Guidance for marking scripts for students with Specific Learning Differences

According to the Equality Act (2010), Higher Education Institutions have an anticipatory duty to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled students are not less favourably treated. In this respect, the marking system in these guidelines should be seen as a levelling of the playing field rather than leniency.

These guidelines are intended to assist academic staff when assessing the written work of students who have diagnosed specific learning differences, such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or have a neurodiverse condition such as ADHD, and have 'Marking Guidelines' as a requirement within their Individual Learning Plan (ILP). They are intended to avoid penalising students' written work for features associated with their specific learning difficulty. However, whilst language-based errors may not be a barrier to demonstrating knowledge, understanding and ideas, in certain subjects these guidelines should not compromise competence standards, nor core learning outcomes.

General guidelines for marking

There are a range of common characteristics that may be evident in the written work of students with a specific learning difference, for example, there are more likely to be spelling errors, even in word processed work. Punctuation, grammar and sentence structure may be weaker. Proofreading skills may be unreliable and language structure may be less sophisticated with omitted or repeated information, words or phrases.

> ➤ Read quickly initially, to assess for ideas, understanding and knowledge to identify what the student intended to write rather than what they actually wrote; in other words, listen to what they mean rather than what they say. It is often possible to understand a piece of writing by a student despite its surface errors or structural flaws.
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> ➤ Aim for a clear separation between the content of the work and language errors, to ensure there is no subjective interpretation of the student's ability.
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> ➤ Mark principally for content and understanding - disregarding, as far as possible,

errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation.

> If you are commenting on spelling, grammar and punctuation select a sample section rather than correcting the entire piece of work and inform the student that this is your approach. This could be time consuming and wasteful, and potentially demoralising for the student.

> Avoid penalising for lack of structure. If a student has produced work which appears to contain all the right elements but does not introduce them in a clear logical order, read for the underlying message to judge the student's understanding and assess their performance against the learning outcomes.

> Be very clear about the marking criteria, especially in terms of spelling, grammar and punctuation.

> Avoid using red to denote errors, due to negative associations that the student may have encountered in the past.

> Ensure that feedback is clear, constructive and sensitive to the student's difficulties. Write legibly, avoiding complex sentence structures.

> When giving feedback it is often particularly useful to give examples of how the work should be structured or worded.

Error analysis marking

Even if you are marking without penalising for mistakes in the technical use of language, students do need help to develop their written English skills. The following marking system will help a student to aim towards independent learning, as long as it is augmented with explanations, examples and models of good practice.

Error analysis marking encourages the student to find and correct errors identified by a tutor through a coded mark in the margin e.g. **Sp** - spelling, **G** -grammar, **SS** - sentence structure, **P** - punctuation, **V** - vocabulary, **O** - word omission, **R** - repetition, **T** - tense.

Using this guidance the student can examine the line of writing, identify the highlighted error and attempt to correct it. Once a student learns to identify particular types of error, they can begin to check their own work and re-draft accordingly

Viva voce examinations

The difficulties experienced by students with specific learning differences which may affect their performance during viva assessment can include:

• Problems ordering sequentially

• Easily losing their place in text

• Difficulties organising ideas

• Short-term memory challenges can result in forgetting questions

• A student may find an assessment stressful due to past negative experiences

General guidelines for viva assessments

➢ **Questions** - Ensure that questions are presented clearly and that wording is unambiguous. They should address a single point and not have multiple parts. Be prepared to repeat or break questions down and allow thinking time for responses, where necessary.

➢ Consider that the student may show signs of apparent stress and anxiety. Extra time may be required to allow for challenges affecting organisation and sequencing.

➢ Consider that the student may experience difficulties reading aloud from notes and lack fluency.

➢ Consider providing short breaks to allow the student to refocus.

➢ Mark for content rather than fluency.

It may also be helpful to offer the student the opportunity to discuss the viva with staff prior to the assessment and that it is made clear to them what will be expected of them during the viva.

Proofreading

Proofreading remains the responsibility of the student. Whilst students with specific learning differences may struggle to identify errors or opportunities for improvement within their work they are advised to seek support from the following areas:

➢ Assistive technology/software for checking, for example Grammarly, Studiosity (all students are advised to check the University Guidance on use of any Generative AI tools as some features of supporting assistive technologies may fall under this category)

➢ Text-to-Speech software, for read-back support

➢ Specialist Study Skills support - if a student is in receipt of funding, for example Disabled Students' Allowances

➢ Study Zone who offer one-to-one drop ins and electronic resources ; https://www.exeter.ac.uk/students/studyzone/

➢ Specialist PhD support; the Doctoral College may have recommended proofreading support available