

# Understanding Dyslexia through the Eyes of Hank Zipzer

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## Abstract

*New Texas literacy laws mandate continuing education requirements for educators who teach dyslexic students. Close to twenty percent of the US population display one or more symptoms of dyslexia (Washburn, Joshi, & Binks-Cantrell, 2011), and teachers must be equipped to adapt instruction to meet these students' needs. The purpose of this article is to promote an understanding of dyslexia through the eyes of Hank Zipzer, a character in a popular children's book series. Hank's experiences provide insight into the thoughts and actions of a character struggling with reading, writing, and spelling.*

*Keywords: dyslexia, struggling readers, learning disability*

*To all children with challenges—learning might be hard, but you have greatness in you!*

*Henry Winkler*

## Introduction

Learning can be hard for children with dyslexia, but “the early identification of students as well as the corresponding early intervention program for these students will have significant implications for their future academic success” (Texas Education Agency, 2014, p. 13). Texas literacy laws help identify and support students who have reading-based learning disabilities like dyslexia. In an effort to ensure teachers understand this reading-based learning disability, the State Board for Educator Certification recently adopted Texas Administrative Codes (TAC) Chapter TEC §21.054(b) and TAC §232.11, which mandates continuing education requirements for educators who teach dyslexic students (Texas Education Agency, 2014). In addition, Chapter 228.35 requires that education preparation programs provide teacher candidates instruction in the detection and education of students with dyslexia (SB, 2011). With approximately twenty percent of the US population displaying one or more symptoms of this reading-based learning disability (Washburn, Joshi, & Binks-Cantrell, 2011), these laws provide necessary steps toward promoting a clear understanding of the needs of dyslexic students. Teacher training is necessary, as current research suggests that teachers may lack knowledge needed to teach struggling readers, particularly children with dyslexia (Washburn, Joshi, & Binks-Cantrell, 2011).

Many teachers continue to hold the common misconception that dyslexia is a visual processing deficit rather than a language-processing deficit. Misconceptions saturate common beliefs in modern society in general, as dyslexia is often misrepresented in media and in literature. Helping dyslexic students requires knowledge of the underlying issues. Children's books may support this knowledge through characterizations of dyslexia. Therefore, the primary purpose of this article is to promote an understanding of dyslexia through the eyes of Hank Zipzer, a dyslexia character in a popular children's book series. A subsequent goal is to present intervention ideas/tools which may help dyslexic learners.

## Characteristics of Dyslexia

The word dyslexia consists of two different parts: *dys* meaning not or difficult, and *lexia* meaning words, reading or language. Therefore, dyslexia relates to the difficulty with words (Hudson, High, & Otaiba, 2007). The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) adopted the following formal definition of dyslexia in 2002:

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge. (IDA, 2002, p. 1)

Thus, dyslexia is a language-based learning difference usually resulting in difficulties with word recognition, word pronunciation, reading fluency, spelling, and writing. These problems in word recognition result from an underlying deficit in the sound component of language that makes it difficult for readers to connect letters and sounds in order to decode (Shaywitz, 2006). This difficulty has been scientifically confirmed through brain imagery studies, which show differences in the way the brain of a dyslexic person develops and functions (Shaywitz, 2006). In other words, the dyslexic reader's brain systems work differently from that of a non-dyslexic brain.

The research regarding dyslexia is not new. The National Institute of Health released research reported on dyslexia in 1994. The findings included a statement reporting dyslexia as the most researched of all learning disabilities (NIH, 1994). Yet, many myths regarding dyslexia still persist (Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity, 2014.). A common myth about dyslexia is that it is visual and that dyslexic children and adults see and write words backwards. Writing letters backwards is a common behavior for many students (not just those with dyslexia), but research does not support the myth that dyslexic students see letters or words backwards or differently.

## Dyslexia in Children's Literature

Dyslexic characters in literature appear more and more frequently. In Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*, the main character is portrayed as having dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which are comorbid (can coexist). According to Riordan, dyslexic students, including his son, are creative thinkers, and portraying Percy as ADHD/dyslexic was his way of honoring the potential of children he had taught with similar reading conditions (Riordan, 2010). The description of Percy's reading condition, however, led

readers to misunderstand the characteristics of dyslexia. The explanation provided in the book seemed to portray dyslexia as a visual issue because Percy jumbled up the words needed for schoolwork. When reading, Percy comments, “the angrier I got, the more the words floated around on the page” (Riordan, 2007, p. 128). In the movie version of Riordan’s book, the words actually moved on the chalkboard as Percy tried to read them. However, Riordan provided an explanation for the floating and jumbled words in his book, which readers overlooked. Because Percy is a demigod, his problem with English words actually enabled him to translate ancient Greek. Therefore, the jumbled words were a result of his relation to Greek gods instead of a problem with dyslexia. This misrepresentation of dyslexia in literature was unintentional but demonstrates the impact media has on society’s beliefs.

