

SECOND EDITION



ACADEMIC  
WRITING  
and  
DYSLEXIA

A Visual Guide to  
Writing at University

Adrian J. Wallbank

# Academic Writing and Dyslexia

Fully revised and expanded, this book presents a unique visual approach to academic writing and composition tailored to the needs of students with dyslexia in Higher Education. It will help you to successfully structure and articulate your ideas, get to grips with critical reading, thinking and writing and fulfil your full academic potential.

The 'writing process' (e.g. genre and style, critical thinking and reading, writing, sentence construction, and proofreading and editing) is de-mystified and translated into innovative, meaningful visual representations in the form of templates, images, icons and prompts designed to meet the visual and 'big picture' learning styles and strengths of your dyslexia. Underpinned by extensive research, this book will help you to present your thoughts and evaluate and critique competing arguments in a compelling way. It is written to help you bridge the gap between your existing coping strategies and the increased demands and rigours of academic writing at university.

This second edition features enhanced visual techniques for reading online, expanded material to cover scientific writing, literature reviews, reflective writing and academic style, and detailed explanations of how dyslexia affects writing, how to reduce pressure on your working memory and how to get your creativity and ideas onto the page in order to excel. This book serves as an invaluable resource for dyslexic students, academics, dyslexia specialists, learning developers and writing tutors throughout the Higher Education sector.

**Adrian J. Wallbank** is a Lecturer in Educational Development at Oxford Brookes University, UK, and is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.



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# **Academic Writing and Dyslexia**

A Visual Guide to Writing at University

**Second Edition**

**Adrian J. Wallbank**

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# Preface

*'One picture is worth a thousand words'.*

(English idiom)

Sometime in the mid-1990s, filming was taking place for an ITV News report on the teaching strategies used at Maple Hayes School and Research Centre (where I was a pupil). During a break in filming, I vividly remember a reporter quizzing one of the students about why using a visual system of icons to learn how to spell was effective. The reporter repeated the same comments and suspicions that many of us had heard before and which have plagued the reputation of its inventor and school's Principal, Dr E. Neville Brown. 'I don't get it,' the reporter quipped, 'I don't understand how words can have visual meanings!' 'You wouldn't,' the student replied rather cheekily, 'you're not dyslexic!'

Despite this student's rather brazen dismissal of the reporter's questions, this memory has stayed with me ever since and I feel is central to understanding the rationale behind this book. Individuals with dyslexia are predominantly right-brain, visual thinkers – words are often secondary considerations. People with dyslexia think holistically and visually. This is why it is necessary to visualise the patterns and underlying meanings of writing to understand its content and structure. This is a different way of doing things to left-brain thinkers, hence why the reporter mentioned above just didn't 'get it'. So while this book may be of considerable use to those who do not have dyslexia, the aim here is to tap into your dyslexic visual strengths and add additional coping/compensatory strategies to the ones that have brought you this far.

If you have dyslexia and are reading this, you've undoubtedly done an excellent job of adjusting to, if not excelling within, a system that simply does not suit your right-brain learning preferences and visual strengths. The next step, however, is a big one. 'Stepping up' from school/college to university, irrespective of your dyslexia, is a challenge, but is one that I guarantee you will succeed in, providing you adjust and learn new, more sophisticated coping strategies. However, this next step has also been complicated recently by the global Covid-19 pandemic and the acceleration of online learning. Since the first edition of this book, reading and searching online has become the standard (and sometimes only) way of accessing material, and assessment methods are becoming more varied. Furthermore, more students than ever are taking 'STEM' subjects in response to concerns about employability. This second edition is expanded and updated to cater for all of these developments. New material, strategies and tips have been added to help you navigate online reading and searching for information, and new sections have been developed to help you consider how to structure and write scientific essays, laboratory reports and literature reviews. Meanwhile, in response to feedback from the first edition, sections have been added on reflective writing (a genre of assessment that is becoming increasingly popular as markers try to diversify their assessment methods and help individuals develop and reflect upon their skills for employment), and a new chapter has been developed on academic writing style. Academic language is not like everyday talk or the informality of a social media or blog post, but needs to have clarity at its heart. This can be tricky, so you'll find new material and guidance on how to give your writing the correct 'tone', polish and style.

Finally, lots of students with dyslexia often think their unique ways of thinking are either a problem, or something that other people don't encounter. It can be incredibly beneficial to be reassured that how you process ideas is precisely because of your dyslexia. You're not alone, and these unique ways of thinking can be turned into a strength. To help with this, you'll not only find new and expanded tips relating to the 'dyslexic experience' of studying and writing, but the first chapter provides a simplified, visual overview of how the dyslexic brain works, what it's good at/bad at, and why. With the help of a few academic studies and our old friend Albert Einstein, this can give you a powerful sense of how and why your thoughts come out in certain ways (or struggle to go in at all), and will help you understand how you can maximise your strengths to overcome your weaknesses. If Einstein could do it by figuring out how his brain worked, so can you.

