



ADVOCACY

Knowing your Needs

In order to advocate for yourself, you need to know what you are advocating for, *what are your needs?* This can be a complex question! It can be very difficult to come to an honest self-understanding that recognizes and accepts your weaknesses and areas of challenge, but that also recognizes and accepts your strengths. Not only does it require a great deal of personal insight, but it also requires you to be willing to accept yourself as you are.

Ultimately, you are the person with the most direct access to your own experiences, and thus the person who is most qualified to judge your own strengths, weaknesses, and needs. However, there are a number of other people and resources that you might be able to use to enhance your self-knowledge:

Parents

- Depending on your relationship with your parents, they may be an important source of insight into your strengths and weaknesses. They might even have been doing things to protect you from certain barriers and challenges. However, some parents tend to focus more on your strengths, while others might tend to focus more on your challenges.

Formal Testing

- Neuropsychological and psycho-educational testing can reveal strengths and weaknesses in your cognitive profile (e.g., if you struggle with processing speed or verbal reasoning).
- Moreover, these reports should come with specific and concrete recommendations that can help you get accommodations. However, they can be expensive, potentially costing thousands of dollars if your insurance or school will not pay. The language is typically very clinical in tone.

Advisors and Mentors

- Universities and colleges are institutions, but they are made up of individual people. Some of these people will be more supportive of you than others, and these supportive people could be important allies for you. These allies might be specific advisors at the disability office, instructors, or others. If you do find allies at college, they may be able to offer you advice and insight.

Therapists and Professionals

- If you receive support from clinicians and professionals, they might also have useful advice and insight for you. However, as with university systems, professionals and clinicians will likely vary in the extent to which they are supportive. Moreover, different types of professionals and clinicians have very different types of expertise.

Friends

- This is tricky, because the relationship between friends is supposed to be relatively equal, unlike your relationships with




advisors/mentors/therapists. However, if you have supportive friends, they might still be important sources of informal advice and support.

Difference between High School and Post-Secondary

Universities are not geared to detect when students are struggling and to offer supports. This is completely different from high school, where teachers are supposed to monitor students and provide support if students are running into difficulty. At post-secondary, we have to identify when we are running into difficulty and when we have to get support ourselves.

Post-secondary also differs from high school because we are adults or entering adulthood. In high school, if parents do not think the teachers are doing enough to provide support, parents are primarily responsible for advocacy.

 At university, not only is there even less support to start with, but if we want to get any support, *we are expected to advocate for ourselves.*

Self-Advocacy

Self-Advocacy Tips

Of course, advocacy is not always straightforward! Even if you know that you deserve accommodations, it can be difficult to navigate the system and make sure you get them.

Here are some tips and suggestions that may help you be as effective an advocate as possible:

1. Collect documentation and keep it in one place

Not only do you need documentation of your disability to register with the disability office but you may also find documentation helpful when you are trying to justify why you need a particular accommodation or support.

It's usually a good idea to gather all your relevant documents and keep them together in one place. This could be a folder or a binder, but it might be safer to scan your records and store them electronically as well.

Key documents could include any records that demonstrate your diagnosis or that discuss supports and accommodations you might need, such as:

- Diagnostic assessments
- Psychoeducational (psych-ed) assessments
- Neuropsych assessments
- Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) from K-12 school
- Records of accommodations you've previously received



- While these documents can sometimes be disheartening and frustrating in the way that they focus on your challenges rather than your strengths, they are still important.

2. Understanding your institution's system and structures

Big organizations like colleges and universities are complex, and there's usually lots of different offices in charge of slightly different but related things, such as:

- Disability accommodations for students, which are administered through a student disability office
- General non-disability academic supports, which you might find through offices like an academic writing centre or tutoring centre
- Disability accommodations in residences, which are often administered through student housing rather than the student disability office
- Disability accommodations for employees, which tend to be administered through human resources

Furthermore, some institutions have offices with idiosyncratic functions that may not exist at many other colleges and universities. One danger is that, as you advocate for yourself, you may find yourself continually referred from one end of campus to another as each office tries to disclaim responsibility. The more you understand about your institution's system and structure, the more likely it is that you will be able to correctly identify the office responsible for your issue.

3. Reading policy and knowing your rights

Reading about policy is not fun, and it can be very confusing, but it can be important to know your rights. If you have a right, then instead of trying to persuade someone to help you out of the kindness of their heart, you can instead demonstrate that you are *entitled* to accommodations and support.

