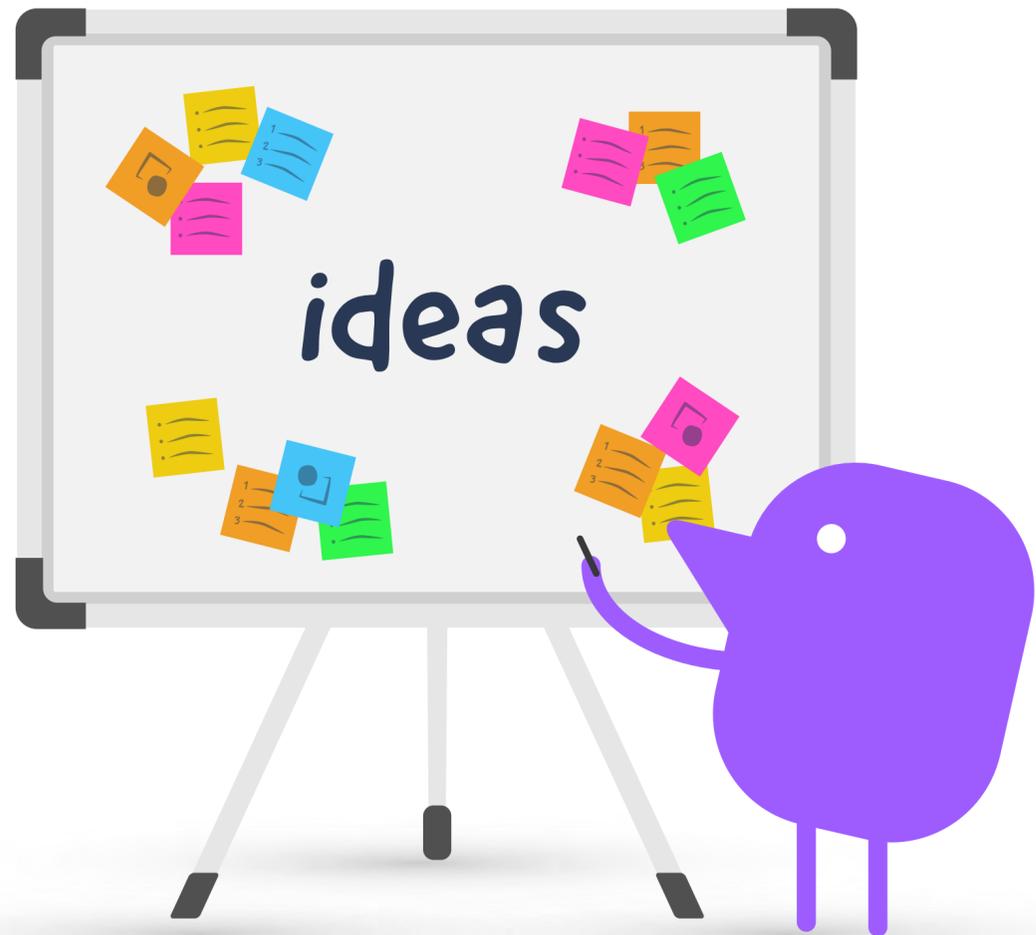
The strengths

While dyslexia can pose certain challenges to students, there are also many positive characteristics of what we call **dyslexic thinking**.

That's why we don't talk about overcoming dyslexia. It's simply a different way of thinking and processing, and with the right support, dyslexic thinkers can excel in ways that others don't.

Let's take a look at some key strengths of dyslexic thinking.





Big-picture thinking

Though they may struggle with accuracy and fine detail, many people with dyslexia have a strong aptitude for holistic thinking. They take a wide-angle view of the project at hand, enabling them to detect patterns others may miss.

