



## Creating an Inclusive Online Class for Students With Disabilities

by [Davey Young](#)

COVID-19 has presented an unprecedented challenge to educational institutions around the world as lockdowns, social distancing, and home quarantines have forced teaching and learning into virtual spaces. Many teachers, unaccustomed to online instruction, have been scrambling to prepare and teach classes across multiple platforms; many students have been struggling, too. Students from low-income families, for instance, may be excluded from learning in this new paradigm for want of the required technology.

Similarly, students with disabilities may face additional barriers presented by the virtual learning format. Students with hidden disabilities, those that are not immediately apparent to others, have particular risks. Without the ability to know what barriers our students may be facing in online instruction during this world-historical event, it is especially important for teachers to assume the presence of any and all barriers and to prepare their lessons accordingly. This time before the start of the fall semester affords an opportunity to reflect on what we've recently learned about virtual teaching, and to continue improving our instruction in this new format by creating inclusive lessons and materials.

The following guidelines will help you prepare to create an inclusive online classroom. These guidelines are largely modified from Grace and Gravestock (2009) and Evans, Broido, Brown, and Wilke (2017), with additional considerations to account for more recent technological developments in the current educational landscape.

### At the Outset of the Course

- **Provide Information:** Provide your contact information and make it clear that you can provide further accommodations upon request if students are having difficulty for any reason. This will hopefully help students with disabilities feel comfortable approaching you and asking for any specific support to help them learn more effectively in your course.
- **Identify Resources:** Be ready to identify institutional resources to which you can direct students with disabilities who require out-of-class support for their learning. These may include counseling centers, disability support offices, or other such resources, depending on the particulars of your teaching context.
- **Be Humble:** Maintain your humility and keep in mind that you may not be able to fully understand the challenges some of your students are facing in their new learning environment.

## Materials Guidelines

### Text Considerations: To Do

- Offer alternative text for images and graphics and name them clearly with the appropriate format (e.g., “homework.txt”). This is because text descriptors allow conversion to other formats (e.g., Braille or read-aloud assistive technology) for students with visual impairments or dyslexia.
- Provide text for audio or video media. This can be in the form of captioning or transcripts.
- Use sans-serif fonts in 11-point font size or higher, minimize use of different fonts within a single document, left-align paragraphs, and use wide spaces between paragraphs and lines to make reading easier for students with dyslexia.

### Text Considerations: To Avoid

- Avoid content that flashes more than three times in a 1-second period. This will remove a major barrier for students with photosensitive epilepsy.
- Avoid excessive use of italics, underlining, and words in all-caps. Bold is less problematic. This will help students with dyslexia and visual processing disorders to read and comprehend the text.
- Avoid using color-coding to convey information, and avoid red and green text altogether, to remove these barriers for students with colorblindness.

### Organization and Presentation Considerations

- Organize content that can be presented in different ways without changing the logical structure (e.g., a SmartArt graphic showing a process can be reformatted to a bulleted list in the same sequence). This will help students with specific learning differences access the content in a way that best suits their needs.
- If using discussion forums, use asynchronous rather than synchronous forums. This will allow all students to engage with the forum at their own reading pace.
- In screen-shared or prerecorded presentations, use an off-white background for presentation slides and avoid patterned backgrounds and text overlying images. This will help remove barriers for students with dyslexia and visual processing disorders.
- Use bulleted lists in screen-shared presentations to reduce text density to ease reading comprehension for students with specific learning differences.
- Do not elide information in written form that you provide to the class verbally. Otherwise, students with hearing impairments or certain learner differences may miss this information.

## Instructional Guidelines

### Providing an Inclusive Online Environment

- Organize content on webpages and learning management systems, like Moodle, in a systematic, predictable way that does not vary from lesson to lesson. Such organization benefits all students, but is especially helpful for students with autism spectrum disorder or similar specific learning differences.

- Setup reversible submission controls on such platforms. This will allow students to minimize errors and reduces anxiety.
- Have a high tolerance for error as students find their way toward engaging with the content and technology on their own terms.
- Use a variety of interactive activities, for both groups and individuals, to accommodate a broader range of learning styles.

### **Providing Clear Expectations**

- Provide clear guidelines for behavior and expected performance in video conference classes and discussion forums.
- As much as possible, indicate how long you expect students to work on or be able to complete an assignment both in and out of class.
- As much as possible, explicitly mention which lesson or course aims an individual assignment targets.

### **Providing Students With What They Need**

- Give students time to familiarize themselves with the virtual learning environment at the outset of the class. This can be done as an entire lesson, or broken into stages across multiple lessons to scaffold use of the given platform through linked classroom activities. Though students will likely need to navigate many of these platforms on their own, you should help guide them through basic operations, including how to resolve common platform-specific problems.
- Provide ample time for reading or interacting with content.
- Provide ample time after eliciting responses, whether spoken or typed, in a video conference class.
- Allow flexible engagement of the material, as many students will already know the best way for them to learn.
- Promote independent learning and ownership of the course.
- Give tips on time-management skills.

It is very likely that you already follow some (if not many) of these guidelines. Similarly, you may have thought as you read these guidelines that many (if not most) are common sense to an experienced teacher. I hope this is the case, as such reactions illustrate the point that inclusive practice is both good for all students and a simple matter of habit for teachers.

It may also be the case, however, that reading this list caused yet another wave of panic as you realized the materials or lessons you've already planned may violate some number of these principles. If that is the case, then remember this final point if you remember anything at all: You are part of a long tradition and large community of people who have dedicated their careers to the cultivation of hearts and minds. If you need help, if you are feeling lost or overwhelmed, lean on each other. Ask your colleagues for advice or a few encouraging words, do not forget your communities of practice, and take the time to ferret out a resource or two.

There are many good resources on inclusive practice available in print or online, and TESOL International Association's own [Supporting Students With Disabilities Interest Section](#) is a

good place to find help through catalogued resources and a community of practice. You are not alone, and you students will not be, either.

## References

Evans, N., Broido, E. M., Brown, K. R., & Wilke, A. K. (2017). *Disability in higher education: A social justice approach*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Grace, S., & Gravestock, P. (2009). *Inclusion & diversity: Meeting the needs of all students*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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