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## 140%: Helping Students with Reading Disabilities

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Utah State University

140%:

Helping Students with Reading Disabilities

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### Abstract

Tutoring students with reading disabilities will take more than a simple knowledge of reading disabilities in general; it takes knowing how to ask specific questions and fighting against popular stereotypes to create a successful tutoring session. Studies show that one in five students have some type of reading disability. There are ways for tutors to make these students feel more comfortable and confident in their ability to write, however, these techniques must be practiced. While mastering these techniques can be profoundly beneficial for students with reading disabilities, they are valuable to apply in all tutoring sessions.

I never knew that tutoring a student with reading disabilities would be so humbling. I remember the day I got a general email from the writing department saying that there was a student with dyslexia whose parents were looking to hire a tutor. I had the time and needed the money, so I emailed the parents. A few days later I met Sarah (name has been changed) and I was determined that I would be the tutor to fix her.

I wish I could go back.

I wish with all my heart I could go back and grab my face, look myself dead in the eye and say, “You are not going to ‘fix’ this student because there is nothing broken about her. She will teach you more than you can even imagine, and by the end of it all...you will love her with all your heart”.

I *wish* I could go back.

It had been about two weeks since I started tutoring Sarah. Each session was littered with small talk and awkward silences. Embarrassed and hesitant, I decided to finally ask. “So...” My hands started to sweat as I stared straight ahead at the screen. “If I zoom into 140% on the Word document, can you read it at all?” After weeks of gingerly dancing around the fact that Sarah has a reading disability, I had finally decided to ask what she could do and what she needed assistance with. I feared she would be offended; I worried that it would come across as rude. Instead, suddenly with that one question, stories began to bubble up and spill out of her. She shared how she never told anyone about her disabilities since they *always* treated her differently. She never wrote an essay in high school because, like me, her teachers had danced around the fact that she needed help and they had overcompensated. She never visited the writing center because she believed the tutor would not know how to work to her level of writing. She talked

about moving from school to school; trying to find a program that would “fix” her like a magic diet pill where she could wake up one day and – *poof* – she would be able to read.

Stories like Sarah’s are far more common in the state of Utah than we think. It is estimated that one in five students have some type of reading disability (Dyslexia Center of Utah). That means that one in every five sessions a tutor may be helping a student who struggles with reading and/or writing. We need to be ready and aware of these students. Learning how to appropriately ask questions and rethinking reading disability stereotypes leads to more effective sessions and boosts the student’s self-confidence.

A reading disorder/disability is “when a person has trouble with any part of the reading process” (NICHD). They can be manifest in “imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations” (NICHD). These reading disabilities may cause “negative social and emotional impacts ... dropping out of school and/or limited access to job and career possibilities” (Ryan). One of the most difficult parts of living with a reading disability, however, can be coping with the stereotypes that accompany it. There is an old stigma that students with reading disabilities were viewed as low intelligence, lacking motivation, or even emotionally disturbed. It is important to reject these stereotypes since “they simply process information in ways that can present additional challenges to the writing process” (Ryan). People are often intimidated or fearful of things they do not understand. These students do not need to be “fixed.” Their brains are not broken or defective, they just think in different patterns and we need to work to understand them.

So how can we be gentle, understanding, yet bold in offering assistance to these students? In the sixth edition of *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, we learn about an effective and powerful tool: asking questions. In my experience with tutoring Sarah, I have come to

understand the importance of asking kind, yet direct, questions. Until I started asking Sarah specific questions about her ability to read, I was shooting in the dark as to how to best help her. Should I write things down for her? Can she write? Can she type? If I read the documents out loud, can she follow along if it is large text? These are the types of questions I should have asked. Sadly, I was embarrassed about offending or calling attention to the fact that Sarah needed help, which caused weeks of little progress in completing her mountain of late work.

If a tutor notices a student's work has an unusual amount of spelling errors, a lack of fluency, or that their Word documents are zoomed into an extremely high percentage, realize that this student might have a reading disability – and for all we know, they might not even know it. Ask them direct questions such as, "Would you like me to read out loud?" or "Would you like me to write down notes?" At the USU Writing Center, we have the wonderful advantage of having a "notes" section in the session form. This is a great feature to point out to students so they do not worry about having to remember or write their own notes. If the tutor pulls up resources on the desktop ask, "Would you like me to make the text larger?" However, if a tutor is uncomfortable or seems awkward about asking these types of questions, chances are the student will feel uncomfortable and awkward too. This concept of asking questions may seem simple, but it shows the student that you are taking a personal interest in their learning process.

As I have worked more closely with Sarah I have been able to become bolder in asking specific questions. "Do you know what that word means?" "Would you like to try reading this portion?" "Can you summarize what I just read to you?" She doesn't take offense because now she knows that I am on her side. I am not trying to "fix" her. Instead, I am finding a balance of working with where she is now and challenging her to become more. These students have gone through school feeling stupid, left out, and alone. Because of the lack of understanding

about reading disabilities, many have not been pushed or challenged in their education. These students should be treated like all other students, as individuals. Ask each person what they need, how you can help, and do not be embarrassed about it. Be sensitive, yes, but show confidence in them. Many of them are grateful to receive help and yearn to progress in life. It helps them out in the long run.

The other week Sarah and I were working on one of her essays when all of a sudden she blurted, "OH! I have to tell you what happened!" She explained how she has been meeting with a specialist at the University to improve her ability to read and comprehend. She went to class and her teacher handed out a packet they wanted the students to read by themselves. Sarah commented that she rarely tried to read handouts in class, but that day she wanted to try. With moving energy, she said, "And I read it! I read the whole paragraph, and I understood it!" There she was, in the back of her general education class crying because she had just read for the first time. This is why we tutor. This is why anyone tutors really, to see students rise above what they thought they could do.

So, ask questions in your tutoring sessions. Help those students with reading and learning disabilities know that someone is cheering them on. Give 140%. The trick is, this individualized attention should not be reserved for those we *know* have a reading disability. All of us struggle with writing or reading in one way or another and deserve to be tutored by people who view us as having the potential to become more than we are.

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