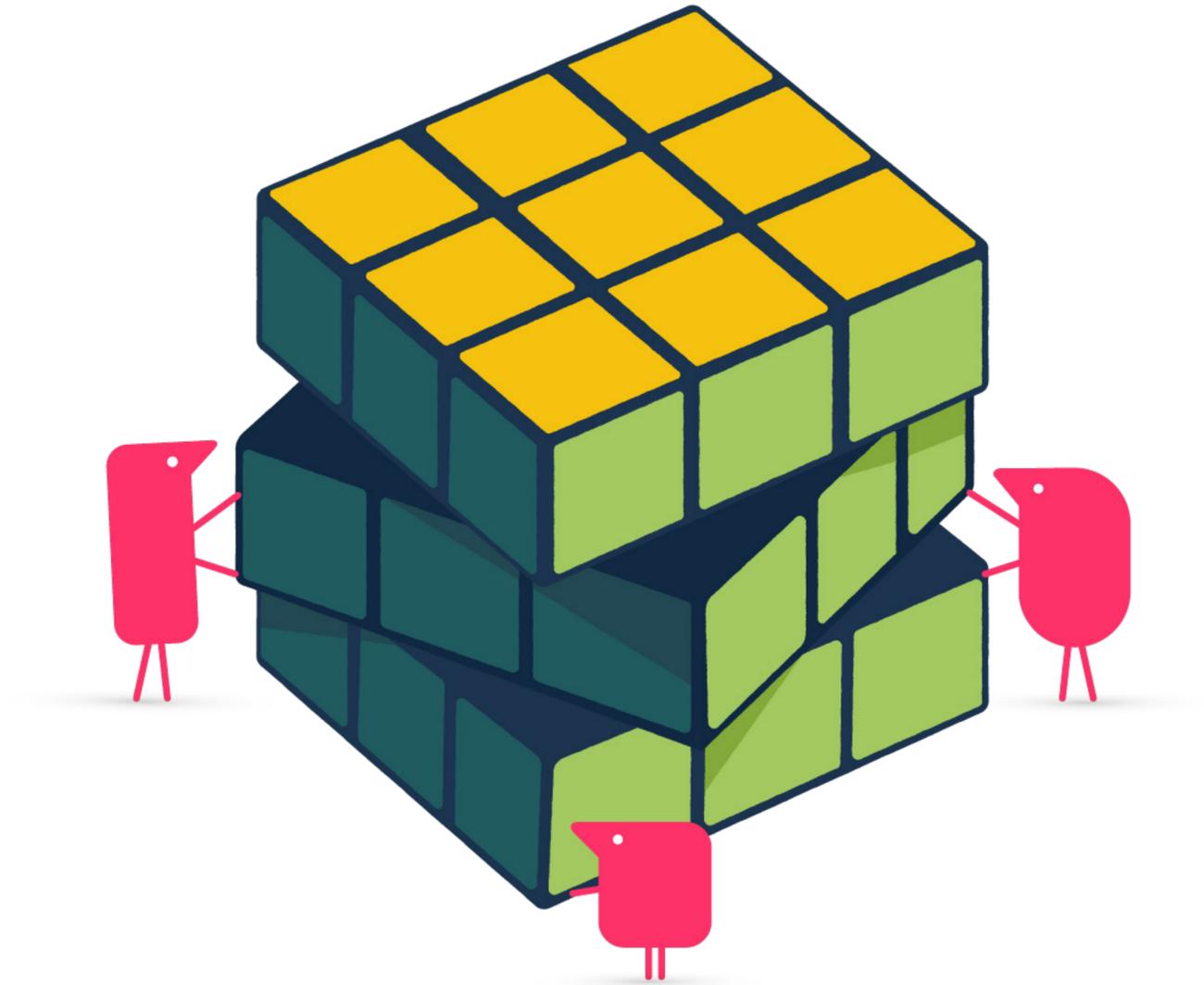
Another strength is their ability to synthesise different ideas, which can lead to new and insightful observations. In short, dyslexic thinkers tend to avoid getting hung up on details; they work best by looking at longer-term goals, overarching strategy and grand-scale patterns.

This quality lends itself well to areas like strategic planning, leadership, project management and entrepreneurship.

Problem-solving

Rather than tackling problems in a linear-sequential way, people with dyslexia often take a narrative reasoning approach. They use pattern analysis and experiential knowledge to weave a cohesive narrative about an issue.

Combining big-picture thinking with a willingness to explore different possibilities can lead to striking insights and solutions.





Empathy

While dyslexia may bring challenges with writing, it can lead people to develop strong verbal communication and interpersonal skills.

People with dyslexia frequently display high levels of emotional intelligence, enabling them to connect with others, foster positive social dynamics, and build strong relationships based on trust and empathy. Related to their big-picture thinking, dyslexic individuals are more readily able to understand different perspectives.