Teacher awareness about dyslexia is important, and the use of children’s literature with dyslexic characters may be beneficial to teachers, students, and parents alike. Children’s fiction and nonfiction increases awareness, understanding, and appreciation of people with disabilities (Prater, Dyches, and Johnston, 2006). Literature often provides a means to illustrate ways people are different and special. The depictions of a group of people, though, must be accurate. Hank Zipzer’s character is the focus of the remainder of this article because his frustrations and successes provide opportunities to clarify the characteristics of dyslexia.

## **Hank Zipzer**

Henry Winkler and Lin Oliver coauthor the Hank Zipzer series, which features a main character with dyslexia. Henry Winkler, well known for his role as “the Fonz” in the television sitcom *Happy Days*, based Hank Zipzer on his own real-life experiences. Henry Winkler found school to be very difficult, no matter how hard he tried. However, Winkler learned that “a learning challenge doesn’t have to stop you” (para. 9), and he wants his readers to realize their greatness (The Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity, 2014). His series of chapter books for young readers contains 17 books that reflect school experiences from the viewpoint of Hank Zipzer, a boy growing up on the Upper West Side of New York City. Written in first person, the reader gains insight into the thoughts and actions of a character with dyslexia, which helps student readers and teachers alike understand the impact certain school tasks may have on a struggling learner.

Hank Zipzer is funny and creative but encounters many frustrations in school. The 17 books in the series span Hank’s fourth and fifth grade years with his best friends Frankie and Ashley. During this timeframe, Hank struggles in school, meets a teacher who suggests he learns differently and should be tested, receives a diagnosis of dyslexia, and uses creativity to solve problems. Each book describes a unique adventure in which Hank always finds a way to get into trouble. Through humor, Hank describes challenges encountered during school and during daily tasks involving math, spelling, writing, and reading.

The series starts with the first day of fourth grade and a writing assignment. Hank spends the rest of the story using creativity to get out of the writing assignment, because he is certain he cannot complete it: “I can’t even write one good sentence. So how am I ever going to write an entire five-paragraph essay?” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003a, p. 12). Hank shares with readers his trouble getting his thoughts down on paper, which is common for dyslexic students. Dyslexia expert Sally Shaywitz reports that dyslexic students have problems with expressive language (not thinking), which may account for Hank’s weak writing skills (Shaywitz, 2006). Between written expression, handwriting, and spelling, Hank feels completely defeated by the assignment, which may reflect the way many dyslexic students feel in the classroom.

Hank shares his frustrations throughout the book, but it is not until the end of book two that Hank is diagnosed with a learning difference. “Dr. Berger found out my problems were because I have actual learning differences that make it hard for me to learn in the regular way. Finding this out was the biggest relief of my life. It was incredible to know that I wasn’t stupid, I just learn different” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 14-15). The use of the word *learning difference* versus *learning disability* in the books should be noted as an appropriate way to describe dyslexia, because with proper instruction, dyslexic students do learn. Many bright dyslexic students feel stupid (Hank’s words) because of their struggles with words but demonstrate remarkable abilities in other areas. IDA’s definition of dyslexia maintains that the difficulties associated with dyslexia are “often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities” (IDA, 2002, p. 1). In other words, dyslexic students are bright children who can succeed academically with effective instruction.

Hank feels relieved when Dr. Berger explained that Hank’s brain was just wired differently. Research supports the notion that the dyslexic brain works differently (Shaywitz, 2006; The Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity, 2014). According to Shaywitz (2006), the reading circuitry of the brain includes regions dedicated to processing the visual features of letters and transforming the letters into the sounds of language and getting to the meaning of words. Examination of brain activation patterns in readers reveals that dyslexic readers use different brain pathways than non-dyslexic readers, which results in a slower, more manual process of reading (Shaywitz, 2006). Through the examination of brain patterns of skilled readers, scientists understand these readers use the back of their brain as they read. Dyslexic readers appear to have an under-activation in the neural pathways in the back of the brain, which causes problems with word analysis and decoding.

