

# Voices of Dyslexia

## TRAGEDIES & TRIUMPHS

*The following profiles are the personal stories of  
people with dyslexia.*

*They have been written as they were told.  
Some people preferred to use a fictitious name.*

Produced by  
the Canadian Dyslexia Association  
in partnership with  
the Canadian Human Rights Commission

**REAL PEOPLE**

# *Voices of Dyslexia*

TRAGEDIES & TRIUMPHS

Contents	Page
PREFACE	1
INTRODUCTION	2
FOREWORD	3
Sent to psychiatric centre	4
Peter - 23 years old	5
Canadian scientist	6
Computer expert	7
Triumph of ability	9
CFL Hall of Famer	10
Steven - 18 years old	11
Triumph of determination	12
Try harder	13
ADVICE FOR PARENTS	15
TIPS FOR TEACHERS	16
TIPS FOR EMPLOYERS OF PEOPLE WITH DYSLEXIA	17

## **PREFACE**

The pages that follow tell the stories *of* real people who, in their own words, explain what it is like to face prejudice and barriers due to a disability called dyslexia.

Although dyslexia affects five million people - one out of every six Canadians -- not many of us know about this learning disability.

The stories of the people profiled in this publication provide compelling reasons for employers and educators alike to make the changes in attitudes and practices that are necessary to eliminate discrimination against people with dyslexia.

The Canadian Human Rights Commission is happy to support this educational initiative.

Michelle Falardeau-Ramsay  
Chief Commissioner  
Canadian Human Rights Commission

## INTRODUCTION

Dyslexia is mild to severe difficulty with the alphabet, writing, reading, spelling and reading comprehension in spite of traditional instruction, stable emotional development and normal or above-normal IQ. Recent scientific research suggests that dyslexia may be caused by differences in brain organization. Dyslexia can be hereditary.

Most Canadians have the ability to learn to read or write. In the case of people with dyslexia, the ability is impaired at a young age although they may excel at math, science, computer technology, or other subjects after 10, 11 or 12 years of schooling.

If unrecognized, dyslexia may lead to:

- undue frustration and stress;
- illiteracy;
- school drop-outs;
- career limitations and dependency, and
- other more serious outcomes such as crime and substance abuse.

Specialized help allows people with dyslexia to increase their self esteem, read and write to their full potential, pursue their education, increase their career opportunities and develop their special talents.

We believe that readers of this booklet will gain more insight into, and understanding about, the barriers and challenges that Canadians with dyslexia face at all stages of their lives.

Canadian Dyslexia Association  
Ottawa, Ontario

## **FOREWORD**

**By Robert G. Smith, Ph.D.**  
**Headmaster**  
**Heritage Academy**  
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During more than four decades as a teacher and administrator in public schools of Canada's two largest provinces and Yukon Territory; I observed that one out of every six students experienced a lack of academic success. Generally, they had difficulty with most reading material, could not express their ideas in writing, and were consigned to special remedial classes.

These young people were not stupid (in fact, most had normal or superior IQ's) and they were not lazy. They had a condition called dyslexia.

Most of the special education classes they took did little to help them minimize their difficulties. Concentration on the eighty-five per cent of English words which follow simple rules was not stressed, nor were attention to handwriting, selection of colored paper and chalkboards, controlled lighting, and de-emphasizing of "surprise" exams. In addition, teaching that encouraged and supported strengths was not sufficiently used. Above all, the current philosophy of "mainstreaming" placed these students in classes of twenty or thirty youngsters who had other learning difficulties. A child with dyslexia must have small classes.

Teachers find that smaller classes in schools lend themselves particularly well to students with 'dyslexia. In fact, they thrive on academic subjects including advanced math and science and particularly complex computer diagrams. Furthermore, their anxiety levels are reduced. Through sympathetic approaches, they develop a whole new outlook on learning and the educational system. Their marketability in the labour force is thus enhanced.

## Sent to Psychiatric Centre

Jocelynn, 21, has been poked and tested all her life. In primary school, she was forced to take several psychological tests between the ages of six and eight. Her only problem was that she could not read or write English or French.

"The lowest point of my life was when I was eight. I was sent to a regional psychiatric centre to discover the problem. My school teachers and the principal told my parents I was not performing. I was disinterested in school, and never smiled or laughed. They actually thought my parents were responsible for my behaviour and moods, and that something dysfunctional was occurring in my home. The school didn't want to take responsibility."