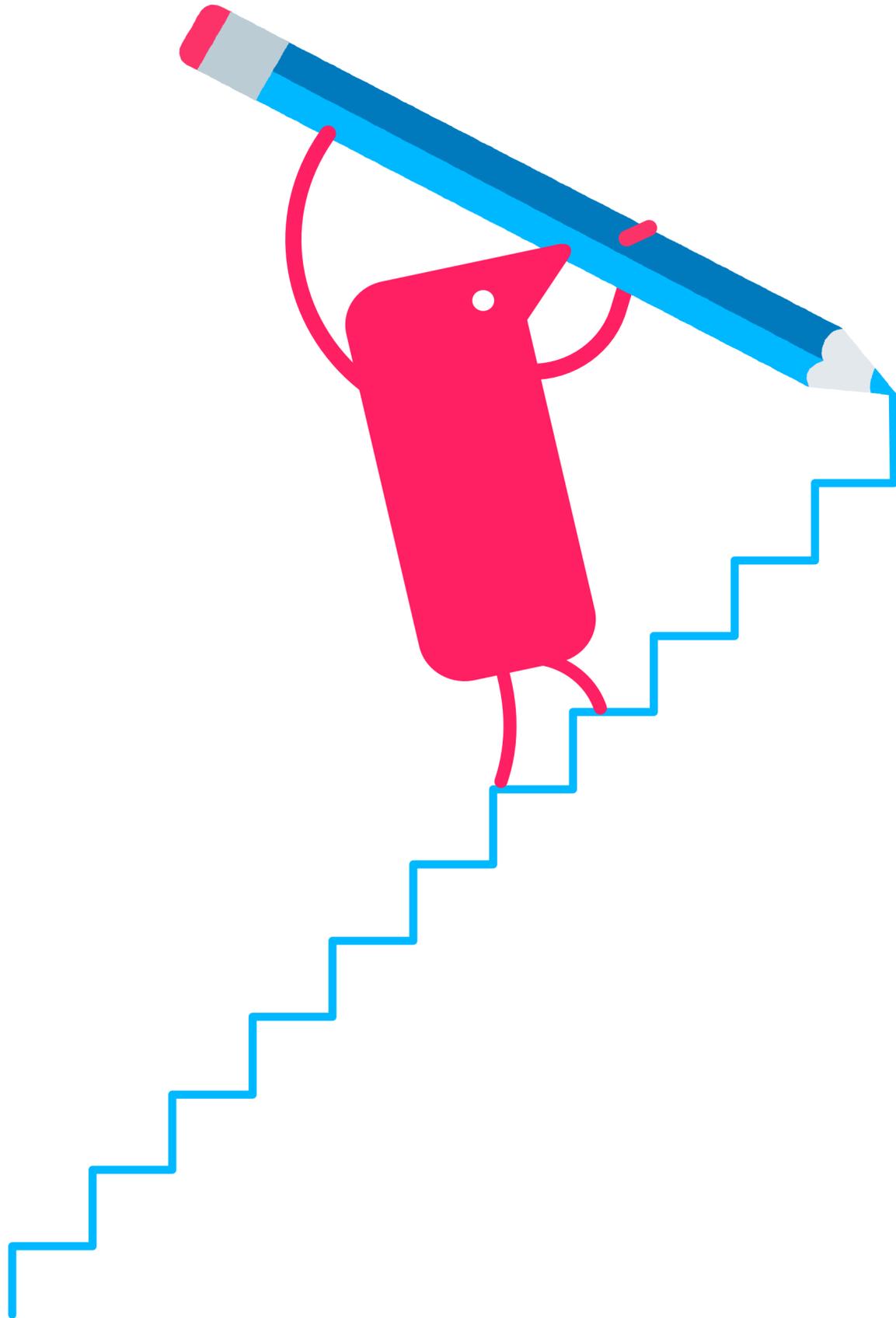
This is a valuable skill that not only aids in communication and decision-making, but also in things like conflict resolution. This quality can lead dyslexic individuals to become highly effective and influential leaders.

Visual/spatial awareness

Most people with dyslexia have a dominant right-brain hemisphere, which means they have a natural inclination towards visual thinking. People with dyslexia have even been found to have greater peripheral vision than non-dyslexic people.

This enhanced visual sense results in above-average levels of spatial awareness. As learners, they may prefer to take on new concepts through **visual diagrams, video, manipulatives or by building things**. These are all things to consider when teaching students with dyslexia.





Creativity

Dyslexic thinkers can display exceptional creativity.

A powerful example is Jørn Utzon. Born in Denmark, Utzon didn't excel in academics. He was diagnosed with dyslexia and struggled with maths.

It was outside the classroom that he excelled, being a keen sailor who dreamed of designing his own boat. Without the grades to pursue the navy or engineering, Utzon had to look for another path. He developed an interest in architecture, and got a place in Copenhagen's Royal Academy of Fine Arts.

In 1957, Utzon had a breakthrough. He entered a competition to design what would become the Sydney Opera House. Out of hundreds of entries from famous architects around the world, his design was chosen.

The inspiration for his captivating design came from slices of orange peel. Utzon admired how the jagged shapes could all slot together to form a perfect sphere. He even admired how they looked like sails.

In interviews, **Utzon credited dyslexia for his creative vision.** It gave him a spatial sense that enabled him to push the boundaries of what was possible. Dyslexia had made his school years difficult, but it also helped him create Australia's most iconic landmark.



