

DEMYSTIFYING ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

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NEED TO REACH US?

The University of Toronto is committed to creating an inclusive teaching and learning environment that aligns with provincial guidelines for academic accommodations. The University's guidelines are outlined in our statement of commitment regarding persons with disabilities:

<http://uoft.me/Statement-Persons-Disabilities>

Instructors are essential partners in the academic accommodation process. The Office for Students with Disabilities (The OFSD) on your campus works in partnership with instructors to provide the academic accommodations that support a fair and inclusive learning environment for undergraduate and graduate students. The accommodations process must maintain safety for self and others and the academic standards that all students must demonstrate.

This document has been created to provide instructors with information about accommodating students with disabilities. In the following pages, you'll find information about:

- roles and responsibilities of the student, the Accessibility Advisor, instructor and staff
- frequently asked questions
- communication style
- universal design and considerations for providing accessible education
- contact information

“It is the University’s goal to create a community that is inclusive of all persons and treats all members of the community in an equitable manner... In working toward this goal, the University will strive to provide support for, and facilitate the accommodation of individuals with disabilities so that all may share the same level of access to opportunities, participating in the full range of activities that the University offers, and achieve their full potential as members of the University community.”

Statement of Commitment Regarding persons with Disabilities

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS: THE BASICS

Types of disabilities

Students registered with the OFSD may be registered in any of the following disability categories: D/deaf, deafened or hard of hearing, low vision or legally blind, mobility or functional limitations, mental health issues, learning disability, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorder, concussion, brain injury or other medical conditions.

Students may also be registered for temporary disabilities such as a broken limb or short-term impairment after medical treatment or surgery. Assistance can be given for on-campus transportation and addressing the completion of academic work.

Students with disabilities meet the same admission criteria as all other applicants. They will also meet the same academic requirements and standards as all students, although the manner by which students with disabilities meet these may vary.

Accommodations

Academic accommodations are provided when students experience disability-related barriers in demonstrating their knowledge and skills. Accommodations provide equitable access for students with disabilities to meet the academic standards of their program. It's also possible for a student to have a disability and not require accommodation. For example, a student with a chronic health disability managed well by medication, diet and appropriate coping strategies, may decide not register for these services. On the other hand, a student might register but not use their accommodations until they are required due to a change in the student's health.

Graduate students and second-entry professional students may require unique academic accommodations due to their personalized research and/or field work/practicum or other licensing requirements.

Essential requirements

The provision of accommodations will not change the essential requirements of a course or program curricula.

“An appropriate accommodation enables a student to successfully meet the essential requirements of the program, with no alteration in standards or outcomes, although the manner in which the student demonstrates mastery, knowledge and skills may be altered.”¹

Instructors play a key role in the accommodations process by communicating what a student must know and demonstrate. When necessary, instructors assist with problem-solving based on their academic expertise. The question of fairness often comes up when providing students with alternate ways of performing academic tasks. Accommodations level the playing field to provide

¹Ontario Human Rights Commission. (2004). *Guidelines on Accessible Education* (ISBN: 0-7794-7191-1). Toronto, ON: Canada.

an opportunity for students with disabilities to complete certain tasks differently, while still meeting the essential requirements of the curriculum. Students with accommodations are expected to demonstrate the same knowledge and skill development as their peers.

If you believe that implementing the accommodations listed in a student’s Letter of Accommodation will compromise academic standards, contact the Accessibility Advisor listed at the bottom of the letter. In some circumstances, the nature and degree of disability may mean that no accommodation would enable an individual to meet the essential academic requirements or behavioural expectations of a course or program. In these cases, the University is not required to accommodate. However, efforts must be made to provide all reasonable options.

Privacy & confidentiality

A student's specific diagnosis is private medical information under Human Rights Code guidelines. Under no circumstances should you ask a student to disclose this information.

While some students are willing to talk about their disability, many others might be reluctant to do so. They might fear being denied opportunities or creating unwanted curiosity or concern. Encourage students to talk about the impact of their disability on their learning.

Because any category of disability contains a wide range of differences in how someone functions, knowing a student's type of disability isn't particularly helpful without the more detailed information provided during the intake process. This information describes additional challenges due to other conditions, family and social supports, past experiences of learning and areas of strength that can compensate for difficulties.