- Sometimes information about rights will be in the form of government legislation and programs, like the Americans with Disabilities Act in the USA or the Grant for Students with Permanent Disabilities in Canada. The terminology and details of these programs and legal texts can be confusing, but non-profit organizations that advocate for disability rights often produce plain-text guides that distill the key points you need to know.
- Furthermore, your own post-secondary institution almost certainly has a complex framework of official policies, and some of these policies likely deal with matters relevant to disability. These institutional policies might cover gaps in official legislation or elaborate the details of how certain processes happen at your specific institution.



4. Ask others for advice and help

This sort of advocacy is not easy, especially if you have more immediate problems and challenges demanding your attention! It can take a long time to learn to be an effective advocate and to understand any given system. If there are other people you know who can give you help or pointers, reach out to them. Perhaps you know other students with disabilities on campus, or perhaps your parents can support you, or maybe you can find some allies or mentors in the college who can help.

Ableism Awareness

While you undertake your studies - and, indeed, go through life in general - you are likely to encounter ableist attitudes, bias, and stigma from others around you.

Some quick definitions:

- **Ableism:** Ableism can include beliefs that disabled people are inferior to non-disabled people, or beliefs that discrimination against disabled people is acceptable. More subtly, though, ableism can simply mean a belief that a person's abilities should determine the worthiness of that person.
- **Bias:** A prejudice or tendency to evaluate something or someone negatively. For example, if an instructor or TA awarded a disabled student a lower grade than they would have given the student if they did not realize the student was disabled, that instructor/TA would be biased against disabled people. It's very easy for people to be unconscious of their biases.
- **Stigma:** Stigma is hard to define, but it roughly refers to a sort of social disapproval, shame, or judgement. Often, people can simply be uncomfortable around disabled people, which can lead them to avoid us.

Ironically, it's also possible for us as disabled people to have ableist beliefs, biases against disabled people, and stigma towards disability. Because these opinions are so pervasive in our society, we can easily learn them from others.

How to Respond:

- Unfortunately, even if you learn to recognize ableism and biases against/stigma towards disabled people, this knowledge is not always very helpful. Of course there are laws prohibiting discrimination against disabled people in most jurisdictions, but it's often extremely difficult to prove that somebody has discriminated against you because of your disability. Pursuing complaints and actions, whether through the university's own bodies or the justice system, is often unlikely to succeed. Moreover, it consumes time and money, and risks (however unfairly) giving you a reputation as a dangerous or irrational person.
- Often, the simplest and best way of responding to ableism, bias, stigma, and the like is to gently confront it. Telling someone directly that you think they are biased



or ableist is likely to make them defensive, especially if you do this in public, and this could easily backfire against you.



However, if you inform them gently, calmly, and privately that their behaviour makes you feel uncomfortable, and explain why it makes you feel uncomfortable, they may change their behaviour.

Another extremely effective solution to others' biases and ableism can be to avoid people whose attitudes, opinions, or actions make you uncomfortable. Of course, realistically, given the imperfect nature of the world, you may sometimes have to ignore ableist opinions. For example, if you are taking a single class with a professor who seems to treat you in a condescending manner, your best option may simply be to ignore this treatment as best you can until you have finished the class.

Whichever option you pursue, recognizing others' biases, stigma, and ableism can at least help you realize these opinions shouldn't influence your own self-concept and self-esteem.

Moreover, in addition to attitudes of ableism, bias, and stigma, there are many common myths about autism and disability.

! Here are some examples:

Autism - at least in individuals who can speak fluently and attend college - is not a 'real' disability.

FALSE: It's true that autism is a nebulous category and one whose boundaries were set by our society, but we've set the boundaries in such a way that many autistic people are people who can succeed academically. Autistic people do have real social and challenges, at least in the world as it currently exists. Even if we renamed this disability, it would still be a disability.

Autistic and disabled students who seek academic accommodations are cheating.

FALSE: Accommodations just put us on a level playing field with others, but we still have to learn the same material as everyone else and demonstrate our knowledge of it. The only reason neurotypical students don't need accommodations is because the system is set up for them by default.

Women (or trans/non-binary people) can't be autistic.

FALSE: Plenty of women, and trans/non-binary people, fully meet the diagnostic criteria for autism.

Autistic people lack empathy for others.

FALSE: Autistic people sometimes have trouble understanding others' thoughts and emotions, but plenty of studies show we care about other people. It's ironic when



others say we lack empathy, because this reveals their lack of empathy and understanding for us.

