

# JAN

Job Accommodation Network

Practical Solutions • Workplace Success

## Accommodation and Compliance Series

### Employees with Learning Disabilities

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**ODEP**

Office of Disability  
Employment Policy

A service of the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy

## Preface

The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) is a service of the Office of Disability Employment Policy of the U.S. Department of Labor. JAN makes documents available with the understanding that the information be used solely for educational purposes. The information is not intended to be legal or medical advice. If legal or medical advice is needed, appropriate legal or medical services should be contacted.

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Updated 10/09/15.

# JAN'S ACCOMMODATION AND COMPLIANCE SERIES

## Introduction

JAN's Accommodation and Compliance Series is designed to help employers determine effective accommodations and comply with Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Each publication in the series addresses a specific medical condition and provides information about the condition, ADA information, accommodation ideas, and resources for additional information.

The Accommodation and Compliance Series is a starting point in the accommodation process and may not address every situation. Accommodations should be made on a case by case basis, considering each employee's individual limitations and accommodation needs. Employers are encouraged to contact JAN to discuss specific situations in more detail.

For information on assistive technology and other accommodation ideas, visit JAN's Searchable Online Accommodation Resource (SOAR) at <http://AskJAN.org/soar>.

## Information about Learning Disabilities

### What are learning disabilities?

Learning Disabilities (LD) refer to a number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning.

Learning disabilities result from impairments in one or more processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning. Learning disabilities range in severity and may interfere with the acquisition and use of oral language, reading, written language, and mathematics. Learning disabilities may also involve difficulties with organizational skills, social perception, social interaction and perspective taking. (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2015)

Although learning disabilities occur in very young children, the disorders are usually not recognized until the child reaches school age. Learning disabilities are a lifelong condition; they are not outgrown or cured, though many people develop coping techniques through special education, tutoring, medication, therapy, personal development, or adaptation of learning skills. Approximately 4.6 million adults in the United States have learning disabilities (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2014).

### What types of learning disabilities are there?

Learning disabilities can be divided into three broad categories with more specific disorders included in each (NCLD, 2015). The specific disorders are described below.

**Specific Learning Disability:** A disorder in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations. Included in this category are expressive writing and expressive language disorders.

**Dyslexia** is the term associated with specific learning disabilities in reading. Although features of a learning disability in reading vary from person to person, common characteristics include the difficulty with individual sounds in words, and difficulties with word decoding, fluency, rate of reading, rhyming, spelling, vocabulary, comprehension and written expression. Dyslexia is the most prevalent and well-recognized of the subtypes of specific learning disabilities.

**Dyscalculia** is the term associated with specific learning disabilities in math. Although features of a learning disability in math vary from person to person, common characteristics include difficulty with counting, learning number facts and doing math calculations, difficulty with measurement, telling time, counting money, estimating number quantities, mental math and problem-solving strategies.

**Dysgraphia** is the term associated with specific learning disabilities in writing. This term is used to capture both the physical act of writing and the quality of written expression. Dysgraphia can manifest in difficulties with spelling, putting thoughts on paper, and poor handwriting, including difficulty in forming letters or writing within a defined space, organizing thoughts on paper, keeping track of thoughts already written down, and difficulty with syntax, structure, and grammar.

### **Associated Deficits and Disorders**

While not designated as specific subtypes of learning disabilities, there are a number of areas of information processing that are commonly associated with LD (NCLD, 2014).

**Auditory Processing Disorder** is the term used to describe a weakness in the ability to understand and use auditory information. Individuals may have difficulties with noticing, comparing and distinguishing the distinct and separate sounds in words, picking out important sounds from a noisy background, recalling information presented orally, understanding and recalling the order of sounds and words, and difficulty with spelling, reading and written expression.

**Visual Processing Disorder** is the term used to describe a weakness in the ability to understand and use visual information. Individuals often have difficulty noticing and comparing features of different items and distinguishing one item from another, distinguishing a shape or printed character from its background, distinguishing the order of symbols, words or images, difficulty engaging in short-term and long-term recall of visual information, and understanding how objects are positioned in space.

