



Tech that empowers everyone

## 'I love big words but I can spell barely any': the tech that helps with dyslexia

Thanks to technology, teenager Ella Warren-Roberts has the tools to overcome her dyslexia and thrive at school. [Sue George](#) finds out how

Main image: Ella Warren-Roberts and mum Glenda Roberts. Photograph: Francesca Jones/The Guardian

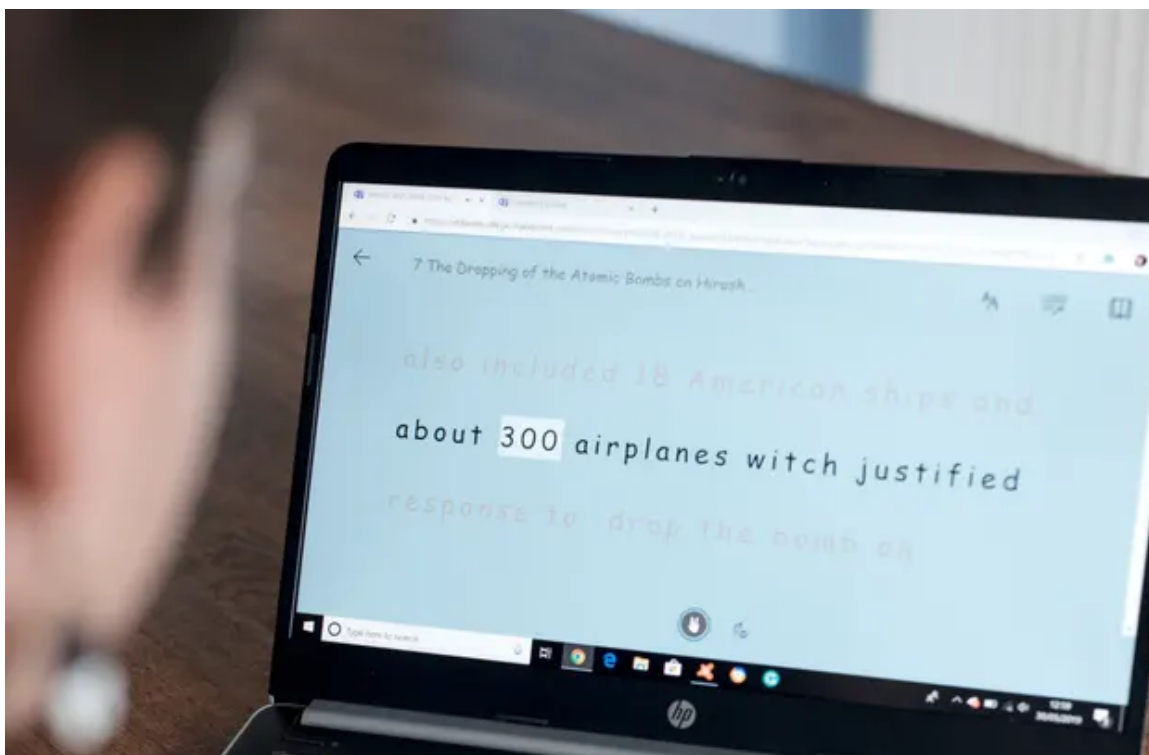


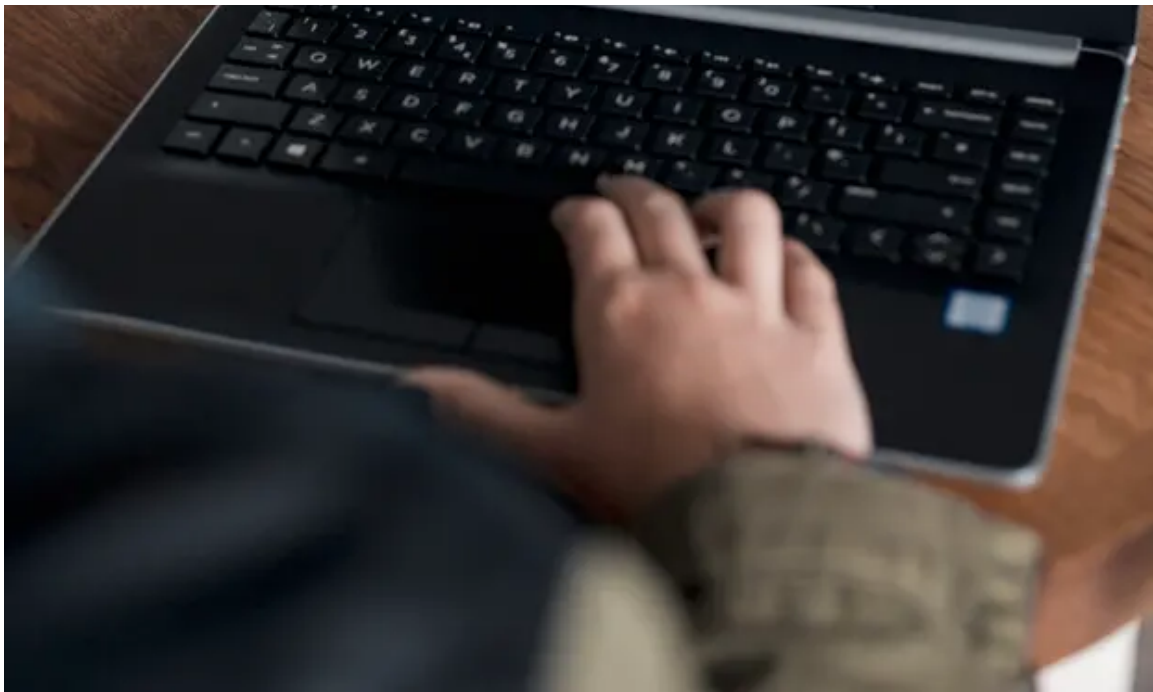
Like many teenagers, Ella Warren-Roberts, 14, is very creative. She makes slate jewellery, she does woodcutting, and paints in watercolours. "She always has more than one project on the go," says her proud mother, Glenda Roberts. "And she always completes them."