Jocelynn is a well-groomed, extremely articulate, bright young woman who comes from a good, stable family. She found it bizarre that she was the focus of so much attention.

"I remember one event at the psychiatric centre when I was taken downstairs into the basement playroom where I spent time with my therapist. We passed by a very large room, and I asked her what it was used for. She replied that it was for children who want to stay in the Centre and that's where they kept them. 'We can keep you too, if you want.' the therapist said. I still have nightmares about this.

Near the end of her therapy, which Jocelynn believed she didn't need, she was given Ritalin as an experiment. She became suicidal for weeks after she took the drug.

Her experiences in school were not that much better. "Many teachers would point me out and tell the class: 'Look everyone, she can't get it together- she'll never amount to anything,' It was so humiliating and negative!" she adds. She left high school in Grade Nine with a Grade Four reading and writing level.

\*1 would compensate for this lack by bluffing my way out of it, by putting on a fake French accent since I couldn't get through English, or vice versa. Jocelyne is perfectly bilingual. "It would take me an hour just to read a page of English or French text."

Jocelyne is now a hairdresser. In her last year of high school, she developed an ulcer which made it just too hard for her. She has felt better since she was tested positive for dyslexia.

"I am - above all - a person. I just happen to process information differently, but this does not make me inferior to others. It's a shame the educational system does not have enough money to deal with problems such as I have. If so, I wouldn't have as many emotional scars."

Jocelyne also remembers some of the unethical behaviour that some teachers engaged in when she left school.

„My teacher called me back and asked me if I wanted to still be part of the 'emotional problem' class. I refused. He persisted and told me he had to have a quota of names on his list if he was to obtain a room for the class." She was told that if she agreed to return, he would give her a student card if she would just sign her name. In addition, the teacher gave her two years of falsified report cards.

"I never had such high marks in all my life!" adds Jocelyne. She now worries about her future, her possible children, their futures. "I just don't know whether I will have the energy to fight. I just don't know..."

## **Peter - 23 years old**

I was diagnosed with dyslexia when I was 19. I always, until then, felt different from everybody else and I was treated differently. School was a nightmare. I failed Grade Two twice, Grade Three twice and Grade Four twice.

One teacher used to say our marks out loud; when my name was called she would say 'Peter you got 20%'- everyone would laugh. So at recess, I started beating up anyone who had laughed at me. High school was worse. I totally gave up. I concentrated on sports. I did all the real rough stuff: football, hockey, rugby. I was always so angry and this was a way of releasing some hostility.

No one seemed to care. My parents just thought I was lazy. So I quit school and went to work as a bouncer in a bar. I was 17.

One day I was sitting at home with my parents and I realized I didn't want to end up like them -miserable with dead-end jobs. I knew I wasn't dumb and thanks to my aunt who suggested I get tested for dyslexia, I now know that for sure. My parents still don't believe that I have dyslexia, but that's their problem not mine.

A few years ago, one of my so-called friends told me I would never amount to anything and I would end-up on welfare for the rest of my life. Well now, I own my own computer business and I'm doing great. I have nothing to prove to anybody because I've already proven to myself that I can do anything I put my mind to.

## **Canadian Scientist**

Thomas, 52, a scientist with a Canadian government department, says that learning with dyslexia is like cramming loads of information into the large end of a funnel and trying to remove it slowly from the small end.

\*I remember when I was younger, " he says. "My dad used to dictate words to me, and if I didn't do well, I would have to rewrite them several times. I would fail constantly. It was only three or four years ago that I was screened for dyslexia as I was having concentration and memory problems. The test came out positive.'

"But when I look back," he adds, "I see there were other clues. For example, I would avoid the organization of words and recording and book-keeping of classmate activities."

Thomas, now a Ph.D., didn't let his learning problems keep him from doing what he wanted. With great incentive and encouragement from his classmates, he got through high school, and went to university.

"I adopted a strategy. I would take copious notes from the blackboard and from what my profs told us, take these notes home and copy them out neatly - all the while internalizing what they meant.'

In his final year at university, Thomas got a 75% in his undergraduate degree. In his final year, He got 96% and 92% for the two most difficult courses (fluid mechanics and elasticity).

