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MODULE 31: Learning the basics

This module deals with the challenging task of equipping the dyslexic child with language skills which people without dyslexia take for granted. The use of phonics, as well as other strategies, means learning these skills can be both fun and effective.

31.1 Phonics

31.2 Language

31.3 Reading

31.4 Spelling

31.5 Writing

31.1 Phonics

There are several methods to teach language fluency to the dyslexic student, but the principal systems are based on phonics.

31.1.1 Phonics - What are “Phonics”? (1 of 2)

Phonics is the ability to detect and manipulate the sounds in words. This is relevant because spoken language is made up of sounds. Translating words into the written word is a function of recognizing sound and linking them to a symbol(s) to represent them on paper.

When a child learns to speak, he imitates the sounds made by his parents. He learns to link certain sounds to certain objects or people, e.g. points to “Mama” and says his first word. Later, when the child learns to read, he is taught to recognize the symbol which represents the spoken word. As he begins writing, he must put the written symbol that codes for the sound onto the page.

To understand how phonics helps with this process, let us break down the steps as they happen when reading.



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Written word > a pattern of symbols on the page > a symbol codes for a sound > the reader decodes the symbol and recognizes the sound > the reader understands the word

31.1.2 Phonics - What are “Phonics”? (2 of 2)

The person with dyslexia may have problems processing any one of the steps above. A break in the orderly pattern of analysis leads to an error of understanding and the dyslexic person struggles to read.

When you think about writing, you begin to see why so many dyslexic children have difficulty keeping up in class.

Hears a combination of sounds > analyzes the individual sounds > retrieves the appropriate symbol for each sound from the memory banks > combines with other sounds and symbols > writes the word

The good news is that practicing the skills of recognizing sounds, and retrieving the correct symbols (i.e. phonics), leads to dramatic improvements in language skills. Indeed, as little as 20 minutes a day, three to four times a week, can reap huge rewards.

31.1.3 Phonics - Assess the Individual

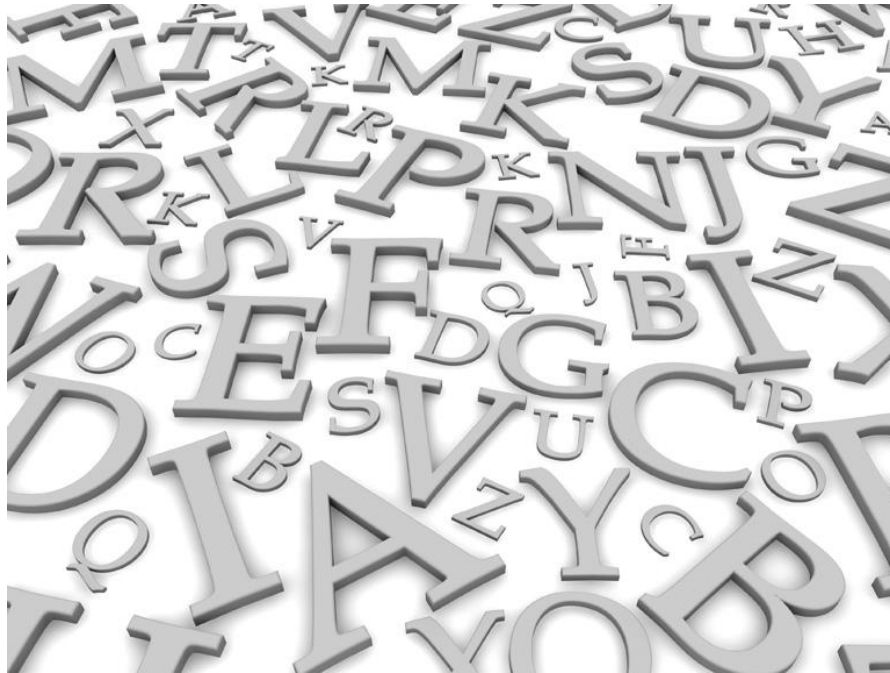
The task of a Dyslexia Therapist is to assess where the individual's processing problems occur. First, look at the big picture such as: difficulties with speech, spelling, reading and organizing ideas (dealt with individually later in this module.) Then, focus on the specific areas of difficulty within each discipline.