What the Office for Students with Disabilities provides:

- a review of the student's medical documentation and needs to determine if academic accommodations are required
- a place for students to discuss their disability-related needs and the appropriate accommodations
- the development of an effective accommodation plan with the student
- ongoing support and problem-solving for disability-related issues that impact a student's academic and co-curricular experience (this frequently requires collaboration with instructors and staff)

- access to financial support (e.g. Bursary for Students with Disabilities, SGS Accessibility Grant) and referrals to other funding sources
- access to adaptive furniture, equipment and software
- coordination of specialized services such as sign language interpreting, computerized note taking and real-time captioning

Types of accommodations

Accommodations depend on the impact of the disability within a particular program of study. They may include:

Classrooms, labs and course work

- accessible classrooms and labs that are safe and provide appropriate supports
- sign language interpretation, note taking
- extensions on assignments/papers
- accessible materials in alternate formats (e.g. braille, large print, digitized text, voice-activated software, assisted-hearing devices)

Tests and exams

- writing within a test/exam space in which accommodations may be provided (e.g. fewer distractions, additional time, ability to take breaks or attend to physical needs)
- alternate formats like large print or braille
- adaptive furniture and equipment (e.g. use of keyboard for writing, screen-reading software)

Practicum/placement

- guidance for requesting accommodations during practicum/placement
- development of safe, appropriate accommodations in the academic program and placement site

Research

- estimates of additional time that may be required to complete research (this plan can be reviewed and adjusted annually, if necessary)
- solving problems with graduate student funding packages for students who require additional time or a reduced work load

Outside the classroom

- liaising with residences regarding disability-related needs
- referring students to campus and community resources
- peer mentoring and educational/support groups (e.g. for students with ADHD and Asperger's)
- co-curricular programming in partnership with campus partners (e.g. navigating disability and disclosure in the workplace)

ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES: WHO DOES WHAT?

Students, staff and instructors all have responsibilities in the accommodations process and in creating an accessible environment. Each party brings an important perspective: the student has a unique and personal knowledge of their disability, the instructor has content knowledge and an understanding of the required outcomes, and the advisor has a broad-based knowledge of disabilities and their impact on academic performance. Roles and responsibilities may differ depending upon the campus or academic division, so please check locally for specific procedures.

Instructor:

- participates, when necessary, in structuring an accommodation plan that meets the essential requirements of the course/program and the needs of the student
- provides accommodations as outlined on the Letter of Accommodation, as appropriate, and works with the student and/or Accessibility Advisor to find solutions if issues arise
- directs students to register with the OFSD if an accommodation request is made but is unaccompanied by a Letter of Accommodation
- makes every effort to develop an inclusive learning environment (e.g. provides clear information in the course syllabus about course policies regarding accommodations)

Don't forget to complete your AODA Online Training Module through the Learning Portal

Student:

- registers with the OFSD once the need for academic accommodation has been determined
- provides appropriate and timely medical documentation to the OFSD verifying the need for disability-related accommodation and outlining the restrictions and limitations of functioning within an academic environment
- informs instructors about the need for accommodation by providing a Letter of Accommodation for each course for which accommodation is being requested or asks the OFSD to provide the letter on their behalf
- fulfills agreed-upon procedures to implement their accommodations, (e.g. requests extensions, informs their instructor and Accessibility Advisor of difficulties in meeting deadlines, registers to write test and exams)

Accessibility Advisor:

- verifies that there is a disability-related need that requires accommodation within a particular learning environment (e.g. classroom, lab, practicum setting)
- receives medical documentation from a qualified medical practitioner confirming a disability and the student's disability-related academic functional limitations
- uses best practices, input from the student and the medical documentation to develop accommodations
- supports the facilitation of the accommodation process with the student, instructor and staff
- Work collaboratively with others in the UofT community to develop an accessible environment so that students with disabilities are fully included in all curricular and co-curricular activities

Registrar:

- assists student in accessing non-disability-related accommodations arising from exceptional life circumstances (e.g. serious family illness or a death of a family member)
- provides student with information on how to access financial support and academic advising
- helps student to understand petitions guidelines and process
- liaise with the OFSD and the student, if necessary

Academic advisor/program director:

- raises any questions regarding professional licensing requirements early in the accommodations process so they can be addressed
- discusses approved accommodations with the student's permission and makes specific course or instructor recommendations to help students make informed decisions when considering and selecting courses or academic programs
- develops a schedule that best meets student needs each term (e.g. breaks between classes to rest or eat)
- handles academic progression when a student requests a reduced course load
- provides information about other resources on campus to develop student's academic skills (e.g. studying, writing, self-management)

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) is a piece of legislation in the Province of Ontario aimed at making the places you work, live and learn as accessible as possible. Visit the University’s AODA website for more information on the various standards within the Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation as well as tip sheets, training modules, resources, relevant policies and building access notices.

