

A Quick Guide to Working Memory

For teachers, SENCos and families

What is working memory?

Working memory is the limited mental workspace used to hold and work with information for a short time. It supports activities such as following instructions, mental calculation, reading for meaning and planning a sentence. Capacity varies between people and can also be affected by attention, language, anxiety, fatigue and familiarity with the task. Working memory difficulty is not a measure of intelligence or effort.

What this may look like in the classroom

Multi-step instructions	Losing part of an instruction before the sequence has been completed.	Mental calculation	Losing an interim answer while carrying out the next stage of a calculation.
Getting started	Appearing unsure where to begin, despite understanding the overall task.	Reading for meaning	Difficulty holding earlier information in mind while reading what follows.
Place keeping	Repeating a completed step or losing track of what remains to be done.	Following the group	Watching or copying peers because part of the original instruction has been lost.
Written expression	Starting a sentence and losing words or ideas before reaching the end.	Cognitive fatigue	Performance reducing when a task places sustained demands on memory and attention.

Remember: These signs do not identify a single cause. Observe when the difficulty occurs, reduce avoidable memory demands and review whether the support improves access and independence.



How to help: practical strategies

Small and consistent adjustments can make a meaningful difference. Support should respond to need and does not require a diagnosis.

01	Reduce the memory load Put key information in writing rather than expecting it all to be held in mind.	07	Teach routines directly Model complex processes one stage at a time and practise the sequence.
02	Give one step at a time Chunk longer instructions and allow completion before adding the next part.	08	Build secure knowledge Short and repeated practice can reduce the load placed on working memory.
03	Check through action Ask the pupil to show the first step rather than simply asking if they understand.	09	Use memory aids Teach purposeful use of checklists, multiplication grids, mnemonics and reminders.
04	Keep key words visible Use a word mat, prompt card, model or worked example during the task.	10	Link new and known Connect new information to familiar knowledge using examples or simple diagrams.
05	Reduce unnecessary copying Provide dates, headings, success criteria and longer passages.	11	Allow processing time Pause after giving information and avoid filling the silence too quickly.
06	Use task boards Show what to do now, what comes next and how the pupil will know they have finished.	12	Review what transfers Check whether the pupil can use a strategy in different lessons and contexts.

Working memory and dyslexia

Working memory can contribute to the effort involved in reading, spelling and written expression. However, a working memory weakness alone does not confirm dyslexia and an average score does not rule it out.

When assessment may help

A diagnostic SpLD assessment considers working memory alongside attainment, phonological processing, other cognitive processes and background information. Defining Dyslexia provides assessments from age 8 through a specialist teacher assessor who is registered with PATOSS and holds a current APC.

Further support

Defining Dyslexia: assessment and support	PATOSS: professional information and standards	EEF: SEND in mainstream schools
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For local assessment and provision pathways, also consult your local authority's SEND Local Offer.