For example, a student has difficulty reading. Does he have difficulty retrieving specific symbols (letters and syllables) and their associated sounds? If so, which ones are they?



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31.1.4 Phonics - Teach the Dyslexic to Listen

A sound foundation is to teach the dyslexic child to listen, identify patterns and rhythms, and repeat them.

It is necessary to teach these skills because the child with dyslexia is using a faulty processor (the wrong part of their brain) not designed to decode language. Contrast this with children without dyslexia that are using a language processing center that is “fit for purpose”.

Teaching skills such as listening, rhythm identification, and repetition helps to create new pathways in the brain, which ultimately “re-fits” the ill-equipped learning center.



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31.1.5 Phonics - First step: Identifying a Sequence of Sounds

This is as simple as clapping or tapping out a rhythm, and asking the child to repeat it.

The next element is to use different objects to make a noise behind a screen. Then show the child the objects and ask them to repeat the pattern.

Also try making noises with different volumes, and have the pupil decide which was softest and which was loudest.

Repeating Sequences

The next step is to have the child repeat sequences found in written language. A great way to do this is to tell a simple story with the key events illustrated on picture cards. As you are



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reading have the child identify the relevant picture cards and place them in sequence on the table.

Once the story is complete, shuffle the cards and ask the child to repeat the story using the picture cards.

31.1.6 Phonics - Second Step: Phonic Awareness

Once the child has some understanding of rhythm, encourage them to spot the rhythms within words. You are inviting them to identify the number of syllables in a word by having them identify the rhythms.

Start with words that have meaning for the child. You may start with their name, favorite hobbies, and movie titles. Say the word slowly with emphasis on the individual syllables, and get the pupil to clap along to the syllables. Once they get used to the idea, get them to clap out the rhythm in words selected from a story.

Now try making this into a game. Ask the child to think of three words that are one, two or three claps long – and be sure to encourage them for their efforts.

31.1.7 Phonics - Third Step: Rhyming Awareness

The next element involves teaching the ear to listen for specific sounds. A great way to do this is by asking the child to match up words that rhyme, such as: “cat”, “hat” and “mat”. Have them spot the odd one out: Cat, Hat, Dog, Mat.

This works especially well if you use nonsensical words, then the child is not trying to match up words and meaning, but concentrating purely on the sounds e.g. fap, hap, wap.



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31.1.8 Phonics - Segmenting and Manipulating Words (1 of 3)

This is about using these new skills to play with actual words by taking them apart, and putting them back together again.

Stretching Words

Recall what the child has learned so far about rhythm and order to help make sense of actual words.

Identify words that are made up of parts.

Start by stretching words and use the “head, tummy, tail” method to mark the parts.

For example “Ccccc-aaaaa-ttttt”.

“C” – pupil touches their head

“a” – pupil touches their tummy



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“t” – pupil touches their back.

This uses the sense of touch to enforce and help the dyslexic child learn.

31.1.9 Phonics - Segmenting and Manipulating Words (2 of 3)

Learn to recognize letters

One of the skills non-dyslexic readers take for granted is recognizing letters. However, this is something dyslexic children struggle with. To overcome this, play games of snap, or recognition games where the pupil matches up the same letter. You can use flash cards showing the letters and having the child match them up.

As the child progresses, use picture flash cards so the child has to mentally process an image of a car, and an image of a cat. He will begin to recognize that both of these words start with the same sound of “C”.

Another idea is the old family favorite of I-spy. *“I spy with my little eye, something beginning with “C”.* The child actively seeks out objects beginning with the same sound, such as “cup”.

31.1.10 Phonics - Segmenting and Manipulating Words (3 of 3)

Manipulating Sounds

Now to have the child become more confident with their use of language by playing with words.

Two methods of doing this are Wordchains and Spoonerisms.

Word chains

An example is:

Bat <> Bet <> Pet

Notice here, one letter changes each turn to make a new word.



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Bat Bet Pet

Or

Car <> Cap <> Tap

Car Cap Tap

Spoonerisms

This is where the beginning of two words are switched over. It can teach the dyslexic child to identify specific elements in the words.