Thomas got help from the departmental secretary -- now his wife -- Brenda.

"It is apparent to my employer that I have problems learning second languages. I have not had considerable support from my superiors, nor accommodation from management. But my younger peers accept my disability well and provide support."

It was often this way for Thomas. He fled South Africa early in his career due to a deteriorating relationship in the workplace. "I was being hounded by my superiors to write research papers, as I held a Ph.D. But I couldn't do this very well, as my publication rate was slow. The result was that the entire experience became very unpleasant and antagonistic for me."

Thomas believes that the education system has to open its eyes to the reality of the problem, and tailor itself to that reality. "Certainly, multiple tasks in some contexts are very difficult, but some are easy. Let us go ahead with the ones we can advance in at our own speed and with the necessary support from the system," adds Thomas.

## **Computer Expert**

"They said I couldn't learn when I took second language training," says Tim, 50, a senior civil servant working in computers for a government department.

Tim didn't know he had dyslexia until he was tested two years ago. He knew he was a slower than average learner, but accepted the fact over the years and concentrated on areas where his educational strengths lay.

"This is how I started my career," he says. "I knew I had a problem, but didn't know what it was. And, most of it was centered on languages."

Knowing he did have a problem, Tim focused on developing his strengths and took a Commerce degree at university.

"Although I had learning difficulties, I noticed that the slower I went, the longer I would retain the information. As far as learning French was concerned, I applied the same technique and memorized vocabulary; built up the language and established a base of what I did know."

Tim, who has been in government for 23 years, claims that his dyslexia was not that debilitating. "Working on my own, at my own pace, was the solution, in addition to having a positive attitude and being highly motivated. He does admit that he was a problem child in high school, and had disciplinary problems and lower marks.

He strongly believes that more and better tools should be made available for people with dyslexia. These include multi-media computer hardware and software, showing how to position one's lips when pronouncing words, and using phonics to a greater degree.

Tim's determination to succeed - no matter what - was the motivating factor in his attaining the level of success he has today. "Simply put, my goal was to succeed, eventually..."

And succeed he has. Tim has his Bachelor of Commerce degree, his CMA and holds the position of Director where he works. He shares this advice with other people with dyslexia: "The more you know yourself, the better you become at something. And that's the one thing that should be the centrepiece of your life's work."

## Triumph of Ability

Pierrette, 37, only learned that she has dyslexia three weeks ago. Not knowing this officially hasn't stopped her in her career.

"I now understand why I've always been a slow learner. In fact, it makes sense to me. When I started my career as a secretary, I worked at a major hydro-electric project. I was let go because of -my inability to write, and was assigned to the payroll department. I didn't have any problems with numbers, though. Now, I'm an accountant with an engineering firm."

Pierrette always thought she was slow because she was a perfectionist. She admits that she had trouble organizing her thoughts into cohesive sentences and paragraphs.

"Although slow, I persevered anyway, and overcame my disability. I am now an accountant, and am also very good in artistic projects. I believe that if it had not been for the way I learned at private school by using phonetics, I would be much further behind."

Pierrette got her high school diploma from a private school, averaging in the low 60's. She then went to high school where she got 90% in writing and reading.

"My two children have dyslexia," she says. "I took them to see two psychologists, one speech therapist, two pediatricians and one neurologist -- all in four years. And what is strange is that my daughter's teachers believed my girl had an ear problem. They wanted to send her to a school for retarded children, although she has an above average IQ! She excels at math but can't write French."

She is determined to go to the provincial government and request a subsidy, and will talk to the required officials unceasingly, to make sure her children are able to be educated the right way.

'Having dyslexia does not mean they should be abused by the system. Rather, the system must make an effort to help them, even if it costs a bit." Pierrette is winning at her own career She is totally committed to see her children also triumph.

## **CFL Hall-of-Famer**

I, Garney Henley, have had dyslexia all my life, but never knew it until recently. I now understand what makes me and 20% of the population so different.

I always knew I was different. When I was a young boy, I would come home with hours of homework. I would struggle to read and understand the written word. And my spelling... forget it... no matter how hard I tried I could not spell. It seemed to be easy for my brother and sisters. My mother, a teacher, patiently helped me each night. Thank God for her guidance and love.

Everyone in my family was smart and at times I believed that I wasn't. After all, anyone who can't read or spell must be stupid. Right? But deep inside me I knew I was not stupid. Needless to say, I was terribly confused.

