

# Part I

## The Definitional Issue

Our first article presents a “working” definition of dyslexia constructed by the Orton Dyslexia Society Research Committee in collaboration with individuals from the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD), the National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), and others from universities in the United States and Canada. This definition has evolved through extensive and lengthy discussions over the last two years, and will continue to evolve as more progress is made. Reid Lyon, the person at the NICHD in charge of reviewing and funding much of the research on dyslexia and other learning disabilities, is particularly well-suited to explain this definition, backing up each point with an impressive set of relevant research findings. The article serves as a comprehensive review of research to date, and is also useful as a look at where future research is heading and at what questions remain.

Lyon’s discussion focusses on the core definition of dyslexia, highlighting the common features abstracted from the myriad and complex individuals who manifest it. It introduces those features that characterize not only individuals with specific reading disability, but that are also evident in persons whose reading difficulties coexist with general cognitive delay, math difficulties, attention deficit disorder, or broader language problems. In short, the attempt here is to isolate what makes a reading disability a reading disability, independent of its common association with other learning disabilities. A noteworthy feature of the definition presented, setting it apart from prior exclusionary definitions, is its reliance on positive identifiable criteria. Such a well-specified definition is essential for research into the biological basis of the disorder and the underlying cognitive and linguistic deficits. At the same time, the precise nature of the definition will surely facilitate diagnostic and treatment decisions as well. It is my hope that this lucid discussion will be of use to parents, clinicians, educators, and researchers, and will move us one step further toward a definition useful to one and all.

# Toward a Definition of Dyslexia

*G. Reid Lyon*

National Institutes of Health  
Bethesda, Maryland

## INTRODUCTION

A precise and *inclusionary* definition of dyslexia is sorely needed for at least three reasons. First, accurate identification of dyslexia requires that the key symptoms and characteristics be specified. Second, treatment of dyslexia, including early intervention and general teaching methods, must be based on an informed understanding of what difficulties impede reading development and reading mastery for children and adults with reading disabilities. Third, an operational definition is essential for research purposes. More specifically, to investigate the causes and consequences of dyslexia, to examine whether there are different types of reading problems, and to explore how dyslexia relates to other disorders, it is crucial to study individuals who meet well-specified selection criteria. A number of recent papers and books address, in detail, this need for an operational and inclusionary definition of dyslexia and are recommended for those who wish to pursue more in-depth reviews of the definitional issues in dyslexia (Fletcher and Morris 1986; Lyon and Moats 1993; Lyon et al. 1993; Morris 1988, 1993; Morris, Lyon, Alexander et al. 1994; Shaywitz, Shaywitz, Liberman et al. 1991).