A lack of word decoding skills typically results in poor fluency during reading. Hank experiences significant issues with reading fluency. For example, the entire third book revolves around Hank’s inability to read the program guide on the television, as it scrolls too quickly for him to keep up. “I’m not the only slow reader in the world, am I?” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003c, p. 70). When reading is slow and labored, it is difficult to read in front of peers—it is embarrassing for many students. Hank shares that standing up in front of people and reading aloud is one of the most difficult things he has to do. Dyslexic learners often report reading aloud in front of peers to be a miserable experience (Hubbell, 2013); therefore, teachers should consider alternatives. For example, a teacher might send reading material with a student to practice ahead of time, or the teacher may choose a one-on-one setting where peers cannot hear the oral reading. The implementation of fluency strategies would help as well (repeated readings, paired reading, choral reading and reader’s theater). To learn more about helping students with dyslexia, review <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/3416>.

Spelling also presents a problem for Hank. “I go over and over and over my spelling words. At the time, they seem to stick to my memory. They seem to be happy in my brain. But then later, like the next morning when I really need them, they seem to have orbited off into space somewhere” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003b, p. 5). The series’ authors use comedy to describe Hank’s struggles, which is entertaining, and many dyslexic students can probably relate. In *I Got a “D” in Salami*, Hank spends extra time studying spelling words in order to do well in the class spelling contest. On the day of the spelling contest, Hank comments, “Last night I knew every one of these words forward and backward. This morning, I’d lost them. From the time I left my apartment until the time I arrived in class, they must’ve fallen out of my head” (p. 27). The book includes examples of Hank’s spelling patterns, which in essence provides insight into spelling

patterns of dyslexic students. For instance, he cannot remember the order in which letters should be arranged, and letters within words are often reversed (he spells *animal* as *aminal*). In addition, Hank uses phonetic spelling, such as “Siense Project in Progres” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003c, p. 83), and lacks knowledge about grammar and spelling rules.

Hank finds it absurd that teachers ask him to look up words in the dictionary, as he states, “I can’t spell words because I can’t sound them out. So how am I going to find them in a dictionary if I can’t spell them in the first place? Do you know my dictionary has one thousand two hundred and fifty-six pages? Words get lost in there” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 22). According to Hank’s dad, spelling is a no-lose situation if you study. However, this is not the case for many dyslexic students. “Almost all people with dyslexia . . . struggle with spelling and face serious obstacles in learning to cope with this aspect of their learning difference which tends to “persist throughout life” (International Dyslexia Association, 2011, p. 1). As Hank puts it, “I can’t spell to save my life. And it really bothers me, too” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003a, p. 18).

Teachers can help dyslexic students improve spelling and decoding skills with systematic and explicit instruction. As Hank works with the school specialist, his skills, including finding words in the dictionary, improve. In book six, Hank states, “At the beginning of the year, I couldn’t use the dictionary at all. But I’ve been working with our school learning therapist, Dr. Lynn Berger, after school. She taught me to sound out some words so I can look them up. When I do find a word in the dictionary, I feel really proud” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003c, p. 22). Nontraditional resource tools may help dyslexic learners as well. For example, technology tools include features, which support struggling learners in many ways. Dictionary.com (the website or the app) enables students to use voice recognition to find words instead of searching through pages and pages. This tool also enables students to hear a word they cannot pronounce by using the audio feature.

Hank exhibits many other behaviors related to dyslexia. He says his handwriting looks like “a chicken stepped in tar and ran across the page” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003a, p. 20). He struggles with memory recall, and he confuses directions such as left and right. Another problem for Hank is the reversal of letters (i.e. b/d; p/q) and numbers. For example, in book two, Hank writes down an address as 541, when he should have written down 451. “The truth is, I flip numbers around a lot. Sometimes I flip letters around too. Most of the time, I don’t even know I’m doing it” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003b, p. 109). To a dyslexic student, “letter formation is tedious rather than natural” (Redford, 2014, para 2), and letter and number reversals are common problems. IDA (2007) cautions, though, that reversing letters does not mean your child has dyslexia, as many children reverse letters before the age of seven.

Myths regarding dyslexia associate reversals with visual processing problems, even though evidence demonstrates dyslexic learners do not see words and letters differently (Shaywitz, 2006). However, authors of children’s literature often provide references to words moving on the page. Unfortunately, the Hank Zipzer series contains a few confusing comments about words on as well. A knowledgeable reader may understand that Hank becomes overwhelmed when reading large amounts of texts and views it as a blur of words. However, due to misconceptions about dyslexia, unclear comments in the book could contribute to common myths. For example, Hank makes several references to letters moving or swimming on the page. In book seven, when discussing the challenge of dictionary searches, Hank makes the following statement: “The letters flip around on the page, and before you know it, there are letters floating in front of your eyes like synchronized swimmers in the Olympics” (Winkler & Oliver, 2004a, p. 117-118). This misleading text contributes to inaccurate myths about the

characteristics of dyslexia. Knowledge about dyslexia is necessary so that readers can make informed conclusions about descriptions of dyslexic traits. Table 1 summarizes Hank’s learning characteristics and the relation to evidence-based research regarding dyslexia. In other words, do Hank’s descriptions accurately reflect characteristics of dyslexia?