Bed time > Ted Bime

Cat Nap > Nat Cap

Jelly Beans > Belly Jeans

More on Phonics

Phonics are a fantastic tool for teaching the dyslexic child. We will cover more aspects as we progress through this module. We will look specifically at speech, reading and writing.

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31.2 Language

31.2.1 Language - Understanding Language

The use of language is vital for making ourselves understood. To appreciate the importance of language, you have only to think of visiting a foreign country where English is not spoken. There are disadvantages if you do not understand the language. The simplest request, such as asking for a drink or where the bathroom is, takes on a whole new level of significance if the answer is unintelligible to you.



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The profoundly deaf experience something similar. They also struggle to understand the spoken word, and are at a disadvantage with articulating words, and ensuring correct pronunciation.

You may not think of language skills as the primary problem faced by children with dyslexia. Moreover, communication skills, pronunciation, listening ability, and verbal self-expression can all be affected depending on the type of dyslexia.



31.2.2 Language - Understanding Language

Common difficulties with spoken language include:

- Difficulty pronouncing certain words
- Delayed speech development
- Inability or difficulty following verbal instructions to achieve a task



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- Confusion when given certain oral instruction, such as left and right
- Impaired ability to memorize oral information such as songs, nursery rhymes or the alphabet
- Struggling to understand concepts or ideas
- Problems with word retrieval or naming of objects
- Identifying individual letter sounds
- Difficulty breaking down spoken words into their syllables.

31.2.3 Language - Understanding Language

Therapy can help teach listening and language skills. Severe problems should always be put in the hands of professionals with the proper certifications and specialist training.

Individuals with dyslexia may struggle with oral communication for several reasons. Their brains handle information differently. They are not able to distinguish the individual syllables within a word, or individual letters making up simple words such as “Cat”.

They fail to make the connection between the symbols on the page (letters) that represent a certain sound. The gap is simply too large between seeing a letter in black and white, and knowing the sound that shape represents. Thus, a “C” is taken at face value and is no more likely to make a dyslexic child think of pronouncing “-cee”, than a child without dyslexia would look at it and associate it automatically with a reindeer.

There are various speech therapy and language learning programs specifically designed for people with dyslexia. The Orton-Gillingham approach is one of the most respected. This is a researched based approach that has been validated by various reading research studies.

31.2.4 Language - Understanding Language

The Orton-Gillingham approach is a “multi-sensory approach”. This means that it is not only the eyes and speech (seeing the letter and pronouncing it aloud). It is also about feeling, touching, and visual and verbalizing.

“The constant use of how a letter looks, how it sounds, how speech organs or the hand feel when writing it”. Gillingham & Stillman.



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For example, rather than pointing to the letter “C” on a page, the child is equipped with a magnetic board filled with magnetic letters in different colors. He can pick up and feel the letters. Thus, he learns what a letter “C” feels like. This gives his brain a stepping stone to understanding that the letter “C” ,on a page, feels a certain way, and is associated with the sound –cee.

The idea is to maximize the number of ways in which the brain can make a connection between letters and sounds. Perhaps, bypassing the faulty wiring that misdirects those visual messages (seeing “C”) to a part of the brain that is not equipped to deal with it. It helps to get the child to repeat the sound and focus on the shape their lips and tongue make, when saying “C”. This will train their brain to make a link between the sound and the physical shape of their lips and tongue while saying the word.

31.2.5 Language - Repetition Works

Repetition is an important part of the process. This is the same idea as using a star chart: You are encouraging a child to repeat a behavior for a reward in hopes that the constant repetition becomes a learned behavior.

Encourage your child's parents to read to them at home. Hearing the sounds improves vocal and listening skills. Reading with a child should be interactive.

Have the parent and child take turns reading. Make sure the child understands the story and comprehends what is happening. It is common for the child to concentrate so hard on pronouncing the words that they forget about understanding the meaning. As you read, discuss what is happening in the story. This helps place it in context, and gives the reader clues as to the sorts of word which may be coming up, thereby improving their recognition skills.

Unfortunately for the parents, they may have to read their child's favorite story over and over with them. This helps them build familiarity with the words and increases word recognition.

