Inclusive Marking Guidelines for Disabled Students

1. Introduction and scope

The University of Greater Manchester recognises that it has a duty to take reasonable steps to ensure all assessment and examination policies, practices and procedures provide disabled students with the same opportunity as their non-disabled peers to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes, without comprising academic or competence standards.

This guideline has been developed for students and academic staff to maintain equality of opportunities for students whose medical diagnoses or specific learning difficulties affect literacy and/or language in assessed written work and receiving written feedback.

It applies to current students diagnosed with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) and disabilities as defined by the Equality Act 2010.

2. Definitions

Competence standard: a defined level of knowledge, skills, abilities, and attributes that students must demonstrate to successfully complete a programme, module or course. These standards are often specified in terms of measurable learning outcomes that indicate the proficiency required in various areas, such as academic writing, critical thinking, research skills, and subject-specific expertise. Competence standards ensure that students meet the academic and professional expectations necessary to succeed in their field of study and future careers.

Specific learning difficulty (SpLD): a group of learning differences that affect a person's ability to acquire certain skills in areas such as reading, writing, mathematics, and memory. These difficulties are typically persistent and can impact academic performance, but they are not linked to a person's overall cognitive ability or intelligence. Dyslexia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia are considered learning difficulties.

Disability: someone is disabled under the Equality Act 2010 if they have physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities, where 'substantial' is more than minor or trivial, and 'long-term' means 12 months or more.

Impairment: it refers to a loss or dysfunction of a physical, mental, or sensory function. It is a medical term that describes an alteration in the body's normal state. Impairments can be permanent or temporary and can result from injury, disease, or congenital conditions. For example, blindness or a hearing loss are impairments, as is a cognitive or neurological issue that affects memory or concentration.

3. Academic Challenges for Disabled Students

The challenges listed below are not intended to be an exhaustive checklist, but rather examples of the diverse difficulties that students with specific disabilities, SpLDs or impairments may encounter when completing written work and/or receiving feedback.

It is crucial to recognise that the nature or severity of these challenges can vary greatly between individuals. Therefore, not all difficulties or challenges described below can be associated to all students with such diagnoses.

Disability or impairment	Potential challenges
Dyslexia	Students with dyslexia often face difficulties with handwriting, spelling, sentence structure and grammar. They may experience challenges in organising ideas coherently, which can lead to fragmented or unclear writing. Common issues include reversing letters or words, difficulty distinguishing between similarly spelled words, and poor spelling accuracy despite attempts to correct errors, even after proofreading.
Dyspraxia	Dyspraxia impacts motor coordination, which can affect handwriting, e.g., poor legibility or slow writing speed. Students with dyspraxia may also have difficulties in organising and structuring written work. This can lead to problems with creating clear, logically sequenced paragraphs, and overall clarity in their assignments. Additionally, the student may take significantly longer to write by hand or typing due to motor difficulties, leading to incomplete work. Paragraphs might lack clear transitions or logical flow, making the ideas harder to follow.
Dyscalculia	Dyscalculia affects a student's ability to understand basic numerical concepts, perform simple calculations, and understand numerical relationships. In written work that involves numerical reasoning, students may struggle to present or interpret data correctly. A student with dyscalculia might write a numerical analysis incorrectly or struggle to interpret graphs and data tables, and may miscalculate when presenting numerical arguments.
Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC)	Students with ASC often have difficulties with language, attention, and organisation. They may have a narrow focus or struggle to interpret ambiguous language, metaphors, or idiomatic expressions, which can impact their comprehension and response to written tasks. These students may also have difficulty with time management, completing assignments within set deadlines, and organising written work in a logical order.
Attention Deficit Disorder (with or without Hyperactivity)	A student with ADHD might submit an assignment with incomplete thoughts or missing information because they struggled to maintain focus throughout the writing process. They may also overlook small but important details, such as citation errors or misspelled words, due to distractions or rushing. They often experience difficulties with concentration, organisation, and time management. These issues can result in spelling mistakes, missed deadlines, and unfinished assignments. Impulsivity can lead to errors in writing or an inability to fully process all components of a task before completing it.
Deaf/Hearing impairment	Students with hearing impairments may rely on visual learning strategies rather than auditory ones, which can influence their spelling and language comprehension. The differences between British Sign Language (BSL) and written English can lead to challenges with sentence structure, word order, and clarity of expression in writing. Additionally, if they are reliant on lip reading or captions, they may miss out on auditory language cues that influence their understanding of instructions.
Blind/Visual Impairment	Students with visual impairments may experience eye strain, headaches, or fatigue, which can impact their ability to proofread and edit written work. This can lead to spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors, as well as difficulty with formatting and structure. Additionally, visually impaired students may rely on screen readers or braille, which can require more time to navigate written materials. They might also experience difficulty with tasks that require precise

