

## Teaching Students with Sensory Impairments

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The Ohio State University Partnership Grant  
Improving the Quality of Education for Students with Disabilities

### Introduction

Students with sensory disabilities such as those who have a visual impairment, are blind, have a hearing impairment, or are deaf, often bring auxiliary aids and adaptive equipment to the classroom (e.g., dog, cane, interpreter, Type-N-Speak). These aids assist in gaining access to the classroom; however, they do not ensure access. The classroom instructor is responsible for considering the needs of every student when teaching. For example, your instruction including lectures, website, videos, overheads, handouts, and textbook must be accessible to the students.

If you would like verification that a student has a disability and you have not received any documentation from the Office of Disability Services (ODS), ask the student to provide you with a letter from ODS. Our office only produces these letters for students who are registered with this office and for whom documentation of the disability is on file. ODS can also send you this letter directly.

### Blind or Visual Impairment

Students with visual impairments are constantly challenged by classroom instructional strategies. Although they can easily hear lectures and discussions, it can be difficult for them to access class syllabi, textbooks, overhead projector transparencies, PowerPoint presentations, the chalkboard, maps, videos, written exams, demonstrations, library materials, and films. A large part of traditional learning is visual; fortunately, many students with visual disabilities have developed strategies to learn.

Students with visual impairments or who are blind vary considerably. For example, some students have no vision; others are able to see large forms; others can see print if magnified; and still others have tunnel vision with no peripheral vision or the reverse. Furthermore, some students with visual impairments use Braille, and some have little or no knowledge of Braille. A variety of accommodations, equipment, and compensatory strategies are used based upon the widely varying needs of each student. Many students make use of adaptive technology, especially print to voice conversion using a scanner and voice production software. Textbooks are often converted and put on disks for later use. Others use taped textbooks or equipment to enlarge print (closed circuit television [CCTV]) or actual enlargements.

#### Guidelines

**Preferential Seating:** Students with visual impairments may need preferential seating since they depend upon listening. Since they may want the same anonymity as other students, it is important that you avoid pointing out the student or the alternative arrangements to others in the class.

**Exam Accommodations:** Exam accommodations, which may include adaptive technology, a reader/scribe and extra time, a computer, closed circuit TV (CCTV), Braille, enlargements, tapes, and/or image enhanced materials, may be needed. These arrangements can be coordinated with ODS.

**Arranging for Accommodations:** A meeting with the student is essential to facilitate the arrangements of accommodations and auxiliary aids which may include, in addition to exam accommodations, access to class notes and/or the taping of lectures; print material in alternative format; a script with verbal

descriptions of videos or slides, charts, and graphs, or other such visual depictions converted to tactile representations.

**Orientation to Classroom:** You may also ask the student privately if he/she would like an orientation to the physical layout of the room with locations of steps, furniture, lecture position, low-hanging objects or any other obstacles.

**Use of Language:** Although it is unnecessary to rewrite the entire course, you can help a student with a visual impairment by avoiding phrases such as “Look at this” and “Examine that,” while pointing to an overhead projection. Use descriptive language. Repeat aloud what is written on an overhead or chalkboard.

**Lab Assistance:** Students with a vision impairment may need a lab assistant or lab partner in lab classes. Assist the student in finding an assistant.

**Print Material in Alternative Format:** Have copies of the syllabus and reading assignments ready three to five weeks prior to the beginning of classes. Students with visual impairments will likely need all print material in alternative format which means that they need print material converted to audio tapes, scanned onto disks, Braille, enlarged or image enhanced. Conversion of materials takes time. It is important that they have access to class materials at the same time as others in your class. Coordinate alternative format with ODS.

**Guide Dogs:** Keep in mind that guide dogs are working animals. They must be allowed in all classes. Do not feed or pet a guide dog. Since they are working, they should not be distracted.

## Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Individuals with hearing impairments rely upon visual input rather than auditory input when communicating. Using visual aspects of communication (body language, gestures, and facial expression) often feels awkward to people who are accustomed to the auditory; however, it is essential that faculty learn to effectively communicate with students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Students who have any level of hearing impairment do not all have the same characteristics. Some have a measure of usable residual hearing and use a device to amplify sounds (FM system). Some choose to speak; others use very little or no oral communication. Some students are extremely adept at speech reading, while others have very limited ability to “read lips.” For some, sign language and/or finger spelling are the preferred means of communication; other communication choices include gestures and writing. Most students who are deaf or hard of hearing have experience communicating with the hearing population. Let them be the guide on how best to communicate.

### Guidelines

**Gaining Attention:** Make sure you have the student’s attention before speaking. A light touch on the shoulder, a wave, or other visual signal will help.

**Preferential Seating:** Offer the student preferential seating near the front of the classroom so that he/she can get as much from visual and auditory clues as possible or clearly see a sign language interpreter if one is used.

**Effective Communication:** Don’t talk with your back to the class (for example, when writing on the chalkboard). It destroys any chance of the student getting facial or speech reading cues. Your face and mouth need to be clearly visible at all times. Avoid sitting with your back to a window, chewing gum, biting on a pencil, or other similar obstructions.

**Videos and Slides:** Provide videos and slides with captioning. If captioning is not available, supply an outline or summary of the materials covered. If an interpreter is in the classroom, make sure that he/she is visible.

**Class Discussion:** When students make comments in class or ask questions, repeat the questions before answering, or phrase your answers in such a way that the questions are obvious.

**Class Notes:** Students may need your assistance in getting class notes if ODS is unable to locate a note taker. When a student is using a sign language interpreter or captioning or lip-reading, it is difficult to take good notes simultaneously.