My marks reflected my struggle, mostly D's and C's, but early in my school career it became apparent that I was good at athletics. I played basketball, baseball and ran track and field and rarely was I beaten. My reputation as an athlete grew and that helped me become accepted at school. People never said much about my grades, but I'm sure some of them thought that I was a typical dumb jock.

I got an athletic scholarship to a small university and the anxiety about academics intensified. I had to get grades to remain eligible. It was a struggle each day. Finally, one of my professors coached me on how to study. His one word of advice that made all the difference was, „if you are reading something you don't understand don't go on, read it again." That's what I had to do. But because I'm such a slow reader it took hours to read one chapter. I was determined to succeed, so I persevered. I stayed up many nights after a football or basketball game painfully

reading every word.... ever so slowly. It paid off because during my last semester at university I made the Dean's list. That same year I was drafted by The Green Bay Packers.

My football career began with Green Bay and I went on to spend 16 years with the Hamilton Tiger-Cats of the Canadian Football League. For the first five years of my career I played both ways. I rarely came off the field. That meant I had to know both the offense and the defense. It was easy for me to learn the plays because we practiced them each day. They were pictures in my head, not written words on the page. Why could I learn and remember twice as many plays as most of my teammates? It was hard for me to believe that I was stupid, yet I couldn't read very well or spell and that seemed to be the measure of intelligence.

After my retirement from football and coaching a national basketball championship team to victory at Guelph University, I went on to become the Athletic Director at Mt. Allison and Brock University. By that time I had devised many ways to cover up my dyslexia. When people would ask me to read a memo and then stood there and expected me to read it immediately, I would always tell them, "I'll read it and get back to you." If I were preparing a memo, I would write it out and then go to the dictionary and rewrite the memo making all the necessary corrections before giving it to the secretary. Like my days in school, I had many a late Right at work.

In conclusion, don't be quick to label and criticize people if they struggle in different ways with the written word. If you look around, someone close to you -- your mate, a child, a co-worker, a friend - is likely to have dyslexia. Explore the minds of people with dyslexia because they are real treasure chests of intelligence, knowledge and ideas.

## **Steven - 18 years old**

In grade school I always seemed to manage to get by. The trouble started in Grade Seven when the work load really increased. I had a lot of difficulty, nothing ever came easily and I had to work hard.

My parents were always very supportive. I went to a private school for a while and that really helped me out. It was very disciplined and demanding, but this was good for me - I really liked it. They pushed me and it was very structured. When I arrived at a normal high school, things went badly. I got labeled right away as being one of the bad crowd because I didn't do well in school and because of whom I hung around with. I got into a lot of trouble and was suspended a lot.

When I first was tested, I went through two weekends of testing. This big report came back, which basically told us what we already knew. I couldn't write or spell very well. When I was diagnosed with dyslexia, I wasn't too concerned about it. I don't want to use this as an excuse. I am past the point of feeling angry but now I just don't care. Whatever happens will happen.

It would be easy to say that everything that's wrong or has gone wrong in my life is because of my dyslexia, but I don't buy that. Somewhere deep inside, I still feel if I try harder and really work at it I would learn more.

But right now I'm motivated. I really like the computer class. I just want to get a job and an apartment and live a normal life.

## **Triumph of Determination**

Francine, a senior official with the Canadian government, sees the map of North America upside down -- Mexico is north and Canada is south -- even though she knows that north is up and south is down. Needless to say, her sense of direction is totally out of kilter.

\*This means I can get lost even going to a meeting in the building where I work. I know where I am, but have trouble understanding which way I must go in relation to where I am coming from. And I can't go out at night, because I can't see the reference points -- buildings, shapes and colors -- that I use during the day." -

Francine, now 54, started to stutter in Grade One and did so right through high school. She has overcome this problem, but still cannot go from point A to point D - just from point A to point B.

'I remember going to the Bayshore Shopping Centre in Ottawa once. I tried three times to get there, but kept getting lost. I came home and cried out of frustration and despair. My disability has expressed itself in a loss of independence although I am quite self-assured, self-confident and self-sufficient in my work.'

Francine has to concentrate a great deal not to get lost. Her directional dyslexia is so strong that she has to put markers on her car to tell left from right. She cannot be re-educated.

