

# Seven myths about dyslexia put to rest

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As researchers who study dyslexia, we often read articles or overhear conversations that completely misunderstand what dyslexia is – or how it can be treated.

Dyslexia is the term used to describe someone with reading difficulties – and it affects up to [10% of Australians](#).

A reader with dyslexia may have difficulty in reading unusual words like *yacht*; have difficulty with nonsense words like *frop*; misread *slime* as *smile*; struggle to understand passages; or struggle in a number of other ways when reading.

To coincide with [Dyslexia Empowerment Week](#) – aimed at raising awareness and understanding of the disorder – we highlight the seven most common misconceptions about dyslexia.

## Myth 1: I’m a bad speller because I’m dyslexic

Some researchers and organisations include spelling problems in their [definition](#) of dyslexia. This can be a problem because spelling and reading are different skills even if they are both based on written language.

There are some processes involved in both spelling and reading, so some people will have problems with both skills. But [research](#) has clearly shown that many people are good readers, but poor spellers; or good spellers, yet poor readers.

To avoid grouping different kinds of problems together, it is less confusing to use the distinct terms dysgraphia (or spelling impairment) for problems in spelling, and dyslexia (or reading impairment) for reading problems.

## Myth 2: I have trouble with (*insert problem here*), because I’m dyslexic

Reading problems are about problems with reading. That may seem obvious, but sometimes problems in other areas become so strongly associated with reading difficulties that they start to be talked about as if they were the same as having a reading difficulty.

For example, some people with reading problems also have problems with some aspects of memory. This can lead people to say things like, “David forgets his lunch box a lot because he’s dyslexic”, but this assumes a connection between the two problems. If dyslexia leads to poor memory, then everyone who has a reading problem should also have memory problems, but this is not at all the case.

In the extreme, one [website](#) claims that Leonardo da Vinci had dyslexia not because of any evidence that he had trouble reading, but because he could write backwards and reversed (as in a mirror image). This is clearly using the term far too broadly.

## Myth 3: Dyslexia is the same for everyone

Though it may not feel like it to many of us, reading is a very complex task which involves many sub-skills and processes. It requires identifying and ordering letters, mapping letter patterns to sounds, and accessing knowledge stored in memory (among other things).

This means that the process can fail in a variety of ways, so as researchers we will almost never say “dyslexia” or “reading impairment” without first discussing what kind of problem we mean.

Does the reader have trouble with new words they have never seen before? Do they mistake *broad* for *board* more often than others their age? Do they read *have* as though it rhymes with *save*? Do they have trouble understanding what they have read? These are different problems, which don't necessarily go together.

## **Myth 4: There is one way to treat dyslexia**

Since dyslexia is not one problem, there also isn't a single solution. The particular nature of the reading problem a person has determines the treatment they need.

Based on current evidence, effective treatment of a struggling reader requires first identifying the specific reading problems the reader has, then designing a reading-based program to develop the skills that have fallen behind.

## **Myth 5: Gymnastics can cure dyslexia**

Treatments like physical exercise, coloured lenses or coloured paper are not helpful for two reasons. First, they assume that all dyslexias are the same. Second, they have nothing to do with reading.

There are many more “snake oil” treatments out there, and many of them have been adopted by school boards and education administrators with no reliable evidence to support them.

Currently, the [evidence](#) favours treatments that are based on developing reading skills that target the specific reading problem.

## **Myth 6: Phonics is a waste of time**

This one is a particular challenge in Australia, where many teaching programs do not emphasise phonics in early reading education. As a result, some children who appear to have a form of dyslexia are struggling because of classroom teaching methods.

Phonics helps children learn to read by teaching them how to convert letters into sounds and then blend those sounds into words. Effective teaching methods for reading should always include systematic teaching of [phonics](#), particularly in the early years.

## **Myth 7: Dyslexia runs in my family, so I just have to live with it**

Research has found that genetics can play a role in reading difficulties. Sometimes the phrase “genetic cause” is mistaken for “there's nothing anyone can do”. This isn't true for reading difficulties.

No matter the source of the dyslexia, there are treatments that can help - provided the problems are clearly identified, and the treatment is targeted.

*Researchers in The Reading Program of the ARC Centre of Excellence in Cognition and its Disorders (CCD) at Macquarie University also contributed to this article - see [here](#) for a list of signatories*