Chapter 4

The challenges

Struggling with literacy can lead us to feel frustrated, isolated, or out-of-step with the world around us. When we surveyed 2,000 Australian adults about their feelings towards literacy, the results showed that:

30% felt **embarrassed** by their literacy skills

27% said their literacy skills make them feel **inadequate**

26% said they feel **less confident** in everyday life

The same feelings can be experienced by students with dyslexia. If not properly supported, they may fall behind at school and disengage from learning. This may result in poor self-esteem, frustration or behavioural problems, and can have a lifelong impact.



Spotting the signs of dyslexia

Not every student with dyslexia will display the same signs. In fact, if we're teaching older students, it's likely they've gotten very good at masking any signs of their dyslexia. With them, we might have to dig a little deeper to uncover what's going on.

On the next few pages, see some of the most **common signs** indicating a student might be dyslexic.

Share this guide with a friend or colleague:
[text.help/dyslexia-guide](text:help/dyslexia-guide)



Reading

Slow reading speed and a reluctance to read aloud in class are both classic signs of dyslexia. Here are some other signs to look out for with students' reading:

- Getting sounds and letters in words mixed up. For example, 'ephelant' instead of 'elephant'
- Changing words when reading out loud, such as substituting 'car' for 'bus'
- Skipping words or lines, or losing their place on the page easily
- Struggling to recognise sounds like 'ph' and remembering how they sound within a word
- Tiring quickly while reading - this can be because words may 'move' around the page as they try to read them
- Low comprehension of what they've just read, as the effort of decoding the words is a significant challenge



Writing

Spelling, grammar, and handwriting can be particularly challenging for students with dyslexia. Some telltale areas in writing are:

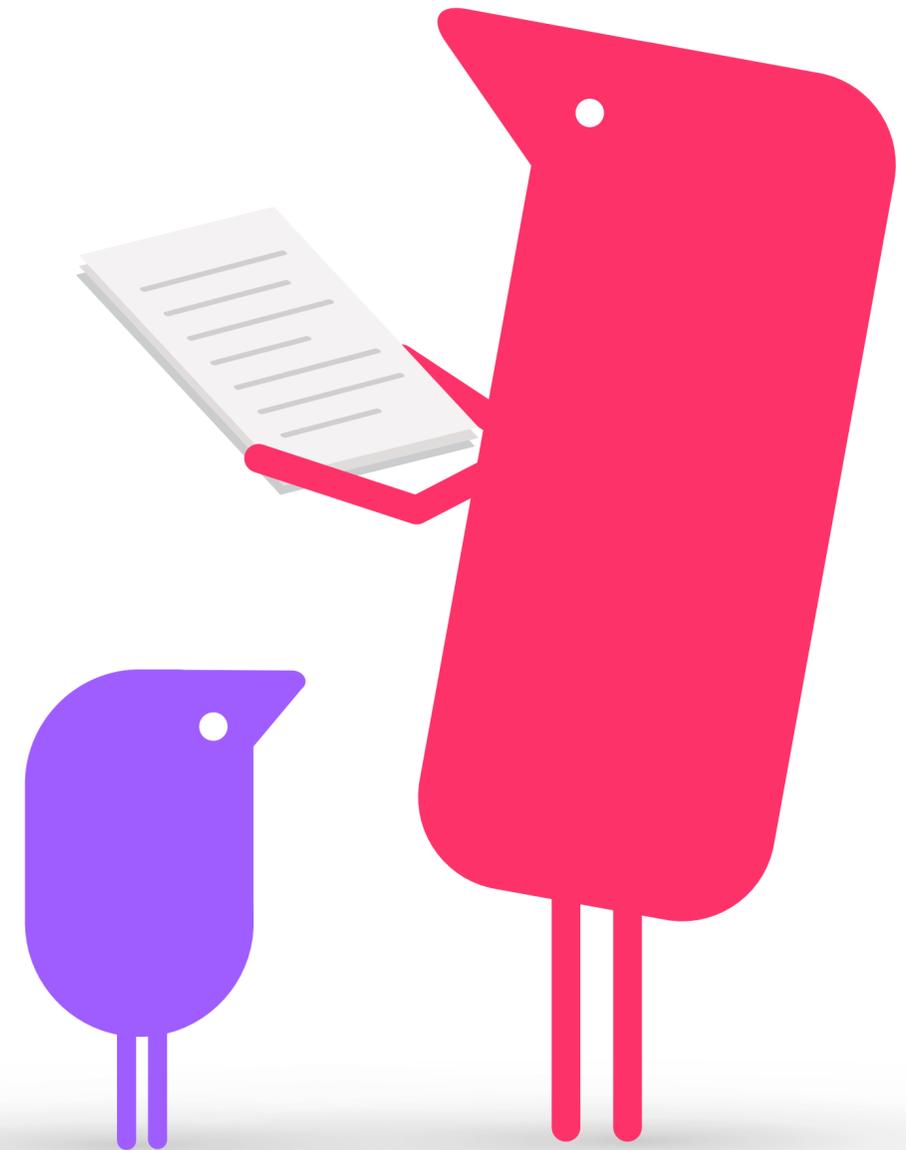
- Making phonological mistakes in spelling like 'f' for 'ph'
- Having continued challenges with common or basic words
- Reversing words like 'was' and 'saw'
- Leaving out or switching vowels
- Writing tasks may take significantly longer than it would for their peers
- Handwriting can be untidy or illegible
- Writing may climb up or down the page - not sticking to the horizontal lines
- Verbal and written skills don't match. A student might have great ideas, but they're not getting them down on paper