Whatever exercises you or the child's parents choose, make them fun. Chose a subject the child is interested in and eager to learn more about. This can serve as a motivating force that cannot be beaten!



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31.3 Reading

Teaching a dyslexic child to read requires patience, kindness, and a plan.

31.3.1 Reading - Plan the Session

All your best intentions are for nothing if the child does not pay attention, has not grasped the point, or feels pressured and stressed. One of the skills a Dyslexia Therapist develops is an understanding that a person with dyslexia will often have issues staying focused.

Skillful therapists overcome these problems without the child even noticing by using the following techniques:

- Short sections: Break the lesson into 10-20 minutes sections.
- Understanding: Before moving on check to see that the child has understood the point. This might mean you have one aim per session (e.g. Recognizing six commonly occurring words) so as not to overwhelm the child.
- Variety: Vary the learning activity. Use a combination of methods such as a word based games, instructing the child, paired reading, or other games.
- Breaks: Take short breaks if the child is fatigued. Have them do a short physical activity such as touching each wall in the room to counter the intense concentration.
- Repetition: Repeat instructions, keywords, or concepts, so that the dyslexic child, with short term memory issues, is not distracted trying to recall instructions.

31.3.2 Reading - Encourage Parental Involvement

Of course, learning to read cannot be done in the classroom alone. The greater the parental involvement, the more the child will improve. Providing therapy to the child with dyslexia is also about showing parents how they can help at home. Instruct them on what reading material is best, and the most beneficial ways to read with their child.

Here are a couple of techniques that are helpful for parents or caregivers to use at home:

Reading Together



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Allow the child to pick out the book. The parent or caregiver points to each word as they say it. Encourage the child to read along at the same time. Read the same book daily as this increases familiarity with the words, especially any that were initially problematic.

Independent Reading

Pre-arrange a signal, such as the child tapping the table, which indicates the child wishes to take over the reading. Start out reading together, but when the child gives the signal, let them read solo. They can then tap again for assistance if a word is unfamiliar.

Make the Book into a Play

Take turns reading the book as if in a play. This is great for books that your child loves to read again and again, and also helps the child to read ahead.

31.3.3 Reading - Encourage Comprehension

The point of reading is to understand a passage of written words. If the child reads the words as single entities yet fails to make a connection to the bigger picture, then this is not helpful.

At regular intervals, check with the child to make certain he has understood what he just read. Avoid closed-ended questions such as, "Did you understand that?" but rather ask open-ended questions which require the child to frame a reply.

Examples of open-ended questions include:

- What do you think happens next?
- What is the story about?
- What is your favorite part of the story so far?
- What do you like about this story?
- Who would you like to be in the story and why?
- What did [Character] do that was wrong?
- How did [character] help?

31.3.4 Reading - Reluctant Readers

Some children with dyslexia become discouraged by failed attempts at reading, and no longer want to read. To encourage these reluctant readers try introducing them to other



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types of reading. Reading does not have to be exclusively about books. It can be about reading cereal boxes, movie posters, comic books, and graphic novels. Indeed, simply reading to the child can renew their interest, as can listening to audio books.



31.3.5 Reading - Good Teaching Practices

Children with dyslexia will undoubtedly make mistakes as they learn new things. As a Dyslexia Therapist, it is important that you approach the child with kindness and understanding. It is crucial that you do not make the dyslexic child feel bad about their mistakes. They may already have low self esteem and very little confidence. You want to build their self esteem and confidence, so they will enjoy learning.

Good therapy practices are:

- Do not jump straight in with a correction. Count to five, or even ten, in your head to give the child a chance to work it out



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- If an error is made when reading, offer them a chance to spot the mistake for themselves. Say something like: “You said X, Y, Z, does that make sense to you?”
- Give the pupil a couple of chances to self-correct, by asking them why they are having difficulty, and suggesting a way to look again
- If you do have to correct, make an effort to point out something that was done well. “Well done for getting the first part of that word correct. It was a tough one.”
- When correcting written work, if a word is spelled incorrectly, make note of the parts that were correct. Or in a sentence, highlight the words that were right

31.3.6 Reading - Starting Points

It is a good idea to work on no more than six words at a time – make it fun!