"Sometimes, I panic and have to turn to people for help. At school, I was considered the black sheep. I couldn't link words with my vision because I can only remember what I hear not what I see. Over the years, I have had to develop an incredible memory and memorize what paragraphs looked like and where they were located in a book for future reference. Alphabetical order is still a mystery to me; I only know the alphabet by rote.'

Francine hid her disability until three years ago. She told her staff and received a lot of respect from her employees and colleagues.

"People with dyslexia work a lot harder than most people," adds Francine. "We have to survive. I remember my days as a student. I'm sure my high school teacher passed me because he was so fed up trying to teach me the conventional way. In fact, my examination was an open book one.

She believes that people with dyslexia have more strengths when it comes to visual patterns, analysis, instinct, problem-solving, and the overall picture. Her daughter has dyslexia, but not her son.

"I'm very happy with my life," she concludes. "My husband is amazed by the way I deal with this problem and by what I can do."

## Try harder !!

Emily, a federal public servant, was 30 years old when she decided to find out if she had dyslexia.

The critical incident that led to her decision came about when she took a series of tests for the Public Service Commission (PSC) to determine her ability to learn French as a second language. At that time, Emily spoke and read French fairly competently. However, her writing skills were limited. After the tests, Emily felt she had done so poorly that her results would indicate her ability to learn a second language was nil.

"I knew I could learn a second language. I already spoke French quite well. I thought the PSC test results would be inaccurate for me because of the way they were conducted. I kept wondering, why are others successful at these tests and not me? I'm capable... but not when tested this way. The tests were timed, multiple choice and audio based."

A few weeks before Emily wrote the second language tests, she had read an article on dyslexia. It outlined the symptoms in children and adults. She recognized a number of these symptoms in herself. After the second test, she decided to find a reputable organization to test her for dyslexia.

"The day I **went for the testing I was anxious.**' Did I have dyslexia or not - if I did, it would explain a lot of the struggles that I had in school. But if I didn't have dyslexia, what was wrong with me?" Emily's test results showed that she did have dyslexia and her IQ test showed she is in the 95+ percentile.

'When I finally got home that evening, after a long day at work, I must have cried for about an hour. The results explained so much - why my **teachers kept** saying 'You're bright, you just have to apply yourself', or 'show more self-discipline and you'll succeed' or 'just try harder...' UrgH!! I was knocking myself out. I really hated seeing those comments on practically every report card. On a lighter note, it also explained why after five years I still get lost in the Rideau Centre! " |

Emily asked for and received her school files. She wanted to see if there were any clues or patterns that could have alerted her teachers. There was nothing. "I was really lucky. My parents worked with me on my homework. I think their efforts and my hard work compensated for an education system that does not fully work with dyslexic's learning styles."

\*Since I found out I have dyslexia, I've done some reading on the subject. There are an incredible number of intellectuals, politicians and artists who have dyslexia. We have tremendous potential -it just needs to be tapped!

Emily hopes that public awareness of dyslexia and the potential of people with it will increase. "Through this awareness, perhaps schools and parents will recognize children's true abilities at a younger age and soon children with dyslexia won't have to hear: Ojust try harder..."

## **ADVICE FOR PARENTS**

Dyslexia usually shows itself in Grades One or Two. If your child is experiencing difficulty reading, writing, spelling and reading comprehension, he or she may have dyslexia. The best procedure to follow is to have him/her tested for dyslexia. If this turns out positive, don't let the diagnosis of dyslexia intimidate you.

The problem is fifty percent resolved with your recognition and acceptance of the difficulty. Your child deserves to be fully informed at his/her level of understanding, either by you or the doctor. It is your prerogative to determine who is best suited to inform your child. Next, make a list of your child's interests and abilities, and develop a strong support program in-the areas of his/her interests and aptitudes. As much effort should go into actions that reinforce the child's abilities. as those that attempt to remediate his/her disabilities. This will keep both you and your child from thinking of him/her as disabled, and you will realize that he/she has strengths and weaknesses like anyone else. Do not attempt to do remedial language training, as your efforts will not be successful. Your child needs you more as a parent and advocate than as a teacher of reading, writing, and spelling.