Your dyslexia will never go away; all we can do is find ever more inventive ways of working with or around it. You need better aids to help you succeed, and this is what this book aims to provide. But remember, you also have an edge – individuals with dyslexia usually have high intelligence and a unique ability to discern patterns and connections and think holistically. It has brought you and sustained you thus far, so with the guidance provided in this book, why not see where else it can take you?

This book is dedicated to individuals with dyslexia everywhere, with faith in the fact that success is obtainable, can be achieved, and is ours for the taking...

Dr Adrian J. Wallbank  
Oxford Brookes University, October 2021

# Acknowledgements

As a pupil at Maple Hayes School and Research Centre in the mid-1990s, I was introduced to the concept of learning how to spell using visual icons through the pioneering work of Dr E. Neville Brown. I arrived at Maple Hayes as an underachieving pupil with dyslexia who had been placed in the lowest possible band at high school and told that although I'd 'never amount to much', one day I'd 'at least make someone a good husband'. Brown, along with his staff, formed the basis of my transformation into a successful academic, lecturer and researcher, and their influences lie behind much of this book. More recently, I have accrued numerous debts during the course of writing the second edition of this textbook. I owe a great deal to my students, both at Warwick and Royal Holloway. Their difficulties and triumphs have frustrated and inspired me in equal measure, and without having read hundreds, if not thousands, of their essays, I'd not have been able to formulate my ideas. But again, my greatest debt is to my wife, Mona Khatibshahidi, who is responsible for battling with the vagaries of technology and the murky depths of graphic design in order to painstakingly construct all of the visual elements of this book. This nearly killed both of us at times, not least because she has consistently challenged my thinking and my predilection for making 'piles' everywhere in ways that only married couples will know about, and I'm sure she'll be heartily glad to see the back of this project. To her patience and design skills, I owe more than words can say.



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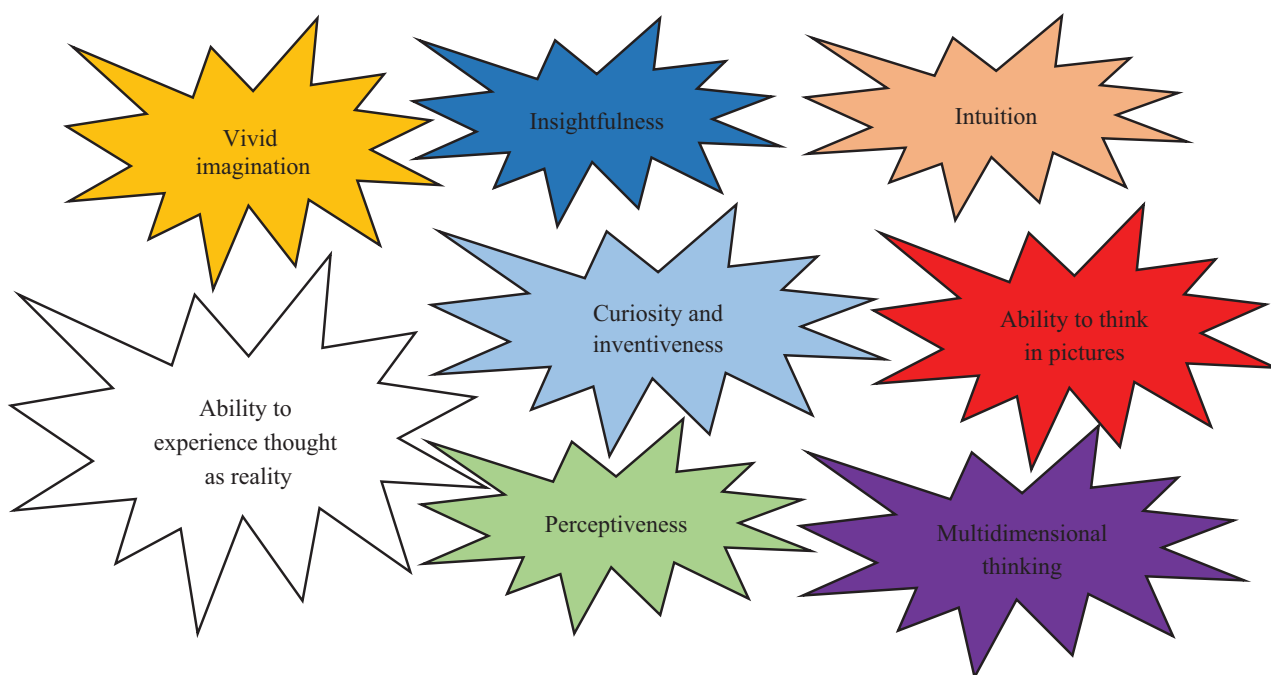
# 1 Understanding Dyslexia and ‘Stepping up’ from School/College to University