**Sign Language or Captioning Services:** When a student uses a sign language interpreter, discuss with both the student and interpreter(s) where the interpreter(s) should be located to provide the greatest benefit for the student without distracting other class members. When a student uses a captioning service, discuss with the student and captioner the appropriate location.

**Role of the Interpreter:** The interpreter is in the classroom only to facilitate communication. He/she should not be asked to run errands, proctor exams or discuss the student's personal issues. He/she should not participate in the class in any way or express personal opinions.

**Interpreter Classroom Etiquette:** The interpreter is in the classroom to facilitate communication for both the student and the instructor. Speak directly to the student, even though it may be the interpreter who clarifies information for you. Likewise, the interpreter may request clarification from you to insure accuracy of the information conveyed.

**English as a Second Language:** For many students who are deaf, English is a second language. When grading written assignments and/or essay tests, look for accurate and comprehensive content rather than writing style. Students should be encouraged to go to the Writing Center for assistance if necessary.

## Considerations for Teaching All Students with Disabilities

**Universal Design for Learning:** "Universal design is an approach to designing course instruction, materials, and content to benefit people of all learning styles without adaptation or retrofitting." (Visit <http://www.sru.edu/ods> for more information.) By incorporating Universal Design principles in instruction that allow students with disabilities access to the classroom, you may also be designing instruction that works better for everyone in the class. Classes designed with this concept in mind offer a variety of methods of content presentation, flexible teaching strategies, and options for demonstrating mastery of course content.

**Expectations:** Although many students with disabilities need accommodations, the expectation for a performance at a level commensurate with their peers should remain. Do not have a special grading scale or other criteria for students with disabilities.

**Collaboration:** Don't hesitate to call ODS to arrange for a three-way meeting between you, the student's assigned disability counselor, and the student to work out any issues and to collaborate on the best instructional strategies for the student.  
(Visit <https://www.sru.edu/ods>)

**Guided Notes on the Web:** Providing students with guided notes that they can access through the Web prior to class assists them with focusing on the appropriate material. It will help them to learn more effectively in the classroom as well as take better notes.  
(Visit <https://www.sru.edu/ods>)

**Web-Enhanced Learning:** If a student is experiencing issues viewing, reading or experiencing materials through the use of assistive technology on [www.sru.edu](http://www.sru.edu), advise them to contact the Web Communications office at 724-738-4314 or through email at [websupport@sru.edu](mailto:websupport@sru.edu). TDD available at 724-738-4501. Please contact ODS if a student reports issues with assistive technology and D2L.  
(Visit <http://www.sru.edu/ods>)

**Comprehensive Syllabus:** A comprehensive syllabus with clearly delineated statements about expectation is helpful to students who need help with structure and organization.  
(Visit <http://www.sru.edu/ods>)

**Inappropriate Behavior:** Students with disabilities are subject to the same code of conduct required of any student at Slippery Rock University. If there are incidences of inappropriate behavior, meet privately to discuss issues of behavior and encourage students to seek help. Give concise and honest feedback about behaviors that are inappropriate. If you observe a student in a non-emergency situation where additional support may be needed, please make a Care Referral to the Office of the Associate Provost for Student Success: <http://www.sru.edu/life-at-sru/health-and-wellness/care-network>. If there are situations involving threats or abusive behavior, call **University Police** directly at 724-738-3333. If the student is so disruptive that he/she prevents you from effectively teaching your class, call Student Conduct at 724-738-4985. You are always welcome to consult with ODS. These situations are not likely to occur, but it is wise to have a plan.

## ***Remember...***

It's your responsibility to support Slippery Rock University's commitment to equal access to education. This information will assist you when you have students with disabilities in your class; staff at the Office for Disability Services are also available to help you. Some key elements are:

- **Alternative Format:** Many students need print materials in alternative format (scanned to USBs, audio tapes, Braille, or enlarged). Work quickly with ODS and the student to make sure students get materials converted in a timely fashion.
- **Verification of a Disability:** If you would like verification that a student has a disability, ask the student to provide you with a letter. ODS produces these letters only for students who are registered with this office and for whom documentation of the disability is on file. You may also login to Accommodate at <https://sru-accommodate.simplicity.com/>.
- **Class Notes:** Some students with disabilities have difficulty taking notes. They may need your assistance in getting a volunteer note taker if ODS cannot locate one. In addition, you may provide them a copy of your notes and/or copies of overheads and other class materials.
- **Proctor Sheets:** A student with a disability may ask you to complete a proctor sheet, a form that facilitates the administration of your tests with accommodations at ODS. It is essential for you to fill the form out completely and quickly so that arrangements can be made for exam accommodations.

## **Resources**

The Ohio State University Partnership Grant Website: <http://www.telr.osu.edu/dpg/>

The Ohio State University Office for Disability Services (ODS) Website:  
<http://www.ods.ohio-state.edu>

The Ohio State University Web Accessibility Center Website: <http://www.wac.ohio-state.edu/>

The Ohio State University Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Coordinator's Office Website:  
<http://ada.osu.edu/>

## **Important Note**

This information is available in alternate format upon request. Please call the Office for Disability Services at (724) 738-4877.

It is also available at <http://www.sru.edu/ods> and Accommodate faculty resources tab at <https://sru-accommodate.simplicity.com/>.

Public requests for accommodations through the Office of Disability Services can be made by visiting the following link: [https://sru-accommodate.simplicity.com/public\\_accommodation](https://sru-accommodate.simplicity.com/public_accommodation).

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