# Guidance for tutors and administrators on supporting candidates with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) at admission interview

This document provides an introduction to SpLD, its possible impact and recommendations for adjustments.

## Introduction to SpLD

1. Specific Learning Difficulty is an umbrella term. It encompasses a range of difficulties which result from specific cognitive weaknesses which are unexpected in light of an individual’s general intellectual capacities and their educational opportunities. The types of weaknesses and difficulties experienced can have an impact on literacy, numeracy, motor co-ordination, organisational or communication skills. SpLDs are spectrum conditions which range from very mild to severe.
2. Students might present with a range of diagnostic labels under the category of SpLD. These would most commonly be dyslexia and dyspraxia, but might also be dysgraphia, dyscalculia or specific language impairment, amongst others. Some individuals also place attention deficit disorder and Asperger Syndrome within the category of SpLD.
3. Different terminology is in use outside the UK. For example, in the United States dyslexic difficulties are more often described as specific reading disorder or specific written expression disorder.
4. SpLDs are highly heterogeneous. It is impossible to state the precise difficulties an individual with a particular diagnostic label will face without knowledge of their case. The following guidance, therefore, can only alert colleagues to a range of common characteristics.
5. Due to the very varied nature of SpLD, it is entirely possible that an area of weakness for one individual could be an area of strength for another, therefore it is important to appreciate that common weaknesses will not apply to all. It is also likely that many students who seek admission to Oxford will have developed some effective strategies to overcome, or at least compensate for, their specific weaknesses.
6. Descriptions of SpLDs tend to focus on the difficulties individuals face, but this can give a false and overly negative impression and so it is useful to note that candidates with SpLDs are just as likely to have strengths as other candidates. For example, individuals with SpLDs *might* have strong language skills, be extremely able communicators, have talents in debate, have strong creative writing skills, develop talents for mathematics and science, be able to focus and concentrate, be highly organised and systematic, and be accomplished in sport, art and music.

## Impact of SpLDs

1. The following can occur across the spectrum of SpLDs although, as noted above, to very different degrees for each individual.

* Slow reading and writing speeds
* Inaccurate reading
* Difficulty in reading aloud
* Text comprehension only gained with repeated reading
* Inaccurate writing in terms of spelling, grammar and punctuation
* Poor handwriting
* Weak written or spoken language construction
* Difficulty in quickly bringing to mind well-known vocabulary. This might appear, for example, as apparent hesitation in spoken responses or the candidate giving long, circular answers to questions.
* Difficulty in accurately retaining extended lists of instructions or multiple pieces of information
* Difficulty producing immediate responses to written or spoken questions - a few extra moments might be needed.
* Articulation difficulties
* Poor spatial awareness - route finding might be particularly difficult.
* Poor motor co-ordination
* Poor awareness of time
* Difficulty in attention or concentration. (Alternatively, cases might arise of hyper-focus with an inability to note when an appropriate level of detail has been reached, in writing or conversation.)
* Communication difficulties including the use of social language or idiomatic language. This might also include difficulty in interpretation of non-verbal communication and managing new social situations
* A tendency to inflexibility – changes to planned arrangements can be highly disruptive
* Restlessness
* Impulsivity

## Adjustments which will help candidates in the lead-up to the interview

* Clear written instructions about time and location of interviews - diagrams and maps are useful as well as written lists;
* Clear detail about the nature and extent of admissions process activities and tasks;
* Advice about the approximate time it takes to travel between locations;
* When giving spoken instructions, colleagues could provide support by delivering these in short sections and undertaking to confirm candidates have understood. Written notes might also be needed;
* Opportunities to undertake orientation visits prior to interview;
* Early advice of any changes to arrangements wherever possible.

## Formal adjustments:

1. The following are likely to be the most common requests

* Extra time for reading comprehension or writing composition tasks
* Use of a word processor for writing tasks
* Use of adaptive technology to support reading and writing
* Material in alternative format – coloured paper, enlarged text
* Opportunity to take tests in private room
* Opportunity to read aloud
* Request for interviewer to be aware of the nature of individual difficulties

It is likely that in the vast majority of cases an allowance of 25% extra time for reading and writing tasks will represent candidates’ normal way of working and will offer a reasonable adjustment. Advice on other adjustments can be sought from the Disability Advisory Service. Contact us on [disability@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:disability@admin.ox.ac.uk).

## Informal adjustments

1. Interviewers can, by awareness of potential difficulties, make allowances in their interview processes. The following are likely to be supportive:
   * Structuring questions into shorter sections and allowing intermediate responses;
   * Being prepared to repeat, or re-phrase questions if asked;
   * Allowing a candidate a short period of time to compose replies – and assuring them that this is acceptable. Supplementary questions while a candidate considers a response is likely to be counter-productive;
   * Using direct rather than metaphorical language;
   * Allowing an opportunity to read in advance any written material usually included as part of the interview;
   * If any interview tasks expose poor handwriting – allowing the candidate an opportunity to interpret illegible words;
   * Avoid asking individuals to read aloud any unseen text;
   * Awareness that restlessness, apparent inattention or poor concentration might not be a reflection of their interest in the subject; and
   * Awareness that poor eye contact or wider communication skills might be a characteristic of a disability.

## Formats for Written Material

1. Text should routinely be presented in a sans serif font (for example, Arial or Calibri) rather than a serif font (for example, Times New Roman), use 1.5 line spacing with left alignment (not fully justified).
2. Reading material and / or forms might be produced single sided and not stapled in cases where it is likely that the candidate will need to refer back to earlier text.