

FAST FACTS FOR FACULTY

Academic Support and Disability Services

Teaching Students with Sensory Impairments

Introduction

Students with sensory disabilities such as those who are blind, visually impaired, deaf, or hearing impaired 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.

Blind or Visually Impaired – Description:

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 who are blind or visually impaired vary considerably. For example, some 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. They use a variety of accommodations, equipment, and compensatory strategies based upon their widely varying needs. Many 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.
- ◆ **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 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 visually impaired student 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:** These students 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.
- ◆ **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 – Description:

Individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing 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 are deaf or hard of hearing 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 a deaf 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. When a student is using a sign language interpreter or captioning or lip-reading, it is difficult to take good notes simultaneously.

Guidelines Cont'd:

- ◆ **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 deaf students, English is a second language. When grading written assignments and/or essay tests, look for accurate and comprehensive content rather than writing style.

Contact Information

LaDonna Bridges, Director of Academic Support
505-626-4906
lbridges@frc.mass.edu