- Use techniques such as writing one word per flash card. Then you can play games of matching them up or Snap.
- Have a short passage that incorporates the words and encourages the child to highlight the words you are learning.
- Get them to analyze the shape and length of each word. For example “good” starts with a curly letter, has two round letters in the middle, and a tall letter at the end.
- Include high frequency words that the child will encounter frequently, so they are less likely to be tripped up by them.

31.4 Spelling

As we learned earlier, spelling is about matching phonic sounds in words to the letters they represent, and then writing them down. The dyslexic child may struggle to hear the sounds, or have a disconnect between the written symbol and the sound.

Helping the child with dyslexia to spell can be achieved by engaging as many other senses as possible, with the help of repetition. The idea of enlisting other senses is to create new pathways in the brain to help make those vital connections.

So what does this mean in practice?



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31.4.1 Spelling - Engaging Other Senses

Spelling does not have to be about laboring away with a pen and paper. Consider using different strategies to engage the other senses:

- Magnetic letter shapes: Picking up the letter shapes and placing them on a magnetic board, means the child feels the shape of the letter
- Verbalize the letter: Saying each letter as it is placed down, engages muscles in the mouth and tongue, which creates “muscle memory” and strengthens the link between sound and letter
- Sand boxes: Have the pupil write the letter in sand
- Drawing the Letter: Have the dyslexic child draw the letter on something unusual, like creating the letter in the air with their hand, or using a finger to draw it on their other arm.
- Use Color: Use letter tiles and use a different colored tile for vowels. If a child regularly misspells a word, replace the incorrect letter with a tile that is a different color to the rest of the letters. Then look for patterns within the word to help the child remember the correct spelling. E.g. Stationery – meaning pens and paper, is misspelled using an “a”. Replace the “a” with the correct “e” in a contrasting color. “E” stands for “envelope” so this can be a good way to help the dyslexic child remember the difference.





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31.4.2 Spelling - Starting to Spell (1 of 3)

The exercises in listening skills and recognizing rhythm from Module 1.1 should now have the child prepared for spelling. Unfortunately, some words whose spelling has no resemblance to their phonics, need to be taught by repetition e.g. who and there. However, the rest can largely be unlocked using phonics.

Breaking Words Down

Break words down into parts. If the word is difficult or long, you may want to pronounce the word slowly and clearly for clarity. Place the correct emphasis on the different parts for the child to hear.

For example: Cu-cum-ber

Now have the child repeat the word, and get as many clues from the word breakdown as possible. Break down each element individually, so first identify the elements of the “cu”, before moving on.

If the child gets stuck, ask them to write down as many letters as they can. You can fill in the blanks at a later time. It can also be helpful to have the child think of any other words that sound similar, to trigger memories of an associated spelling.

31.4.3 Spelling - Starting to Spell (2 of 3)

Spotting Hidden Words

Looking for words within words is a great way for the dyslexic child to make sense of a word. If they can spot a hidden word, it stops the letters from being a random collection, and adds a sense of order. Often these hidden words are simple ones that the child with dyslexia may already be able to spell, which then helps fill in chunks of a new, strange word.

Examples include: WHAT, WHEN, MANY, HOSPITAL

Using Silly Sayings



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Even without dyslexia some words are difficult to learn. For these words, it can help the dyslexic child if they have a funny saying to spell out the letters. For example:

BECAUSE: Big Elephants Can't Always Use Small Exits

DOES: Dots On Elephants Socks

SAID: Sally Anne Is Dancing

31.4.4 Spelling - Starting to Spell (3 of 3)

Make It Fun!

Perhaps you did not enjoy spelling tests much at school, so think how much harder it is for a child with dyslexia. Overcome this by making lessons fun. The sessions should be short and remember to use a variety of learning methods.

Turn spelling into a game. You might try writing down six different ways to write out a word, and give each method a number. For example:

- 1 – Write with your left hand
- 2 – Write with your right hand
- 3 – Write with your eyes closed
- 4 – Write on the back of your tutor's hand with your finger
- 5 – Write it in the air
- 6 – Write each letter in a different color.

Now have the pupil throw a dice, and whatever number comes up is how they are going to write the spelling.