Processing and memory

Problems processing or recalling information might indicate that a student has dyslexia. The student may:

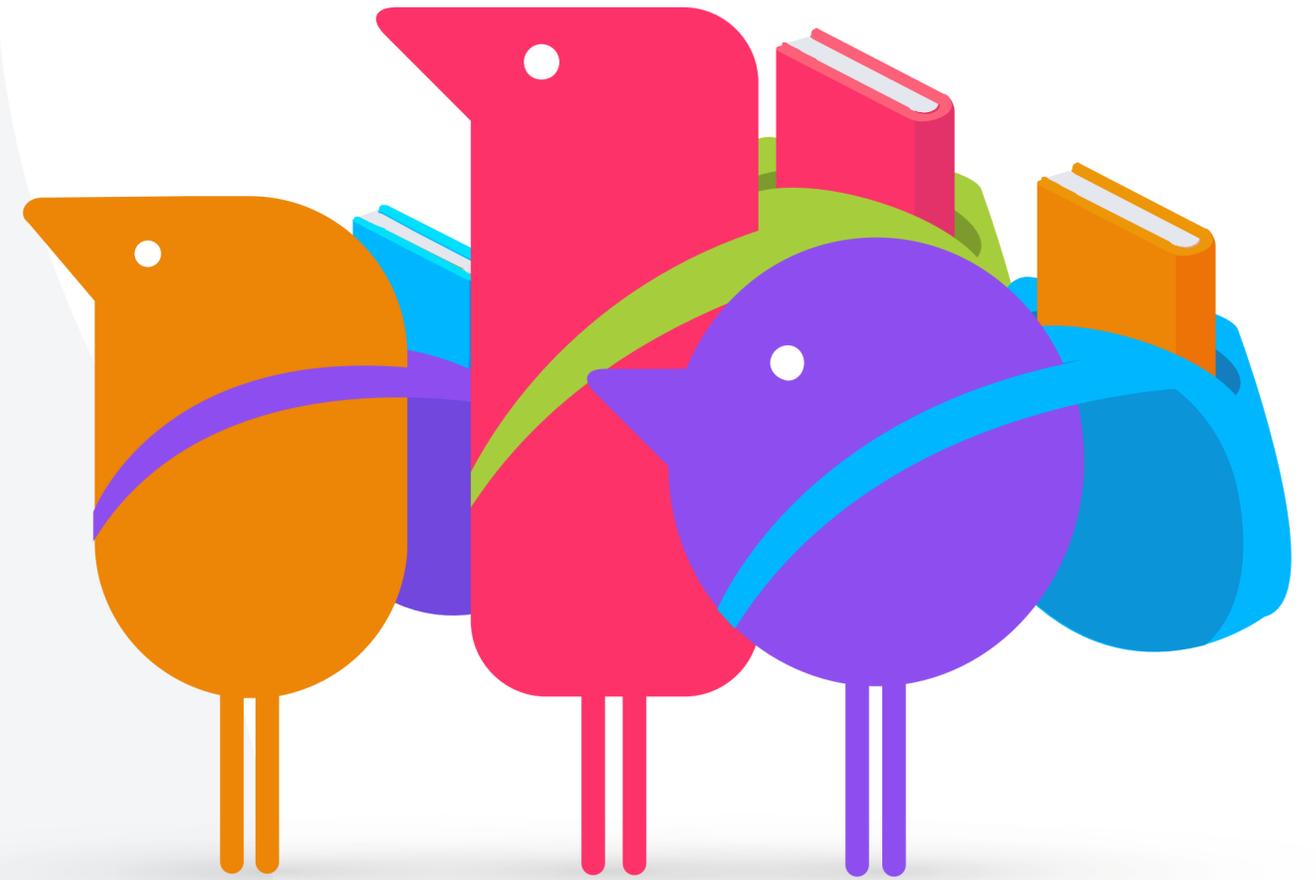
- Have a hard time remembering lists of information such as dates, times, etc.
- Find it difficult to follow spoken instructions
- Take longer to answer oral questions
- Find it hard to remember names of everyday items
- Not be able to retain information from one lesson to the next



Organisation

Planning and organising their day can throw up some challenges for students with dyslexia.

