

## Five easy ways to enhance accessibility in teaching

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This is an abridged version of a longer (five-page) document that outlines eight [Easy ways to incorporate insights from disabled university students to enhance accessibility for all students](#).

Please see the full document if you would like more information about incorporating these practices and for the student voices that informed these suggestions. Both documents draw on insights from a research project on the access experiences of disabled students at Western inside and outside the classroom. If you are interested in two short published overviews of our research findings, please see [How accessibility for disabled university students can benefit all students](#) (in The Conversation) and [Engaging anthropology to understand the experiences of disabled university students](#) (in the Canadian Anthropology Society's newsletter).

Centering the goal of ensuring all students can meet course learning outcomes, and bringing that together with instructor workload challenges, the practices outlined below were selected because:

- students with disabilities highlighted their positive impact on access;
- they also help enhance access for other students; and, importantly,
- they can be adopted without a significant negative impact on instructor workload.

### 1. Provide information (like instructions) in multiple formats

In addition to providing course information on your syllabus and assignment instructions on OWL, consider the following:

- Post regular reminders on OWL
- Use a video to reach those who learn better from non-textual sources

Even students who are in attendance in class when instructions or extra advice is provided may be distracted and miss something. All students benefit from being able to go back over guidance.

### 2. Provide lecture slides to facilitate notetaking

- Consider posting slides in advance of classes to assist students with their notetaking
- If you don't want to post all slides, provide lecture outlines as slides or as text documents to help students follow along

This practice helps students with disabilities follow the flow of your lecture, helps those with dexterity challenges keep up, and also helps those studying in a second language.

### 3. Use accessible formatting for documents and websites

Students using screen readers—who are not just students with visual impairments—benefit from incorporating basic accessibility features in documents and course websites.

- Use embedded headings in documents, so students can easily see the document structure and go to the relevant section; headings can also be used on OWL webpages
- Use descriptive text to embed links, rather than “click here” or pasting in the http address (imagine how that sounds on a screen reader)

- Post PowerPoint files rather than converting them to PDF files, since the latter does not permit students to alter or download the text to meet their access needs. Power Point slides have accessibility features, and students also have more control over how they view them (for instance, they can change font or colour contrast for greater accessibility)
- Where you convert documents to PDFs, please use “Save as” or “Save a copy” to create PDF files (not “Print as PDF”), to retain accessible formatting.
- Turn on transcription in Zoom calls; add edited captions to videos

#### 4. Use a microphone for in-person classes

- Amplifying your voice helps students who are D/deaf or hard of hearing
- Microphones can also override classroom noises (e.g., chatting students)
- Students whose first language is not the teaching language benefit from amplified voices
- The microphone is essential for students who are registered with Accessible Education—they can use a code to connect an assistive device or headphones directly to the microphone

#### 5. Always provide a break in classes longer than one hour (in person or on Zoom)

Students have different levels of ability to focus and may have health conditions that require attention. Breaks can help in many ways:

- To permit washroom use
- To allow for food or drink
- To take medication
- To refocus attention

Predictable timing of breaks is beneficial so students can pace themselves and their attention.

An important finding from our research project is that the majority of our student research participants have non-apparent (invisible) disabilities, so we may not realize which students in our courses are disabled. In addition, a considerable proportion are not registered with Accessible Education due to barriers to diagnosis or lack of information about what registration may offer. These are some reasons to incorporate accessibility in a general way, rather than to focus on individual accommodations (which can increase instructor workload and cause students to have to advocate for access repeatedly, increasing the high rates of access fatigue that they described).

For three additional steps to enhance access that involve a bit more instructor planning and effort—offering multiple ways to demonstrate learning and to participate, flexible deadlines, and hybrid course delivery—please see [the extended version of this document](#). There you can also learn more about what students said regarding the impact of these practices, and some additional information about how to incorporate them.

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