**Non-Verbal Learning Disabilities** is the term used to describe the characteristics of individuals who have unique learning and behavioral profiles that may overlap with dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia but that differ in significant ways. Most notably, these individuals often have strengths in the areas of verbal expression, vocabulary,

reading, comprehension, auditory memory and attention to detail, yet have difficulty with math computation and problem solving, visual-spatial tasks and motor coordination, reading body language and social cues, as well as seeing the “big picture” in social and academic contexts

**Executive Functioning Deficits** is the term used to describe weaknesses in the ability to plan, organize, strategize, remember details and manage time and space efficiently. Executive functioning deficits are often seen in individuals who have a learning disability.

### **What causes learning disabilities?**

Learning disabilities arise from neurological differences in brain structure and function and affect a person’s ability to receive, store, process, retrieve or communicate information. While the specific nature of these brain-based disorders is still not well understood, considerable progress has been made in mapping some of the characteristic difficulties of LD to specific brain regions and structures.

Progress has also been made in understanding the interface between genetics and LD, with documentation of LD, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and related disorders occurring with considerable frequency within members of the same families.

Learning disabilities may also be a consequence of insults to the developing brain before or during birth, involving such factors as significant maternal illness or injury, drug or alcohol use during pregnancy, maternal malnutrition, low birth weight, oxygen deprivation and premature or prolonged labor. Postnatal events resulting in LD might include traumatic injuries, severe nutritional deprivation or exposure to poisonous substances such as lead. (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2014).

Only qualified professionals who have been trained to identify learning disabilities can perform a formal evaluation to diagnose learning disabilities. Such professionals may be clinical or educational psychologists, school psychologists, neuro-psychologists, or learning disabilities specialists. Adults who suspect they have learning disabilities should seek out professionals who have training or direct experience working with and evaluating adults with learning disabilities. Local school districts can help with referrals to qualified professionals who can diagnose a learning disability, universities that have a doctoral psychology program will do testing as part of their training program, and clients of vocational rehabilitation may be evaluated as part of their assessment process.

## **Learning Disabilities and the Americans with Disabilities Act**

### **Is a learning disability a disability under the ADA?**

The ADA does not contain a list of medical conditions that constitute disabilities. Instead, the ADA has a general definition of disability that each person must meet (EEOC Regulations . . . , 2011). Therefore, some people with learning disabilities will have a disability under the ADA and some will not.

A person has a disability if he/she has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a record of such an impairment, or is regarded as having such an impairment (EEOC Regulations . . . , 2011). For more information about how to determine whether a person has a disability under the ADA, go to JAN's Accommodation and Compliance Series: The ADA Amendments Act of 2008 of 2008 at <http://AskJAN.org/bulletins/adaaa1.htm>. Also visit <http://AskJAN.org/corner/vol05iss04.htm>.

### **Accommodating Employees with Learning Disabilities**

Note: People with learning disabilities may experience some of the limitations discussed below, but seldom experience all of them. Also, the degree of limitation will vary among individuals. Be aware that not all people with learning disabilities need accommodations to perform their jobs and many others may only need a few accommodations. The following is only a sample of the accommodation possibilities available. Numerous other accommodation solutions may exist.

#### **Questions to Consider:**

1. What limitations is the employee with the learning disability experiencing?
2. How do these limitations affect the employee and the employee's job performance?
3. What specific job tasks are problematic as a result of these limitations?
4. What accommodations are available to reduce or eliminate these problems? Are all possible resources being used to determine possible accommodations?
5. Has the employee with the learning disability been consulted regarding possible accommodations?
6. Once accommodations are in place, would it be useful to meet with the employee with the learning disability to evaluate the effectiveness of the accommodations and to determine whether additional accommodations are needed?
7. Do supervisory personnel and employees need training regarding learning disabilities?

## **Accommodation Ideas:**

**Reading:** Employees with learning disabilities may have limitations that make it difficult to read text. Because it can be difficult to visually discern letters and numbers, these characters may appear jumbled or reversed. Entire words or strings of letters may be unrecognizable.

Reading from a paper copy:

- Convert text to audio
- Provide larger print
- Double space the text of print material
- Use color overlays (Irlen lenses) to help make the text easier to read
- Provide materials that are type-written, in a font that is not italicized; if handwritten material must be provided, use print, not cursive
- Have someone read the document aloud to the employee
- Scan the documents into a computer and use Optical Character Recognition (OCR), which will read the information aloud
- Use a reading pen, which is a portable device that scans a word and provides auditory feedback

Reading from a computer screen:

- Use voice output software, also called screen reading software, which highlights and reads aloud the information from the computer screen
- Use form-generating software that computerizes order forms, claim forms, applications, equations, and formula fields
- Use an on-screen "ruler" or strip or screen highlighting software to help focus and read from a computer screen.
- Alter color scheme on computer screen to suit the employee's visual preferences
- Adjust the font on computer screen to suit the employee's visual preferences

**Spelling:** Employees with learning disabilities might have difficulty spelling, which can manifest itself in letter reversals, letter transposition, omission of letters or words, or illegible handwriting.