*‘Whenever people talk about dyslexia, it’s important to know that some of the smartest people in the world, major owners of companies, are dyslexic. We just see things differently, so that’s an advantage. I just learn a different way; there’s nothing bad about it’.*

(Charlotte McKinney: American model and actress)

## The potential to excel

In the Foreword to the third edition of Ronald D. Davis’s famous book *The Gift of Dyslexia* (2010, p.xi), Linda Silverman highlights the ‘essential gifts of dyslexics’, these being:



Unfortunately, the current pre-university education system (in the UK at least), with its focus on passing exams, on hitting ‘Assessment Objectives’ and ‘Learning Outcomes’ rather than critical thinking, creativity and curiosity, is often ill-suited to the learning styles and ‘gifts’ of people with dyslexia. Does this sound familiar? This is precisely what Albert Einstein, himself dyslexic, probably had in mind when he stated that ‘it is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education...Education is what remains after one has forgotten everything...learned in school’ (TheDyslexiaProject, 2017). As a consequence, you may well have had a considerable struggle to make it to university in the first place and feel as though your experience of education so far has been stifling or even traumatic rather than enlightening. Fortunately, studying at university is rather different and gives you much more intellectual and creative space to spread your wings. Indeed, as

Silverman points out, in today's world, student success (both within and beyond university) depends upon the

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 empathise, to synthesise information from a variety of sources, and to perceive possibilities from different perspectives. These are the natural talents of dyslexics (p.xi).

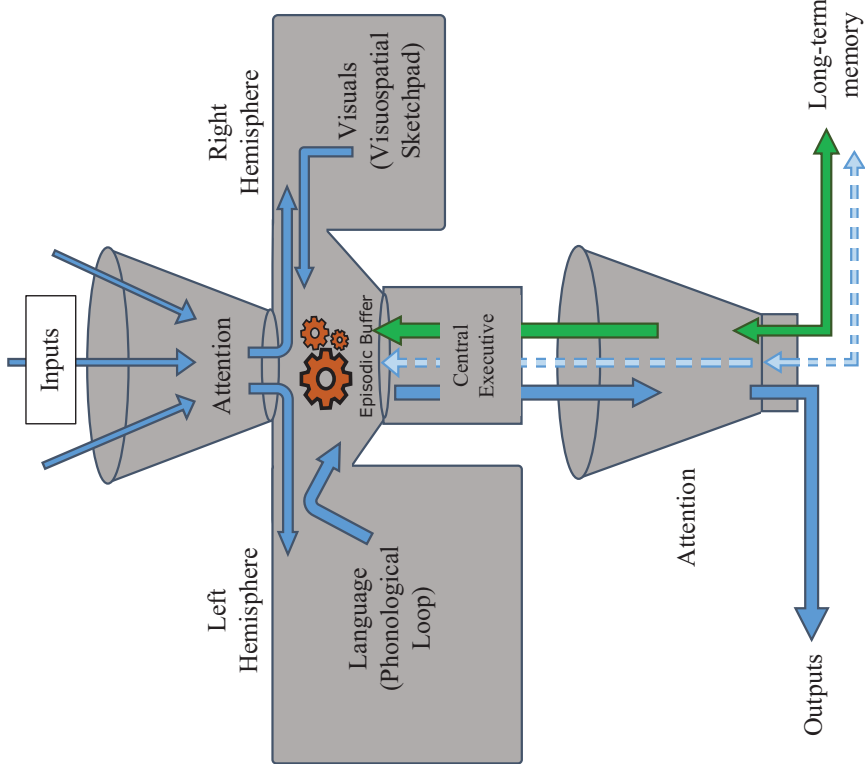
While these words are undoubtedly inspiring and hopeful, and undoubtedly relevant in a world witnessing increasingly complex and sometimes contradictory agendas, let us not get ahead of ourselves. School may have been challenging, but a new battle awaits you in the form of the higher intellectual demands associated with advanced study. ALL students, not just those with dyslexia, face new challenges when 'stepping up' from A levels, Access, BTECs or the International Baccalaureate to an undergraduate course. Indeed, you will need to 'step up' again as you transition from your first year to second year, from second year to third year, from third year to masters, and from masters to doctorate. This may seem obvious, but in contrast to students without dyslexia, this natural process of 'stepping up' also means that you need to develop increasingly sophisticated coping, learning and writing strategies so as to meet the higher demands placed on you as a result of your dyslexia. Unfortunately, nobody can wave a magic wand and make your dyslexia disappear. As such, what is required is the development and expansion of the coping strategies that have brought you this far to help you meet the new, advanced challenges you are likely to encounter. Remaining static or relying on the coping strategies you have already developed are unlikely to work. Your dyslexia doesn't mean that you cannot compete with your peers, or that the increasingly sophisticated coping strategies you need to develop mean that your progress will be slower or hindered. Rather, the coping strategies proposed in this book harness and tap into your gifts as a visual, 'big picture' and multidimensional thinker. By adopting them, you will not only cope at university, but will thrive and excel to your full potential.