- Keeping their desk tidy
- Losing pens, pencils, other resources
- Forgetting homework, assignments, sports kits, or permission slips
- Moving between classes and losing their way
- Keeping their locker or schoolbag tidy



Concentration

Some students with dyslexia may find their concentration on tasks is negatively affected by the effort it takes to process information. This can cause dyslexic students to:

- Fidget
- Find it hard to sit still
- Come across as lazy or bored



Other signs of dyslexia

- Tripping, falling, bumping into and dropping things
- Finding it hard to tell right from left
- Difficulty telling the time
- Finding rote-learning challenging
- Struggling to get motivated to work
- Displaying challenging behaviour through frustration



Supporting students with dyslexia

Once we've identified any students who may have dyslexia, we can take steps to ensure the learning environment is actually conducive to learning.

It's important that we keep our dyslexic students in mind when designing teaching strategies. On the next few pages, we've collated some of the most tried and tested strategies for supporting students with dyslexia.

Remember, every learner is unique and there is no set way of learning or processing information. A collection of strategies is usually the best option.

Referring a student for diagnosis

A dyslexia diagnosis can only be obtained through a formal assessment by a licensed educational psychologist. However, educators play an important role in spotting the signs of dyslexia and facilitating early intervention.

If a student displays signs of a specific learning difficulty, you should consult with your school or university's learning support services.

Together with learning support, you can coordinate an action plan to help remove learning barriers for the student and determine any reasonable adjustments that could support their learning.

Use a structured approach to learning

Allowing students to build their mastery of a topic is recommended for every learner, but for students with dyslexia, it's often the best way to accommodate their learning styles.

In practice, this can mean equipping students with new vocabulary before beginning a topic. You can begin with the basic concepts and build to more difficult ideas. This is a strategy known as the **Structured Literacy Approach**. This allows students to gradually build upon the skills they've learned, giving them confidence in their own ability to learn a new skill or topic.

The approach also asks that educators are continually interacting with students to ensure they understand the topic. Part of this involves continually adapting lessons and teaching methods to meet the needs of all students.



Creating inclusive learning environments

Regardless of what learning needs may be present in your class, having a supportive environment promotes better learning outcomes for all.

The addition of **multisensory lessons** and **assistive technologies** can enhance engagement for students with dyslexia. In an inclusive learning environment, it's important that not all activities and tasks are centred around reading, writing or taking instructions. Consider offering a variety of ways to grow and show knowledge, skills and confidence.



Personalised learning

Identifying students in our classrooms with dyslexia means we can start to alter our teaching strategies, activities, and even the assignments we set to ensure that we're meeting the needs of every student.

A personalised learning experience means we might place students with dyslexia closer to us, allowing them to ask questions more easily. It might also mean we give instructions in multiple ways: verbally, in writing, or even through a hand-drawn diagram.

Change doesn't have to be monumental. Small adjustments to our already great strategies and lessons can help to promote positive learning experiences, and make sure everyone in the class has a voice.



Getting the right tools

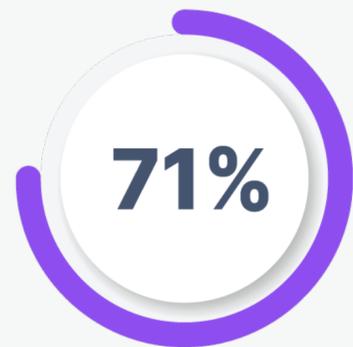
Assistive technology can transform education for students with dyslexia. Many tools offer a variety of features, allowing students to work in a way that best suits their learning needs and preferences.

For students who find large texts overwhelming, extracting relevant information can be a slow and arduous process. **Text-to-speech tools** read text aloud, enabling students to focus on the ideas expressed, rather than the mechanics of reading.

For many of us, speaking feels more natural than writing. If that's the case, then **dictation tools** can be a great way to help students get their thoughts and ideas onto the page.

