

For the parents of all students who don't like reading, won't read the textbooks, or who are making lower grades than someone with their intelligence should be making.

**Bett Huffaker, English Teacher Valencia High
Certified Screener for Irlen Syndrome/Scotopic Sensitivity**

Keep reading to the end. There is hope and help available.

There is a little known problem facing a significant portion of our population that makes reading difficult and unproductive. Do you or your children or students identify with these symptoms?

When you read a text for information in a bright light situation such as reading a History text for a significant amount of time in a brightly lit classroom and you know you have to remember the information for a test. When you get to the point that you feel like you have to stop reading...can't do it any more...

1. Do you skip words or lines when reading?
2. Do you reread lines? (Accidentally go back to the same line instead of dropping to the next)
3. Do you lose your place?
4. Are you easily distracted when reading?
5. Do you need to take breaks often?
6. Do you find it harder to read the longer you read?
7. Do you get headaches when you read?
8. Do your eyes get red and watery?
9. Does reading make you tired?
10. Do you blink or squint?
11. Do you prefer to read in dim light?
12. Do you read close to the page?
13. Do you use your finger or other markers?
14. Do you get restless, active, or fidgety when reading?

(Source: www.Irlen.com)

If you answered **three or more** of these questions, "yes", you may have a condition called Irlen Syndrome.

This questionnaire, found at web site of the Irlen Institute in Long Beach is a self-test for a perception problem called Irlen Syndrome. This condition is also called Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome or SSS and affects at least 14% of the general population. Current statistics are indicating it may be more like 20-25%. Among the population with ADD/HD, dyslexia or other learning disabilities that statistic rises to 46%. Most people who have it are born with the problem but can also be acquired as a result of brain injury – even if the injury wasn't severe enough to cause unconsciousness. When dealing with adults who are still having trouble reading efficiently that number is even higher – 78% have Irlen Syndrome as the cause or as a significant contributor to the problem.

So, how would you recognize the problem and whether or not it can be helped?

Look for these symptoms as described by Helen Irlen*. Not everyone has every symptom. Different people have different clusters of difficulties associated with Irlen Syndrome/Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome.

Reading Behavior:

Does your child:

- avoid reading?
- dislike reading?
- prefer reading under dim lights?
- have difficulty with comprehension?
- become easily distracted?

When reading out loud, does your child:

- skip words or reread words and lines?
- read word by word?
- misread words?
- read slowly or with hesitation?

When reading, does your child complain:

- the print seems to move or even disappear?
- of stomachaches or feeling dizzy?
- the page seems too bright or glary?
- of headaches or sore eyes?
- of blurry print?

Body Language

Does your child:

- move around trying to shade the page?
- move his/her head across the page?
- use a finger or marker
- blink a lot, squint, open his/her eyes wide, rub his/her eyes?
- vary his/her distance from the page?
- become very sleepy?
- become restless and lose concentration?

Written Work

Do you see:

- an inability to write on the line, writing uphill or downhill?
- unequal spacing?
- errors in copying?
- inconsistent spelling of the same word?
- misaligned numbers in columns?

Gross Motor Skills

Does your child show:

- poor coordination?
- problems with balance?
- difficulty catching a ball?
- difficulty judging distances?
- poor depth perception?
- problems using escalators or stairs?

Scotopic individuals are not always aware that they have a problem. This is the way things have always looked to them and they aren't aware that things don't look the same to everyone else. They also aren't aware of how much more effort they are putting into the task of reading than other people.

I learned about this condition approximately five years ago when the first of my three children was diagnosed. As they got into Junior High my kids were having to work extremely hard to compensate for some distortions and problems that were getting worse as the words on the pages got smaller and there were more of them on the page. They each reached a point where it was interfering with their ability to comprehend written information and the effort to read, especially shiny textbooks in florescent light, was causing headaches, fatigue and poor comprehension. The problem was that, for them, words had always gotten blurry or floated or vibrated on the page. It was normal to have white pages look like they were glowing or sparkling. It didn't occur to them to complain since that was just how reading was. It didn't occur to me to ask if the page or the words changed or did anything different after they read for a while. I discovered Irlen Syndrome by accident when a friend mentioned it because my fourteen-year-old son was wearing dark sunglasses in church. By then he was having such severe headaches we were doing CAT scans looking for brain tumors. Eventually, all three of my children were diagnosed as severely Scotopic and, this year, so was I. It does appear to run in families.

Irlen Syndrome is a problem with how the brain processes light. Without a long technical explanation, the timing is off in the nerve pathways between the eye and the brain, and the brain, instead of creating a clear image, produces distortions. Because this is completely separate from focus problems and occurs in the nerves and brain beyond the eye, it isn't detected by standard eye tests. It is also a response to too much light and optometrists test one letter at a time in the dark.

The nerve pathways respond to differences in the wavelengths of light. Changing the color of light going into the eye can change the timing and the speed at which the brain processes the light and the distortions and headaches can be reduced or eliminated. The first step, which is what I am trained to do, is to find the right color or combination of colors of plastic overlays that the student can then use over the pages. The colored overlay changes the color of the reflected light going into the eye and can eliminate the distortions in print on a page. It helps with reading and comprehension but has limitations. It doesn't help with depth perception or tasks for which it is impractical to

have the page covered in plastic. If a parent chooses to go further on their own, it is possible to be tested by a Diagnostician who can determine the precise color to tint filters or lenses for glasses allowing even more benefit from the colors. The filters or lenses are not exactly the same color as the overlays. Once my children were using the overlays and the filters the headaches stopped and their grades jumped dramatically. This isn't a cure for all reading problems but it is amazing what skills you can implement when you can actually see the page clearly.

I became fascinated with this condition and made it the topic of my Master's Thesis in 2003. Two years ago I went a step further. With the financial support of a grant from the City of Santa Clarita Education Foundation I took the course on how to diagnose or screen students for SSS. To the best of my knowledge, I am one of only two Irlen Screeners in the Hart District. I have begun small – just testing the students in my own classes in addition to my regular teaching duties. I am certified to determine the extent to which the child has Irlen Syndrome and then what color or colors of overlays are the most effective for that student. This is not yet a district- or school-supported program so I am donating my testing time and at a cost of \$3.50 per overlay I can help struggling students to see the pages clearly so that they can take advantage of the learning opportunities at school. I test during lunch or after school.

Once a student has been screened and knows the correct color of overlays to use they can begin getting the benefits. The results of the consistent use of the correct Irlen Overlays by the Scotopic Student can be:

- Better comprehension (Averaging over a year and a half in measured ability with the use of the correct overlay and no other intervention in double blind tests performed in Australia.)
- Increased reading speed
- Improved accuracy
- Reduced strain and fatigue
- Improved motivation
- Improved self-esteem
- Improved academic performance

For more information on Irlen Syndrome, I recommend:

The Irlen Institute's web site at www.Irlen.com

Links available on Mrs. Huffaker's class website <http://staff.hartdistrict.org/bhuffak/>

Reading by the Colors by Helen Irlen

The Light Barrier by Rhonda Stone

“The Irlen Method, A Piece of the Puzzle” brochure

*Irlen Syndrome Warning Signs ©1987

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