

EXPLAINING IDA'S NEW DEFINITION OF DYSLEXIA



Questions & Answers

During the webinar, participants submitted thoughtful questions about IDA's new definition of dyslexia. This resource includes responses prepared by the webinar panelists to expand on key topics discussed during the event.

Panelists

Dr. Nadine Gaab: Professor, Harvard Graduate School of Ed/Gaab Lab

Dr. Hugh Catts: Professor, Florida State University

Dr. Charley Haynes: Professor Emeritus, MGH Institute of Health Professions

Ms. Clarice Jackson: Parent Advocate, President, Decoding Dyslexia NE and The Reading League NE, Founder of Voice Advocacy Center and Black Literacy Matters Conference

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1

How should we interpret the roles of oral language, orthographic processing, morphology, and spelling within the new definition—particularly given the variability in children’s language profiles—and what does current evidence suggest about how these skills interact to support early identification?

It is stated explicitly in the definition that oral language problems often foretell dyslexia, and as such, can be an early indicator of risk. Spelling difficulties are explicitly listed as a primary characteristic of dyslexia and are most significant if persistent in nature. Morphological and orthographic processing can also be risk factors for dyslexia, but their roles in early identification have had more limited investigation, and results are unclear about their unique contribution to early identification.

2

How does the new definition broaden our understanding of dyslexia, and what guardrails are needed to prevent over- or under-identification?

The 2025 definition broadens our understanding of dyslexia in several important ways. It recognizes that dyslexia occurs across languages and writing systems, that difficulties may involve reading accuracy, speed, or both depending on the orthography, and that dyslexia arises from multiple interacting genetic, neurobiological, and environmental influences. The definition also acknowledges a wider range of secondary consequences, including impacts on written expression, academic achievement, psychological well-being, and employment opportunities. Each of these has direct implications for broadening diagnosis and treatment.

At the same time, the definition includes important guardrails. Dyslexia remains fundamentally a difficulty in word reading and/or spelling that persists despite instruction that is effective for peers. The definition does not support identifying dyslexia solely on the basis of cognitive test scores, phonological deficits, family history, or neuroimaging findings. Nor should every struggling reader automatically be considered dyslexic. Identification requires evidence of persistent word-level literacy difficulties interpreted within the learner's instructional and developmental context. The dyslexia community will need to advocate for cut-off points and for careful dyslexia assessment that does not exclude children from poverty or children who are learning English as an additional language.

3

In what ways might this definition strengthen implementation science and accelerate the translation of research into classroom practice?

One goal of the revised definition was to bring scientific advances closer to educational practice. The definition emphasizes that dyslexia exists along a continuum of severity, is influenced by response to instruction, and benefits from early identification and targeted support. These ideas align well with contemporary implementation science, which focuses on how evidence-based practices can be delivered consistently and effectively in real-world settings.

The definition also highlights characteristics that educators can observe and address, such as difficulties in word reading, spelling, phonological processing, morphological processing, and oral language development. Rather than focusing on exclusionary criteria or cognitive discrepancies, it directs attention toward the skills that matter most for assessment and instruction. By providing a common language for researchers, educators, clinicians, and policymakers, the definition can help ensure that research findings are translated into practices that improve outcomes for students.

4

How does the definition clarify who it is intended for (e.g., educators, diagnosticians, policymakers) and what outcomes or characteristics each group should be looking for?

The definition was designed to serve multiple audiences while maintaining a single scientific foundation. For educators and interventionists, it highlights the importance of monitoring word reading and spelling development, identifying students early, and providing targeted instruction when difficulties emerge. For diagnosticians, it describes the core characteristics of dyslexia and clarifies that no single cognitive marker is required for identification.

For parents and families, the definition helps explain why reading and spelling difficulties may persist despite effort and why early support is important. For policymakers, it provides an evidence-based framework that can inform screening, intervention, professional development, and service delivery. Across all audiences, the central message remains consistent: dyslexia is characterized by persistent difficulties in word-level literacy, varies in severity, and is best addressed through informed assessment and effective instruction.