## **Understanding and harnessing your dyslexia**

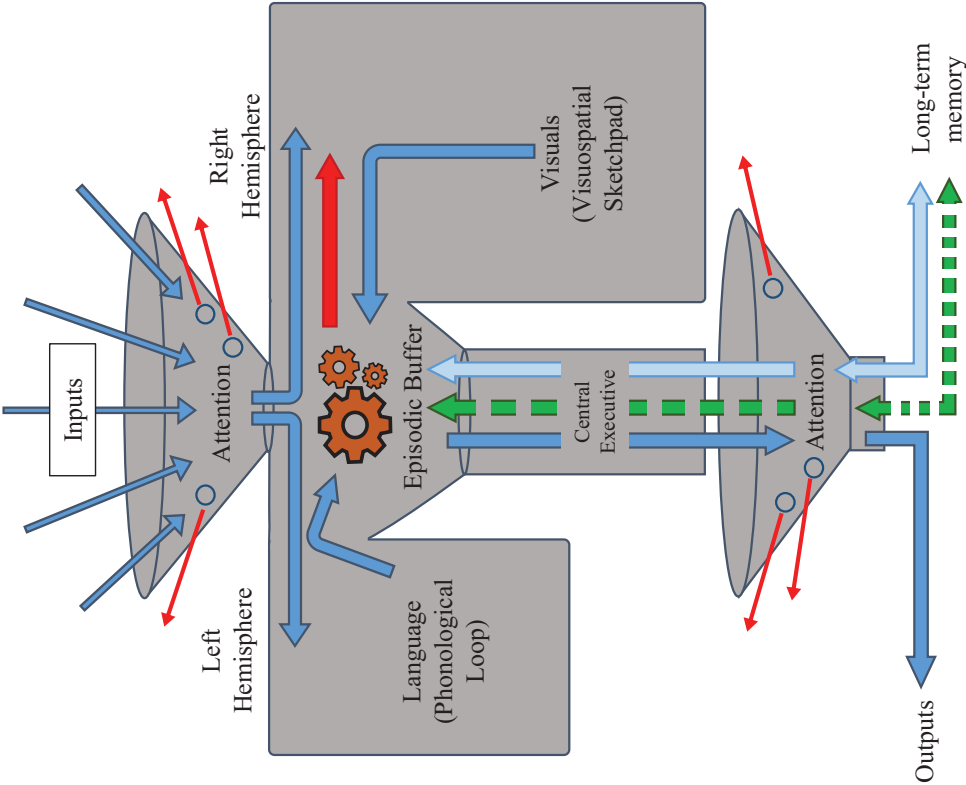
Nobody really understands what causes dyslexia or how the dyslexic brain/thought processes work. As you are probably all too aware, dyslexia affects concentration, short-term memory, reading speed/focus, spelling, time management, organisation, and the ability to structure and sequence ideas – especially in writing. Yet, equally, as we have seen, many people with dyslexia are highly creative, can make links that other people can't, and can be incredibly successful (think Albert Einstein, Richard Branson, Stephen Spielberg, Leonardo da Vinci, Agatha Christie and possibly Winston Churchill). How is this possible? And how does having dyslexia affect your ability to study and write effectively at university?

Dyslexia mainly affects how the working memory receives and processes information. The brain's right hemisphere (known for its role in visual processing and holistic thinking) is bigger and more active than non-dyslexic brains. In non-dyslexic brains, however, the left hemisphere/language-processing operations are more active and developed. With dyslexia, because the working memory is weaker and the brain is wired differently, when receiving or presenting information through language, mental activities are more difficult and you can quickly become overwhelmed – a scenario called 'cognitive overload'. This can leave you feeling exhausted. Cognitive overload can happen with anyone of course, but if you have dyslexia, this happens much sooner because of how inefficiently and ineffectively the working memory processes language. The best way of thinking about these processes is to visualise them as follows:

Non-dyslexic working memory processes:



Dyslexic working memory processes:



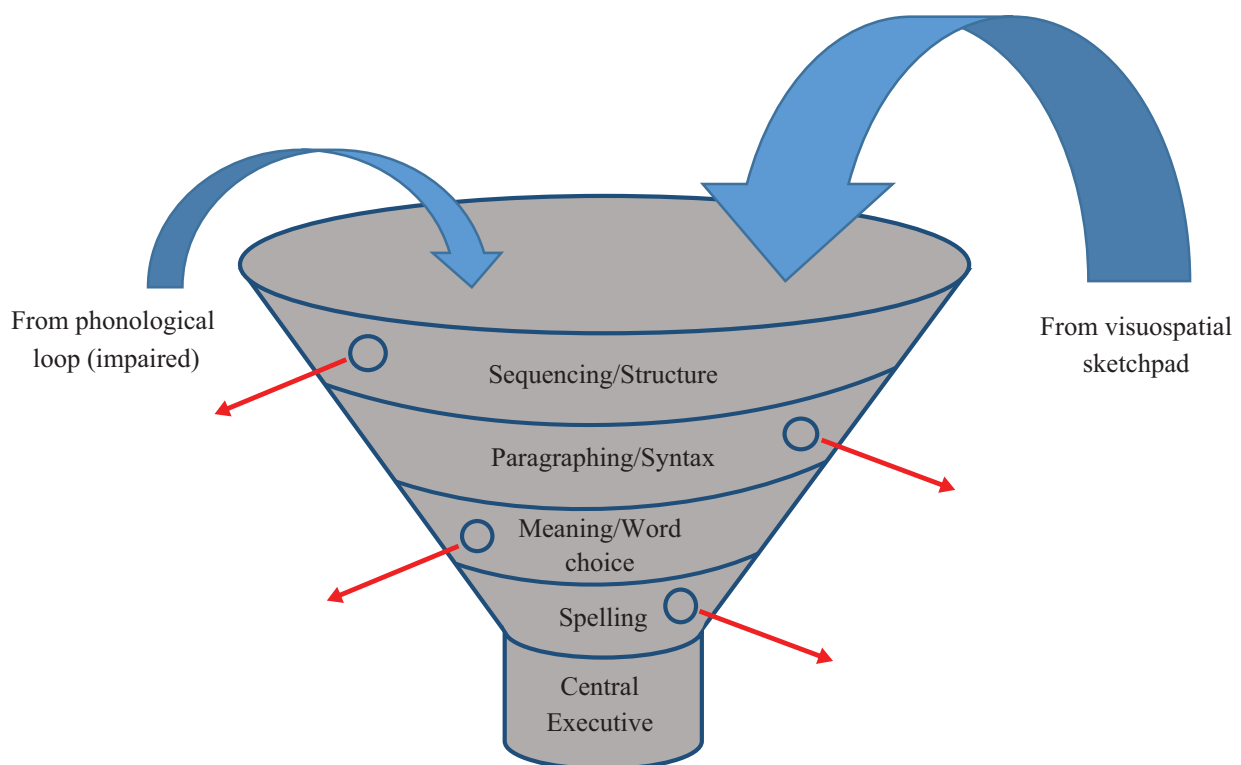


The key differences can be summarised and explained as follows:

<i>Dyslexic working memory</i>	<i>Non-dyslexic working memory</i>
<p>Wide, 'big picture' search and input capabilities, but inputs have to negotiate relatively short/limited attention span so less information gets through into the working memory. In addition, some information is lost/'leaks' out before it even gets processed.</p>	<p>Less global, 'big picture' search capabilities but longer attention span, and so more information gets through into the working memory.</p>
<p>Weaker, smaller language-processing ability, stronger visual, right-hemisphere, holistic processing ability. Inputs are more effective when visual.</p>	<p>Stronger, larger language-processing ability, weaker right-hemisphere, visual/holistic processing ability. Inputs more effective when language based.</p>
<p>The episodic buffer, which brings together and puts into order the inputs from the visual and language functions, has to route language over to the visual side for processing (as indicated by the red arrow) because of a) the brain's preference for the visual and b) the language side is impaired/not as strong. This takes additional mental effort and time, and as a result there's an increased likelihood of information being lost. Research has suggested that learning to do things automatically takes considerably longer than individuals without dyslexia, so working memory has to work pretty hard (Nicolson and Fawcett, 1990, 2008).</p>	<p>Episodic buffer combines inputs from the visual and language functions to make sense of the world and impose order.</p>
<p>The central executive (the boss of the whole system) processes the ideas and decides what to do with them, but this takes longer because of the increased length of neurological pathways.</p>	<p>The central executive processes the ideas and decides what to do with them (relatively quickly).</p>
<p>Outputs are generated to go either into the world (e.g. speech, action or writing) or into the long-term memory, but weaker attention span means less outputs are achieved and some information is 'lost'.</p>	<p>Outputs are generated to go either into the world (e.g. speech, action or writing) or into the long-term memory. Stronger, longer attention span means that more outputs are achieved and more ideas are memorised.</p>
<p>According to something called 'Fuzzy Trace Theory' (Reyna and Brainerd, 1995), memories are encoded through 'verbatim traces' and 'gist traces'. In this theory, as shown on the diagram above, two parallel memory traces are created – one literal or verbatim, and one based on 'gist' (i.e. incomplete, or 'fuzzy' traces often based on clues, situational or cultural context and non-literal representations). Gist memory traces are stronger in individuals with dyslexia (Obidziński and Nieznański, 2017). Memories are created through gist, fragments and contexts rather than being literal representations. Some verbatim memory traces are formed, but these are not as strong as in individuals without dyslexia.</p>	<p>Memories are encoded through both gist and verbatim traces, but literal, verbatim traces are stronger.</p>
<p>Material from the long-term memory goes to the episodic buffer for processing before being converted to outputs, but the process is impaired owing to weaker attention span and longer neurological pathways. However, because more memories are created through gist (rather than being literal), and because of the longer neurological pathways, clues and intuition enable patterns to be formed and original ideas to be generated.</p>	<p>Material from the long-term memory goes to the episodic buffer for processing before being converted to outputs. Memories are more literal and less based on clues and context.</p>