- Allow use of reference materials such as dictionary or thesaurus
- Provide electronic and talking dictionaries as well as apps
- Use word prediction software that displays a list of words that typically follow the word that was entered in a document
- Use word completion software that displays sample words after someone starts typing part of a word
- Allow buddy, coworker, or supervisor to proofread written material

**Writing:** Employees with learning disabilities might have difficulty with the cognitive or the physical process of writing.

Cognitive process of writing: Employees with learning disabilities might have difficulty organizing a written project, identifying themes or ideas, structuring sentences or paragraphs, or identifying and/or correcting grammar errors.

- Use Inspiration software, a computerized graphic organizer
- Use writing/editing software such as Texthelp Read & Write Gold or WhiteSmoke to assist with spelling, reading, and grammar
- Provide electronic/talking dictionaries and spellcheckers
- Create written forms to prompt the employee for information needed
- Allow the employee to create a verbal response instead of a written response
- Permit use of reference books such as a thesaurus or dictionary

Physical process of writing: Employees with learning disabilities may have difficulty with the physical process of writing. It may be difficult to fill in blanks, bubble in dots, line up numbers or words in a column, on a line, or within a margin. Handwriting may be illegible.

- Provide writing aids
- Use line guides and column guides
- Supply bold line paper
- Permit typewritten response instead of handwritten response
- Allow use of personal computers, laptops, and tablets
- Use Inspiration software, a computerized graphic organizer
- Use speech recognition software that recognizes the employee's voice and changes it to text on the computer screen

**Mathematics:** An employee with a learning disability may have difficulty recognizing or identifying numbers, remembering sequencing of numbers, understanding the mathematical sign or function (whether symbol or word) or performing mathematical calculations accurately and efficiently.

- Use scratch paper to work out math problems
- Permit use of fractional, decimal, statistical, or scientific calculators
- Use calculators or adding machines with large display screens
- Use construction calculator, such as Jobber 6
- Use pre-measurement guides or jigs
- Post mathematical tables at desk or in work area
- Provide talking tools such as tape measures, scales, watches, and calculators

**Speaking/Communicating:** Employees with learning disabilities may have difficulty communicating with co-workers or supervisors. For employees with learning disabilities,

poor communication may be the result of underdeveloped social skills, lack of experience/exposure in the workforce, shyness, intimidation, behavior disorders, or low self-esteem.

- To help facilitate communication, provide advance notice of topics to be discussed in meeting
- To reduce or eliminate anxiety, provide advance notice of date of meeting when employee is required to speak
- Allow employee to provide written response in lieu of verbal response
- To reduce or eliminate the feeling of intimidation, allow employee to have a friend or coworker attend meeting

**Organizational Skills:** An employee with a learning disability may have difficulty getting organized or staying organized.

- Use daily, weekly, and monthly task lists
- Use calendar with automated reminders to highlight meetings and deadlines
- Use electronic organizers, mobile devices, and / or apps
- Divide large assignments into smaller tasks and goals
- Use a color coding scheme to prioritize tasks and identify materials
- Hire a job coach or a professional organizer
- Assign a mentor to assist employee
- Build organization skills by attending time management workshops, like those offered by Franklin Covey

**Memory:** An employee with a learning disability may have memory deficits that affect the ability to recall something that is seen or heard. This may result in an inability to recall facts, names, passwords, and telephone numbers, even if such information is used regularly.

- Provide written as well as verbal instructions
- Provide written checklists
- Use a wall calendar
- Use a daily or weekly task list
- Provide verbal prompts and reminders
- Use electronic organizers, hand held devices, and /or apps
- Allow the employee to record meetings and trainings
- Provide printed minutes of meetings and trainings
- Allow additional training time for new duties
- Provide a mentor for daily guidance
- Provide reminders of important deadlines via e-mails, memos, and weekly supervision
- Use notebooks, planners, or sticky notes to record information for easy retrieval
- Provide cues to assist in location of items by using labels, color coding, or bulletin boards

**Time Management / Completing Tasks:** An employee with a learning disability may have difficulty managing time. This can affect the employee's ability to organize or prioritize tasks, adhere to deadlines, maintain productivity standards, or work efficiently.