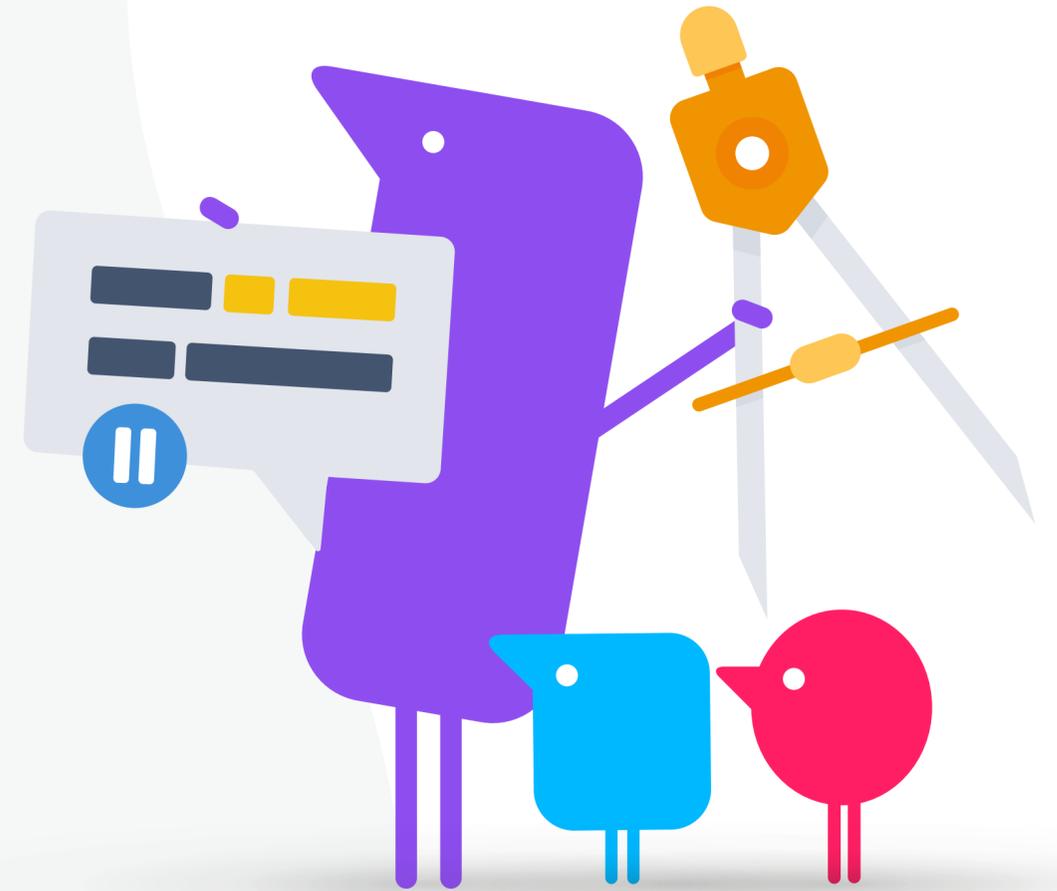
Similarly, **screen-masking or screen-tinting** can help students improve their focus. They remove on-screen distractions and enable students to focus on one sentence or paragraph at a time. There are some key things to consider when choosing assistive tools.

[Find out more in this guide.](#)



Did you know?

71% of the people we surveyed said they think some form of **technology would have been helpful to them** in overcoming their literacy difficulties during education

