

# In Defence of Truth: A reply to 57 Reading Voices on the Issue of Dyslexia

**Steve Dykstra replies to a letter from 57 academics following a program on the US Public Broadcasting System in April 2019, which triggered a debate on the existence of dyslexia as an identifiable condition and whether it can be ameliorated by specific instructional approaches.**

Recently, a collection of professors and others wrote a letter to officials at the Public Broadcasting System, taking issue with reports on dyslexia that aired on PBS. The signatories of this letter are a list of some of the best-known and most influential reading voices of the past several decades. They are past presidents and officials of the International Literacy Association, members of The Reading Hall of Fame, and authors of books and curricula found in most of the schools and nearly all of the universities in North America. The link to the letter, at <https://readingrecovery.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Concern-letter-to-PBS.pdf>, is hosted by the Reading Recovery Council of North America, purveyor of the widely-marketed Reading Recovery intervention program, completing the triangle with the ILA and university professors that has defined reading instruction and policy in this country for the past 40 years. The common purpose of these

partners is to undermine the work of parents and grass roots organizations working to promote the science of reading in opposition to the discredited philosophies, ineffective practices, and failed products the 57 signatories prefer.

The letter makes two arguments: dyslexia is a vague and useless concept describing a condition which they imply may not be real, and there is no agreed upon treatment for dyslexia. They cite three sources in their argument: The American Psychiatric Association, Julian Elliott and Elena Grigorenko's book, *The Dyslexia Debate* (2014), and the International Literacy Association. It is important to note that many of the 57 signatories of the letter are or have been major leaders of the ILA, so they are essentially citing themselves. While there are many scientific sources which solidly dispute the claims in the letter, this reply is focused on the two independent sources the letter cites, which I will address one at a time.

## Dyslexia, the DSM 5, and the American Psychiatric Association

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM 5) is a publication of the American Psychiatric Association. The first substantive argument made in the letter is that the APA expressed ambivalence about the validity of dyslexia. *"That ambivalence is reflected in the American Psychiatric Association's decision to drop dyslexia as a diagnostic category in the current edition of its Diagnostic Statistical Manual, that field's most respected and widely used reference source."* (page 1 of the letter).

Had the APA expressed ambivalence about dyslexia or removed it from the DSM, this would be an important argument. However, it is untrue, and

no matter how many times the signatories or their followers repeat it, it will remain untrue. The APA did not drop dyslexia from the DSM 5, and they freely use the term without ambivalence.



The source of their false claim is a 2013 document from the APA entitled, Specific Learning Disorder (Appendix B) that includes the following sentence: *"The DSM-5 Neurodevelopmental Work Group concluded that the many definitions of dyslexia and dyscalculia meant those terms would not be useful as disorder names or in the diagnostic criteria."* Since that sentence was published 6 years ago, many who dispute dyslexia and reading science have latched on to it to claim the DSM does not include dyslexia and the APA finds the diagnosis problematic.

## The APA did not drop dyslexia from the DSM5, and they freely use the term without ambivalence.

In fact, the sentence only refers to the decision to keep the previous taxonomic structure of the DSM, using the term "Specific Learning Disorder" as an umbrella category which includes more specific impairments in math, decoding, writing, and a variety of other specific skills. Rather than address each of these specific impairments as a category unto itself, the APA chose to maintain the previous structure that treats different learning issues as subtypes of Specific Learning Disorder.

This is abundantly clear if the sentence is seen in fuller context:

*“Just as in DSM-IV, dyslexia will be included in the descriptive text of specific learning disorder. The DSM-5 Neurodevelopmental Work Group concluded that the many definitions of dyslexia and dyscalculia meant those terms would not be useful as disorder names or in the diagnostic criteria.”* As the document clearly states, dyslexia is included, just as it was in the past. The APA did not *“drop dyslexia as a diagnostic category in the current edition of its Diagnostic Statistical Manual”* as the letter claims. If any signatories of the letter wanted to check, they could have looked at page 67 of the DSM 5, which includes the following guidance:

*“Dyslexia is an alternative term used to refer to a pattern of learning difficulties characterized by problems with accurate or fluent word recognition, poor decoding, and poor spelling abilities.”*

Including dyslexia as an alternative term should not be taken as ambivalence for the term. The DSM does not commonly allow alternative terminology. This example, along with similar allowances for dyscalculia and dysgraphia, are among the very few, possibly the only, such allowances. Far from distancing the DSM from dyslexia, it embraces the term by going well outside normal practice, as it did in the previous editions, contrary to the false claim in the letter.

This is all public knowledge, widely published and explained. It is found in the very document the signatories so often cite, and the DSM 5 itself to which they refer, but apparently never read.

If the signatories needed more evidence of the APA's attitude toward dyslexia, they could have reviewed the 2018 APA document on Specific Learning Disorders (Appendix C) that lists the three types of Learning Disorders as “dyslexia,” “dysgraphia,” and “dyscalculia.” The APA uses these allegedly problematic terms with neither ambivalence nor apology. The document uses the term dyslexia eight times, preferring it to alternative terms which are used less often. Furthermore, the APA, recognized as an expert source by the signatories of the letter, refers readers to the International Dyslexia Association, a source the signatories disparage, for more information, but makes no mention of the International Literacy Association, a source the signatories are trying to promote. The APA not only doesn't take the position the letter signatories claim. In important ways, they take the opposite position. This is most striking when we consider

the APA's guidance on the treatment of dyslexia, found in the treatment section of 2018 paper:

*“Research has shown that the most effective treatments for reading disorder are structured, targeted strategies that address phonological awareness, decoding skills, comprehension and fluency.”*

This strikes at the heart of the signatories' second claim: that no way of treating dyslexia has been shown to be most effective. The APA, one of only two independent sources cited in the letter, specifically names an instructional approach which the ILA and signatories of the letter so often publicly dispute.

