

## **What Are Learning Disabilities?**

A learning disability can be described as a learning difference in the way a person takes in, understands, remembers, and/or expresses information. This translates into difficulties with reading, writing, and/or math. To qualify as having a learning disability at the community college level, one must exhibit at least average to above average intelligence. It isn't because they can't learn - they just learn differently. The signs of learning disabilities vary from person to person. Common signs that a person may have learning disabilities include the following:

### **Reading**

- Confusion of similar words, difficulty using phonics, problems reading multi-syllable words
- Difficulty finding important points or main ideas
- Slow reading rate and/or difficulty adjusting speed to the nature of the reading task
- Difficulty with comprehension and retention of material that is read, but not with materials presented orally

### **Writing**

- Difficulty with sentence structure, poor grammar, omitted words
- Frequent spelling errors, inconsistent spelling, letter reversals
- Difficulty copying from chalkboard
- Poorly formed handwriting -- might print instead of using script; writes with an inconsistent slant; have difficulty with certain letters; space words unevenly
- Compositions lacking organization and development of ideas

### **Listening**

- Difficulty paying attention when spoken to
- Difficulty listening to a lecture and taking notes at the same time
- Easily distracted by background noise or visual stimulation
- Might appear to be hurried in one-to-one meetings
- Inconsistent concentration

### **Oral Language**

- Difficulty expressing ideas orally which the student seems to understand
- Difficulty describing events or stories in proper sequence
- Difficulty with grammar

- Using a similar sounding word in place of the appropriate one

## **Math**

- Difficulty memorizing basic facts
- Confusion or reversal of numbers, number sequences or symbols
- Difficulty copying problems, aligning columns
- Difficulty reading or comprehending word problems

## **Study Skills**

- Problems with reasoning and abstract concepts
- Exhibits an inability to stick to simple schedules, repeatedly forgets things, loses or leaves possessions, and generally seems "personally disorganized"
- Difficulty following directions
- Poor organization and time management

## **Social Skills**

- Difficulty "reading" facial expressions, body language
- Problems interpreting subtle messages, such as sarcasm or humor
- Seems disorganized in space: confuses up and down, right and left; gets lost in a building, is disoriented when familiar environment is rearranged
- Seems disoriented in time: is often late to class, unusually early for appointments or unable to finish assignments in the standard time period
- Displays excessive anxiety, anger, or depression because of the inability to cope with school or social situations

## Suggestions For Faculty

**Syllabus Tips** - Try to provide the students with a copy of the syllabus as soon as possible. This allows time for the student to get their materials converted to an alternative format if needed.

Provide a detailed syllabus that includes course objectives, weekly topics and classroom activities, required reading and writing assignments, and dates of tests, quizzes, and vacations. Leave a blank space for notes after the outline for each week's work.

**Disability Syllabus Statement** - Please provide a disability syllabus statement because it provides an invitation to students who have disabilities to meet with the faculty member, normalizes the accommodation process by treating it as just another part of the course, and opens the lines of communication making the student feel more comfortable approaching faculty to disclose their disability and need for accommodation.

**Please include this statement in your syllabi:**

*“Students with Disabilities: Students with disabilities are encouraged to meet with me in private to discuss their services and accommodations. Please bring your Accommodation Memo from the Disability Resource Center (DRC) to our meeting. This information will be kept confidential and will not affect your grade.*

*Also, students who think they could use support from the Disability Resource Center for temporary or permanent conditions, or if you suspect you might have a learning disability, please contact their office at: (650) 306-3259 or visit 5-303 to make an appointment.”*

**Rules Clarification** - Clarify rules in advance: how students will be graded, whether makeup tests or rewrites of papers are allowed, what the conditions are for withdrawing from a course or getting an incomplete. These should be included in the syllabus.

**Reviews and Previews** - It is extremely helpful if the instructor briefly reviews the major points of the previous lecture or class and highlights main points to be covered that day. Try to present reviews and previews both visually and orally.

**Study Aids** - Use study aids such as study questions for exams or pretests with immediate feedback before the final exam.

**Multi-sensory Teaching** - Students with learning disabilities learn more readily if material is presented in as many modalities as possible (seeing, speaking, doing.) Provide opportunities for

touching and handling materials that relate to ideas. Cutting and pasting parts of compositions to achieve logical plotting of thoughts is one possibility.

**Visualization** - Help the student visualize the material. Visual aids can include overhead projectors, films, carousel slide projectors, chalkboards, flip charts, computer graphics, and illustrations of written text.

**Use color** - Some examples: In teaching respiration technology, everything related to the body's respiratory system might be highlighted in green and the digestive system in orange. In complex mathematical sequences, use color to follow transformations and to highlight relationships.

