

On Being Smart and Dyslexic

by Richard Crume, MSPE



Photograph by Richard Crume

A few years ago, with the COVID pandemic in full swing, I had some free time on my hands and decided to sort through some old files that had been collecting dust in the garage for many years. To my surprise, I ran across my third-grade report card from the 1950s. What was it doing there after all these years!?

I was about to toss the report card in the trash, but something interesting caught my attention. I noticed that for each of the four quarters of

the school year, my teacher wrote that, while I excelled in most areas, there was one big problem: spelling. I could not spell worth a darn, and my reading comprehension was not great, either. One of my sisters was a poor speller, too—even worse than I—and my father spent many evenings at the kitchen table drilling her on words she should have learned to spell long before. Our teachers must have thought we were not trying hard enough, or maybe we were just not that smart.

In the garage that day, organizing old papers and thinking about our troubles with spelling and reading, it suddenly dawned on me: dyslexia! I did a little internet research and found I had many of the characteristics often associated with dyslexia, and so did my sister. Dyslexia runs in families, and perhaps she and I both had some level of dyslexia all these years and did not even know it.

What is dyslexia? According to the International Dyslexia Association (IDA),

Dyslexia is a language-based learning disability. Dyslexia refers to a cluster of symptoms, which result in people having difficulties with specific language skills, particularly reading. Students with dyslexia usually experience difficulties with other language skills such as spelling, writing, and pronouncing words . . . most people with dyslexia have been found to have problems with identifying the separate speech sounds within a word and/or learning how letters represent those sounds, a key factor in their reading difficulties.¹

In my case, in addition to spelling and reading worries, I had difficulty remembering people's names and learning languages. I occasionally mispronounced words, and sometimes I needed a little extra time responding to questions—problems I continue having today as an older adult. On the other hand, I excelled at math and science, consistently at or above the 99th percentile on nationwide aptitude tests, year after year, in middle and high school, and my IQ was exceptionally high. Dyslexia seemed to be a plausible explanation.

An important fact about dyslexia is that it has nothing to do with intelligence—there is no direct correlation—and people of all intellectual levels, smart and not so smart, may experience it. Dyslexia is not an indicator of low intelligence, just as it does not predict high intelligence. *But if that is so, why does it seem a disproportionate*

number of really smart people have dyslexia, even benefiting from it in their careers?

One possibility is that there is simply more attention paid to highly accomplished people, especially high-profile individuals, who have spoken about how they overcame dyslexia, and this creates the illusion of many more smart people having this condition. Two names that come to mind are Richard Branson, the billionaire entrepreneur and adventurer, and Steven Spielberg, the famous Hollywood filmmaker, both of whom have spoken extensively about being dyslexic. (Albert Einstein is thought to have been dyslexic, too, but not all historians are convinced.)

Another possibility is that, in struggling to adapt to dyslexia and compensate for their reading deficiencies, young people develop a number of cognitive strengths, including enhanced visual-spatial reasoning.² This skill helps them to become more imaginative, creative, inquisitive, and better at problem-solving than many of their non-dyslexic peers. Perhaps this explains the IDA's observation that "People with dyslexia can be very bright. They are often capable or even gifted in areas such as art, computer science, design, drama, electronics, math, mechanics, music, physics, sales, and sports."³ (My sister, who couldn't spell, became an artist; and I am a scientist and engineer.) Dyslexia may not cause people to be exceptionally bright, but because of it, some accomplished individuals may have developed certain cognitive strengths that help them excel in their chosen fields.

Richard Branson is convinced that having dyslexia is an asset. Writing in his blog (virgin.com), he says, "Dyslexia isn't a disadvantage—it's a superpower" and "The world needs to realise that skills inherent to dyslexic people (such as problem-solving, creativity, adaptability and communication) are the most sought-after in every job sector across the globe."⁴ And Steven Spielberg believes the blockbuster movie *Jaws* would never have come to be if he had not had to

overcome dyslexic challenges growing up. Movie-making, he says, was his creative escape.⁵

In our local schools, there may be many more Bransons and Spielbergs just waiting to be recognized and encouraged, who may not even be aware they have special talents. These are the so-called “2e” students—those who are “twice exceptional”—who are both intellectually gifted and learning disabled, including students with dyslexia. Up to 5% of young students may be 2e; but, unfortunately, many go unrecognized because their schools don’t have the resources to evaluate every student and situation.