Table 1  
Dyslexia Through the Eyes of Hank Zipzer

<b>Hank’s characteristic</b>	<b>Accurate? (yes/no)</b>	<b>Hank’s perspective</b>
<b>Poor Self-Image</b>	Yes	It was incredible to know that I wasn’t stupid, I just learn different” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 14-15).
<b>Weak Writing Skills</b>	Yes	“I can’t even write one good sentence. So how am I ever going to write an entire five-paragraph essay? ” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003a, p. 12).
<b>Poor Handwriting</b>	Yes	. . . looks like “a chicken stepped in tar and ran across the page” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003a, p. 20)
<b>Poor Spelling</b>	Yes	“I go over and over and over my spelling words . . . then later, like the next morning when I really need them, they seem to have orbited off into space somewhere” (Zipzer & Oliver, 2003b, p. 5).
<b>Weak Decoding Skills</b>	Yes	“. . . so I guessed that’s what the word was. I do that a lot when I can’t actually read something” (Winkler & Oliver, 2004b, p. 96).
<b>Inefficient Fluency Skills</b>	Yes	“I’m not the only slow reader in the world, am I?” (p. 70).
<b>Visual Issues</b>	No	“The letters flip around on the page, and before you know it, there are letters floating in front of your eyes like synchronized swimmers in the Olympics” (Winkler & Oliver, 2004a, p. 117-118).
<b>Reversals</b>	Yes	“The truth is, I flip numbers around a lot. Sometimes I flip letters around too. Most of the time, I don’t even know I’m doing it” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003b, p. 109).
<b>Creativity</b>	Yes	“Get ready for creativity like you’ve never seen before” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003a, p. 85).
<b>Auditory Learning</b>	Yes	“I don’t always learn from books very well, but if you tell me something, I’ll remember it forever” (Winkler & Oliver, 2004c, p. 139).

As Hank works with Dr. Berger to improve his skills, he practices strategies that help him learn. For example, he uses taped books, he takes notes, he utilizes visuals, and he receives systematic phonics instruction. Some of the strategies mentioned throughout the series relate to

a method called multisensory teaching. “Multisensory instruction utilizes all learning pathways in the brain (visual, auditory, kinesthetic-tactile) simultaneously in order to enhance memory and learning” (Birsh, 2011, p. 19). In other words, *see it, say it, hear it, do it* works for dyslexic students. Hank learns differently, and Dr. Berger helps Hank understand ways he learns best. As Hank’s grandpa says, “We’re all different and that’s what makes us great” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003a, p. 132).

The stories of Hank’s frustrations in school and funny adventures provide insight beyond the weaknesses of a dyslexic reader. The reader gains insight into potential talents as well. Hank’s tendency to find trouble offers opportunities for Hank to utilize his creative side to get out of trouble. His friends understand his weaknesses and provide support in many situations, but they also consider Hank the problem-solver of the group. As Ashley says, “Hank, you are covered in creativity” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003a, p. 62). In the *Dyslexic Advantage*, Eide & Eide (2011) emphasized the creativity of dyslexic individuals, attributing possible links between spatial ability and dyslexia to talents in art, architecture, and engineering. Dyslexic students need affirmation of their talents. While teachers should work to improve weaknesses, strengths should be a focus of instruction as well. Both teachers and students must recognize and target learning strengths and weaknesses.

## Summary

*Hank Zipzer: The World’s Greatest Underachiever*, provides insight into the daily frustrations dyslexic students encounter. Hank struggles with spelling, fluency, writing, reversals, and many other skills associated with dyslexia. Some characteristics of dyslexia, such as weak phonemic awareness skills, are not addressed in the Hank Zipzer series. Phonemic awareness, the ability to hear and manipulate sounds in words, is a major predictor for success in reading (TEA, 2014). Teachers must understand how to assess and build these skills in order to help dyslexic students succeed in learning. Therefore, continued reading and learning for teachers is recommended. Mandated professional development in Texas will equip teachers with knowledge and tools necessary to help dyslexic learners. Perhaps Hank Zipzer can help teachers, parents, and students as well. In 2014, Hank Zipzer appeared on a CBBC television series, starring Nick James as Hank Zipzer and Henry Winkler as Mr. Rock. If the producers presented dyslexia accurately (and let us hope they do), the show may contribute to an understanding of dyslexia . . . through the eyes of Hank Zipzer.

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