

# 16 Terms to Help Understand your Child's Learning Difficulties



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## 16 Terms to Help Understand your Child's Learning Difficulties

If you have a child with language challenges, reading problems or learning difficulties, and you have sought help from their teacher, speech pathologist or other learning professionals, you may have heard some unfamiliar terms.

Words like phonemic awareness, auditory processing, listening comprehension and working memory.

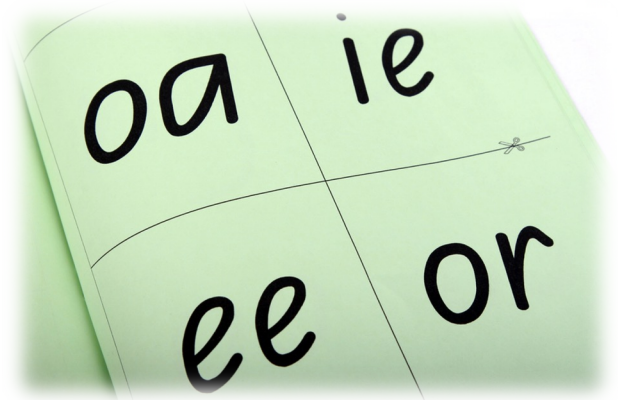
Here are 16 common terms used in discussions about learning difficulties. Once you understand these, you should be able to have more productive discussions with your child's teacher or therapists.



# 1. Phonics

Phonics is the understanding of the relationship between a single letter or combinations of letters (e.g. oo, ow, ch, igh) and the speech sounds they represent.

Phonics is also a method for teaching reading and writing English. The phonics teaching method enables readers to decode written words.



# 2. Phonemes

A phoneme is a speech sound. When we speak English we make 44 different speech sounds. But the English alphabet has only 26 letters. This is one of the reasons why English is a difficult language to learn.

## 3. Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness is the ability to notice, think about and work with individual speech sounds (phonemes) within words.

## 4. Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is the understanding that words are made up of smaller parts (e.g. syllables and sounds).

The term encompasses a number of sound related skills necessary for a person to develop as a reader. As a child develops phonological awareness, she/he not only comes to understand that words are made up of small sound units (phonemes), but also learns that words can be segmented into larger sound “chunks” known as syllables.



## 5. Phonological Accuracy

Phonological accuracy refers to the ability to make correct distinctions based on individual phonemes (e.g., matching words that begin with the same sound) or other aspects of phonology (e.g., rhyming, number of syllables).

Phonological accuracy is critical for listening skills and learning to read. It allows students to make subtle distinctions between similar words (e.g., “picture” vs. “pitcher” or “cease” vs. “seize”), including morphological differences, which can dramatically change a word’s meaning and/or grammatical function (e.g., “known” vs. “unknown” or “clip” vs. “clipped”).



*Pacific or  
Specific?*

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The ability to distinguish and identify speech sounds is critical for learning phonics rules and correctly mapping spoken language to printed text.

A child with good phonological accuracy will more easily develop decoding skills, build knowledge of vocabulary and sentence structure, follow directions, and attend to class discussions, stories, and presentations.

Good phonological accuracy helps with:

- Ability to follow verbal directions
- Listening skills
- Reading skills
- Ability to learn phonics rules



## 6. Phonological Fluency

Phonological fluency refers to the awareness that words are composed of different sounds, along with the ability to identify and manipulate those sounds in a quick and efficient manner.

Phonological fluency is critical for learning to read. It allows students to remember and manipulate sequences of sounds with speed and efficiency. This facilitates both spelling words and decoding them. When students can decode more efficiently, they can then focus more of their cognitive resources (brain power) on comprehension.

A student who has good phonological fluency will also have an easier time learning new words when reading. When confronted with a new word, a student who can accurately sound out the word will be more likely to recognise the word and understand its meaning.

A student who possesses strong phonological fluency will have good:

- Ability to learn phonics rules
- Reading skills
- Spelling

# 7. Phonological Memory

Phonological memory refers to the capacity for holding speech sounds in memory. It is needed for tasks such as comparing phonemes, relating phonemes to letters, or sounding out words. It also helps both listeners and readers to understand sentences because it allows them to remember a series of words in order.

Phonological memory is critical for listening skills and learning to read. It allows students to remember and manipulate sequences of sounds, associate spoken words with written words, remember new words while identifying their meanings, and remember the beginning of a sentence while listening to the end.

The ability to remember speech sounds is essential to determine the correct meaning of sentences where a change in word order causes a change in meaning (e.g., "Dog bites man." vs. "Man bites dog.").



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Correctly remembering word order also supports building accurate representations of sentence structure and acquiring knowledge of syntax.

A student with good phonological memory will more easily develop phonemic awareness and decoding skills, build knowledge of vocabulary and sentence structure, follow directions, and attend to class discussions, stories, and presentations.



## 8. Auditory Processing

Auditory processing refers to what brain does with what it hears. It encompasses various skills such as auditory discrimination, sound localisation, listening in background noise and processing what is heard when the sound is not clear.



When something is wrong with what we do with what we hear, this is known as auditory processing disorder.

