

Guidance for marking the course test and examination scripts of candidates with specific learning difficulties (SpLD)

The Learning and Teaching Committee agreed that, with effect from April 2008, students who had been identified as having a specific learning difficulty could choose to identify their examination scripts by means of a coloured sticker. The use of stickers was extended with effect from January 2009 to cover written course tests as well as University examinations. These guidelines have been produced to help staff marking such scripts to ensure that, whilst anonymity is maintained, students are not penalised for errors attributable to their disability.

What are specific learning difficulties (SpLD)?

“Specific learning difficulties” is an umbrella term sometimes used as a synonym for dyslexia but now generally accepted as also including the following:

- Dysgraphia
- Dyspraxia
- Dyscalculia
- Attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD or ADHD)
- Asperger Syndrome.

Further information about the individual SpLDs can be found on the Dean of Students' Office web site at www1.uea.ac.uk/portal/home/services/students/disability/disability_SPLD

The impact of SpLD on examination performance

No two individuals experience the same combination of difficulties and some students may exhibit signs of more than one SpLD. However, these learning difficulties typically affect students' motor skills, information processing and memory and are likely to be more acute under examination conditions. Furthermore, in course tests and examinations, students do not normally have access to the assistive technology that many use for their coursework.

Even though students may have had individual arrangements for their course tests and examinations (extra time and/or use of a computer or a scribe) these arrangements do not fully compensate for their problems. In particular, students with SpLDs typically:

- have slower than average writing speeds (15 rather than 25 wpm)
- have to spend much longer than their peers reading and re-reading material to check their understanding of its content
- have difficulty organising their thinking
- and, in some cases, need to deal with the visual disturbance (scotopic sensitivity) which can make print appear to “dance” on the page.

Guidance for markers of exam scripts identified by a SpLD sticker

The key requirement is that, wherever possible, markers do not penalise for errors in spelling, syntax, word order or expression, or other relatively minor errors but should focus their marking on the student's knowledge, understanding and academic argument. However,

if the script is incomprehensible, facts are incorrect, interpretation is flawed, or the spelling or grammar do not meet clearly specified learning outcomes of the course, then the script should be marked as such.

Therefore, wherever appropriate markers should not unduly penalise:

- long paragraphs that look like a single sentence but are composed of an undifferentiated string of simple sentences linked by conjunctions
- short sentences lacking links with those that precede or follow
- sentences in which prepositions have been omitted or mistaken eg “of” in place of “on”.
- sentences that change direction. This can happen because the student realises that the sentence requires a word they cannot spell and so re-phrases the sentence mid-way to avoid a spelling error
- the use of a repeated sentence structure
- apparent preference for simple words rather than more complex academic vocabulary. This may reflect difficulty with rapid word retrieval or spelling and may create a false impression of an immature understanding of the topic
- repetition of ideas, perhaps using slightly modified phrasing. This may be because the student wishes to make sure that they have made the point clearly
- clumsy/very poor handwriting. This is often an indication of the problems with motor control which is common among students with specific learning difficulties. These problems are likely to be exacerbated by the stress of the examination situation
- spelling errors such as single words misspelled in different ways, parts of polysyllables in incorrect order, letters within words out of sequence e.g. flied/feild for field, a tendency to use phonetic spelling or capital letters used in the wrong place.

Further guidance

The Dyslexia Tutors, Ellie Baker and Anyesa Sorrentino, in the Dean of Students' Office are happy to talk to markers who would like further information about SpLDs and their impact on examination performance, or clarification of these marking guidelines. Further information is also available via the Dean of Students' Office website noted above.