

The Upside of Dyslexia

by ReadWorks

We live in a society where reading is very important-not just for school, but for survival. (Think street signs, subway maps, medicine labels, and allergy labels on foods...) So life can be hard for people with dyslexia. *Dyslexia* is a learning disability that affects the way you see, hear, and express language-and according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, it is the most common learning disability. However, learning to cope with dyslexia can also equip people with the kinds of survival skills and personality traits that can help them to succeed later in life.

Says Emerson Dickman, president of the International Dyslexia Association in Baltimore: "Individuals who have difficulty reading and writing tend to deploy other strengths. They rely on mentors, and as a result, become very good at reading other people and delegating duties to them. They become adept at using visual strengths to solve problems."

Take, for example, Richard Branson, the successful founder of Virgin Atlantic Airways, who credits his dyslexia as his "greatest strength." As he explains it, he "got bored easily" in school because he couldn't read well, and teachers thought he was simply "lazy and not very clever." So he spent most of his time visualizing all the things he would do when he left school. After launching his first business at 16, he went on to start eight different companies and amass billions of dollars. "On one of my last days at school, the headmaster said I would either end up in prison or become a millionaire," Branson recalls. "That was quite a startling prediction, but in some respects he was right!"

According to Julie Logan, a professor of entrepreneurship at the Cass Business School in London, Branson's story is far from unique: in a 2007 survey of U.S. entrepreneurs, she found that 35 percent of them identified themselves as dyslexic.

"We found that dyslexics who succeed had overcome an awful lot in their lives by developing compensatory skills," says Logan. "If you tell your friends and acquaintances that you plan to start a business, you'll hear over and over, 'It won't work. It can't be done.' But dyslexics are extraordinarily creative about maneuvering their way around problems."

Well-known journalist Anderson Cooper, who frequently visits battle-torn areas and conducts interviews about tough subjects, knows this fact firsthand. Diagnosed as dyslexic as a child, he would "see some letters backward," and relied on the help of a reading instructor to tackle challenging books by authors like Joseph Conrad. "I don't think it's an accident that I became a war correspondent," Cooper says. "I'm interested in stories of survival: how some people make it through desperate times and others don't."

The television and film world, with its focus on visuals and emotions, boasts a surprising number of other dyslexic superstars. For example, Whoopi Goldberg, an Oscar-winning actress and comedian, was diagnosed with dyslexia after suffering through her school years without being able to understand the books she read.

"You can never change the effect that the words 'dumb' and 'stupid' have on young people," says Goldberg. However, she says, "I knew I wasn't stupid, and I knew I wasn't dumb. My mother told me that."

Now, Goldberg defines herself as a person who believes that "it is okay to feel differently than the pack." When asked about what it takes to be successful, Goldberg says, "We're born with success. It is only others who point out our failures and what they attribute to us as failure."

Clearly, the experiences dyslexic people can have in facing rejection, overcoming obstacles, and thinking visually and creatively can serve them well throughout life, even if they still struggle to read. And like Branson and Cooper, Goldberg discovered early on that she had these kinds of strengths; she's been acting in plays since age seven.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What is the most common learning disability according to the American Academy of Pediatrics?

- A. dysgraphia
- B. dyslexia
- C. dyscalculia
- D. dyspraxia

2. What does the author describe in the passage?

- A. entrepreneurs who identify themselves as dyslexic
- B. how Anderson Cooper became a war correspondent
- C. celebrities who are coping with their dyslexia
- D. how Richard Branson founded Virgin Atlantic Airways

3. Richard Branson was not very successful in school. What evidence from the passage best supports this conclusion?

- A. Branson's teachers thought he was lazy and not very smart.
- B. Branson credits dyslexia as "his greatest strength."
- C. Branson spent his time visualizing what he would do when he left school.
- D. Branson launched his first business at sixteen and started eight companies.

4. Why might Whoopi Goldberg have been called "dumb" or "stupid"?

- A. because she thought she could become a famous actress
- B. because she was not as intelligent as her classmates
- C. because she played the role of a teapot in her first play
- D. because she could not understand the books she read

5. What is this passage mostly about?

- A. how Whoopi Goldberg learned to live with dyslexia
- B. how coping with dyslexia can help people succeed
- C. how Anderson Cooper's dyslexia affected his career
- D. why many people with dyslexia work in television and film

6. Read the following sentences: "We found that dyslexics who succeed had overcome an awful lot in their lives by developing **compensatory skills**," says Logan. "If you tell your friends and acquaintances that you plan to start a business, you'll hear over and over, 'It won't work. It can't be done.' But dyslexics are extraordinarily creative about maneuvering their way around problems."

As used in this sentence, what does the phrase "**compensatory skills**" most nearly mean?

- A. skills that are not necessary for life
- B. skills that can only be gained from practice
- C. skills that make up for a weakness
- D. skills that are taught in textbooks

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Dyslexic people have trouble reading and understanding text, _____ they often develop visual strengths to solve problems.

- A. so
- B. after
- C. for example
- D. otherwise

8. As a learning disability, what does dyslexia affect?

9. According to Dickman, what strengths do people with dyslexia tend to develop?

10. "Clearly, the experiences dyslexic people can have in facing rejection, overcoming obstacles, and thinking visually and creatively can serve them well throughout life, even if they still struggle to read."

Explain how the obstacles and difficulties faced by people with dyslexia can actually help them to succeed. Support your answer using information from the passage.