**Announcements** - Whenever possible, announcements should be in oral and written form such as deadlines for assignments or exam dates. This is especially important for changes in assignments or exams.

**Distinct Speech** - Speaking at an even speed, emphasizing important points with pauses, gestures, and other body language, helps students follow classroom presentations. Avoid lecturing while facing the chalkboard.

**Eye Contact** - This is important in maintaining attention and encouraging participation.

**Demonstration and Role Play** - These activities can make ideas come alive and are particularly helpful to the student who has to move around in order to learn.

**Breaks** - Make sure to give breaks in class to help students stay focus and engaged.

## Other Tips

- Emphasize new or technical vocabulary.
- Assist the student in teaming up with a classmate to obtain copies of notes.
- Allow time for students to work in small groups to practice, to solve problems, and to review work.
- Break down teaching into small units. Short daily reading assignments will help the student with learning disabilities learn how to budget and organize study time. Build up to longer units.
- Teach students memory tricks and acronyms as study aids. Use examples from current course work and encourage students to create their own tricks.
- Encourage students with learning disabilities to sit in front of the classroom.
- Give feedback. Errors need to be corrected as quickly as possible.
- Read aloud material on the board or on transparencies.

- Remind students often of your availability during office hours for individual clarification of lectures, reading, and assignments.
- Periodically offer tips and encourage class discussion of ways for improving studying such as organizational ideas, outlining techniques, summarizing strategies, etc.
- Permit use of a calculator when mathematical disability is severe.
- Permit the use of a dictionary or spell checker for essay exams.
- In exam questions, avoid unnecessarily intricate sentence structure, double negative and questions embedded within questions.
- Give less weight to spelling when the disability is severe.
- Provide additional scratch paper for exams to help students with overly large or poor handwriting.
- Encourage students to use a word processor with a spell check.
- Encourage students to dictate best ideas into a tape recorder before writing a report.

## How to Refer a Student to the DRC

Do you have a student you think might benefit from DRC services? Not sure how to refer him or her?

The best time to bring up your concerns would be in a private meeting, when other students are not present. Following are some suggestions on how you might express your concerns; please keep in mind that students benefit most from honest yet kind feedback about their performance in class, whether they have a disability or not.

- Do not ask the student directly if they have a disability, this might put **him/her on the defensive and cause some discomfort**.
- Instead gather information about a few resources on campus, in addition to DRC, such as the [Learning Center](#), [Career Center](#), [Counseling Center](#), [Transfer Center](#), [Bookstore](#), [EOPS/CARE/CalWorks/Former Foster Youth](#), [Health Center](#), [Psychological Services](#), [International Students](#), [TRiO SSS](#), [Veterans Services](#) etc.. You might say, "I want to share some information on campus services that you might find helpful."
- When you mention the DRC, you could ask the student, "Are you aware of the DRC office? The DRC provides a number of services for students with a variety of disabilities."
- Some students feel their disability isn't "severe enough" to warrant utilizing the DRC services and feel guilty because they don't want to take away from "more deserving" students. You may assure your student that DRC serves all types of disabilities and that requesting services through DRC in no way affects the level of services someone else with different needs shall receive.

Ultimately it is up to the student to decide whether or not to disclose a disability and pursue DRC services. However, do feel free to let students know that you are willing to work with them and DRC to ensure that they have equal access to your curriculum.

Once you have broached the subject and your student wishes to pursue DRC services, what can you do to facilitate the process?

- You may advise your student to go to the DRC office, where he or she may initiate the process of becoming a DRC student.
- Some students will benefit from being walked over, which is certainly acceptable as long as it is what the student wishes. Please keep in mind that students with disabilities are not required to utilize DRC services.
- Please do not ask the student to provide you any disability related documentation. The DRC office will take care of getting the appropriate paperwork from the student.
- **Please advise your student that he or she will need to provide documentation of a disability and that we will provide a simple form for his or her doctor or other**

**professional to complete. Many students will qualify based on having received services in high school, in which case they may bring in their IEP and psycho-educational testing report to serve as disability verification.**

- Students who suspect they have a learning disability that has never been identified may be referred to contact Jenna French, Learning Disability Specialist / DRC counselor to discuss possible LD testing.

DRC welcomes questions and partnering with classroom faculty so we can support you in your efforts to accommodate a student with a disability. Individual consultations with our highly qualified DRC staff are most welcome and available to all Cañada College faculty and staff on any disability-related issue. We look forward to collaborating with you.

For additional information, please contact: **Jenna French, Learning Disabilities Specialist / DRC Counselor**, (650) 306-3368 , [frenchj@smccd.edu](mailto:frenchj@smccd.edu)