



Dyslexia & Music: Supporting Students with Dyslexia in the Music Classroom

- Tara J. Chapman, M.S., AMS-EL, CALT-QI

Understanding Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a **specific learning disability** that affects the accurate and fluent reading of words, spelling, and decoding of written language. It exists along a continuum of severity and persists even with high-quality instruction.

- **Key Features:** Difficulty recognizing words automatically, challenges with spelling and decoding, and slow or labored reading.
- **Causes:** A complex interplay of **genetic**, **neurobiological**, and **environmental** factors.
- **Early Language Connection:** Weaknesses in oral language often appear before reading problems.

Signs and Risk Factors

Primary Red Flags

- Misreading or guessing at words
- Poor spelling and limited word recognition
- Slow, effortful reading
- Reliance on pictures or context to identify words

Underlying Processing Challenges

- *Phonological* and *morphological* processing difficulties
- *Weak working memory* and difficulty following multi-step directions

Secondary Consequences

- Reading comprehension problems
- Limited vocabulary growth and background knowledge
- Writing struggles (dysgraphia)
- Social or emotional challenges, such as frustration or low confidence

Dyslexia and Music Learning

Students with dyslexia may experience parallel challenges in learning music—especially in sound-symbol decoding, sequencing, and fluency.

Challenge Area	Impact on Music Learning	Helpful Strategies
Auditory / Phonological Processing	Trouble matching sounds to notes or rhythm	Call-and-response, clapping, vocalizing scales, and metronome use
Visual Tracking	Losing place on staff, confusion left/right	Color-code notes, enlarge print, simplify page layout
Coordination (Rhythm & Timing)	Difficulty synchronizing hands or maintaining tempo	Rhythm games, break pieces into sections, and count aloud
Decoding Symbols	Confusing note direction or duration	Flashcards, color patterns, repeated practice
Working Memory	Forgetting note sequences or patterns	Chunk tasks, preview lessons, and use visual cues
Learning Vocabulary	Slow recall of terms (tempo, clef, octave)	Visuals, vocabulary, consistent review



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Effective Instructional Strategies

Multimodal (Multisensory-VAKT) Teaching

Engage all learning pathways - visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile. *See it. Hear it. Say it. Write it.*

Direct & Explicit Instruction

Model new skills, provide guided practice, and offer immediate feedback using clear routines.

Systematic & Cumulative Instruction

Begin with simple concepts and progress gradually, reviewing them often to reinforce memory.

Automaticity & Practice

Encourage repetition and overlearning to free cognitive resources for musical expression.

Synthetic & Analytic Approaches

- *Synthetic*: Teach how parts form a whole (notes → melody).
- *Analytic*: Teach how a whole breaks into parts (melody → notes).

Strengths and Encouragement

Students with dyslexia can show exceptional **creativity**, **reasoning**, and **auditory learning** abilities. Many excel in **improvisation**, **composition**, and **performance**.

Encouragement Tips

- Celebrate small successes and persistence
- Build confidence through positive reinforcement
- Foster a growth mindset
- Show empathy - students with dyslexia can empathize deeply with others

Key Takeaway

With structured, multimodal instruction and patient encouragement, students with dyslexia can thrive in the music classroom, developing confidence, joy, and a lifelong love of learning through music.