

## Teaching Students with Disabilities (Vanderbilt University)

In order to create an inclusive classroom where all students are respected, it is important to use language that prioritizes the student over his or her disability. Disability labels can be stigmatizing and perpetuate false stereotypes where students who are disabled are not as capable as their peers. In general, it is appropriate to reference the disability only when it is pertinent to the situation. For instance, it is better to say “The student, who has a disability” rather than “The disabled student” because it places the importance on the student, rather than on the fact that the student has a disability.

For more information on terminology, see the guide provided by the National Center on Disability and Journalism: <http://ncdj.org/style-guide/>

### *Strategies* (Adapted from various institutions)

- A statement in your syllabus inviting students with disabilities to meet with you privately is a good step in starting a conversation with those students who need accommodations and feel comfortable approaching you about their needs. Let the student know times s/he can meet you to discuss the accommodations and how soon the student should do so. Here is a sample statement:
- *If you have a learning or physical disability, or if you learn best utilizing a particular method, please discuss with me how I can best accommodate your learning needs. I am committed to creating an effective learning environment for all learning styles. However, I can only do this successfully if you discuss your needs with me in advance of the quizzes, papers, and notebooks. I will maintain the confidentiality of your learning needs. If appropriate, you should contact the Disability Resource Center to get more information on accommodating disabilities.*
- Provide an easily understood and detailed course syllabus. Make the syllabus, texts, and other materials available before registration.
- If materials are on-line, consider colors, fonts, and formats that are easily viewed by students with low vision or a form of color blindness.

- Clearly spell out expectations before the course begins (e.g., grading, material to be covered, due dates).
- Make sure that all students can access your office or arrange to meet in a location that is more accessible.
- On the first day of class, you can distribute a brief Getting to Know You questionnaire that ends with the question ‘Is there anything you’d like me to know about you?’ This invites students to privately self-disclose important challenges that may not meet accommodations requirements or that may be uncomfortable for the student to talk to you about in person upon first meeting you.
- Don’t assume what students can or cannot do with regards to participating in classroom activities. Think of multiple ways students may be able to participate without feeling excluded. The next section on “Teaching for Inclusion” has some ideas for alternative participation.

## Teaching for Inclusion: Inclusive Design

One of the common concerns instructors have about accommodations is whether they will change the nature of the course they are teaching. However, accommodations are designed to give all students equal access to learning in the classroom. When planning your course, consider the following questions (from Scott, 1998):

*What is the purpose of the course?*

*What methods of instruction are absolutely necessary? Why?*

*What outcomes are absolutely required of all students? Why?*

*What methods of assessing student outcomes are absolutely necessary? Why?*

*What are acceptable levels of performance on these student outcome measures?*

Answering these questions can help you define essential requirements for you and your students. For instance, participation in lab settings is critical for many biology classes; however, is traditional class lecture the only means of delivering instruction in a humanities or social science course? Additionally, is an in-class written essay exam the only means of evaluating a student who has limited use of her hands? Could an in-person or taped oral exam accomplish the same goal? (Scott, 1998; Bourke, Strehorn, & Silver, 2000)

When teaching a student with any disability, it is important to remember that many of the principles for inclusive design could be considered beneficial to any student. The idea of “Universal Design” is a method of designing course materials, content, and instruction to benefit all learners. Instead of adapting or retrofitting a course to a specific audience, Universal Design emphasizes environments that are accessible to everyone regardless of ability. By focusing on these design principles when crafting a syllabus, you may find that most of your course easily accommodates all students. (Hodge & Preston-Sabin, 1997)

Many of Universal Design’s methods emphasize a deliberate type of teaching that clearly lays out the course’s goals for the semester and for the particular class period. For instance, a syllabus with clear course objectives, assignment details, and deadlines helps students plan their schedules accordingly. Additionally, providing an outline of the day’s topic at the beginning of a class period and summarizing key points at the end can help students understand the logic of your organization and give them more time to record the information.

Similarly, some instructional material may be difficult for students with certain disabilities. For instance, when showing a video in class you need to consider your audience. Students with visual disabilities may have difficulty seeing non-verbalized actions; while those with disorders like photosensitive epilepsy may experience seizures with flashing lights or images; and those students with hearing loss may not be able to hear the accompanying audio. Using closed-captioning, providing electronic transcripts, describing on-screen action, allowing students to check the video out on their own, and outlining the role the video plays in the day’s lesson helps reduce the access barrier for

students with disabilities and allows them the ability to be an active member of the class. Additionally, it allows other students the opportunity to engage with the material in multiple ways as needed. (Burgstahler & Cory, 2010; Scott, McGuire & Shaw, 2003; Silver, Bourke & Strehorn, 1998)

## Learn More

Please contact the [SU Disability Resource Center](#) for more information and consultation.

The Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) has a list of resources for implementing universal design principles in the classroom: [www.ahead.org/resources/ud](http://www.ahead.org/resources/ud)

Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), home to the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), has an extensive guide on considerations and suggested classroom practices for teaching students with disabilities: <http://www.rit.edu/studentaffairs/disabilityservices/info.php>

The United Spinal Association has a publication on Tips for Interacting with People with Disabilities: <http://www.unitedspinal.org/disability-etiquette/>