Don't let these myths affect your self-esteem or sense of your own worth!

Disclosing

Pros and Cons of Disclosing to Instructors and TAs

Pros	Cons
<p>Although official disability accommodations are coordinated through the disability office, your instructor might be able to provide important informal supports or exceptions if you disclose your needs. These supports might fill important gaps in the sorts of formal accommodations that come from the student disability office.</p> <p>If you behave in an eccentric or unusual way, the instructor will realize this could be due to your disability rather than intentional rudeness.</p>	<p>The fact you have a disability might negatively influence your instructors' judgement of you, perhaps biasing them when they grade your work.</p> <p>Your professor might simply refer you to the disability office, because accommodations are technically supposed to be coordinated through there.</p>



Pros and Cons of Disclosing to Other Students (Friends, Study Partners, Acquaintances, etc.)

Pros	Cons
<p>You won't have to worry about hiding your disability from others, which can help you avoid the stress of camouflaging.</p> <p>If your friends accept you as you are and aren't bothered by the disability, they might be good friends for you to have.</p> <p>If you behave in an eccentric or unusual way, other students will realize this could be due to your disability rather than intentional rudeness.</p>	<p>The fact you have a disability might negatively influence other people's judgement of you, make them uncomfortable, bias them against you, and/or cause them to avoid you.</p> <p>The fact you have a disability might make unscrupulous people think you are vulnerable, so they might try to exploit you (for example, by asking for money).</p> <p>If you disclose your diagnosis to students, there is a danger that some might violate your confidence and spread the information further.</p>

Pros and Cons of Disclosing to the Student Disability Office

Pros	Cons
<p>You will be able access disability accommodations. These might include things like extra time on tests, note-taking, assistive technology, and reduced course loads.</p> <p>Even if you don't think you will need disability accommodations, you will have the ability to set them up relatively quickly if they become necessary Initially registering with the student disability office is a time-consuming process.</p> <p>The disability office is required to keep your information on a need-to-know basis, so you can trust the disability office not to spread the information widely.</p>	<p>If you need certain accommodations that require an instructor's involvement, your instructor will be given a letter with your name, the fact you have a disability, and the nature of accommodation (though not other details). This could influence your instructor's perception of you.</p> <p>It can sometimes be disheartening to have to go through a process that is based on identifying challenges and weaknesses rather than strengths.</p>



Communicating with Professors

In universities and colleges, instructors do not reach out to individual students to make sure that students are experiencing success. Unless your instructors hear otherwise from you, they will assume that you are happy with how you are doing in their classes.

However, if you seek out help and support from your instructors and teaching assistants (TAs), they are usually happy to provide it, within reason. As experts in the material, and as the people who structure the class and grade your assignments, instructors and TAs are often the best people to answer any questions you might have about the class.

Furthermore, reaching out to your instructors and TAs can often help them provide informal accommodations or supports, beyond the official accommodations you might have through the student disability office. For example, if you find speaking in class difficult, and if your class grade is based partly on participation, you might be able to discuss alternatives with your instructor.

Some students think that there's something shameful in approaching instructors - that it is a sign that you are not doing well and need help. That's not true at all. Many of the most successful students at colleges and universities make the most use of office hours. Unfortunately, it can be difficult to figure out how to approach your professors and TAs.

Here are some suggestions to help:

Have a clear question/topic in mind. Your professors and TAs are usually happy to help you, but they are busy people. Teaching your class is often not even their main job - instructors and TAs will usually have research, other classes, and/or administrative responsibilities. For this reason, there is a social custom that you should not go to office hours or send emails to your professors without a clear question or topic of discussion in mind - you shouldn't just be dropping by for a random chat. That being said, disability can be a general topic of discussion. As long as you are comfortable disclosing your disability, it is perfectly acceptable to drop by your professor's office hours to introduce yourself as a student with a disability and discuss your needs.

It is also okay to come with general questions about future plans and careers. If you think you might be interested in going to graduate school, it is invariably a good idea to ask people like instructors and TAs questions about their experiences and career trajectories. Much of the information about graduate school is transmitted through word of mouth in precisely this way.

You could also come to your instructors and TAs with a more specific question about the class, such as a question about an assignment: for example, in classes where you write argumentative essays, it's usually a good idea to ask the professor if your thesis and topic sound acceptable. You might also want to ask a question about some of the class material, or you could discuss a disability-related challenge you are encountering in the class and ways your professor could eliminate that barrier.