	formatting or working with charts, graphs, or images due to limited visual feedback.
Brain injury	Brain injuries can lead to difficulties with memory, information recall, and fatigue. These issues can impact a student's ability to remember key details, structure sentences clearly, and organise ideas logically. In some cases, cognitive fatigue may cause the quality of written work to decline over time, especially for lengthy assignments. A student with a brain injury might forget key points they planned to include in their work, leading to incomplete or fragmented ideas. They may also struggle with maintaining focus and may find it difficult to sustain effort over long periods of writing, leading to errors in grammar and structure.

For specific examples of common mistakes, please see Appendix 1

4. Guidance for Academic Staff

4.1. Marking written coursework

Prioritise content and learning outcomes: when marking coursework, ensure that the focus is on the assessment criteria, including the ideas, knowledge, and understanding of the subject matter, as well as analytical, evaluative, and practical skills. Technicalities such as spelling, grammar, punctuation, essay structure, and presentation should not overshadow the core academic content, unless specified as part of the learning outcomes or competence standards.

Major errors: in cases where spelling, grammar, or other surface errors significantly detract from the clarity of the student's work and make it difficult to understand their argument or the meaning, it may be necessary to adjust the mark. However, this should only occur if the errors severely obscure the student's ability to demonstrate their knowledge, analysis, or understanding of the coursework. For instance, if a nursing student miswrites a medical term (e.g., *hypoglycaemic* instead of *hyperglycaemic*), this may affect the mark depending on the context. In medical or technical coursework, such errors could impact understanding and, if so, would need to be considered when marking. Similarly, if a nursing student spells a medication name incorrectly and is written out of context, this should be considered when marking as it could potentially cause future concerns in professional practice.

If the *surface errors or structural flaws* make the student's work so ambiguous that it is impossible to understand the meaning, this might reflect on their ability to demonstrate that they have met the learning outcomes of the module, therefore this should be reflected in the mark awarded. If appropriate in some circumstances, a verbal discussion with the student might help to clarify the level of their understanding, and to ascertain if an alternative assessment method might be more appropriate.

4.2. Marking examinations

The key principle in marking exams for students with disabilities is to ensure that adjustments are implemented so that the student is assessed on their knowledge, not on their ability to navigate the challenges of their disability during examinations. The adjustments should not give the student an unfair advantage or disadvantage in the exam process.

Where a student has been awarded extended time for exams, no marks should be added or deducted based on the extra time; it is simply a mechanism for giving the student an opportunity to fully demonstrate their understanding.

In cases where a student requires the use of a scribe or reader for examinations, the student is responsible for formulating their answers, and the scribe simply transcribes the response. If there are any issues related to transcription (e.g., misheard words), this should be clarified with the student before the final marking. The focus should always be on the accuracy and clarity of the student's responses.

If the student uses assistive technology like speech-to-text, make sure that the answers reflect their intended responses (e.g., check for transcription errors or misunderstanding of technical terms). The student should be given a chance to review and correct any technological issues before the final submission.

4.3. Providing feedback

It is important that the feedback provided to disabled students is clear and meaningful so that they become aware of any mistakes and can develop their skills. It is crucial to make the student aware of your usual feedback style. For example, if you do not highlight spelling or grammatical errors, it is important that the student be made aware of this, otherwise they may think their work does not contain any errors of this type. If you are commenting on spelling, grammar and punctuation, select a sample section rather than correcting the entire essay. The student should also be made aware that this is the marking approach. Please see below some additional considerations:

Constructive feedback: feedback should focus primarily on the content and quality of the analysis, rather than on minor surface errors. If necessary, offer constructive suggestions for improving technical aspects of writing, but always within the context of the overall academic performance.

Clarity and simplicity: avoid jargon, overly complex sentences, or academic language that may be difficult for some students. If the feedback is lengthy or addresses multiple points, break it down into bullet points or numbered lists to make it more digestible.

Formatting: consider the use of an alternative to red colour corrections as this colour is traditionally associated with negative marking and non-constructive criticism. Type feedback and comments on a separate sheet as, even if feedback is positive, students may have difficulty reading feedback comments that overlap with their actual output.

