

Paula Kerger, PBS, President and CEO
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Sara Just, Executive Producer, PBS NewsHour
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Dear Ms. Kerger and Ms. Just,

We, the undersigned, write to express concern about the PBS NewsHour segment on dyslexia, broadcast on April 30. As experienced senior scholars in the field of reading and literacy education, we found this segment to be inconsistent with the NewsHour's stated aim of balanced and trusted reporting.

Our professional work is devoted to studying literacy and how it can be developed in schools to enrich the lives of all students. So, we well understand and share parents' and others' anguish and frustration when children are identified as experiencing reading difficulties. Competent reading and writing are fundamentally important in and out of school, and difficulties can shape children's concepts of themselves as learners, while affecting virtually every aspect of their everyday experience.

Our concern is that the NewsHour received inadequate and incomplete scientific advice when producing the segment on dyslexia. The result perpetuates inaccuracies, misconceptions, and distortions related to reading, how it is taught, and the complexity of reading difficulties. It suggests erroneously that there is scientific certainty about dyslexia and how it should be addressed instructionally. In fact, the research evidence is equivocal and there is much room for debate about whether dyslexia is an identifiable condition, whether it can be reliably diagnosed, and whether there are instructional approaches that are uniquely effective in ameliorating it.

That ambivalence is reflected in the American Psychiatric Association's decision to drop dyslexia as a diagnostic category in the current edition of its *Diagnostic Statistical Manual*, that field's most respected and widely used reference source. Further, dyslexia is viewed, and often defined, differently in different countries, language groups, and cultures. Ambivalence is also evident in a [research advisory](http://literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/ila-dyslexia-research-advisory.pdf) [http://literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/ila-dyslexia-research-advisory.pdf] about dyslexia posted by the Literacy Research Panel of the International Literacy Association, a respected professional organization that for many decades has served professionals who teach reading. It cautions that many assumptions about dyslexia remain unsettled and that research does not support a single certifiable approach to addressing reading difficulties, including some popular, widely used instructional approaches aimed at children identified as dyslexic. An [addendum](http://literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/ila-dyslexia-research-advisory-addendum.pdf) [http://literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/ila-dyslexia-research-advisory-addendum.pdf]

that addresses objections to the advisory from the International Dyslexia Association provides a more detailed glimpse into the uncertainties surrounding dyslexia. One of the most highly regarded, thorough and least biased contemporary analyses goes further. Elliott and Grigorenko (2014), in their book *The Dyslexia Debate*, concluded that the term dyslexia is so misunderstood and misinterpreted that its use may hinder rather than support successful teaching and learning. These are only recent examples of a long history of controversy and debate about dyslexia that have been on-going since its emergence as a hypothesized condition in the late 19th century.

We are particularly concerned about the dyslexia segment's suggestion that a narrowly conceptualized instructional approach is unequivocally effective, not only for individuals categorized as dyslexic, but for all individuals learning to read. Such a suggestion perpetuates a view that there is a single approach guaranteed to transcend the incredible diversity of factors and individual characteristics that might explain why learning to read is easy for many but incredibly difficult for some. It is widely accepted that learning to read English texts entails instructional attention to sound-symbol correspondence and other phonemic aspects of reading. But, the amount and form of that attention, how it is balanced with other aspects of reading and learning to read such as motivation, and how it might deal with the orthographic irregularities of English spelling, cannot be reduced to a single, narrow, unquestioned approach. In particular, we worry that such a narrow view might divert teachers from attending to other scientifically based facets of good literacy pedagogy, such as attention to oral language, knowledge acquisition, motivation and self-efficacy, and sheer exposure to print. Again, such issues, in one form or another, have periodically blossomed into public controversies across decades and are often nurtured among the general public by shallow or misleading media reports such as the NewsHour's segment.

We are also dismayed that the NewsHour segment implicitly questioned, even if unintentionally, the professionalism of teachers and American schools in regard to teaching reading. It was suggested that teachers were ignorant of or resistant to the scientific certainty of dyslexia and how reading can be effectively taught, not only to those children diagnosed with dyslexia, but to all children. Beyond the absence of such certainty, as we have explained above, the segment unfairly provided no opportunity for a rebuttal from qualified representatives of those groups. They could have pointed to a complementary body of scientific research that supports alternative explanations of reading difficulties and instructional approaches that have been shown to be effective for a wide range of students with reading difficulties. That lack of balance was exacerbated when the segment included emotional comments about how children's needs were not being met.

Finally, we believe that PBS and the NewsHour missed an opportunity to do more in-depth, balanced, and accurate reporting about dyslexia. Beyond the perspectives we have outlined here, such reporting could examine the conditions that have allowed dyslexia to remain such an amorphous, shape-shifting, yet resilient, explanation for reading difficulties for more than a century. Nuanced and balanced reporting is also needed to critique the increasing number of states passing arguably ill-advised legislation about dyslexia.

We ask that you consider options to rectify what we believe has been an unfortunate disservice to parents, to students, and to professionals dedicated to helping all individuals learn to read. Doing so, we believe, would be an excellent opportunity for PBS and the NewsHour to demonstrate clearly the strength of its commitment to accurate, balanced, and unbiased reporting. We stand ready to assist in such an effort in any way that might be helpful.

Sincerely,

[Note. All of the following senior scholars and leaders in the area of reading and literacy have independently approved adding their names, thus indicating that they agree with this email/letter. Please feel free to contact any of them directly using the emails provided. To send a general response, you may reply to this email and I will forward it to all. On behalf of all of the individuals below, David Reinking, reinkin@clemson.edu]

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