As you can see here, the more the information being received or communicated is based in language, the more restrictions there are and the more mental effort is required to find workarounds (as indicated by the red arrow) or compensatory strategies (Helland and Morken, 2015, p.20). Unlike the non-dyslexic brain, most information has to be decoded via the visual, right hemisphere because the left, language-based phonological loop is impaired. Any information that does get to the left, language-based side of the system has to be routed back towards the visuospatial sketchpad to be decoded (thus taking up yet more valuable energy and again increasing the likelihood of forgetting information). Indeed, brain imaging (Waldie et al., 2013) has actually shown ‘over activation’ of the right hemisphere as a result of this, which can again lead to tiredness.

The episodic buffer also works differently in the case of individuals with dyslexia. Whilst it handles visual inputs extremely well (better than in the case of the non-dyslexic brain), unfortunately, it acts as a further hurdle to communicating ideas in a coherent, structured manner. In the case of the language-based messages and inputs it receives, instead of combining them and putting them into a cohesive and logical order, further issues arise, especially when writing. In effect, language-based inputs have to undergo the following increasingly problematic, restrictive hurdles in the episodic buffer:



With each hurdle/restriction, not only does information get blocked (think of it like a traffic jam or the internet with limited bandwidth), but the risk of ideas being ‘lost’ increases. To make matters worse, the attention span controlling all of the above activities is not only weaker, but captures/transmits less information in the first place. Indeed, it’s believed that a high percentage of people with dyslexia also have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), which makes it harder to concentrate and thus dedicate effort to these processes.

Reading and writing entails the working memory handling various tasks simultaneously (decoding words/images, putting together sequences to piece together meaning, blending visual/language-based inputs, maintaining concentration, processing inputs, combining them with both ‘gist’ and literal inputs from the memory, and turning them into various outputs). Given that in individuals with dyslexia the whole operation is impaired (and full of leaks), cognitive overload quickly occurs. Put another way, your brain is like a computer with limited RAM – the more demands you place on it (browsers, applications etc.), the slower it gets. However, whilst you may have limited RAM, the bigger, more developed visual side of the system can compensate. But that’s not the only thing. As already mentioned, in the dyslexic brain, neurological signals have to travel much greater distances. Although this perhaps slows down some activities, it is suggested that greater connections with other neurological signals and pieces of information can be made because of the greater distances travelled. This, especially when combined with the episodic buffer’s greater input from the visuospatial sketchpad, inputs from ‘gist’ memory, and its talent for making sense of visual materials, is why individuals with dyslexia often excel at seeing the ‘big picture’ and making connections.

### THE DYSLEXIC EXPERIENCE:

Have you ever noticed that when you're reading, you can't remember what you read a few pages previously, but you have a good idea what's going to happen on the next page / in a few pages? This is due to cognitive overload. Because of all the processes taking place, for the sake of self-preservation you have started reading on auto-pilot. In other words, you're reading the words, but you're not taking in their meaning (to conserve mental energy). Owing to the space this has freed up, you've started thinking creatively about the content. From the brief clues you pick up, you're able to make / see connections and anticipate what's likely to be said next (but can't remember what's just been said). In fact, when you get there, you're likely to feel frustrated with having to go through the sequence of reading everything to get to the main points. In other words, for people with dyslexia, sequences are not only difficult, but boring / too slow. We make the connections quicker than the sequence can lay them out. If they could be presented in an image rather than as a chapter, we'd be much better off!