Accessibility: some students may have specific needs regarding how feedback is delivered. For instance, students with visual impairments may need feedback in a screen reader-compatible format. Students with dyslexia might benefit from feedback provided in audio format. Additionally, consider verbal feedback in addition to written comments, where possible.

Sensitivity: avoid making assumptions about the students' abilities or using language that could be stigmatising.

5. Inclusive Marking Sticker

5.1. What is the inclusive marking sticker?

The inclusive marking sticker is designed to notify lecturers that a student may experience specific challenges related to academic writing due to a disability or SpLD, as described above. The sticker serves as a way to ensure that students' writing challenges are understood and appropriately considered during the marking process. It is used only for the purpose of ensuring fair assessment practices and does not require lecturers to inquire about the nature of the student's disability.

5.2. How to use the sticker?

Students should place the sticker on the front page of their written assignments or exams to notify lecturers that writing challenges may be present. Student should include their student ID number, the course name and module being assessed.

For digital submissions, students will be provided with a digital template of the sticker which will be emailed by a disability advisor. For physical submissions, such as portfolios, students can collect paper copies of the sticker from the Student Centre.

5.3. How does the sticker help with assessment?

The sticker informs lecturers that challenges with spelling, grammar, or writing structure should not overshadow the student's understanding, critical thinking, or analysis. The sticker helps prevent bias by clarifying that writing mechanics may not reflect the student's full ability, and markers are encouraged to adjust their expectations accordingly.

5.4. How to request the sticker?

Following an assessment of the student's needs, a disability advisor will use their professional judgment and expertise to decide whether a student is eligible for a sticker. The advisor will then send the sticker to the student via email or inform staff in the Student Centre that the student is allowed to collect physical copies.

Inclusive Marking Guidelines for Disabled Students	
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Appendix 1. Common mistakes disabled students might make based on different conditions

Disability or impairment	Common mistakes
Dyslexia	**Phonetic errors**: writing words as they sound, leading to spelling errors like *thier* instead of *their* or *definately* instead of *definitely.*
	Subject-verb agreement: students might use incorrect verb forms, such as writing *He go to school* instead of *He goes to school.*
	Omission of letters: Sometimes students might leave out letters, like writing *seperat* instead of *separate.*
	Transposed letters: letters may be swapped in a word, such as writing *becuase* instead of *because.*
	Confusion with word order: difficulties with organising words in a logical order, such as *The book I read yesterday was good* being written as *I read the yesterday book was good.*
	Random capitalisation: incorrect capitalisation of letters, such as in the middle of words, e.g. *I Wrote a Paper* instead of *I wrote a paper*
Dyspraxia	**Inconsistent letter size and spacing**: letters or words may vary in size or spacing, creating a text that is uneven and difficult to follow.
	Poor alignment: writing may be misaligned on the page (e.g., slanted writing, words crossing margins) due to difficulties with spatial awareness.
	Letter reversals and transpositions: students might reverse letters or numbers (e.g., 'b' and 'd,' 'p' and 'q'), which can lead to spelling errors.
	Misplaced apostrophes: confusing apostrophes in contractions and possessive nouns, such as writing *its* instead of *it's* or *the dog's are hungry* instead of *the dogs are hungry*.
	Irregular spacing between words, sentences or lines: Difficulty maintaining consistent spacing between words, leading to overly tight or uneven spacing in writing.
Dyscalculia	**Misplacing numbers**: when referring to statistics or numerical data, students might transpose digits. For example, writing *2,134* as *1,324* or mixing up number orders in equations or data sets.
	Incorrect decimal placement: When dealing with decimal points, students may place them incorrectly, such as writing *3.25* as *32.5* or *0.5* as *5*.
	Improper decimal or thousand separators: students may use inconsistent or incorrect decimal or thousand separators, especially in international contexts where formatting conventions differ. For example, writing *1,000.50* (in the US format) as *1.000,50* (in European formats) or vice versa.
	Errors in measurement: if their academic writing involves measurement (e.g., in science, engineering, or geography), students may miscalculate or inaccurately describe measurements, e.g., writing *5 kilometres* when it should be *500 meters*.
Autism Spectrum Disorder	**Literal interpretation of prompts or questions:** Autistic students may interpret language very literally and may not understand abstract or figurative language in writing prompts. They might struggle with questions that require them to provide nuanced or deeper interpretations beyond a straightforward or concrete answer. E.g., *Explain the concept of justice*, student's response: *Justice is when people follow the law.*
	Overly detailed or focused responses: Autistic students may sometimes focus on irrelevant details or provide overly specific information, missing the broader

