

# Tips for Teaching Dyslexic Students

*by Joan Blench*

As an eager and lifelong reader who enjoys getting my information from the printed word, it's difficult to imagine the world of someone whose brain is wired differently and does not see letters and numbers in the same way. Recently I watched a video where the individual letters of the words kept moving, jumping and transforming themselves. I was able to read the text but it took a lot of concentration and prompted me to learn more about dyslexia and, more specifically, how dyslexia contributes to difficulty reading music. Is it possible, I wondered, that some of my students who quit piano lessons over the years might not have done so had I recognized and responded appropriately to a visual processing issue?

Dyslexia is a general term for disorders that involve difficulty in learning to read or interpret words, letters and other symbols. In classic cases, numbers or letters appear to shift or change position on the page which leads to difficulty in reading, writing and spelling. Dyslexia affects one in five people and is equally prevalent in both genders. It is not a sign of low intelligence or laziness. On the contrary, people with dyslexia are often very creative, perhaps because their brain is "wired" a bit differently, or perhaps because they get

used to thinking "outside the box." Director Steven Spielberg, actress Whoopi Goldberg and celebrity chef Jamie Oliver are three familiar names you'll run across if you do an internet search of famous people who have learned to cope with dyslexia.

Children who have dyslexia take longer than their peers to correctly process written information and this lag often leads to low self-esteem [the feeling of being "stupid"] which can also lead to difficulty paying attention and acting out. Approximately 25% of children with dyslexia also have ADHD (a connection known as co-morbidity), but it cannot be stressed enough that the two are completely separate disorders. Dyslexia is language-based; ADHD is attention/behavior-based. Dyslexia is a life-long condition which can be manifested in mild to severe forms, but with effective coping strategies, it can be managed through adulthood.

So how does this affect piano learning/teaching? Human beings are all drawn to music, so it seems perfectly natural to assume that children will start learning an instrument before it becomes apparent that their brains are having decoding issues. We all have students who are excellent sight-readers. We also have students who struggle with note-reading. The

following tips may help dyslexic students succeed in their music studies:

Encourage the student to improvise and play by ear to minimize the struggle of always having to read from the score.

Give the student as many verbal directions as possible. If the parent can't attend the entire lesson, ask that he or she come during the last five minutes in order to review what needs to be done at home. Even students who can read perfectly well often don't bother to read their assignment sheet, so the more creative you can be with setting up effective at-home practice, the better.

Have an open dialogue with the parent about how to reduce stress in the child's life. Is an exam *really* necessary? Is it *essential* that all your students perform by memory? Errors may not be because of a lack of understanding of musical ideas and themes, but from problems with short-term memory, a feature very common in dyslexic individuals.

Use a dyslexic-friendly font for lesson notes and type them out instead of writing them by hand. The typeface Dyslexie emphasizes the difference in letters by extending the ascender or descender (ex. n vs. h), enlarging spaces in letters (ex. e vs. c), making parts of letters thicker so that they are no longer mirror images of each other (ex. b, d, p), and bolding capital

letters and punctuation to allow the reader to easily identify the beginnings and endings of sentences. Go to [www.dyslexifont.com](http://www.dyslexifont.com) to see sample text and download a free edition for home use.

Find multi-sensory ways of engaging the student. Touch is especially valuable. For example, music symbols can be drawn on a cookie sheet covered in cornmeal or created out of play dough. Remember the acronym VARK: Visual, Auditory, Read/Write (yes, some dyslexic people like it!) and Kinesthetic.

Use colored symbols as cues on the page instead of written words. Buy a package of colored dots from your office supply store. A green dot could mean a rhythm issue, a blue dot might indicate a note which needs fixing, and a yellow dot could stand for a timing issue. Instead of writing "move up" on the score, use an orange pencil crayon to draw an upward arrow or draw two yellow circles instead of writing the words "two beats." Above all, be consistent with your color-coding!

Enlarge the score on a photocopier and see if your student finds the notes easier to read. Or copy the music onto colored paper. Photocopying is only illegal if you do so to avoid buying a book. Copying your purchased scores for study purposes is perfectly acceptable. Colored filters (either as an

overlay or tinted reading glasses) can also mitigate the glare of white backgrounds which can be disturbing for many dyslexic readers.

Recognize that harmonic intervals and blocked chords may "wobble" around on the staff more than a single line of notes. Details such as multiple beams or flags can make rhythm reading a challenge.

Learn a new piece from a holistic approach. Focusing on structure in music and using the architecture of the piece as a starting point can be useful because of the strong sense of pattern and shape that many dyslexic musicians have. Play for your students and encourage them to use recordings to pre-learn the music aurally then use the written score as a reference point.

Help your student develop organizational skills. Dyslexia can manifest itself in many different ways. An organized binder with dividers, color-coded tabs and sticky notes is valuable for all students, not just those with reading issues. Likewise, the strategy of breaking down tasks into simple components and then slowly adding elements and progressing to faster tempos is universally beneficial.

Above all, be patient! According to the British Dyslexia Association, dyslexic people can take 10 times as long to

complete an activity This can lead to extra tiredness and frustration. But with patience and guidance, dyslexic students can channel their gifts of creativity, enhanced perception and innovative thinking to excel in music, thus boosting self-esteem.

What to do about Undiagnosed Dyslexia? According to Andrea Dow of [teachpianotoday.com](http://teachpianotoday.com),

”As piano teachers, we are often put in the awkward position of picking up on a learning challenge that may have gone unnoticed in other areas of the child’s life. Suggesting to parents that their child may have a learning difficulty is never easy. However, for the best interests of the struggling child, it is always a good idea to bring your observations to a parent’s attention. Choose your wording carefully and avoid labels like ADHD or dyslexia when first bringing your concerns to the parents, but do pass on what you’ve observed and keep an open dialogue going as the student progresses.”

### Additional Resources

The video clip mentioned in the opening paragraph is the TED-Ed talk ”What is Dyslexia?” by Kelli Sandman-Hurley.

The British Dyslexia Association website, [www.bdadyslexia.org.uk](http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk), contains many interesting links

including an 18-page downloadable document about dyslexia as it relates to music learning/teaching as well as the online purchase of their book *Music, other Performing Arts and Dyslexia*.

Dr. Kent Nelson, a junior high school music teacher from Utah, has started a blog project at <http://dys-mus.blogspot.ca/> to heighten awareness about dyslexia and music. He co-authored the article *A Comparative Case Study of Learning Strategies and Recommendations of Five Professional Musicians With Dyslexia* which was published by the National Association for Music Education in 2015 and contains an invaluable list of references.

Do you have experiences with extraordinary students you would be willing to share with members of the APTA family? Please use our members-only Facebook group page to post thoughts, tips, insights or questions on anything related to piano teaching.