## Dyslexia, creativity and studying

So where does creativity and the so-called 'gift' of dyslexia come in? Again, it's not clear, but it's thought that all parts of the working memory contribute to the creation of 'aha' moments. One theory, as just mentioned, is that because neurological pathways within the dyslexic brain are further apart, there's more opportunities for seemingly unconnected ideas to merge – hence why people with dyslexia excel at 'big picture' thinking but also, crucially, need the context/'big picture' in order to more easily make sense of inputs (verbal, reading, sensory etc.). Furthermore, drawing on Fuzzy Trace Theory, whilst non-dyslexic individuals remember things literally, people with dyslexia remember better via clues and 'big picture' context. By remembering via the 'big picture' and clues/gist, the brain is able to piece clues together in new ways and come up with new ideas. So while working memory may be weaker, the ability to piece together 'global' information and ideas is actually stronger (Todd et al., 2012). This is why Eide and Eide (2011) have suggested that individuals with dyslexia excel at seeing 'relationships of likeness and togetherness; connections between perspectives and fields of knowledge; and big-picture or global connections that create heightened abilities in detecting gist, context and relevance' (p.105) – all skills that should enable you to excel at university if you play to your strengths.

Whilst processing speeds associated with language-based inputs may be slower in people with dyslexia, the ability to make connections (especially via visual inputs) is actually faster – one of the so-called 'paradoxes' of dyslexia (Shaywitz, 1996). Indeed, it has been shown that individuals with dyslexia score more highly than people without when it comes to non-verbal memory, non-verbal reason and creativity (Everatt and Denston, 2020, p.104). It's thought that it is the visuospatial sketchpad and the right hemisphere's holistic processing strengths that contribute to creativity (Jaswal, 2015, p.223), and that overall, if you take language out of the equation, individuals with dyslexia can perform as well as, if not better than, people without dyslexia (Everatt and Denston, 2020, p.103). Albert Einstein made precisely this claim when he suggested that in his 'mechanism of thought', 'signs' and 'images' being 'voluntarily reproduced or combined', coupled with 'combinatory' or 'vague play' in the absence of the urge for 'logical construction', was 'the essential feature in productive thought – before there is any connection with...words or other kinds of signs that can be communicated to others'. In essence, he claimed that 'words or...language...do not seem to play any role in my mechanism of thought' (Einstein, 1995, p.25). As such, people with dyslexia can often excel when we minimise the role of language, and the 'combinatory' or 'vague play' resulting from less focused, weaker attention spans actually helps to create more eureka moments.

In terms of writing and studying at university, then, owing to the dyslexic brain's preference for visual material, the more the information can be received or transmitted visually, the better. Indeed, it has been proven that reading techniques and compensatory strategies that exploit right-brain visual networks not only help

improve the activation of that part of the brain, but they result in better reading skills. Conversely, traditional techniques that persevere with improving reading and writing skills via left-brained, language-based systems can actually make matters worse (Waldie et al., 2017). This is where the visual templates, icons, prompts and structures contained within this book come in. By aligning the principles of academic writing to meaningful visuals, it can help you make sense of writing essays by a) harnessing your visual/‘big picture’ strengths, and b) making the passage of information in and out of your working memory easier by harnessing the strengths of the right hemisphere of your brain.

## Getting started – understanding the differences between writing at school/college and university

Studying and writing at university is very different from what you have probably encountered at school or college. Some of the key differences are as follows:

<i>A level/Access/BTEC</i>	<i>University</i>
Taught, coached and mentored.	Emphasis is on independent learning.
Prescriptive (coursework titles are often chosen by the teacher or exam board, or if the student chooses it you are coached to create a title which allows you to focus on meeting the exam boards’ very precise criteria).	Student increasingly autonomous and independent, minimal coaching/guidance.
Focused on fulfilling the exam boards’ very explicit criteria (‘Assessment Objectives’ – these are set in the UK by OFQUAL).	Focused on articulating an argument which is engaged critically and creatively with the question.
Limited engagement with secondary reading.	Extensive, critical and evaluative engagement with secondary materials and theories.
Focused on exhibiting or achieving a specific aim or demonstrating a specific acquisition of knowledge rather than exhibiting wide-ranging, critically perceptive knowledge of the discipline.	Critical evaluation, analysis and creativity/independent thinking.

