

Considerate Marking guidance - staff

Introduction

Specific learning differences (SpLD) is an overarching term is used for a range of learning variances that influence an individual's ability to receive, process, retain and recall information. These differences exist in neurological conditions such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia, and can manifest in specific areas such as literacy, memory, and coordination.

SpLD's are lifelong conditions, meaning they persist throughout an individual's life and can have a significant impact on areas of a person's life, including their education, work, and personal relationships. Understanding and accommodating for these differences are crucial for ensuring that individuals with an SpLD can reach their full potential and thrive in educational environments.

At Warwick, the Considerate Marking Adjustment supports students that have SpLD's (such as Dyslexia, Dyspraxia/DCD, dysgraphia, dyscalculia), and where appropriate to some students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), and those with visual or hearing impairments. The exceptions for students with other conditions, aside from SpLD's, will be decided by a Disability Adviser, based on information the student is able to provide.

Legislation

The Equality Act (2010) represents a significant step forward in protecting the rights of disabled individuals, extending and strengthening previous legislation. One crucial aspect of the Equality Act states that it is 'illegal to treat a disabled person less favourably than others for a reason that relates to their disability without justification, and in some cases, it may be legitimate to treat a disabled person more favourably'.

Importantly, the Act mandates that educational providers must make reasonable adjustments if a student is at a substantial disadvantage due to their disability. This requirement encompasses various aspects of education, including curriculum delivery and the marking of assessed work.

It should also be noted that the Office for Students (2021), also produced a review into spelling, punctuation and grammar in written assessment, underlining the need for quality and reliability within qualifications, but also reflecting that 'providers have obligations under the Equality Act that relate to the assessment of students.

Student perspective

Students with SpLD's may find it difficult to clearly structure work and eloquently express their ideas. For example, some students with dyslexia find it difficult to spell, punctuate and spot errors. Students are, of course, expected to do all they can to check their work by using conventional assistive technology (such as spelling and grammar checking functions). However, the core principle of the Considerate Marking Adjustment is that students should not be unfairly disadvantaged for minor inaccuracies within their written work, in which errors 'do not interfere with the reader's ability to understand what is written' (BDA, 2020). Students with these conditions may have challenges around sentence structure, for example starting a

sentence one way and ending it in another, or their presentation of ideas may be more sporadic and not formatted in a linear manner.

A student with a visual or hearing condition can also experience difficulties with the production, editing, formatting of written work, and therefore can also be offered a Considerate Marking Adjustment, depending on their individual needs.

Subject differences

Many disciplines do not specifically refer to spelling, punctuation and grammar in their marking criteria. However, it is recognised that Considerate Marking Adjustments are complex in some academic subjects, for example, medicine, law, and education, or for external bodies who accredit degree programmes. Other subjects, such as languages, may be assessing competencies with grammar, spelling and written expression. It is essential for institutions and accrediting bodies to collaborate closely to ensure that accommodations meet the needs of disabled candidates without lowering the standards expected in these fields. This might involve developing guidelines or protocols for differential marking that take into account the specific requirements of each subject area while ensuring fairness and equality for all candidates, regardless of disability.

When producing written work students with these conditions may transpose or substitute words (e.g. for/from/form, a/an/and), and may use homophone substitution (e.g. affect/effect, there/their, rain/rein/reign). Their spelling may also be affected by phonetic equivalents (e.g. axident/accident, sed/said).

If competence standards have the potential to adversely impact a disabled student, they could be considered discriminatory under the Equality Act (2010). In such cases, it may be advisable to develop alternative competence standards that achieve the same objectives but in a manner that does not disadvantage disabled students.

Academic departments may want to build on this university level guidance with further, more detailed and nuanced approaches for their own disciplines. For example, to support with consistency within subjects, there could be agreement at a local level of how to interpret marking criteria or more specific guidance that begins with this framework, with the emphasis on how structure, grammar, punctuation, sentence structures and spelling is to be assessed within academic departments.

Guidance for assessing written work

1. Student work should be marked in accordance with learning outcomes and assessing their ability to demonstrate ideas, knowledge, and understanding of the subject to maintain academic standards.
2. Academic staff are encouraged to not unduly penalise poor spelling, punctuation, grammar or structure, unless these form explicit assessed course criteria or competency standards, but rather mark for content and demonstrated understanding.

3. Disabled students with a Considerate Marking Adjustment should not have their marks reduced for minor inaccuracies in their writing, however these should not affect the assessor's comprehension of the text (the assessor should still be able to understand the ideas and knowledge within the work).
4. Where grammar and spelling are specific competence standards, they should be 'objectively justifiable, a proportionate means to a legitimate aim, and be genuinely relevant to the course in question' (AdvanceHE, 2020).
5. If appropriate, assessors may make limited reference to inaccuracies in a student's writing, but these should be empathic and form part of enabling how a student may develop their writing in the future. It is generally not best practice to highlight every minor error a student may make. Feedback should highlight the positive aspects of the student's work in the first instance, then concentrate on improvements.
6. If assessors feel that a student would benefit from further advice and guidance about academic writing, then there may be opportunities to develop their skills in sessions in academic departments, or seek advice from the university's Study Skills team.

Oral Presentations

The following additional guidance relates specifically to the marking of oral presentations. Although some disabled students might prefer this assessment method to written work, for many it is equally challenging. It may be beneficial to discuss any presentations with disabled students before they prepare to present.

1. Provide a calm, reassuring and, ideally, familiar environment, perhaps with a smaller audience, or the ability to pre-record the presentation, opportunities for a 'mock' or practice presentation (unless regulations specify otherwise).
2. Allow the student to present first or as early as possible to avoid unnecessary anxiety.
3. If possible, provide an outline of questions (or possible questions), they may be asked during/after their presentation in advance. Ensure any questions are presented clearly and repeated if necessary.
4. Allow extra time for setting up, delivery and any responses to questions.
5. Take account of any difficulties reading aloud from notes.
6. Ignore difficulties with sequencing and organisation.
7. Ignore any hesitations or mispronunciations.
8. Some disabled students may have different ways in which they use their body language (for example, difficulty with eye contact, fluency of speaking), students should not be unduly penalised for this.
9. Assessors should mark presentations based on the content, demonstration of ideas, knowledge, and understanding rather than the delivery of presentation (unless these form explicit assessed course criteria or competency standards).

References:

AdvanceHE (2020) Competence standards and reasonable adjustments

BDA (2020) 'Assessment Considerate Marking and Feedback Policy for Disabled Students'

Equality Act (2010) – guidance <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance>

Office for Students (2019) Assessment practices in English higher education providers: Spelling, punctuation and grammar