It could be that a child has difficulty perceiving speech when there's background noise, or has difficulty locating where a sound is coming from.

Or it could be a problem distinguishing between similar-sounding speech sounds.

## 9. Auditory Sequencing

Auditory sequencing refers to the ability to recognise and remember the order in which a series of sounds is presented. This is critical for mapping sound sequences to letter sequences when decoding or spelling.

Auditory sequencing is crucial to developing language and reading skills. The ability to identify and remember the order of sounds in words is essential for recognising subtle differences between words (e.g., "top" vs. "pot") and for building skills in phonemic awareness and decoding.

A student with good auditory sequencing skills is better able to comprehend and absorb information and become a stronger reader. They will develop good reading and listening skills and will be able to pay attention well in the classroom.



# 10. Auditory Word

Auditory word recognition refers to the ability to accurately identify spoken words by relying on sound cues alone, without the aid of visual or context cues.

Auditory word recognition is critical for listening comprehension and vocabulary building, and thus it is important for reading development. This skill enables students to accurately and efficiently identify words in speech and helps them build correct representations of aurally presented information.

A student with good auditory word recognition skills will more easily attend and respond to directions and class discussions; more easily remember questions, directions, and information; and more easily learn to read and become a better reader.

They will also be more easily able to follow conversations in noisy or distracting situations.

# 11. Listening Accuracy

Listening accuracy refers to the ability to distinguish differences between sounds and to correctly identify sequences of sounds.

Listening accuracy is one of the foundations of language and reading skills. Listening accuracy skills enable students to recognise and discriminate the rapidly changing sounds that are important for discriminating phonemes (the smallest units of speech that distinguish one word from another).

A student with good listening accuracy skills will more easily attend and respond to directions and class discussions; more easily remember questions, directions, and information; and more easily learn to read and become a better reader.



They will be able to:

- Read and write quickly
- Focus on orally presented information
- Follow conversations in noisy or distracting situations.

## 12. Listening

Listening comprehension refers to the ability to understand successive sentences and derive meaning from a story.

Listening comprehension is one of the foundations of language and reading skills. Students must develop good listening comprehension in order to develop more sophisticated language skills. Good listening comprehension enables a student to recognise meanings formed by combinations of words and series of sentences.

A student with good listening comprehension will more easily respond to directions and class discussions; will more easily remember questions and information, and will become a better reader.



A student who possesses good listening comprehension will show good ability to:

- Focus on orally presented information
- Derive meaning from a story
- Respond accurately to directions and questions.

# 13. Sustained Attention

Sustained attention refers to the ability to remain focused on a task while ignoring distractions and refraining from impulsive behaviour.

Sustained attention is crucial to learning. It allows a student to apply all of their cognitive (thinking) resources to a particular task, and to keep that focus long enough to complete the task. This allows them to give their best performance.

A student with good sustained attention skills is better able to:

- Concentrate and stay focused during classroom activities
- Stay on-task
- Follow verbal directions
- Absorb information



# 14. Word Analysis

Word analysis refers to the ability to recognise words, identify multi-syllabic words, recognise the relationship between letters and sounds, and understand letter patterns.

It is one of the fundamental language and reading skills. Good word analysis skills support vocabulary acquisition because it helps students to recognise and learn new words.

Word analysis also supports reading development because it enables students to map sounds to letters.



A student with good word analysis skills will have an easier time sounding out new words, and thus will be more likely to recognise the word and understand its meaning. Likewise, a student who has good word analysis skills will have an easier time making letter-sound associations and will more easily learn to read.



# 15. English Language

English language conventions refers to understanding the elements of the English language, including proper word order, syntax, vocabulary, prefixes and suffixes, plurals, and subject-verb agreement.

A good understanding of English language conventions is important for strong listening comprehension and reading comprehension. Knowledge of English language conventions allows students to understand the different meanings conveyed by different sentence structures and grammatical markers (e.g., plurals, possessives, past-tense forms, and personal pronouns).

Students with a good understanding of English language conventions derive more meaning from what they hear in the classroom, and more easily master reading and writing skills, including:

- Usage of standard English
- Comprehension of written text
- Comprehension for orally presented information
- Ability to respond accurately to questions and directions
- Language expression

# 16. Working Memory

Working memory is where we need to hold information in our mind and do something with that information.

For example in mental arithmetic, in understanding what we read, and many other learning tasks, the child has to listen to or read the information, hold it in their memory and do something with that remembered information – to come up with an answer or understanding of the information.



Good working memory is an essential component for learning.

Many children with reading problems or learning difficulties will benefit from activities to improve their working memory.

# Knowledge & Action

## What can you do to help your child?

Now you know them - 16 terms often used in discussions about language, reading and learning difficulties. Knowledge can be useful, but how can you take action to help your child?

Well, you should certainly now be able to have more productive discussions with learning support professionals who will be able to make recommendations specifically for your child.

You could also consider the Fast ForWord programs for them. These neuroscience based online programs are done at home or in school. They develop working memory, attention, auditory processing & sequencing skills, listening accuracy & comprehension, and phonological skills.

Find out more  
[www.learnfasthq.com](http://www.learnfasthq.com)