The IDA reports that as much as 15–20% of the global population may have “some of the symptoms of dyslexia, including slow or inaccurate reading, poor spelling, poor writing,

or mixing up similar words.”⁶ With such a large percentage, there must be more to the phenomenon than an inherited brain deficiency. Instead, perhaps it is evolutionary, leading *Homo sapiens* toward the specialized and collaborative skills needed for the 21st century.⁷ Perhaps, as Branson says, it is a superpower rather than a weakness. Perhaps it is much more than a coincidence that dyslexia and giftedness exist side by side.

Am I dyslexic, even a little bit? Or a lot? To compensate for classroom challenges in my youth, did I develop unique cognitive skills I am not even aware of? At 73 years old, there’s not much point in going through a formal dyslexia assessment—my career and contributions to society are mostly behind me now. But by learning about dyslexia after so many years, I have embarked on a new journey—one of discovery about myself.

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1. “Dyslexia Basics,” International Dyslexia Association, <https://dyslexiaida.org/dyslexia-basics/>. Another definition of dyslexia comes from the Definition Consensus Project, led by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) in partnership with the National Center for Learning Disabilities and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (<https://dyslexiaida.org/definition-consensus-project/>): “Dyslexia is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.”

2. Visual-spatial reasoning is the ability to understand and analyze objects and their relationships in three-dimensional space. It is a strong predictor of success in science, engineering,

and mathematics and essential for problem-solving and critical thinking.


3. “Dyslexia in the Classroom: What Every Teacher Needs To Know,” International Dyslexia Association (2017), 4. According to the IDA, “There may be a causal link between being at risk for dyslexia and giftedness,” but “evidence is not conclusive,” from “Gifted and Dyslexic: Identifying and Instructing the Twice Exceptional Student Fact Sheet,” International Dyslexia Association, <https://dyslexiaida.org/gifted-and-dyslexic-identifying-and-instructing-the-twice-exceptional-student-fact-sheet/>.

4. Richard Branson, “Launching DyslexicU: The World’s First ‘University of Dyslexic Thinking,’” Richard Branson’s Blog (September 24, 2024), <https://www.virgin.com/branson-family/richard-branson-blog/launching-dyslexicu-the-worlds-first-university-of-dyslexic-thinking>. Citing “Intelligence 5.0,” a report by the organization Made By Dyslexia, Branson argues that “today’s AI-driven world needs a new kind of intelligence focused on human skills such as complex problem-

solving, adaptability, resilience, communication and creative thinking. These are skills dyslexics naturally possess but aren't measured by traditional education and workplace tests, which instead focus on dyslexic challenges. Based on this, it [the Intelligence 5.0 report] concludes the outdated systems that are designed to teach and measure intelligence need a rethink—it's time for a new school of thought," Richard Branson's Blog, <https://www.virgin.com/branson-family/richard-branson-blog/launching-dyslexicu-the-worlds-first-university-of-dyslexic-thinking>.

5. Richard H. Smith, "Dyslexia Led Steven Spielberg to Make Movies: How a Kid Found Self-Confidence in a Super 8 Camera and Became a Film Director," *Psychology Today* (June 19, 2025), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/joy-and-pain/202506/dyslexia-led-steven-spielberg-to-make-movies?msocid=3b6c077fc0606442006d15a7c14b6504>.

6. "Dyslexia Basics."

7. For example, Taylor and Vestergaard discuss this evolutionary concept, proposing that "the cognitive differences observed in individuals with DD [developmental dyslexia] are not simply reflective of variation in the population. Rather, the strong clustering between exploratory traits and trade-offs suggests that these differences are part of a pattern of specialization and were selected for during human evolution," in Helen Taylor and Martin David Vestergaard, "Developmental Dyslexia: Disorder or Specialization in Exploration?" *Frontiers in Psychology* 13, no. 889245 (June 2022), doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.889245. 

"You can be extremely bright
and still have dyslexia.
You just have to understand
how you learn
and how you process information.
When you know that,
you can overcome a lot of the
obstacles that come with dyslexia."
—Tim Tebow