"So I don't get too stressed out on one thing, I can relax by doing another," says Ella.

This lively, cheerful teenager also really likes science but, until recently, she wasn't able to shine at it. She struggled reading science questions and her work took too long. But now, she is third in her year at chemistry.

Ella is a day pupil, and Glenda is a teacher, at St David's college, an independent boarding and day school in north Wales for children aged nine to 19. The school prides itself on teaching mixed classes, where pupils with additional learning needs, and those with none, work together to reach their full potential. Many of the pupils, like Ella, have dyslexia, and teachers, such as Glenda, have been trained at Bangor University to work with dyslexic learners. Some teachers bring their dogs to work, which pupils – including Ella – find very calming. "I have anxiety, and animals really help me. They aren't judgemental," she says.





Using a computer for her schoolwork has also played a part in reducing Ella's anxiety – which came about because it took her longer than others to complete certain tasks. “It made me feel more stupid than anyone else,” she says firmly. But now she realises that she isn't stupid and her past problems with reading and writing have eased greatly.

The apps and programs available with Office 365 allow this to happen smoothly. For instance, the school has a OneNote account used by both pupils and teachers. OneNote is a collaborative digital notebook that can be typed into, drawn or written on, and visual or audio clips can be added to it. Teachers use it to compile worksheets; pupils then work on them online.

Glenda points to the Microsoft Edge immersive reader, part of Microsoft's learning tools, and the assistance this tool can give learners across a range of programs, including OneNote and Word. For instance, it can highlight words or sentences, or split individual words into their component syllables – something that can also help anyone learning in an additional language.

Ella uses it to change the background colour on her screen: she finds it easier to read on a sepia tone, where there is no glare. Previously, she relied on teachers printing worksheets on coloured paper. Then there is the choice of fonts. She can immediately choose a font she finds legible. “I used to be behind everyone else, but now I'm on target,” she says.

“I can't type as fast as my brain goes. I jump around a lot when I am writing. I would just jump over chunks [of text] as I'd been distracted by another thing. But with a computer you can just go back,” she continues.

Ella also uses the dictation tool in Word. “I am quite comfortable typing [in class] but can dictate the words I have no idea how to spell. I love big words but I can spell barely any of them,” she smiles.

For Glenda, Microsoft programs have also been a big help. Last year, she was away from work for nine months after being diagnosed with endometrial cancer. "I was in dire straits," she says. "They gave me three months to live." She is currently on the anti-cancer drug Avastin and is still going to the Christie hospital in Manchester for treatment.

OneNote helped her feel less isolated when she was off work, and even in hospital the apps on her phone helped her keep track of how her pupils were getting on. "I might be part-time, but I am invested," she says confidently.

Using the Microsoft Teams platform, she was able to see what they were learning and could make comments to help their teachers.

Both Glenda and Ella are physically active, doing the Race for Life 5k together. They live in an area where outdoor activities are popular; people come to the family's Airbnb to enjoy the nearby mountaineering. Her school also gives Ella the opportunity to enjoy another of her hobbies: wakeboarding. This sport is similar to waterskiing, but with one board instead of two skis. Ella describes it as "like snowboarding, if the snow had melted".

The teenager's wit and vitality have been supported by the tech she uses to help her learn, meaning she can concentrate on what she enjoys. "I used to get really anxious. I used to be the last person finishing [in class]. But I don't have to worry about that now because it's not a problem any more," she smiles.

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