<http://aoda.hrandequity.utoronto.ca/>

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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General

What should I do if I think a student has a disability?

Please invite the student to review on-campus services and to choose a support office/contact to begin a discussion about their concerns. Consult the Student Services & Support page on the University of Toronto Current Student website (uoft.me/studentsservicesupport) for a list of services to provide to the student. The OFSD on your campus is also available to meet with any student who is wondering whether they have a disability. Refer to the “Communication and Contact” section for more information on talking to students.

One of my students has disclosed their disability to me. What do I do with this information?

If a student discloses their disability/medical condition to you, this suggests that the student is experiencing enough challenges that they feel they need to seek help. It’s reasonable for you to ask the student if they’ve accessed any of the on-campus services for support.

If the student doesn’t mention the OFSD, you can encourage them to visit the Office to find out if they may be eligible for specific supports/accommodation, to find solutions for present issues and, if appropriate, receive a referral to on-campus supports or community professionals.

If the student indicates that they’re already registered with the OFSD, encourage the student to contact their Accessibility advisor. If appropriate, you can also offer to contact the advisor directly (with the student’s permission) in order to address an ongoing situation in the classroom. The student, instructor and Accessibility advisor may then collaborate on finding reasonable solutions.

If the student isn’t interested in working with the OFSD (not all students with disabilities are registered with accessibility services) then it’s reasonable to encourage them to access other campus services, such as the health and wellness centre on their campus, depending on their concern. Disability-related accommodations aren’t provided unless the student registers with the OFSD and provides the necessary medical documentation.

General

How are academic accommodations determined?

Students provide documentation from a qualified medical professional that confirms they have a disability that requires academic accommodations. The Accessibility Advisor reviews this documentation, meets with the student to determine their academic strengths and considers best practices. When academic programs have specialized accommodation requirements, the Accessibility Advisor will consult with the academic program.

Am I required to accommodate a student's request?

When the OFSD has determined a need for academic accommodation, the student is accommodated unless there is undue hardship. Undue hardship consists of safety to self or others, the preservation of the essential degree requirements and the cost of the accommodation to the institution. Academic accommodations should reasonably reflect (but

not extend beyond) what is specified in the official Letter of Accommodation. It's not appropriate for a student to negotiate accommodations beyond those outlined in the letter. If a student requests an academic accommodation that isn't previously identified, refer them to their Accessibility Advisor to discuss the request.

What do I do if I disagree with the recommended accommodations?

The OFSD supports both instructors and students in negotiating the accommodation process. If you have questions about the accommodations recommended for a student, contact their Accessibility Advisor. These discussions can be very useful for clarifying misunderstandings and reaching mutually acceptable solutions.

Design & planning

How can I create a more accessible learning environment?

Create a section in your syllabus about accommodations and accessibility, and clearly state the knowledge and skills students need to know and demonstrate in your course/program. A statement in your syllabus can signal your openness and invite students to contact you. You might say something along the lines of: “Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you have a disability that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the OFSD.”

Why might instructors be asked for course materials so far in advance of the start of each term?

Course textbooks and readers are requested in advance to allow for the lengthy production time it takes to reproduce print and graphical materials into an alternate format. For example, reproduction time for braille and

tactile images can take as long as three months. This creates a disadvantage to the student who is then unable to access the course material alongside their peers. Please be in touch with the Accessibility Advisor as soon as you receive this request to discuss options.

How do I modify a lab or practicum for a student with a disability?

Students with disabilities may require accommodation in clinical placements, internships, cooperative placements, practicum placements and other experiential-learning courses. Supports that have been suited to the classroom environment don't necessarily transfer to the placement environment. Contact the Accessibility Advisor to find a solution if what is being suggested won't work within your practicum/lab setting or could compromise the health and safety of clients, essential requirements or requisite licensing processes.

Delivery

What is a Letter of Accommodation?

The Letter of Accommodation informs an instructor that the student has registered with the OFSD. It lists academic accommodations to help you support the student in the classroom (e.g. request a volunteer note-taker, respond to requests for extensions and questions about course material and expectations.) Feel free to contact the Accessibility Advisor listed at the bottom of the letter if you have any questions or concerns about implementing the recommended accommodations.

Why don't students provide their Letter of Accommodation at the beginning of the term?

Students can be diagnosed with a disability at any time, so registration with the OFSD continues throughout the academic year. Some students try to complete their academic work without accommodations until they realize that they're unable to do so. Other students fear the stigma of being known as a student with a disability.

