

Learning Disabilities*

What is a learning disability?

According to the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC), learning disabilities are “disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning. As such, learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual deficiency.”

How do I know if my learner has a learning disability?

The following table summarizes how three types of learning disabilities are manifested in ELLs (Links in Learning, 1995, pp. 14–18).

Visual Learning Disabilities	Auditory Learning Disabilities	Organizational Learning Disabilities
<p>A learner may...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have difficulty reading and writing • have difficulty dealing with visual information (following a map; filling in a form; recognizing faces, words, their name, their street) • have difficulty with word and crossword puzzles 	<p>A learner may...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not seem to hear • manage better in quiet settings or in one-on-one settings • be hesitant in speech • not hear unaccented syllables (7 and 70 sound the same) and may not distinguish between similar sounding words • appear uncaring/uninterested • give answers to questions that are inappropriate rather than incorrect grammatically 	<p>A learner may...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • appear to be lazy, careless, lost, disinterested, unmotivated • have problems following steps • have difficulty managing time (e.g., chronically late or early) • have difficulty organizing space (closet, desk, or page in a document) • have difficulty analyzing and applying information in a new way, adapting to new settings
<p align="center">General Signs of Learning Disabilities (pp. 19-20)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easily distracted, overactive or impulsive • Unable to estimate time or distance accurately • Avoids filling in forms, giving address or phone number • Difficulty with abstract ideas or connections • Difficulty expressing thoughts • Variations in mood and attentiveness • Confuses left and right • Gets lost easily • Doesn't follow what is being said (misses point, looks intently at speaker, takes a long time to answer, appears confused, makes irrelevant remarks, has trouble asking and answering questions) 		

These signs are often true for ESL literacy learners as well, so it is important to explore whether they are apparent in the ELLs first language, and whether literacy is also an issue (see the **ESL Literacy Tip Sheet**). For more details, for manifestations of other types of learning disability, and for interview tools, see the two resources listed below.

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Where can I find strategies for ELLs with learning disabilities?

For strategies for working with ELLs with the above learning disabilities, see:

- **Assessing Learning Disabilities in ESL:** (pp. 7–12)
<http://www.teslontario.net/uploads/research/ESLLDStrategies.pdf>
- **Links in Learning:** A manual linking second language learning, literacy, and learning disabilities: (pp. 81–90)
<http://atwork.settlement.org/downloads/linc/LnksLrn.pdf>