

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 students know you are committed to teaching successfully with diverse learning environments 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-

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?

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)

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