

## [A Parent's Guide to Access Arrangements](#)

As a new school year begins, year-10 students commence their GCSE, or equivalent courses. This means a whole new set of challenges ahead for students, and their parents. For the dyslexic student there is the added stress of facing that part of education many dread; formal exams, extended writing tasks and copious amounts of unfamiliar text. As parents we know that some children can get 'help' (formally known as Access Arrangements) in exams, but what does this mean and who receives this?

Every year the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) produce the following document:

### **Adjustments for Candidates with Disabilities and Learning Difficulties, Access Arrangements and Reasonable Adjustments, General and Vocational Qualifications.**

This is available online and contains the rules, regulations and guidance on what a student may, or may not receive when sitting formal examinations. If you would like to read the full version, please go to:

<http://www.jcq.org.uk/exams-office/access-arrangements-and-special-consideration/regulations-and-guidance>

### **Access Arrangements and the Equality Act 2010**

The rationale behind Access Arrangements is to allow students with special educational needs, disabilities or temporary injuries to:

- Access the assessment/exam
- Show what they know and can do without changing the demands of the assessment/exam

These are part of the 'Reasonable Adjustments' of the Equality Act 2010 which requires an awarding body (any organisation that produces formal examinations) *to make reasonable adjustments where a student who is disabled within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010, would be at a **substantial disadvantage** in comparison to someone who is not disabled.*

If we are to apply this to dyslexic learners we need to establish if they fall into the category of having a substantial disadvantage. For the most part they do.

### **What Access Arrangements may be available to a dyslexic student?**

The following list is by no means exhaustive. They are in general the most used arrangements for dyslexic students.

Access Arrangements that require students to be formally assessed by a 'specialist assessor' before a school can apply for them:

- Extra Time (this is generally up to 25% extra time for each paper and course work or controlled assessments)
- A reader

- A computer reader. A computer reader is software that accurately reads out text. Where a student has a computer reader the school can open the exam papers 90 minutes before the exam to scan the paper into an accessible electronic format
- Use of a word processor with the spell check enabled
- A Scribe
- Voice activated software that converts speech to text

Access Arrangements that can be given by a school or college without formal assessments and do not need to be applied for:

- Coloured overlays
- Read Aloud (some students find that reading aloud helps them understand what they have read. Obviously this would be a distraction for others so they can sit their exams in a separate room with an invigilator present)
- Use of a word processor with the spell check disabled
- Examination Reading Pen

### How is a student identified as needing Access Arrangements?

Students are generally identified by teachers, parents or student concerns on potential difficulties in exams. Then it is determined what would be the most appropriate arrangement. As already shown some of these arrangements require a **specialist formal assessment** before they can be granted. This is an area of potential conflict and contention between parents and schools as there are cost implications for the school.

A specialist assessor is: A specialist Teacher that holds a current Dyslexia qualification or a recognised qualification in assessing students for Access Arrangements. A few schools have a member of the teaching staff, quite often the SENCo, with these qualifications. JCQ recommend this as best practice for all schools and colleges. Alternatively a school can commission a private assessor or an Educational Psychologist to assess individual students and produce a report to be kept on file. This report is evidence of the student's entitlement for Access Arrangements. The cost of this assessment can be anything upwards of £200 per student.

The assessments used measure the following:

For a reader/computer reader in examinations

- Word reading and reading comprehension
- Reading speed

For a scribe/voice activated software in exams

- Speed of writing
- Spelling accuracy

For Extra Time

- Reading speed

- Cognitive Processing speed (This is the speed in which a student to retrieves information from long term memory)
- Writing speed

The assessment must be carried out no earlier than the beginning of year 9 for Access Arrangements in years 10 and 11. It is advisable that these assessments are done at the end of year 9 as they are valid for two years and will therefore cover a student until the end of year 11. This also ensures students get plenty of practice using these arrangements in practice papers and mock exams.

To qualify for any Access Arrangement that requires formal assessment, a student's scores must fall well below the average expected for a student of the same chronological age. This is shown in a standardised score that is below 85.

All assessments and subsequent reports must be shared with and discussed with parents and students.

### **Additional evidence required**

For **all** Access Arrangements the SENCo must also produce a document that, according to JCQ, 'paints a holistic picture of need'. This confirms a student's normal way of working in school and could contain the following:

- Arrangements used in SATs at the end of primary school
- Comments and observations of teaching staff
- Interventions used during years 7,8 and 9 (individual learning plans, support given, small group work)
- Screening test results
- Reasonable Adjustments used when working in the classroom, mock exams or internal school tests.

This emphasises how important it is that schools ensure Reasonable Adjustments are in place as soon as possible for children with identified learning difficulties.

### **Will my child lose marks if they have an Access Arrangement?**

#### **Scribe**

In subjects where separate marks for spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG) are being awarded the student will not be credited the marks for spelling and punctuation. They will be awarded marks for grammar. These are generally 3% of the total marks. Subjects that award separate marks for SPaG are:

- GCSE English/English Language
- GCSE English Literature
- GCSE Geography
- GCSE History
- GCSE Religious Studies

It should be noted that in the new GCSE English Language a student using a scribe or voice activated software may lose 20% of the total marks.

A scribe cannot be used for **Functional skills English Writing**, although **voice activated software** can be used without any loss of marks. Students will need a great deal of practice in using this software prior to the exams.

**A scribe is not allowed in Modern Foreign Language Papers.** Unless the candidate can dictate foreign words letter by letter!

## Reader

Students do not lose any marks for having a reader.

However in exams assessing reading comprehension such as;

- GCSE English Language
- GCSE Modern Foreign Languages
- English Functional Skills Reading

A student **must have a computer reader**. This is because a computer reader does not give a 'layer of vocal interpretation ...and therefore compromise the reliability of the qualification'.

## What can I do as a parent?

Talk to your child, ask them what they feel would be the best form of support for Access Arrangements. They are the ones that have to sit the exams.

Consider the implications of Access Arrangements and the long term aim of promoting independence. Using a reader and a scribe is not a viable long term prospect for a young adult although it can prepare them for using computer readers and voice activated software.

Arrange a meeting with the SENCo of your child's school to discuss the options.

## Conclusion

Access Arrangements are reasonable adjustments that should level the playing field. They are not in place to create an unfair advantage, nor should they disadvantage a young person. As such Reasonable Adjustments should be put in place as soon as possible. This enables the student to develop their exam techniques over time so an Access Arrangement is their normal way of working. It is not an arrangement suddenly presented to them just before sitting their first examination.

There are implications for schools in terms of the costs of formally assessing students and facilitating Access Arrangements that require extra rooms, staff and computers during the exams. However these are not insurmountable especially given the potential of enabling a young person to experience the exam success they are capable of.