



# Working Effectively with People with Learning Disabilities

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## What is a Learning Disability?

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities describes the term “learning disability” as a general term referring to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant disabilities in the acquisition and use of listening, spelling, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical skills. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be caused by central nervous system dysfunction, and they exist throughout the person’s life. A learning disability is not a disorder that an individual “grows out of.” It is a permanent disorder that has a significant effect on learning but is not an indicator of intelligence. An individual with a learning disability may develop compensatory skills that help them to overcome the disability.

Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perceptions, and social integration may exist with learning disabilities but do not, by themselves, constitute learning disabilities. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other disabilities, they are not the result of those conditions or influences.

Learning disabilities affect some 10% of the American workforce. As a result, many persons applying for work or currently employed by an employer will have learning disabilities. These individuals are often intelligent, creative and productive.

Learning disabilities can sometimes cause inconsistent work performance and may require reasonable accommodation. Some learning disabilities may have a global effect on functioning in the workplace. Other individuals may only need a reasonable accommodation for a specific task.

Some common learning disability terminology is listed below:

**Dyslexia** – Difficulty with language processing, which, in turn, affects reading, writing and spelling.

**Dyspraxia** – Difficulty with writing, fine motor skills and coordination.



**Dysgraphia** – Difficulty with writing, spelling, and writing composition.

**Auditory Discrimination** – Difficulty in perceiving differences between speech sounds and sequencing these sounds into meaningful words, which affects reading and spoken language.

**Visual Discrimination** – Difficulty in noticing important details and assigning meaning to what is seen, which is critical to reading and writing.

### **What is the Impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act on People with Learning Disabilities?**

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities. The term disability under the ADA is defined as:

- A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual,
- A record of such impairment, or
- Being regarded as having such an impairment.

“Substantially limits” means that the person is unable to perform, or is significantly limited in the ability to perform an activity as compared with an average person in the general population. “Major life activities” refers to functions such as caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and working.

Learning disabilities are considered physical or mental impairments. The term “Specific Learning Disabilities” is cited in the regulations of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), which enforces the ADA, implementing the employment provisions of the ADA (29 C.F.R. Part 1630).

Whether the ADA would protect a person with a learning disability from discrimination depends on whether the disability substantially limits a major life activity. For example, an employee whose auditory perception difficulties causes her to be unable to gain information from a staff meeting likely would have an ADA disability, especially where most employees would have little or no difficulty gaining relevant information from the meeting. By contrast, the inability to take excellent notes of a highly detailed, eight-hour technical discussion would not



constitute a substantial impairment because the average person would also not be able to do this.

As the definition of disability makes plain, an employer also may not discriminate against an individual with a record of a disability or against someone perceived as being disabled. For example, job applicants who have been through special education may not be discriminated against based on a school record of a disability. Similarly, employers also may not discriminate against applicants with learning disabilities because of a perception or fear that they cannot read.

An individual's limitations must be caused by a learning disability. Thus, an employee who is unable to read or write because he or she was never taught these skills, and not because of a learning disability, would not be an individual with a disability under the ADA.

### **Causes of Learning Disabilities**

A learning disability is a developmental disorder that is present from birth, although it may go undetected until later in life. While genetic predisposition, perinatal injury, and various neurological or other medical conditions may be associated with the development of learning disabilities, the presence of such conditions does not invariably predict an eventual learning disability.

Some individuals with learning disabilities have no familial, medical, or environmental history that would predict a learning disorder.

### **Potential Functional Limitations Caused by Learning Disabilities**

Workers with learning disabilities may have difficulties with:

- Processing auditory material (e.g., receiving oral directions and other communication issues).
- Writing, including: issues with spelling, grammar, and/or sentence structure; expressing information in a written format; and/or legible handwriting.
- Reasoning ability regarding the comprehension of new information, quantitative information, or complex verbal information.
- Reading speed or reading comprehension.

### **Workplace Accommodations for Individuals with Learning Disabilities**



Reasonable accommodations are by definition individualized in order to meet the needs of the specific applicant or employee. Some accommodations may include:

- Alternate print formats
- Reduced-distraction work environments
- Computer technology for written work
- Reading materials presented in auditory formats
- Extended time to learn job tasks or to perform work
- Instructions presented both in written and oral formats
- Allowing the employee to tape-record information
- Clearly defined job requirements, including the dates when projects assignments are due; advance notice of any changes
- Providing handouts and visual aids
- Using more than one way to demonstrate or explain information
- Breaking information into small steps when teaching many new tasks in one lesson (state objectives, review previous lesson, summarize periodically)
- Allowing time for clarification of directions and essential information
- Providing assistance with the proofreading of written work
- Allowing the use of spell check and grammar-assistive devices.

When in doubt about possible accommodations, ask the employee what would be helpful. In addition, remember to observe confidentiality. For example, avoid pointing out the employee or the alternative arrangements to the rest of the work group.

## Resources

Assistive Technology Partners  
601 E. 18<sup>th</sup> Ave., Suite 130  
Denver, CO 80203  
303/315-1280 Main  
800/255-3477 within Colorado  
303/837-8964 TTY  
303/837-1208 FAX  
[www.assistivetechpartners.org](http://www.assistivetechpartners.org)

Colorado Department of Education  
201 E. Colfax Ave.  
Denver, CO 80203  
303/866-6600

International Dyslexia Association  
Chester Building  
8600 LaSalle Road, Suite 382  
Baltimore, MD 21286-2044  
410/296-0232  
[www.interdys.org](http://www.interdys.org)



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Job Accommodation Network (JAN)  
West Virginia University  
P.O. Box 6080  
Morgantown, WV 26506-6080  
800/526-7234  
[www.jan.wvu.edu](http://www.jan.wvu.edu)

Learning Disabilities Association of  
America  
4156 Library Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15234-1349  
412/341-1515 Voice  
412/344-0224 FAX  
[www.ldanat.org](http://www.ldanat.org)

National Center for Law and Learning  
Disabilities  
P.O. Box 368  
Cabin John, MD 20818  
301/469-8308

National Center for Learning  
Disabilities  
381 Park Avenue South, Suite 1401  
New York, NY 10016  
212/545-7510  
[www.LD.org](http://www.LD.org)

Office of Disability Employment  
Policy – U.S. Department of Labor  
1331 F Street NW, Suite 300  
Washington, DC 20004  
202/376-6200 Voice  
202/376-6205 TTY  
202/376-6219 FAX  
[www.dol.gov/dol/odep](http://www.dol.gov/dol/odep)

Rocky Mountain Disability and  
Business Technical Assistance  
Center  
3630 Sinton Road, #103  
Colorado Springs, CO 80907  
800/949-4232 Voice/TTY  
719/444-0269 FAX  
[www.ada-infonet.org](http://www.ada-infonet.org)

SWAAAC  
601 E. 18<sup>th</sup> Ave. Suite 130  
Denver, CO 80203  
303/315-1276 Main  
800/255-3477 within Colorado  
303/837-8964 TTY  
303/837-1208 FAX  
[www.uchsc.edu/atp](http://www.uchsc.edu/atp)

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity  
Commission (EEOC)  
800/669- EEOC Voice  
800/800-3302 TTY  
[www.eeoc.gov](http://www.eeoc.gov)



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