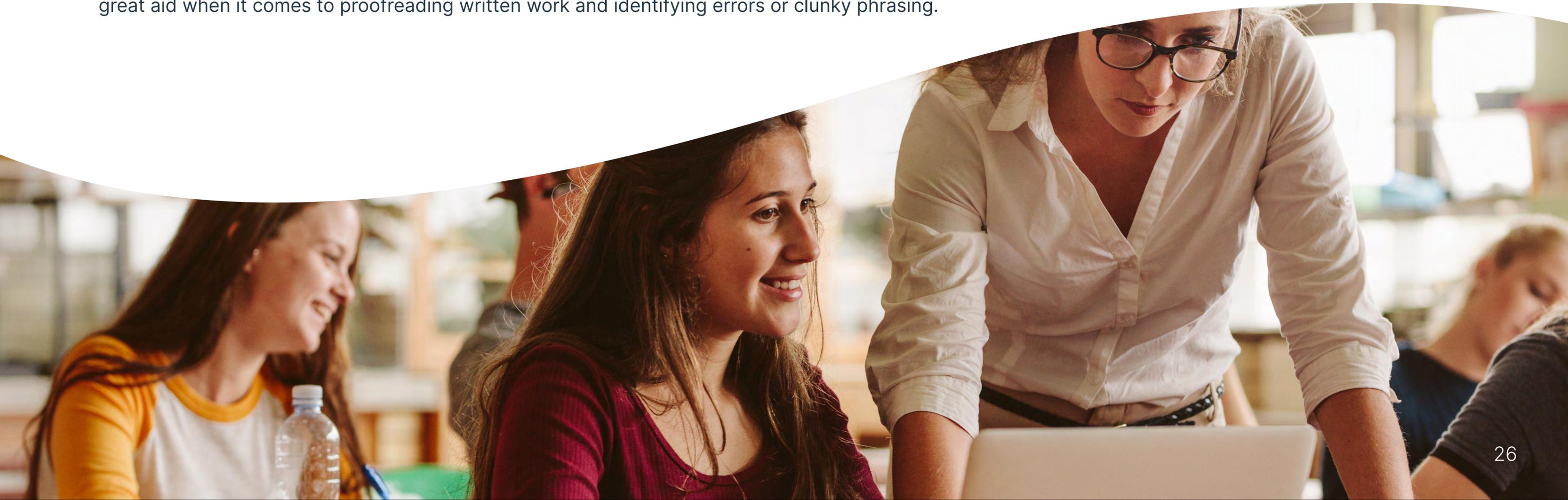


Create a dyslexia-friendly learning environment

- Organise your learning environment with clear routines to minimise movement and noise
- Where possible, use a mix of **visual, auditory and kinesthetic activities** within lessons to suit all learning styles
- Offer technology as a multi-sensory method of working
- Try to avoid setting assignments that rely solely on written work, as this can turn into a long, hard task for students with dyslexia
- Where possible, assess and mark work based on the content, not spelling and grammar skills. Comprehension of the topics or activities should be the important factor. Spelling and grammar can be assessed separately
- Give instructions in simple sentences. For students with dyslexia, listening to and processing verbal instructions at speed can be very difficult, especially if they need to remember what's being said
- Have resource boxes with lots of visual and hands-on support. Have these on each table or dotted around your classroom. Include things like visual cue cards, word banks specific to the topic you're teaching, counting equipment, dictaphones, coloured overlays, etc.
- Keep a variety of writing implements to hand, including tablets, laptops, different coloured pens and pencils



- Use a variety of planning activities such as mind maps, storyboards, flowcharts, video, diagrams, oral presentation
- Consider alternatives when asking students to read aloud in front of the class. This can be a top source of stress for students with dyslexia
- Give students brainstorming, thinking and talking time
- Integrate **assistive technology** into the learning environment. By making these tools available for all students, you can remove any stigma attached to using support tools. What is necessary to some students can be beneficial for all. For example, text-to-speech can be a great aid when it comes to proofreading written work and identifying errors or clunky phrasing.



Chapter 6

Putting support into practice

At Texthelp, we're lucky to work with educators who have brought inclusive learning practices to the heart of their school or university's culture. Hear from a few of them below.



Vanna Blucher,

SENCo at Hobsonville Point Secondary School

“

For a learner with a diagnosis like dyslexia, over time, using Read&Write tools, they become more confident, their stress levels drop, they become risk takers. And as students get more confident and engaged, our teacher wellbeing also improves. We can't thank Read&Write enough for what that gives us.

[Read the case study](#)



Kathryn Olsen,

Tutor at Alphability

“

When I first started using Read&Write, many of the students I worked with were very reluctant writers who wouldn't put pen to paper. Read&Write meant that the whole digital world was opened up to them... This tool allowed them to submit work that was of their intellectual ability, not limited by their reading and writing skills.

[Read the case study](#)



Rachel Armstrong,

Parent of a child with dyslexia

“

Read&Write has really transformed the way Owen learns. It's been an absolute game-changer... It's really helped his creativity and we've seen such huge improvements in his results at school as a consequence of being able to use Read&Write.

[Read the case study](#)



Brigid Taylor,

College Principal at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, Kensington

“

Read&Write has allowed our students to better organise their thoughts, and it has supported their overall study efforts. The teachers also find it helpful as they don't need to type resources, they simply record it and it can be uploaded. They are using Read&Write for reports, summarising, taking notes and a multitude of other things.

[Read the case study](#)

Useful Resources

[Our Research into Literacy Struggles](#)

[Overview: What is Dyslexia?](#)

[Factsheet: Dyslexia in Australia](#)

[Podcast: The Strengths of Dyslexia](#)

[Quick reference: The Many Strengths of Dyslexia](#)

[Resource: Structured Literacy Approach](#)

Dysgraphia

[Webinar: Dysgraphia - Common Signs, Tailored Support, and More](#)

[Webinar: Powerful Approaches that Improve Written Communication](#)



This guide is brought to you by Texthelp

At Texthelp, we know that students do their best when they understand and are understood.

Our tools help build confidence with reading, writing and communicating at all stages of life. Texthelp tools have already helped millions of people. And we're ready to help millions more.

Want to learn more?

To learn more about our inclusive tools or to arrange a demo, get in touch with the team:
<https://text.help/dyslexia-support-aus>



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