What is a VOI and what should I do if I get one?

A Verification of Illness or Injury (VOI) is used for any U of T student experiencing a time-limited medical condition. If the student is experiencing an illness unrelated to their disability (e.g. the flu), then a VOI is appropriate. Each academic area has its own policies and processes regarding accommodation for illness or injury. Please consult your college/division/faculty/graduate coordinator for detailed information.

A student registered with the OFSD isn't usually asked to provide a VOI because registration at the OFSD already requires students to provide health-related documentation.

If a student registered with the OFSD does provide you with a VOI, it's likely for a time-limited illness, unrelated to their disability. You may check with their Accessibility Advisor.

Delivery

What information can I share about a student's needs with other students or a TA?

Be careful in classrooms and casual conversations to maintain the confidentiality of a student's registration with the OFSD. There will be times when you need to communicate information about a student's accommodations to other staff involved in teaching the course, such as a TA. Share information on a need-to-know basis and make efforts to preserve the student's private information. When it comes to making decisions and following procedures in the accommodation process, outline the responsibilities for yourself and your TA.

Why do some students need to use laptops in the classroom?

Laptops are an effective learning tool and it's appropriate for professors to create clear messages about the use of laptops in the classroom. For some students, laptops are essential. Allowing the use of an assistive device (e.g. laptop or tablet) can support learning and bypass disability-related challenges to note taking.

Banning laptops for all students except those registered with the OFSD is discouraged because it breaks the confidentiality of students registered with the office. Some instructors establish laptop-free zones in certain sections of their classroom to minimize disruption and distraction.

Evaluation & assessment

What's my role in the test and exam process for students with accommodations?

Test and exam accommodations are frequently required, and students must register to write an accommodated exam on campus. If you receive email notifications about test and exam accommodations, please respond to these requests. Most frequently, you'll be asked to send a copy of the test or exam to the centre where the student will write with access to their accommodations. Refer a student to the OFSD for exam accommodation requests that don't originate from the centre and/or aren't indicated on the student's Letter of Accommodation.

The test and exam centre follows university guidelines for invigilation. Tests and exams are stored securely in a safe.

What do I do when a student asks for an extension on an assignment or other work to be submitted for evaluation in my course?

Ask your student for the Letter of Accommodation to ensure that they require additional time. Learn about the procedure for extension requests from the OFSD on your campus. Negotiate with the student to find an appropriate date to complete the work, being mindful of the University's deadlines and policies. Usually, students are granted up to a seven-day extension beyond the deadline. Extensions longer than seven days require the student to consult with the Accessibility Advisor who will then verify the need for the request. If there are questions or concerns about an extension request, contact the Accessibility Advisor for consultation.

Evaluation & assessment

How do I handle requests for alternatives from class participation?

Clarify how participation may be an essential academic requirement of your course (e.g. language learning courses) and negotiate viable alternatives early in the course to prevent misunderstandings at the end of term. Contact the disability adviser to discuss options if needed.

What does “may miss class for disability-related reasons” mean?

Although there is an expectation that students will attend most classes, this statement informs you that the student may need to miss class because of their medical condition. Contact the Accessibility Advisor if you need assistance in establishing reasonable expectations for attendance.

Why do students living with disabilities need extra time?

Students with disabilities often need more time to process the information required for learning or communicating knowledge due to: neurological differences, chronic health issues that limit focus and concentration or physical disabilities that require the use of adaptive technology.

Evaluation & assessment

What do I do if a student makes a request for an aid sheet/cue cards/dictionary?

These requests will be outlined in the student's Letter of Accommodation and follow stringent criteria. The Accessibility Advisor will contact you with detailed information. Students requesting an aid sheet must have it approved by the instructor prior to the test/exam. Review the aid sheet and either approve it or ask for revisions from the student. If there are issues or concerns, you or the student can contact the Accessibility Advisor. Once a decision has been reached about the use or content of an aid sheet, send it to the accommodated test/exam centre via email, or when providing the test or exam material. Any aid sheet used during a test or exam is returned along with exam materials upon completion.

What happens if a student registered with the OFSD isn't meeting academic expectations?

Appropriate accommodations shouldn't lead to diminished academic expectations. Contact the student's Accessibility Advisor if the student is in academic jeopardy, as this may indicate that the accommodation needs to be renegotiated or the student may benefit from other campus supports and resources.

