

Teaching Persons with Disabilities: Part II: Deaf-Blindness

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There are many teaching strategies you can use to ensure effective and productive learning environments and experiences for all students, including those with disabilities. Accessible Educationⁱ is the process of designing courses and developing a teaching style to meet the needs of people who have a variety of backgrounds, abilities, and learning styles. Just as there is no single way to teach, people learn in a variety of ways; using different instructional methods will help meet the needs of the greatest number of learnersⁱⁱ.

Under the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*, you have a responsibility to learn about accessibility for persons with disabilities and how it relates to the development and delivery of accessible programs and courses.

The following are some practical tips for teaching students with deaf-blindness.

What does it mean if someone has deaf-blindness?

A person who has deaf-blindness has a greater or lesser extent of hearing and vision loss. This results in difficulties accessing information.

Persons with deaf-blindness use different communication methods. Persons with deaf-blindness may be accompanied by an intervenor, a professional who is trained in tactile sign language. This sign language involves touching the hands of the client using a two-handed, manual alphabet, also known as finger spelling.

Other persons with deaf-blindness may use American Sign Language (ASL) or Langue des signes québécoise (LSQ), or they may require small window interpreting (signing within a restricted range of vision). Some persons with deaf-blindness have some sight or hearing, and others have neither. Persons with deaf-blindness will probably let you know how to communicate with them. If you are unsure, ask.

Suggested tips on teaching a person with deaf-blindness

In the classroom or laboratory

Avoid making assumptions about a person's disability or capabilities; many persons with disabilities talk about being frustrated with people assuming what they can or cannot do. Remember that although persons with disabilities might have specific needs, every individual is different.

Prior to beginning the course:

- Advance planning is usually crucial for academic success. Consult with the staff at the Office for Students with Disabilities.
- Choose course materials early. This will allow enough time for you to convert the documents into alternative formats, or for students to request the formats they need.

When the course begins:

- Encourage students to tell you about any accessibility concerns. You can do this both verbally early in the semester and by including an accessibility statement on your syllabus. Indicate that such conversations are confidential and are strictly for the purpose of facilitating any learning needs or accommodations that may be in place.
- Identify and clearly express the essential course content, and recognize that students can express understanding of essential course content in multiple ways. Diversify assignments or allow for exceptions to enable all students to demonstrate their specific talents (for example, oral presentations, poster presentations, written assignments).
- Insist on professional, civil conduct between and among students to respect people's differences and create an inclusive environment.
- Consider providing your classes with information about the accessible features of their immediate environment (for example, automatic doors, accessible washrooms, etc.).
- Provide the course outline, the list of reading requirements, copies of overhead slides, and all other materials in an accessible, digital format whenever possible. Some persons with deaf-blindness will use assistive technology. The type of technology they use will depend, in part, on their hearing and sight levels and whether they rely on one of their senses more than the other, if at all. Assistive technologies could include sound amplification (hearing aids), as well as screen readers and/or screen-enhancement software that allows the user to magnify the computer screen or change the contrast.

While in session:

- Accommodate the needs of students who use adaptive technology, such as closed-captioning, screen readers, personal frequency modulation (FM) systems, teletypewriters (known as TTYs), amplified phones, closed-circuit television (CCTV), braille, magnifiers, and magnification software.
- Understand that environmental noise, poor acoustics, and a speaker's voice pitch, volume, patterns, and accent will impact the quality of the communication process for students who rely on residual hearing.
- Be flexible and available to meet with a student and his/her intervenor, and with staff in the Office for Students with Disabilities, as needed to discuss specific learning needs, strategies for success, alternatives to course assignments, and methods of evaluation. The communication process for a student with deaf-blindness can be slower than that of a student who does not have a hearing or visual disability. Curriculum may take longer to deliver, and greater time may be required for clarification of course content.

Tests, exams, and evaluation

- If possible, online tests should be tested for accessibility. Ensure that a student can navigate them using an assistive technology, such as a screen reader to read aloud the information on the screen, or using screen-enhancement software that allows the user to magnify the computer screen or change the contrast.

Suggestions for interacting one-on-one with a student with deaf-blindness

- Patience, respect, and a willingness to find a way to communicate are your best tools.
- When you approach a person with deaf-blindness, identify yourself and speak directly to them.
- Ask permission before touching the individual, unless it is an emergency.
- A service animal may accompany a person with a visual disability. Service animals are working and should not be distracted.
- Speak directly to the person, not to the intervenor.
- If you are not sure what to do, ask, “Can I help?”

Accommodating a student with deaf-blindness

As an educator, you have a responsibility to accommodate students with disabilities under the *Ontario Human Rights Code*. Requests for accommodation are made on an individual basis by students through the Office for Students with Disabilities and require medical and/or formal documentation.

The following are common academic accommodations that may be required for students who have deaf-blindness. This list is not exhaustive and is not intended to replace the official request for academic accommodations as communicated by the Office for Students with Disabilities.

Classroom and laboratory accommodations

- If possible, send your teaching material to the student electronically, or transfer it onto a USB flash drive for the student.
- Provide your contact information by e-mail and orally.
- Identify note-takers.
- Allow students to audio-record lectures.
- Allow for preferential seating, either to facilitate better listening or to allow for proximity to an electrical outlet.
- Arrange to meet with the student to discuss specific learning needs, strategies for success, alternatives to course assignments, and methods of evaluation when the student provides their letter of accommodation.

Tests, exams, and evaluation accommodations

- For exams that include graphic content (charts, maps, illustrations), it's best to call on the Office for Students with Disabilities to have the material transcribed

into a format that's accessible to the student; if needed, you can provide an alternate evaluation method.

- Consider, when appropriate, offering alternatives to more traditional assignments and exams, such as an oral presentation instead of a written assignment or exam.
- Provide extended time for tests and exams; note that students may have access to an interpreter during tests and exams to interpret questions.
- Note that students may use an interpreter for oral assignments and presentations.

Remember that students with disabilities do not have to disclose their disability to their professors or anyone else in the academic environment in order to receive accommodations. Unless a student chooses to disclose the nature of the disability to you, you will only receive information on the accommodations the student is entitled to receive. It is important to familiarize yourself with the accommodation and the accessibility resources and protocols at your university to ensure you are following recommended practices.

Sources

Kwantlen Polytechnic University, [Disability Information and Strategies](#)

University of Ottawa, [A Guide for Professors: Minimizing the Impact of Learning Obstacles](#)

Western University, [Accessibility in Teaching: Strategies and Requirements for Supporting an Accessible Learning Environment](#)

York University, [Faculty Resource Guide: Teaching Students with Disabilities](#)

Additional Resources

[Canadian Deafblind Association](#)

Council of Ontario Universities, [Educators' Accessibility Resource Kit](#)

To obtain this document in an alternative format, contact:

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ⁱ The term Accessible Education has been adopted to capture the value of two frameworks in improving the accessibility of university education: Universal Instructional Design (UID) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Both were informed by the architectural concept of Universal Design, which is “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.” (Center for Universal Design, [The Principles of Universal Design](#)).

“UID is not just about accessibility for persons with a disability – it’s about truly universal thinking – maximizing learning for students of all backgrounds and learner preferences while minimizing the need for special accommodations.” (University of Guelph, [UID Implementation Guide](#)).

“UDL is a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn. UDL provides a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone – not a single, one-size-fits-all solution but rather flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs.” (Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), [Universal Design for Learning](#)).

ⁱⁱ Nilson, Linda B. (2010). [Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors](#) (3rd ed). John Wiley & Sons.