Furthermore, do not punish or penalize your child for his/her difficulty in reading, writing and spelling. It would be of no benefit to remove privileges because of poor grades when he/she is making an effort. Support your child in group activities where he/she has a reasonable chance of being successful and receiving positive acclaim. Please do not

remove your child from successful sports and group competition because of poor grades that are a result of dyslexia.

If your child is not making adequate efforts, or using dyslexia to avoid school work, schedule a group meeting at the school with his/her teachers to discuss the appropriate action. Always bring your child to the group meetings, as he/she deserves to be present when his/her fate is being discussed. These sessions should result in agreements and decisions - not adversity, anger and indecision. Do not allow your child to undermine your parental authority because of his/her diagnosis. He/She is still a member of your family and subject to its rules and regulations, and he/she should be treated and react accordingly. Finally, provide the best remedial language training available in your area to help your child overcome his/her language disorder and prevent complications.

## **TIPS FOR TEACHERS**

These guidelines have been developed to assist parents and teachers in teaching students with dyslexia. They are a result of more than four decades of teaching students with dyslexia in several parts of the country, and can help ease the difficulty many people with dyslexia face in the classroom.

- Speak very clearly at all times, and face the students.
- When speaking clearly, do not use a loud voice, as this will bother students with certain kinds of dyslexia.
- Always be upbeat with individuals and be encouraging with classes. Most students with dyslexia have received a lifetime of criticism by the time they reach high school.
- Be patient. Provide sufficient time for any task that has been assigned.
- Try to keep facial expressions neutral or happy. Students with dyslexia misread frowns.

- Exercise care when telling a student he/she is doing an exercise or task incorrectly. Never say "you're wrong" or "you've made a mistake". The typical student with dyslexia will react personally. Concentrate on the work and ask them to think about the answer.
- Keep verbal explanations and written notes to a minimum in any single session. Give the student brief explanations, and then "hands-on" opportunities to apply the theory.
- Do NOT spring tests without advance notice. Such practice brings on panic attacks. In some classes, the words "test" or "exam" are forbidden. They are called "reviews."
- Use kindly humour as much as possible. Never use sarcasm and never make the individual the butt of any joke or comment.
- Ideas, formulae, and procedures should be repeated several times to enable pupils to sort out the labyrinthine nature of the English language.
- In presenting typed notes (students with dyslexia can rarely create their own notes or summaries), try to avoid a cluttered look with dark headings. This approach tends to make words, numbers and other symbols literally dance for a student with dyslexia. Make the notes short with plenty of space, and do not use a typeface that is too small or too large.
- Colour is important as a background. Ask your students which background colour and type size they find easiest to read.
- Keep reading aloud to the students to a minimum. Only have a student read aloud if he/she does so voluntarily.
- Do not be reluctant to explain any test question to a student.
- Keep directions simple and brief.
- Give directions slowly and precisely, but be careful of volume and never use sarcasm or condescension.

## TIPS FOR EMPLOYERS OF PEOPLE WITH DYSLEXIA

You've just hired a new employee, and the Human Resources Department, your immediate supervisor, or the employee informed you that he/she has a condition called dyslexia.

Here are some suggestions to help you encourage him/her to provide the best possible performance:

- 1) **Work to the employee's strengths:** offer support and encouragement whenever possible.
- 2) **Over-learning of any task or sequences is vital:** dyslexia is often associated with short-term memory.
- 3) **Learning** should be structured and multisensory (visual, tactile, auditory, kinesthetic).
- 4) **New information** needs to be given more than once.
- 5) **Use a holistic approach:** present the whole picture and then concentrate on the parts.
- 6) **Beware of generalizing:** this can create difficulties for some people with dyslexia.
- 7) **Present learning sequences** in a variety of ways.
- 8) **Panic attacks:** now and then, some people with dyslexia have an "overload" or "panic attack". Give support, assurances, have the employee lie down for 10 minutes. Reinforce your assurances. Suggest the employee see your Employee Assistance Coordinator for professional help if required.
- 9) **Provide sufficient time** for the employee to get organized- work one problem at a time.
- 10) **Remind** the employee of any spelling strategies as long as he/she needs it.
- 11) **Right brain skills:** people with dyslexia have well developed "right brain" skills like imagination, patterns, colour, and visualization. These skills, if used by the employer, will augment learning and performance.
- 12) **Encourage use of memory aids**, such as dictionaries, mnemonic devices, rhymes, sayings, and mottoes.

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