If you have studied for A levels, an Access or BTEC qualification, you’ll probably have already seen how these priorities are mapped onto the assessment criteria. Exam boards have to adhere to ‘Assessment Objectives’, and these are designed to provide teachers and examiners with a framework for assessing work in a fair, transparent and rigorous manner. These aims are entirely understandable, but this often leads to students being taught how to ‘jump through hoops’ rather than gaining an in-depth knowledge of the subject. Indeed, as a former teacher of A level English, I probably spent 80% of my time teaching my students how to meet the ‘Assessment Objectives’ rather than teaching them about English! This results in rather formulaic, precise writing which is obsessed with hitting targets rather than exploring ideas creatively or in depth. Let’s look at the following exemplar A level literature essay which seeks to compare Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* with William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* to see how this happens:

<i>Exemplar paragraph:</i>	<i>Assessment objectives:</i>
<p>One of the main themes around which the play pivots is Hamlet’s despair and alleged madness. In <a href="#">Act Three Scene One</a> we find him uttering the now famous and thought-provoking <a href="#">line</a> ‘To be, or not to be- that is the question’; which initiates a <a href="#">bout of philosophical questioning</a> concerning life and death. The <a href="#">definitive determiner</a> ‘the’ emphasises the level of despair that Hamlet feels as it is ‘the question’; no other question matters. Moreover, ‘is’, the <a href="#">third person singular</a> of ‘be’, reinforces the <a href="#">definitive determiner</a> by preventing any possibility of <a href="#">modal questioning</a> such as ‘might be the question’. Hamlet’s questions thus stand in sharp contrast to the rather more emotive, rhetorical questions Blake poses in relation to poverty, abuse and religion (such as ‘<a href="#">Is that trembling cry a song?</a>’ in ‘Holy Thursday’ and in respect of child abuse, ‘<a href="#">are such things done on Albion’s shore?</a>’ in ‘A Little Boy Lost’), <a href="#">although they clearly engage the reader in a similar form of self-examination as that encouraged by Hamlet and are perhaps intended to make the reader question not their life, but their conscience</a> in relation to the ongoing suffering of children caught up in the exploitation of early industrial society.</p>	<p>AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression (<u>Note – terminology is underlined</u>)</p> <p>AO2: Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts</p> <p>AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received</p> <p>AO4: Explore connections across literary texts</p>

As you can probably see by the sheer number of colours used here (and even these are not enough), an awful lot of thought went into this extract to make it fit the assessment criteria. The fact that there is only limited analysis/evaluation and that comparing Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with Blake is a very odd decision indeed is irrelevant. The main thing that matters is the student hitting the Assessment Objectives, which, in this case, they have done superbly.

Access assignments are similar. Access courses are marked as a pass, merit or distinction in accordance with the following criteria:

- 1) Understanding of the subject (e.g. student demonstrates an excellent grasp of the relevant knowledge base)
- 2) Application of knowledge (e.g. student makes use of relevant ideas, facts, theories, perspectives, models, concepts)
- 3) Application of skills (e.g. student consistently selects/applies appropriate skills, techniques, methods)
- 4) Use of information
- 5) Communication and presentation
- 6) Autonomy/Independence
- 7) Quality

The assessment criteria for BTECs are very similar, but more usefully differentiate the grade boundaries using key words such as 'explain' (pass), 'analyse' (merit) or 'evaluate'/'justify' (distinction), which more closely align with university-level marking criteria. But again, the emphasis here is upon testing the acquisition, application and use of knowledge (often in an almost box-ticking manner) rather than wide-ranging analysis, independent thinking, critical analysis, evaluation and argumentation. These are assessed, but, like in A levels, they are not the primary focus. Indeed, at A level, analysis and evaluation often only accounts for around 28% of the overall mark (English), and for science subjects, this is often lower. A much higher weighting is often allocated for demonstrating and applying knowledge (AO1 and AO2), which often constitutes as much as 70–80% of the total mark (Biology and Physics).

In addition to the 'Assessment Objectives', the assessment criteria and assignment briefs you'll have encountered thus far often dictate the sequence of ideas within the essay and, along with the tutor's guidance, this schema coaches students towards responding in a set way. For example, take the following Access assignment for psychology:

**Assignment title: Outline and evaluate the causes, effects and treatment of stress (1500 words)**

No	Assessment criteria: the learner can	Achieved?	
		First submission	Second submission
1	Define the term stress and describe potential sources of stress (internal or external stressors) and their biological effects.		
2	Explain and evaluate some of the effects of chronic stress on the body and behaviour.		
3	Evaluate three different treatments/therapies for stress.		

(Openawards, 2016)

Notice here that the student is practically told what to write in their essay, and in what sequence. In fact, one could even match up the 3 aspects of the assessment criteria to the word count and simply allocate 500 words to each criterion. It is no surprise, therefore, that this incredibly formulaic, assessment-driven way of teaching results in extremely formulaic, assessment-driven essays. Indeed, note that two submissions are allowed – a situation that usually leads to the tutor 'coaching' their students towards fulfilling assessment criteria rather than giving them the intellectual space and freedom to explore their own ideas. This level of intervention, coaching and prescriptiveness simply doesn't happen at university. Take a look at the following extract from a typical university mark scheme. As you will see, it is rather less prescriptive and considerably vaguer: