THE GIFT OF DYSLEXIA

Why Some of the Smartest People Can't Read . . . and How They Can Learn

THIRD EDITION

Ronald D. Davis
with Eldon M. Braun

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Foreword

Why is this book important? Because the methods described in it work. Because the techniques can be used to ameliorate a wide variety of symptoms besides reading difficulties—from anxiety to writing difficulties to inability to concentrate. Because it recognizes the unusual gifts and the extraordinary potential of dyslexics. Because it turns the mysteries of orientation and disorientation into practical, life-changing techniques. Because the ability to think in pictures is needed for success in the twenty-first century.

I was introduced to Ron Davis's work 25 years ago, by my dear friend and colleague at the Gifted Development Center, Betty Maxwell. One of our clients enrolled in the Davis Dyslexia Correction Program and returned with enthusiastic stories of the unique methods Ron used and the progress her daughter had made in reading. She had also shared with Ron some of our articles on visual-spatial learners and he immediately recognized that we were on the same wavelength. We were both talking about individuals who were picture-thinkers.

Betty and I had been developing the concept of the visual-spatial learner since the early 1980s. These children think in pictures rather than in words, need hands-on experiences to learn, and often reach conclusions without appearing to take the logical steps. So the directive "show your work" mystifies them. "I just saw it in my head!" doesn't gain any credit on standardized achievement tests.

When we first began studying visual-spatial learners, we thought that they represented a small percentage of the student body. We were surprised when field-testing of our Visual-Spatial Identifier revealed that at least one-third of the regular classroom was strongly visual-spatial. Davis Dyslexia Facilitator Crystal Punch writes that there is a "need for educators to truly understand this visual process, or . . . it oftentimes is diagnosed as something else. . . . It truly is a different learning style just requiring a paradigm shift in learning, learning a visual way."

We recognized that Ron's approach was perfect for those visual-spatial children who struggle to master reading. The main difference between his population and ours was that most of our visual-spatial learners were excellent readers. Why? As we delved into the developmental histories of these children, we noted that the vast majority had taught themselves to read before school age. They had absorbed whole words well in advance of sound/symbol awareness. They had started with stop signs, storefronts, and cereal boxes—images they could visualize. They weren't constrained to having to string together phonemes. Had their first encounter with reading been in the classroom, perhaps they would not have excelled.

We have recommended *The Gift of Dyslexia* to our clients who struggled with decoding words, and we have referred many of them to the Davis Dyslexia Correction Center, as well as to the providers Ron has trained all over the world. We do this because Ron's methods achieve results. One exceptionally gifted boy we sent to work with Ron and his associates gained four grade levels in reading in one week, and he retained that growth over time.

One of Ron's more compelling ideas is that genius does not occur *in spite of* learning disabilities, but *because* of them. He is

right. I had the good fortune of meeting Patience Thomson, creator of the Barrington Stoke reading series for reluctant readers, when we both spoke at a conference on visual-spatial learners at Green College, Oxford University, sponsored by the Arts Dyslexia Trust. Patience is the daughter and granddaughter of Nobel Prize winners in physics. Her husband is the son and grandson of Nobel Prize winners in Physics. A family tree of both sides of the family was posted during the conference. Artists and dyslexics are prevalent in these family lines. What is the relationship between dyslexics, artists and geniuses in physics? They all see the world in a unique manner, with greater activation of their right hemispheres. The brain organization that creates dyslexia also enables revolutionary breakthroughs in the complex arena of physics.

Ron lists all of the essential gifts of dyslexics, including greater development of intuition, the ability to perceive multi-dimensionally, vivid imagination, greater curiosity, insightfulness, the ability to experience thought as reality, heightened awareness of the environment, the ability to think in pictures, and, most important, the ability to alter and create perceptions. These are vital gifts, becoming more and more sought after in the work world in the modern era.

While we are still obsessed in education with the importance of literacy, the future of today's students is dependent on their ability to see the big picture, to predict trends, to read customers, to think outside the box, to see patterns, to inspire collaboration among peers, to empathize, to synthesize information from a variety of sources, and to perceive possibilities from different perspectives. These are the natural talents of dyslexics. And Ron has developed a powerful method that allows them to learn to read efficiently without sacrificing any of these important abilities.

I am honored to write the foreword to this new edition of Ron Davis's *Gift of Dyslexia*, and I feel blessed to know this creative thinker, who has revolutionized our understanding of dyslexia and been such a gift to the special individuals he serves.

Dr. Linda Kreger Silverman

Dr. Linda Kreger Silverman is a licensed psychologist and founder of the Institute for the Study of Advanced Development and its subsidiaries, the Gifted Development Center and Visual-Spatial Resource. She has contributed to more than 300 publications and is the author of Upside-Down Brilliance: The Visual-Spatial Learner *and the textbook* Counseling the Gifted and Talented.

Author's Note

The Gift of Dyslexia is intentionally typeset with larger than normal type and the fewest possible number of hyphens to make it dyslexic-friendly.

Preface

A scene from my life in 1949 . . .

The clock on the classroom wall ticks slower and slower. Tick . . . tick . . . tick . . .

"Please hurry! Please hurry! Please—please—please hurry!" The words are whispered barely aloud by the young boy. Every muscle in his body is tense. His fingers twitch and tremble. His knees, pressed tightly together, quiver and touch the walls of the corner. He rocks slowly back and forth, but is careful not to dislodge the folded white handkerchief, his label of unworthiness, draped like a flag across the top of his head.

"Please—please!" he whispers again. Then he sucks in his breath and winces. But it doesn't help; nothing can. Within minutes it starts, a trickle at first, then all of it. He silently hopes there isn't so much that it makes a puddle on the floor.

He hunches over, pressing his face tight into the corner. His wrists cross into an X in his lap, hoping to hide the wet spot. Now he is glad he won't be leaving the school when the other kids do. Maybe they'll all be gone when he leaves and nobody will see; nobody will tease him. He has hoped this hope at least a hundred

times before, but maybe this time he won't hear those awful words:

"Retard!"

"Retard!"

"Look at the retard."

"Retard pissed his pants again."

He is startled by the bell that signals school is out for the day. In the corner, amidst the clatter and clamor of the kids leaving, the boy sits motionless, hoping nobody looks in his direction. If he could be invisible he would be. Not until the room is quiet does he dare move, does he dare make a sound.

As the noise fades, the ticking of the clock accelerates. Tick . . . tick, tick!

Barely aloud, the boy whispers something that only he should hear.

"What did you say?" The loud voice booms right behind him.

If he hadn't already done it, he would be wetting his pants now. He presses into the corner as tightly as he can and tries to be as small as he can be.

One of the hands that put him in the corner grabs his shoulder and pulls him around. "What did you say?" the voice demands.

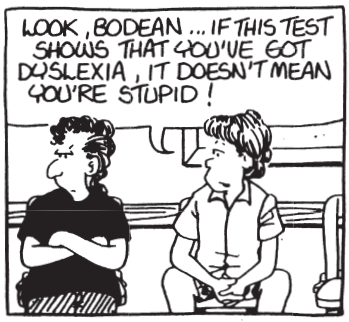
"I asked God not to make me sit in the corner anymore."

That child's prayer is the sole reason for this book.

PART ONE

What Dyslexia Really Is

FUNKY WINKERBEAN



CHAPTER 1

The Underlying Talent

Usually when people hear the word *dyslexia* they think only of reading, writing, spelling and math problems a child is having in school. Some associate it only with word and letter reversals, some only with slow learners. Almost everyone considers it some form of a learning disability, but the learning disability is only one face of dyslexia.

Once, as a guest on a television show, I was asked about the "positive" side of dyslexia. As part of my answer, I listed a dozen or so famous dyslexics. The hostess of the show then commented, "Isn't it amazing that all those people could be geniuses in spite of having dyslexia."

She missed the point. Their genius didn't occur *in spite* of their dyslexia, but *because* of it!

Famous Dyslexics

Hans Christian Andersen	Danny Glover
Harry Belafonte	Whoopi Goldberg
Alexander Graham Bell	Bruce Jenner
John Britten	Jay Leno
George Burns	Greg Louganis
Stephen J. Cannell	General George Patton
Cher	Nelson Rockefeller
Winston Churchill	Charles Schwab
Leonardo da Vinci	Jackie Stewart
Walt Disney	Quentin Tarantino
Albert Einstein	Woodrow Wilson
Henry Ford	W. B. Yeats

Having dyslexia won't make every dyslexic a genius, but it is good for the self-esteem of all dyslexics to know their minds work in exactly the same way as the minds of great geniuses. It is also important for them to know that having a problem with reading, writing, spelling or math doesn't mean they are dumb or stupid. The same mental function that produces a genius can also produce those problems.

The mental function that causes dyslexia is a gift in the truest sense of the word: *a natural ability*, *a talent.* It is something special that enhances the individual.

Dyslexics don't all develop the same gifts, but they do have certain mental functions in common. Here are the basic abilities all dyslexics share:

1. They can utilize the brain's ability to alter and create perceptions (the primary ability).
2. They are highly aware of the environment.
3. They are more curious than average.
4. They think mainly in pictures instead of words.
5. They are highly intuitive and insightful.
6. They think and perceive multidimensionally (using all the senses).
7. They can experience thought as reality.
8. They have vivid imaginations.

These eight basic abilities, if not suppressed, invalidated or destroyed by parents or the educational process, will result in two characteristics: higher-than-normal intelligence and extraordinary creative abilities. From these the true gift of dyslexia can emerge—the gift of mastery.

The gift of mastery develops in many ways and in many areas. For Albert Einstein, it was physics; for Walt Disney, it was art; for Greg Louganis, it was athletic prowess.

A Paradigm Shift

To change our perspective of dyslexia from disability to gift, we must start with a clear, accurate understanding of what dyslexia really is, and what causes it. Doing this will bring out the positive as well as the negative aspects of the situation and allow us to see how dyslexia develops. Then

the idea of correcting it won't seem far-fetched. Going a step beyond correcting the problem, we can also recognize and explore this condition as the gift it truly is.

Before a dyslexic person can fully realize and appreciate the positive side of dyslexia, the negative side should be addressed. That doesn't mean the positive side will not surface until the problems are solved. The gift is always there, even if it isn't recognized for what it is. In fact, many adult dyslexics use the positive side of dyslexia in their life work without realizing it. They just think they have a *knack* for doing something, without realizing their special talent comes from the same mental functions that prevent them from being able to read, write or spell very well.

The most common disabilities of dyslexia occur in reading, writing, spelling or math; but there are many others. Each case of dyslexia is different, because dyslexia is an unintentionally *self-created condition.* No two dyslexics have created it exactly the same.

In order to understand the *gift of dyslexia*, we need to view the learning disability known as dyslexia from a different angle.

Dyslexia is the result of a perceptual talent. In some situations, the talent becomes a liability. The individual doesn't realize this is happening because use of the talent has become integrated into the thought process. It began very early in life and by now seems as natural as breathing.

CHAPTER 2

The Learning Disability

Dyslexia was the first general term used to describe various learning problems. Eventually, these problems were subdivided and categorized to describe different learning disabilities. Because of this, we might call dyslexia the Mother of Learning Disabilities. By now, more than 70 names are used to describe its various aspects.

Originally, researchers thought dyslexic people had some form of brain or nerve damage, or a congenital malfunction that interfered with the mental processes necessary for reading.

Then, in the late 1920s, Dr. Samuel Torrey Orton redefined dyslexia as "cross lateralization of the brain." This meant that the left side of the brain was doing what the right side was normally supposed to do, and the right side was doing the job of the left side. This was only a theory, and before long he decided it was incorrect. Then

he introduced a second theory, saying that dyslexia was "mixed hemispheric dominance." This meant that *sometimes* the right side of the brain was doing what the left side was supposed to, and vice versa.

Today there are many different theories of what dyslexia is and what causes it. Most were formulated to explain the symptoms or characteristics of dyslexia—and why the disability occurred.

A New Perspective

The theories and procedures in this book were developed not to explain the nature of the problem, but to explain *why it could be corrected.* The theories were developed during and after the development of the corrective procedures described in the final chapters. Because I used "hindsight," and because I have firsthand experience at being a dyslexic, mine is an entirely different perspective.

This is what I've found out: dyslexia is not the result of brain damage or nerve damage. Nor is it caused by a malformation of the brain, inner ear or eyeballs. Dyslexia is a product of thought and a special way of reacting to the feeling of confusion.

Two Kinds of Thought

It is widely believed that human beings think in two different ways: "verbal conceptualization" and "non-verbal conceptualization."

Verbal conceptualization means thinking with the *sounds* of words. Nonverbal conceptualization means thinking with mental *pictures* of concepts or ideas.

Verbal thought is linear in time. It follows the structure of language. When using it, a person composes mental sentences one word at a time. Verbal thinking occurs at about the same speed as speech. Normal speech has a speed of about 150 words per minute, or 2.5 words per second.

A skilled radio announcer or auctioneer can race along at 200 words per minute. Electronically doctored speech can remain intelligible to an attentive listener at speeds of up to 250 words per minute. This is essentially the maximum limit of verbal conceptualization.

Nonverbal thought is evolutionary. The picture "grows" as the thought process adds more concepts. Nonverbal thought is much faster, possibly thousands of times faster. In fact, it's difficult to understand the nonverbal thinking process because it happens so fast you aren't aware of it when you do it. Usually nonverbal thinking is subliminal, or below conscious awareness.

People think in both verbal and nonverbal modes, but being human, we have a tendency to specialize. Each person will practice one mode as his primary mode of thinking and the other as a secondary mode.

During the period when the learning disability aspect of dyslexia is formed, between the ages of three and thirteen, the potential dyslexic must be primarily a nonverbal thinker—a person who thinks in pictures.

To see how this mode of thinking contributes to the dyslexic's learning disability, we must look at our language. We can consider language a mirror of the thought process. Otherwise language would be far too complicated for anyone to learn.

Language is composed of symbols. Symbols are composed of three parts:

1. What the symbol sounds like
2. What the symbol means
3. What the symbol looks like

When we use verbal conceptualization, we are thinking with the *sounds* of the language. We are actually carrying on an internal monologue of mental statements, questions and answers. Some people verbalize these conceptualizations by talking to themselves out loud. It's a slow process, but one that can make the meaning of a sentence easy to get, even though some of the words may not be fully understood.

Listening to a sentence mentally can aid understanding, because all the symbols (letters and words) don't usually occur in a sequence that makes the meaning of the sentence unfold as it is being read. For instance, you can't tell whether an English sentence is a statement or a question until you get to the end and discover whether it is followed by a period or a question mark—can you?

If we use nonverbal conceptualization, we are thinking