	context or key points. This might be a result of intense focus on specific interests or aspects of a topic.
	Inconsistent use of transition words: autistic students may overlook using transition words (like "because," "however," "therefore") that guide readers through their arguments or explanations. This can lead to writing that feels abrupt or lacks cohesion between ideas. E.g.: *I like cats. Cats are cute. I have a dog* instead of *I like cats because they are cute, but I also have a dog*.
	Challenges with tone or social cues: autistic students may have difficulty adjusting their tone to fit the academic or social expectations of writing. Their writing might sound blunt, overly direct, or even inappropriate for the context because they may not easily pick up on social cues related to politeness or formality.
Attention Deficit Disorder (with or without Hyperactivity)	**Repetition of ideas or phrases:** students may repeat certain ideas or phrases throughout their writing, as they may not have fully processed or articulated their thoughts before moving on to the next one. E.g.: *'The Renaissance was an exciting time. It was exciting because artists were making new types of art. People were excited about new art. The excitement of the Renaissance was in how it influenced later art periods'.* In this paragraph, the student repeats the word 'exciting' and the concept of excitement without adding new information or refining the idea, making the writing feel redundant.
	Poor organisation and structure: writing may lack a clear structure or logical flow. Students may jump from one idea to another without transitions, making the text hard to follow. Difficulty in outlining or planning before writing can lead to disorganised papers.
	Incomplete sentences or thoughts: writing may contain incomplete sentences or fragmented ideas. This can happen because the student loses track of their thought or has trouble expressing their ideas fully.
Deaf/Hearing impairment	**Grammar and syntax issues:** deaf students may struggle with word order and sentence structure, especially if they are more familiar with sign language, which has a different syntax from spoken languages.
	Inconsistent use of punctuation: deaf students might not always use punctuation marks correctly because sign language often conveys tone, pauses, or sentence boundaries visually, which doesn't translate directly to writing.
	Spelling and phonetic confusion: spelling errors may be more frequent because deaf students do not rely on hearing to reinforce the sounds of words.
	Struggles with complex sentence structures: complex sentences that require coordination or subordination may be harder to grasp. Deaf students might favour simpler sentences or struggle with correctly using conjunctions, relative clauses, or conditional forms.
	Transfer of language from sign language to English: some deaf students may translate directly from sign language to English, leading to unnatural sentence structures or phrasing, as sign language grammar and vocabulary differ from English.
Blind/Visual Impairment	**Formatting and layout issues:** blind or visually impaired students may not have full access to the visual layout of their documents, leading to mistakes with formatting. This is particularly common when students are using assistive technology like screen readers or Braille displays.
	Inconsistent use of capitalisation or formatting for emphasis: students may miss capitalising the first letter of sentences or fail to follow formatting rules for emphasis (such as italics or bold). Assistive technology like screen readers doesn't

	always indicate when capitaliasation or formatting changes should be made, leading to inconsistent usage. E.g.: *the cat sat on the mat. the dog was outside*.
	Difficulty with complex or abstract language: blind or visually impaired students might struggle with complex or abstract concepts that are usually understood through visual means. They may need additional explanations or guidance to process these concepts in writing.
Brain Injury	**Difficulty with abstract thinking and conceptualisation: s**tudents with brain injuries may struggle with more abstract or complex ideas, and as a result, they might oversimplify concepts or fail to explore the deeper implications of a topic. Their writing might lack nuance or a thorough exploration of a topic.
	Poor sentence structure and grammar: a brain injury can make it hard for students to follow grammatical rules, resulting in incomplete sentences, improper word order, and difficulties with punctuation. Their writing may have fragmented or awkward sentences due to these struggles.
	Difficulty with executive functioning: issues with executive functioning may cause students to have trouble planning, initiating, and completing tasks. They may forget to write certain parts of their paper (like introductions or conclusions) or may struggle to prioritise and manage their writing process effectively.

Appendix 2. Additional resources

Carter, C., & Sellman, E. (2013). A view of dyslexia in context: Implications for understanding differences in essay writing experience amongst higher education students identified as dyslexic. *Dyslexia*, *19*(3), 149-164.

Madriaga, M., Hanson, K., Kay, H., & Walker, A. (2011). Marking-out normalcy and disability in higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *32*(6), 901-920.

Riddell, S., & Weedon, E. (2006). What counts as a reasonable adjustment? Dyslexic students and the concept of fair assessment. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, *16*(1), 57-73.

British Dyslexia Association

The SpLD Assessment Standards Committee (SASC)

Professional Association of Specific Learning Difference Specialists in Higher Education (PASSHE)