- Make daily TO-DO lists and check items off as they are completed
- Provide organizational tools such as electronic schedulers, recorders, software organizers, calendars, watches, and apps
- Divide large assignments into smaller tasks and steps
- Schedule weekly meetings with supervisor, manager, or mentor to determine if goals are being met
- Remind employee of important deadlines
- Assign a mentor to assist with determining goals, providing daily guidelines, reminding of important deadlines
- Consider providing training on time management

**Social Skills:** Employees with learning disabilities may have difficulty exhibiting appropriate social skills on the job. This may be the result of underdeveloped social skills, lack of experience/exposure in the workforce, shyness, intimidation, behavior disorders, or low self-esteem. This can affect the employee's ability to adhere to conduct standards, work effectively with supervisors, or interact with coworkers or customers.

Behavior:

- To reduce incidents of inappropriate behavior, thoroughly review conduct policy with employee
- Provide concrete examples to explain inappropriate behavior
- Provide concrete examples to explain consequences in a disciplinary action
- To reinforce appropriate behavior, recognize and reward appropriate behavior

Coworker Interaction:

- Provide sensitivity training to promote disability awareness
- If feasible, allow employee to work from home
- Help employee "learn the ropes" by provide a mentor
- Make employee attendance at social functions optional
- Allow employee to transfer to another workgroup, shift, or department
- Encourage the employee to walk away from frustrating situations and confrontations

Working Effectively:

Two common issues that JAN receives inquiries on are: (1) what accommodations will work for individuals with learning disabilities when workplaces are implementing

substantial changes, and (2) what accommodations will help supervisors work effectively with individuals with learning disabilities. Many accommodation ideas are born from effective management techniques. When organizations are implementing workplace changes, it is important that key personnel recognize that a change in the environment or in supervisors may be difficult. Maintaining open channels of communication to ensure any transitions are smooth, and providing short weekly or monthly meetings with employees to discuss workplace issues can be helpful.

Supervisors can also implement management techniques that support an inclusive workplace culture while simultaneously providing accommodations. Techniques include the following:

- Provide positive praise and reinforcement,
- Provide day-to-day guidance and feedback,
- Provide written job instructions via email,
- Develop clear expectations of responsibilities and the consequences of not meeting performance standards,
- Schedule consistent meetings with employee to set goals and review progress,
- Allow for open communication,
- Establish written long term and short term goals,
- Develop strategies to deal with conflict,
- Develop a procedure to evaluate the effectiveness of the accommodation,
- Educate all employees on their right to accommodations,
- Provide sensitivity training to coworkers and supervisors,
- Do not mandate that employees attend work related social functions, and
- Encourage all employees to move non-work related conversations out of work areas.

### **Situations and Solutions:**

A new-hire telemarketer had deficits in reading comprehension. He participated in CBT (computer-based training), which included watching a customer service tutorial, then completing timed quizzes on the computer. To accommodate this employee, the employer adjusted the color scheme, resolution, and font size of the computer screen, making the appearance of material easier to view. The employee held a ruler to the computer screen to “stay on the line” when reading test questions. The employee was allowed to watch the tutorial over again, and was given extra time to complete quizzes.

A teacher with a learning disability had difficulty spelling words correctly on the board. The employer provided a laptop computer and a PC projection system that projected the written information onto a screen or wall, negating the need to write on the board. With the help of word prediction software, the teacher was able to display correctly spelled information to her students.

A researcher in a technology company had expressive writing disorder. The employee’s job tasks included gathering information for written reports. To accommodate this

employee, Inspiration software was provided to help organize, prioritize, and then outline the information for reports. The employer also provided a hard copy dictionary and thesaurus.

An employee who works in a manufacturing environment had a learning disability. The employee had difficulty remembering task sequences of the job. The supervisor provided written instructions, whereby each major task was broken down into smaller, sequential sub-parts. Each subpart was color-coded for easy reference (green means start, red means stop).

An employee who had expressive language disorder had difficulty communicating with the supervisor. This employee preferred to read communication, then respond in writing. The supervisor adjusted the method of supervision, whereby communication with this employee occurred through email instead of face to face.