## The Dyslexia Debate, Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014

This important work argues that the term dyslexia serves little purpose in the educational realm, and may do more harm than good by encouraging excessive effort to distinguish dyslexic children from other struggling readers. The authors do not, as the letter implies, dispute the existence of dyslexia. Instead, they take issue with the possible confusion of dyslexia with other causes of early reading difficulty. While many other scholars and scientists take a different view, there is no doubt that *The Dyslexia Debate* (2014) is an important and serious work of scholarship.

## Research has shown that the most effective treatments for reading disorder are structured, targeted strategies that address phonological awareness, decoding skills, comprehension and fluency'

It must be noted, however, that Elliott and Grigorenko are approaching the issue from both a scientific and practical perspective. Those are two separate debates, but the practical debate is worth understanding in reply to the letter.

The core of Elliott and Grigorenko's practical argument is that spending precious time and resources separating dyslexic children from other struggling readers is wasteful since they all need the same approach, tailored to the needs of each child, built on systematic instruction in the alphabetic principle.

Elliott and Grigorenko are unambiguous as to what that instruction must include. Chapter 4 of the book is a systematic take down of whole language and so-called “balanced” approaches that minimize phonics and related skills.

*“... the suggestion that a common balanced approach is suitable for all children is overly simplistic and potentially misleading... Irrespective of the child's skills, however, it is now widely accepted that a systematic phonics approach usually leads to superior skills when compared to a non-phonics or nonsystematic phonics approach.”* (The Dyslexia Debate, Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014, pp, 129-130)

Rather than trust my own understanding of their work, I wrote to Julian Elliott to check my interpretation of their position. I wrote:

*“Here in the US, and elsewhere I believe, the diagnosis of dyslexia has been seen as the tool for unlocking needed intervention. Sadly, it does not in most cases. These children continue to get mostly the same instruction with a heavy dose of multiple cues and various strategies which minimize and obscure the importance of the alphabetic code. As one reading specialist said to me, she teaches phonics to struggling readers if she sees they really need it, whenever they get stuck on a word and nothing else works. The idea of something more planned and systematic was offensive to her.”*

*For me, the finite resources argument is pierced if we simply build the decoding aspect of instruction around those elements science tells us matter most (phonics, phonology, phoneme awareness, morphology, etc) and stop spending precious resources (including time) on approaches which do far less good.”*

Elliott replied:  
*“Quite agree, Steve.”*

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While I did not reach out to Elena Grigorenko, it is worth mentioning that she serves on the Scientific Board of Directors of the International Dyslexia Association, an organization maligned by the signatories.

The letter cites Elliot and Grigorenko without understanding their work. It takes their questions about the term dyslexia out of context and ignores the reasoning behind them. Elliott and Grigorenko support the kind of instruction many of the signatories reject, the kind of instruction the signatories say is not especially effective in addressing reading difficulties. The only way you can accept Elliott and Grigorenko's argument about dyslexia is to also accept their clear argument that all struggling readers, and all beginning readers, benefit from the same systematic, code-based instruction the letter says is unproven and the signatories of the letter have spent their careers resisting.

## Summary

The 57 signatories of the letter made a number of false claims, including that the APA rejects dyslexia, that the DSM-5 dropped dyslexia as a diagnosis, and that there is no agreed upon best approach to remediating dyslexia. By promoting this misinformation, the signatories themselves are responsible for creating much of the confusion over the term "dyslexia" that they decry. While Elliott and Grigorenko do question the term dyslexia (but not the existence of the disorder) and make important arguments against its use, they do so because all children who struggle to read need the same thing, an approach the letter disputes and many of the signatories have worked against for most or all of their careers.

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We must consider what it says about the state of reading instruction and scholarship that a letter so thick with lies and so thin with facts could attract so many signatures from so many people of influence. By making claims about the DSM and reading instruction which are so clearly untrue, by building an argument on lies and half-truths, the

signatories have revealed the source of major problems, and it is not in the use of the term "dyslexia."

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# LDA Awards

LDA offers a series of annual Awards that are designed to recognise outstanding work in the field of learning difficulties.

These Awards are as follows:

The Mona Tobias Award, which is presented in recognition of an outstanding contribution to the field of learning difficulties in Australia.

The Bruce Wicking Award, which recognises an individual or organisation for innovative programs or practices relating to the teaching of children with learning difficulties.

The Tertiary Student Award, which is presented in recognition of academic excellence and significant research which advances the understanding of theoretical and practical issues in the field of learning difficulties, carried out by a student in the course of their tertiary level studies.

The Rosemary Carter Award, which recognises an outstanding LDA Consultant member who has contributed to the education of struggling students.

There are also two AJLD Awards which are presented by Taylor and Francis, the publishers of the Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties.

These are:

- 1 The Early Career Researcher Award, which is based on the submission of a paper appropriate for publication in the Journal, and
- 2 The Eminent Researcher Award, which is designed to recognise significant contributions by eminent researchers in the field of learning difficulties, and is awarded by invitation.

Further information about these Awards is provided on the LDA website, at <https://www.ldaustralia.org/ldaajld-awards.html>