

Name	Darren
Age	20-30
Degree	Archaeology PhD
Year	3
Full-Time/Part-Time	Full-Time
Disability	Dyslexia

I was first diagnosed with dyslexia when I was eight years old. My parents were concerned about my progress at school, especially reading and maths. They were advised that I was clearly quite bright, but that I should go and have a dyslexia test. I did, and was diagnosed. At Primary School that was okay, I had support. When I went to the bigger school it was different. So I was taken out in my first year and sent to a specialist dyslexic school from the age of twelve. It was very good.

I got into archaeology purely by accident. I applied to do medicine, I was very strong in the sciences, and I got offered a place at London. Then I realised that the reason I wanted to do it was to prove a point associated with my dyslexia. I took up my last choice and went to do Pharmacology at another University. In the first year I took two archaeology modules as well out of interest, as you were allowed to do. I hated the Pharmacology; it was all the bits about biology that I did not like. So, I transferred at the end of the first year. I thought, 'If I'm going to be here for three years, I might as well do something I enjoy'. The first time I really got hooked on it was the first Field School at Easter. It was snowing. They gave me a planning frame, a pencil and a trowel and told me to plan the site. My first job was to plan the whole site without any training. It was a sort of logical exercise; I worked how to make the grids and did it.

I got a 2:2 for my first degree. I still wanted to go down the academic route, but a 2:2 is difficult to come from. The best way was to play from my strengths. I went to work for an archaeological unit where I got a varied experience. I then moved to a firm which was more about archaeological consulting than excavation and I began to write my own reports. I felt quite nervous to start with, but I got lots of help from the staff there. They stayed after hours to proof read my English and make sure all my reports made sense. It was really encouraging, a fantastic experience. Then they let me run my own small excavations and Watching Briefs and write bigger reports. I basically became a supervisor and it was all based on the practical stuff. It was very much a learning experience, rather than a working experience, and I got to the

point where I had done about everything they could offer. I decided to revisit the academic game with a new-found confidence in writing. I started to do an MA and got a distinction. I needed to demonstrate that I was capable on the academic side, it was make or break. I pulled out all the stops and got a lot of encouragement, especially with the writing. Getting a distinction was how I managed to get funding for the PhD.

On fieldwork I particularly enjoy working as part of a team, or really running an archaeological team. The archaeology is very interesting, but it has almost become secondary to managing projects. I ran a lot of excavations between my MA and PhD. I do not really see my dyslexia as an obstacle to fieldwork at all. There are problems in writing reports, but in excavating I can see stuff that nobody else can; like differences in the soil stratigraphy and features, more than anyone else I know. It is almost second nature to me. I find it hard to believe that other people cannot see the same things. With lots of field experience they can, but it seems to me that they have to learn it much more. I think that being dyslexic has meant my spatial awareness skills and my abilities to make connections between things are much increased. Because I have trouble with written English and presentation skills, I do not write the same as other people. I think of the most original and scandalous thing I can say and try to justify it. All the academic side of my work has been proving arguments fed by my imagination. I think that has been a very important part of the fieldwork as well – imaginative interpretation. That is where my strength lies, the one thing that will get me a job as an academic, it is my imagination. I won essay writing prizes at school because of my imaginative story-telling and ideas. These were special essays for dyslexics, so they did not take into consideration any of the spelling, punctuation or structure. It encouraged me to think that I could write, although I still have enormous trouble with some of the work.

I loath paperwork on excavations, I hate forms even more. I look at the average government forms and think, 'I'll do that tomorrow'. I pick up some forms and the first thing you do is fill your name in and I spell it wrong. My first experience of context cards, which are really a simple laid-out form, was not very good. It took me much longer to go through a certain system and learn how to do it. It still takes me a while to get back into it each season. Once I am there, it is okay, I get them done. I can process them quite quickly, but it is very easy to forget.

The other thing I have to do is the matrix. I always go back to my matrix at the end of each season of the Field School – one number may be in several places, another upside down and another backwards. What I have found is that I have an Assistant Supervisor to help me. So, I put them in charge of the matrix because they are better at presenting numbers than I am. Then I just check and make sure the whole thing

correlates with my interpretation, make sure the expressions and relationships are correct. Last season it worked the best it ever has. I have always had trouble releasing quite serious jobs like that to other people. Having done that now, it has worked much better. There are examples where I do need assistance.

I have not really had much trouble with planning; just have to do double and triple checking. I have quite a scientific background, so I am reasonably familiar with how these things work. I do occasionally do things the wrong way round. As I have done more and more fieldwork, it has not been a problem at all. It was just getting used to it. I have much less of a problem with planning than with matrices. I actually prefer planning to context cards. All-in-all, my disability has not prevented me from doing what I am doing.