13.5 Writing



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You have worked hard, and now it is time to draw upon those new skills to create fluent writing. The child with dyslexia will need help learning how to organize their work.

But first, let us take a look at different ways of putting pen to paper and start writing.

13.5.1 Writing - Minimize Distractions

Writing is not just about spelling one word after another. It requires additional skills including grammar, punctuation, capitalization, accuracy, organizing a logical sequence of thoughts, and keeping track of what has already been written. For the child with dyslexia, this represents a considerable challenge.

To make things easier, minimize distractions. This is where a one-to-one session is so valuable. There is not the constant distraction of other people competing for attention. Make sure the room is comfortable and quiet. It should be away from TV or radio noise, and without pets coming and going. Alternate writing practice with other activities such as reading, or a learning game. This will help reduce boredom and fatigue in the child.



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13.5.2 Writing - Top Tips for Writing Practice (1 of 2)

Here are some useful tips to remember when teaching writing skills:

Writing Takes Practice

Writing is a skill, and involves muscular coordination; knowing how to move the fingers and wrists to make the letter shapes. Repetition teaches muscular memory, so the hand is better equipped and more fluent at creating those shapes.

Hand Strength

Strong hands and fingers become less fatigued when writing. Build the muscle strength in hands and fingers by encouraging play with clay, or from time-to-time shaking out the hands and fingers.



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Pencil Grip

Check that the child holds the pencil properly. If they do not, this means they have poor control over the direction the pencil takes, which makes for poor handwriting. A good pencil grip is with the pencil held between the thumb and first finger of the dominant hand, while being supported by the middle finger.

13.5.3 Writing - Top Tips for Writing Practice (2 of 2)

Trace Shapes and Connect Dots

Hand writing styles differ. If a child has an overlarge style, then tighten it up by getting them to join the dots on small shapes. Likewise, if their style is tight and cramped, loosen them up by having them trace sweeping curves and more open shapes.

Teach “b” and “d”

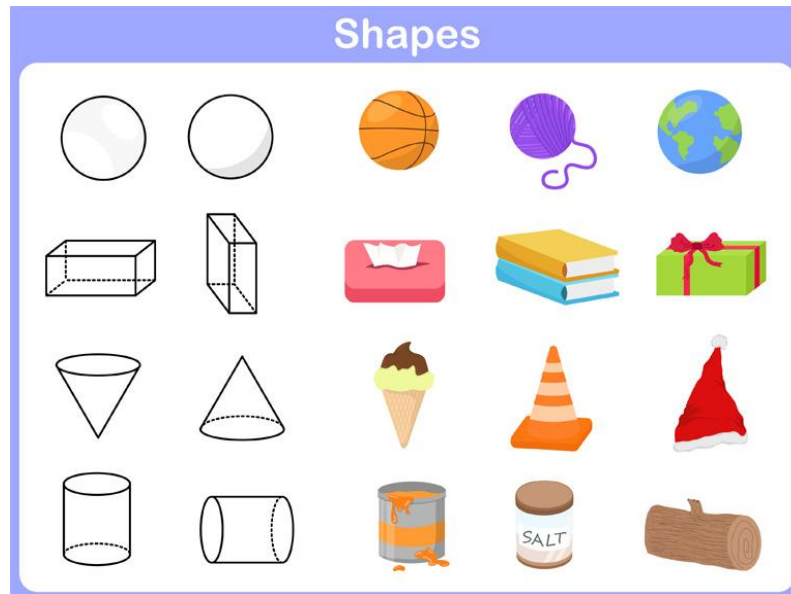
These two letters can be especially problematic. Some children with dyslexia struggle to hear the difference between them in the spoken word, while others have difficulty visualizing which way they are on the paper.

Spend time talking about “b” and “d”. A useful aid is the word “bed”. Help them to understand the word starts with a “b” and when written, the “b” starts at the top stalk. The word ends with “d”, which when written starts in the middle.



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13.5.4 Writing - More Advanced Writing Skills

Basic writing skills are best learned by letting the child concentrate purely on the task of writing simple sentences. Once the child has mastered this, they can add in other factors which require different skills, such as structuring and organizing their work. These topics are covered later in the course. (Modules 6 & 7)



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