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In the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does say that official disability accommodations must be coordinated through the student disability office. However, your instructors still have the discretion to - if they so choose - grant exceptions to any student if they so desire, whether or not that student has a disability.

For example, they could exempt you from group work requirements and allow you to work alone on an assignment. They can also - if they so choose - modify their teaching practices in small ways to suit your needs. Because there are limits to the types of official accommodations you can get through the student disability office, you might find these sorts of informal and unofficial accommodations extremely useful, although not all instructors will agree to them.

Make sure your question isn't answered elsewhere. Again, your instructors and TAs are busy people. Before you bring a question to your instructors and TAs, make sure that your questions aren't answered in the syllabus and relevant class material. That being said, if you can't understand something in the syllabus or the class material, you should certainly ask for clarification - that is a very appropriate question to bring to a professor's office hours.

Do not contact your professor/TA at the last minute. Not only does asking questions at the last minute suggest to your professor/TA that you are disorganized, but your professors and TAs are busy people and may have other schedule commitments (e.g., meetings, webinars, other classes, research, writing, sleeping) that could prevent them from being able to answer your question if you don't give them enough time to do so.

Write emails that follow current social conventions. If you are emailing a professor, societies do have certain conventions about the proper way of writing an email to your professors/TAs. Here are some important points regarding conventions in North American Anglophone culture:

 Ask yourself if this is a question that your professor can answer over email. If you plan to ask your professor to give a simple concrete answer to a clear question, good - this is suitable for an email. If you have a complex question that would demand a multi-paragraph reply or that would require your instructor to ask you follow-up questions, this is something you should be discussing in office hours. If you cannot attend office hours, it is perfectly acceptable to write an email politely asking if your professor/TA could meet you another time.

- Your professor will expect you to begin your email with a formal salutation. As a general rule, "Dear" is usually a good option. "Hello" is acceptable. "Hi" is usually a riskier option.
- Most instructors will have a doctoral degree (so that they can be addressed as "Dr."), although your TAs and some younger instructors from smaller classes will not have doctorates. There is a widely-accepted convention that undergraduate



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students should not address any instructor with a doctoral degree by their first name unless they have given you permission.

- If you prefer, instead of using the term “Dr.”, you can say “Professor” if your instructor is a professor, associate professor, assistant professor, etc. However, some of your instructors could be sessional instructors without a formal professorship. Some people will say that instructors inhabit the role of professor when teaching a class; others disagree. If you are not sure of your instructor’s formal academic rank, check the university website.
- Do not call your instructor “Mr.”, “Mrs.”, etc. Some instructors will be offended if you address them based on their gender identity and marital status instead of based on their academic accomplishments.
- As a general rule, you will want to give your instructor/TA lots of context to better understand your question. Some instructors/TAs get dozens or hundreds of emails a day regarding many different topics. To make sure they know who you are and what you are asking about, you should explicitly state what class you are asking about and you should include that information to the subject line of your email.
- If you have previously spoken with your instructor/TA, jog their memory by alluding to that conversation. They might struggle to remember the names of all their students.
- In general, try to make your question as clear as possible. If it is about a specific lecture, for example, give the date of the lecture. Try to include lots of clear helpful details, without adding so much information as to overwhelm and confuse.
- To show your professor that you are a diligent student and that you tried to figure out the answer on your own, it can be helpful to include a sentence saying that you tried unsuccessfully to look for the information that could answer your question (e.g., in the syllabus, your readings) before contacting your professor/TA.
- Include appropriate polite terms (please, thank you, etc.).
- If you like, you can even embed meaningless small talk and pleasantries (e.g., “I hope you are well,” “I hope you are enjoying the sunny weather,” etc.) into your email, but keep this brief.
- Conclude with a conventional farewell (e.g., Sincerely, Best).
- Take time to edit your email. If possible, it can be helpful to ask someone else to look at the email.



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Sample Email:

Dear Dr. Lastname,

I hope you are enjoying the sunny weather!

You might not remember me, but I am a student in your international relations class. I came to your office hours two weeks ago to ask a question about realism.

I'm very sorry to bother you again, but I have a quick question about the paper regarding international law that is due on Oct. 22. I was wondering if we should use Chicago author-date or in-text citations? I tried looking in the syllabus and the assignment instructors, but I wasn't able to find the answer to my question there.

Thank you so much for your help.

Best,
Your Name



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