

Timeline Handout Cards

Card 1 - 1877 – Word Blindness/Word Deafness

A German neurologist (Kussmaul) used the term *word blindness* to describe the loss of reading ability in persons with normal vision who see letters and words distinctly but can no longer interpret written or printed language.

Kussmaul used the term *word deafness* to describe individuals whose hearing was intact, but who had trouble understanding words that were heard.

These conditions were used to describe individuals who had lost their ability to read through some type of brain trauma – in other words, **acquired** disabilities.

Card 2 - 1884 – Dyslexia

A German ophthalmologist (Rudolph Berlin) was the first physician to actually write the term *dyslexia*. He used the word to describe the loss of reading ability due to brain injury or disease.

Berlin described several of his patients who had difficulty reading printed words and who complained of headaches when reading.

Although the term *dyslexia* had been introduced, the term *word blindness* was used more frequently during this time period.

Card 3 - 1896 – Congenital Word Blindness

A Scottish ophthalmologist (James Hinshelwood) was one of the first scientists to describe clinical studies of children who failed to read. He concluded that his patients with a reading disorder, which he called *congenital word blindness*, must have had either birth injuries to the brain or brain defects.

He emphasized the importance of two observations: There often were several cases in a single family, and the children's symptoms were closely paralleled to those that appeared in adults who had lost the capacity to read because of injury to the brain.

(*Congenital* - of or related to a condition present at birth)

Card 4 - 1925 – Strephosymbolia (twisted symbols)

An American psychiatrist and neurologist (Dr. Samuel Orton) is credited with the first report on word blindness to appear in American medical literature.

One specific characteristic that Orton observed in the children he studied was the poor recall of both the orientation and sequencing or ordering of the letters when reading and spelling. Based on these observations, Orton developed a **theory** that dominance of the left-hemisphere was poorly established in people with dyslexia, which resulted in what he called *strephosymbolia*, or twisted symbols.

It is important to note that Orton’s theory was discredited by the 1970s due to ongoing findings from research.

Card 5 - 1928 – Specific Reading Disability

Dr. Samuel Orton was also one of the first to associate dyslexia with language disorders. Early on he suggested that word blindness may be due to **brain differences** rather than brain damage.

Dr. Orton became very involved in the development and use of remedial interventions for students with specific reading disability. He indicated that a sight word (or look-say) approach to reading would not be beneficial for children with dyslexia. Instead, those children required a multisensory, structured phonics approach.

One of Dr. Orton’s associates, Anna Gillingham, organized Orton’s principles into an alphabetic phonics approach, which became known as the **Orton-Gillingham approach**.

Card 6 - 1968 – Specific Developmental Dyslexia

In 1968, the Research Group from the World Federation of Neurology met in Dallas, Texas. The group recommended the following definition:

Specific Developmental Dyslexia is a disorder manifested by difficulty in learning to read despite conventional instruction, adequate intelligence, and socio-cultural opportunity.

This definition was included in the law that was passed in Texas (TEC §38.006) in 1985 (see *The Dyslexia Handbook, Revised 2014*, p. 8).

The term “specific developmental dyslexia” is still used today, often shortened to “developmental dyslexia” or “dyslexia.”