A building contractor with dyscalculia was inefficient when creating job quotes. To ensure the mathematical calculations were accurate, the employee spent extra time “figuring” and “double-checking” the numbers. The site supervisor purchased the Jobber 6 contractor’s calculator to help the employee “figure” fractions, triangles, circles, area (and more) efficiently and accurately.

A clerical worker with auditory processing disorder worked for a large employer where different work assignments were handed out daily. To ensure the job assignment was accurate, the employee used a voice recorder to capture information about the work assignment, such as the job location, the supervisor’s name, and tasks to be completed. To refresh his memory, the employee was able to listen to this recorded information whenever necessary, sometimes several times each day.

### **Products:**

There are numerous products that can be used to accommodate people with limitations. JAN's Searchable Online Accommodation Resource (SOAR) at <http://AskJAN.org/soar/> is designed to let users explore various accommodation options. Many product vendor lists are accessible through this system; however, upon request JAN provides these lists and many more that are not available on the Web site. Contact JAN directly if you have specific accommodation situations, are looking for products, need vendor information, or are seeking a referral.

## Resources

### **Job Accommodation Network**

West Virginia University  
PO Box 6080  
Morgantown, WV 26506-6080  
Toll Free: (800)526-7234  
TTY: (877)781-9403  
Fax: (304)293-5407  
jan@AskJAN.org  
<http://AskJAN.org>

The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) is a free consulting service that provides information about job accommodations, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and the employability of people with disabilities.

### **Office of Disability Employment Policy**

200 Constitution Avenue, NW, Room S-1303  
Washington, DC 20210  
Toll Free: (866)633-7365  
TTY: (877)889-5627  
Fax: (202)693-7888  
<http://www.dol.gov/odep/>

The Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) is an agency within the U.S. Department of Labor. ODEP provides national leadership to increase employment opportunities for adults and youth with disabilities while striving to eliminate barriers to employment.

### **American Speech-Language-Hearing Association**

2200 Research Blvd  
Rockville, MD 20850  
Toll Free: (800)638-8255  
Direct: (301)296-5700  
Fax: (301)296-8580  
TTY: (301)296-5650  
actioncenter@asha.org  
<http://www.asha.org>

Promotes the interests of, and provide the highest quality services for, professions in audiology, speech-language pathology, and speech and hearing science; and an advocate for people with communication disabilities.

**Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development**

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NICHDInformationResourceCenter@mail.nih.gov  
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The mission of the NICHD is to ensure that every person is born healthy and wanted, that women suffer no harmful effects from reproductive processes, and that all children have the chance to achieve their full potential for healthy and productive lives, free from disease or disability, and to ensure the health, productivity, independence, and well-being of all people through optimal rehabilitation.

**International Dyslexia Association**

40 York Rd., 4th Floor  
Baltimore, MD 21204  
Direct: (410)296-0232  
Fax: (410)321-5069  
<http://www.interdys.org>

The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) is a non-profit organization dedicated to helping individuals with dyslexia, their families, and the communities that support them. IDA is the oldest learning disabilities organization in the nation. The mission is to provide the most comprehensive forum for parents, educators, and researchers to share their experiences, methods, and knowledge.

**Learning Disabilities Association of America**

4156 Library Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15234-1349  
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[info@ldaamerica.org](mailto:info@ldaamerica.org)  
<http://www.ldaamerica.org>

LDA is the largest non-profit volunteer organization advocating for individuals with learning disabilities. LDA publishes materials on issues of importance to adults with learning disabilities on adult literacy, parenting, and special populations. A special series of bulletins address civil rights and accommodations in various settings, including college, the workplace and the military.

**National Center for Learning Disabilities**

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The NCLD works to ensure that the nation's 15 million children, adolescents and adults with learning disabilities have every opportunity to succeed in school, work, and life. NCLD provides essential information to parents, professionals, and individuals with learning disabilities, promotes research and programs to foster effective learning and advocates for policies to protect and strengthen educational rights and opportunities.

**National Institute of Mental Health**

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NIMH offers a variety of publications and other educational resources to help people with mental disorders, the general public, mental health and health care practitioners, and researchers gain a better understanding of mental illnesses and the research programs of the NIMH. All publications and educational materials are written by science writers, in collaboration with NIMH scientists and outside reviewers.

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