5

How does the new dyslexia definition affect our understanding of dyslexia across languages with different orthographic systems?

One of the most important advances in the 2025 definition is its recognition that dyslexia is a global phenomenon whose manifestation varies across writing systems. In more transparent orthographies, such as Spanish, Finnish, or Italian, reading accuracy often develops relatively quickly, and difficulties may be most evident in reading speed or fluency. In less transparent orthographies, such as English and Danish, difficulties often appear in both accuracy and fluency.

The definition therefore states that reading and spelling difficulties may involve accuracy, speed, or both and that these difficulties vary depending on the orthography. At the same time, the definition emphasizes that dyslexia reflects a common underlying challenge in learning written language, even though its behavioral expression differs across languages. This broader perspective makes the definition more applicable internationally and encourages assessment and intervention approaches that are sensitive to the linguistic and orthographic context in which literacy is being learned.

6

How might the new definition influence IDEA eligibility, particularly regarding the discrepancy model and the classification of specific learning disabilities?

Although the new definition does not specify procedures for dyslexia identification, it refers to the role of instructional response as a relevant factor in determining dyslexia, elaborating on prior language about effective classroom instruction. The old definition described that difficulties associated with dyslexia are “unexpected in relation to... effective classroom instruction,” while the new definition clarifies that effective instruction is “instruction that is effective for the individual’s peers.” This shift is subtle, but it puts more emphasis on ensuring that classroom instruction is evidence-based and effective for teaching other students to read and suggests that instructional response data should be included in approaches to dyslexia identification. As currently defined under IDEA, dyslexia is a specific learning disability (SLD), identified in school contexts through several primary methods: (a) the discrepancy model, (b) patterns of strengths and weaknesses, and (c) response-to-intervention. The new definition does not explicitly give primacy to one identification method over another but does suggest that if schools are using the discrepancy model or patterns of strengths and weaknesses – identification methods that largely focus on within-child deficits – instructional response data should also be considered.

7

How should environmental factors be considered in identifying dyslexia without allowing them to become exclusionary barriers? What types of environmental influences meaningfully contribute to dyslexia risk?

A balanced approach is to recognize that environmental factors can influence the expression, severity, and timing of reading difficulties without assuming they are the sole cause of those difficulties.

Historically, IDEA's exclusionary-factor framework was designed to prevent students from being mislabeled when inadequate instruction, poverty, language differences, or other environmental circumstances were the primary explanation for academic struggles. However, research increasingly demonstrates that environmental conditions and neurobiological differences are not mutually exclusive. A child can have dyslexia and also experience poverty, school instability, limited access to books, trauma, interrupted instruction, or linguistic variation.

Therefore, environmental factors should be considered as part of a comprehensive evaluation by asking:

- Do the reading difficulties persist despite appropriate instruction and intervention?
- Are the students' challenges consistent with the known characteristics of dyslexia, particularly difficulties in phonological processing, word recognition, spelling, and decoding?
- How have environmental conditions affected the student's opportunity to learn and demonstrate literacy skills?
- Are there co-occurring risk factors that may intensify reading difficulties without fully explaining them?

The goal should not be to use environmental factors as a reason to deny identification, nor to ignore their impact. Rather, evaluators should determine whether environmental influences are contributing factors, exacerbating factors, or the primary cause of the reading difficulty.

In practical terms, environmental factors should be viewed as contextual variables that inform evaluation and intervention, not automatic exclusionary barriers. A student should not be denied consideration for dyslexia simply because they come from a low-income background, speak another language, have experienced educational disruption, or belong to a historically underserved community. Instead, evaluators should examine how those factors interact with the student's underlying reading profile and response to instruction.

This approach protects against both over-identification and under-identification while ensuring that students receive the support they need based on the totality of the evidence rather than a single environmental circumstance.