COMMUNICATION AND CONTACT

Conversations with students

- Speak privately with the student.
- Be straightforward and factual in your approach.
- Outline what you've observed and describe the services available.
- Allow time for the student to think about what you've said.
- Recognize that the student may not know that support for functional limitations within the Canadian context is legally mandated.
- If you think a student may not understand what you're saying, summarize your points in written form.
- Allow time and space for the students to ask questions and to clarify what it is they need to know.

Registering with OFSD

- Packages are on the OFSD website.
- Students complete the package and submit relevant documentation.
- Students meet with a Accessibility Advisor for an intake interview in order to register with the OFSD. This advisor will work with the student moving forward.

Responding to distressed students

Instructors play an important role in recognizing a student in distress and supporting student wellness. Refer to the Responding to Distressed Students page for faculty & staff on the University of Toronto website (distressedstudent.utoronto.ca). The University of Toronto Student Mental Health Framework is another important resource in our efforts to provide students with the support and services needed to optimize their mental health and well-being.

Emergency

In case of emergency, please dial 911.

For 24/7 emergency on campus, please call University Campus Police:

- St. George | 416-978-2222
- UTM | 905-569-4333
- UTSC | 416-287-7333

“Language plays a powerful and important role in shaping ideas and perceptions. Sensitivity in how we present information relating to people with disabilities can go a long way in overcoming the most difficult barrier to full integration and accepting attitudes. For suggestions on how to speak with people with disabilities, see UTSC’s resource *Words with Dignity (A Way with Words)*.”

uoft.me/wordswithdignity

INFORMATION TO SUPPORT INSTRUCTORS WITH ACCESSIBLE DESIGN

Consider implementing basic universal design principles to make your course accessible for a wide variety of learners in diverse life circumstances. When teaching a student with any disability, 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.

Create learning environments in which students feel free to ask questions and discuss/apply the material to help them integrate their learning.

Clearly articulate course goals and expectations, and promote best practices in assessment and timely feedback. Curriculum, and teaching and learning committees in each division or faculty should initiate discussions with faculty about the relationship between student stress, and course and curriculum design.

REPORT OF THE PROVOSTIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH, October 2014, The University of Toronto Student Mental Health Strategy and Framework

Consider the following top 10 tips:

1. Ensure your syllabus clearly articulates the essential course requirements and includes an accessibility statement.
2. Provide handouts (e.g. PowerPoint slides) and any other course information ahead of time and in electronic formats to assist students in preparing for and following the lecture.
3. Include the equivalent text alternative for all graphics and images.
4. Use captioned or subtitled video and transcribed audio, where possible.
5. Use colour effectively by providing crisp, high-contrast handouts.
6. Avoid using animated, flickering or flashing content.
7. Use a font that is a sufficient size (i.e. 12 point or larger) and a readable style (e.g. sans serif typefaces such as Arial or Calibri).
8. Repeat student questions and comments out loud to help students follow the discussion.
9. Request electronic versions of textbooks when ordering.
10. If you have a course website make sure that it meets the WCAG 2.0 website guidelines. www.w3.org/WAI/intro/wcag

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Developing accessible programs and courses through the Council of Ontario Universities

Resources to help educators at Ontario universities create accessible learning environments for students.

Available at: accessiblecampus.ca/educators/

Hub for teaching and learning at the University of Toronto

Learn more about the support offered to U of T instructors and staff with teaching and learning related issues.

Available at: teaching.utoronto.ca

Universal Instructional Design, Creating an Accessible Curriculum (2004). Teaching and Learning Services and Accessibility at University of Toronto Scarborough Campus.

Help in understanding disability and accommodations legislation, policy, guidelines and recommendations, as well as some practical ideas for making the classroom accessible to all students.

Available at: [ctl.utoronto.ca/home \(instructor resources/teaching courses/course design\)](http://ctl.utoronto.ca/home/instructorresources/teachingcourses/coursedesign)

Understanding accessibility in graduate education

Results of a study focused on the major myths and perceptions surrounding the academic experience of graduate students.

Available at: needs.ca

NEED TO REACH US?

Look for the Accessibility Advisor's name and email address on the bottom of a student's Letter of Accommodation and contact them through email. Contact the front desk staff if the Accessibility Advisor is away from the office.

Accessibility Services,
St. George

Email: accessibility.services@utoronto.ca

Phone: 416-978-8060

AccessAbility Resource
Centre, Mississauga

Email access.utm@utoronto.ca

Phone: 905-569-4699

AccessAbility
Services, Scarborough

Email: ability@utsc.utoronto.ca

Phone: 416-287-7560

