How do you spell Magenta?

Magenta: three syllables, a short ‘e,’ and two ‘a’ s making the ‘uh’ sound. The ‘g’ makes the ‘juh’ sound because it is followed by an ‘e, i, or y,’ like gem but not like gator.

I know all this now, but that has not always been the case. In kindergarten, all I knew was that magenta started with the same letter as my name, and it was the most beautiful color in the world.

In art class, I often asked my teacher to read the names on the paint bottles out loud. I would stare at the big black M on the magenta bottle and wonder when I would be able to read the other letters that followed it.

But there was one problem; One glaring issue. I absolutely despised everything about the written English language.

I believed that my uppercase E’s should not be restricted to only three horizontal lines, and I did not understand why it mattered which direction my letters faced. They were just squiggles on a page, who really cared if they were uppercase or lowercase?

In preschool, I got frustrated trying to learn all 26 letters in the alphabet. The tune of their song mocked me every morning. By the time we began learning to write the letter G, I had had enough, I had to escape. I needed to create a distraction so I did the first logical thing I could think of, I fell out of my chair. To my delight, my wipeout created quite a commotion and the teacher came running to the scene of my accident.

In fact, my tumble was so successful in interrupting the class that I decided to try it again, and again. I would sway from side to side, testing how far I could go while slowly inching off the edge of the of my little yellow chair. Eventually, I would lose my balance and plummet a whole 18 inches to crash on the linoleum floor. Once, my performance was so dramatic that I knocked over my chair and it hit a small and unsuspecting classmate. It was soon after this incident that my preschool teacher advised my parents that I should see a neurologist to test for some sort of balance disorder.
I knew the gig was up, and, as I started pre-first, I realized I was getting too old for these childish theatrics. I had to craft a new plan. At my new school, nail polish was strictly forbidden and offenders were sent to the nurse’s office to have it removed. Perfect. I would paint my nails at night. Then, when I was called on during reading class, all I had to do was flash my Barbie pink fingernails… and I was out of there. The nurse and I grew very close.

As I moved on to first grade, I managed to memorize the alphabet. One day, I came home from school and proudly told my mom that I had a book to read to her. We sat down on the couch together, and, with the book in my lap, I read her an entire story about a little pig. The only problem was, the book was about a large hog. I had been inventing a story based on the pictures. The next time I brought a book home, I was able to read it word for word. In fact, I was so good at “reading” it, that I didn’t ever have to open the front cover. The truth was, I had just memorized what my teacher had read in class. It was at this point that my parents decided something was wrong. My parents had me tested and discovered I had Dyslexia.

Many people who are dyslexic have a story like mine: a story about being different and trying to find ways to slide by undetected. The difference in the plot depends on what happens at this point in the story, whether the dyslexic person receives the help she needs to succeed, or she must continue to hide her struggles. The opportunities she experiences can change the course of her story forever.

Data suggests that 6% of the human population has Dyslexia. That means that if there are 400 people in this room, about 24 of us are dyslexic. Other statistics reveal that when supported, dyslexics can be extraordinarily successful. A study of millionaires preformed by BBC in 2003, found that Dyslexia is the second most common characteristics among the millionaires they studied. In fact, between 40 and 50% of all recorded millionaires are dyslexic. To put this in perspective, imagine that we are all millionaires, up to 200 of us would be dyslexic. Researchers believe that this number is so high because many people with Dyslexia develop strong work ethics to compensate for their struggles, and, once given the tools they need to learn, people with Dyslexia can be extremely successful. Leonardo Da Vinci, Albert Einstein, Charles Schwabb, Pablo Picasso, Thomas Edison, and Orlando Bloom are all dyslexic.

But this is just one of the possible storylines. The alternate plotline is much more frightening. 80% of juvenile delinquents have trouble reading, and most are believed to have some sort of learning difference. Furthermore, 70% of adult prisoners are still unable to read,
suggesting that their learning difference was never addressed. Instead, they have been shuffled along through school without ever learning to read. Many grow frustrated and drop out of high school without graduating. Because they can’t read, they lack the skills necessary for most entry-level jobs. They can’t even fill out a job application. Faced with poverty, many turn to crime. Studies show a dyslexic criminal is the most likely to be convicted and return to jail multiple times throughout his teenage and adult life.

So what is the problem? Why is it that some people with Dyslexia manage to be so successful while others continue to struggle with their learning differences? The truth is, it is all about the resources they receive. People with Dyslexia have brains that are wired differently from the minds of the majority of the population and therefore, they need to be taught differently as well. In order to provide dyslexics with the tools to succeed, there first needs to be an understanding of the definition of Dyslexia. In middle school, Dyslexia was one of my vocabulary words. It was defined in my workbook as, “an inability to learn to read.” I was shocked. How could people be expected to understand Dyslexia if the definition they are taught is simple, blunt, and quite frankly, wrong? According to The International Dyslexia Association, Dyslexia

“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.”

Ok, right, so what does that mean? I don’t know. Definitions of Dyslexia are either over simplified or extremely complicated.

So what exactly is Dyslexia? It is a language-based learning disability. Dyslexia refers to a variety of symptoms, which result in people having difficulties with specific language skills, particularly reading.

The most well known of these symptoms is, of course, writing backwards or “mirror writing.” Yes many Dyslexic people confuse their right and left and yes, my dad did threaten to put an ‘L’ and an ‘R’ on the dashboard of my car when I got my license. But writing backwards is not just an issue of confusing right and left. People with Dyslexia think in terms of pictures and sounds. We memorize letters and words to represent these sounds and as a result, we may forget the way they are supposed to be written. I personally flip my letters upside down
especially my lowercase ‘p’s and ‘b’s. When trying to write “but” or “put” I often have to stop and really think about which one I mean. Last year when taking the AP European History exam, I wrote my entire essay about the Weimar Republic. Then earlier this year, I grappled to understand why grappled was spelled wrong when I got my English paper back. And finally, I even confused but and put in the first draft of this speech. Another symptom of Dyslexia is an issue with word retrieval, which I compensate for by referring to almost everything as “that thing” or even better “the thing with the thing.” Poor spelling is also a result of Dyslexia. There is a point at which no spell check can help you. I often reach that point. When I was younger, I could never remember how to spell the simple word ‘of’ and I was always told to sound it out. “Uh-v, of” so I spelled it “uv.” Other effects of Dyslexia include difficulty comprehending information, remembering instructions, and reading out loud.

Since being diagnosed with Dyslexia I have been fortunate to receive the support I need to cope with these symptoms. With an understanding school environment and a variety of resources, I have always felt a sense of encouragement. I can’t imagine what my life would be like if I didn’t have the support of my amazing parents and teachers. They have guided and encouraged me over the course of my journey and I want every person with dyslexia to have the same opportunities I have had. It is the stark contrast between the benefits I have received and the astounding statistics of those who have neither the personal nor the financial means to seek remediation for their Dyslexia that has formed in me a desire to help. I want to spread awareness and generate an understanding of Dyslexia so every child has the equal opportunity to become a millionaire. Yesterday, I turned 18 and am now eligible to begin training to become a tutor in the Dyslexia Tutoring Program. I will learn to tutor dyslexic students who cannot afford alternate means of support. Although spreading awareness about Dyslexia is an ongoing challenge in our society, I look forward to exploring ways I can contribute significantly to the effort. I want to help every dyslexic child learn to read the name of her own favorite color on the label of the paint bottles too.