



## Tips for Becoming an Effective Self-Advocate

### 1. Recognize Your Strengths and Limitations

Recognizing your strengths and limitations allows you to determine which accommodations you need in your classes—with course structure in mind. Also, strengthening your understanding of your disability may help you better identify your needs and express them appropriately to instructors. To practice, ask yourself the following questions:

- *How does my disability affect the way that I learn?*
- *How does my disability affect the way that I work?*
- *How do I learn best?*
- *How do my accommodations support my abilities?*

Answers to these questions may enhance awareness of how your disability impacts you, which can make self-advocacy easier.

### 2. Know Your Rights and Responsibilities

Understanding your rights and responsibilities can empower you to make informed decisions and ensure your accommodations are implemented appropriately. Detailed information about the rights and responsibilities of students and instructors can be found in your SSD Student Handbook and on SSD's website: <https://diversity.utexas.edu/disability/responsibilities-of-students-and-faculty/>. Following your responsibilities is a way to take control of your education and exercise your rights to equal access and opportunity!

### 3. Be Proactive

Instructors are not required to accommodate you until you discuss your Accommodation Letters with them, so it is important to be proactive. Request your Accommodation Letters from SSD at least one week before classes begin each semester, and reach out to your instructors as early as possible in the semester to discuss your accommodations. Try scheduling an appointment with instructors or visiting their office hours for a more confidential space to communicate.

**Some benefits of being proactive are listed below.**

- a. Instructors have reasonable time to make arrangements for your accommodations.
- b. Students have access to accommodations throughout the semester.
- c. Stress is reduced for students and instructors.
- d. The overall classroom experience is improved.
- e. Common issues related to receiving accommodations are prevented from occurring.
- f. Students feel more empowered and in control of their education.

### 4. Consider Common Concerns of Instructors

Think of potential concerns instructors may have about your accommodations prior to discussing your letters with them. Make a list of questions your instructors may ask you and plan how you would answer them.

#### **POSSIBLE SCENARIOS:**

- Your instructor may inquire about your need for an accommodation. You are not required to disclose any personal or private information regarding your disability. It is your choice how much you want to share. Instead of discussing your diagnosis, you can choose to focus on your strengths and limitations and how your accommodations apply. For example, you might say, "My extended time on exams allows me to be graded on what I know, rather than how quickly I can write down/read/process information." However, you are never required to explain or justify your need for accommodations. You or your instructor can contact your SSD Coordinator with any questions or concerns.
- Your instructor may believe that they do not have to provide certain accommodations listed on your letter or complete various forms associated with your accommodations. It is important to notify your SSD Coordinator if an instructor is unclear about their responsibilities. One option is to tell the instructor, "These accommodations are approved by the university, and if you need more information about the accommodations, I can have my SSD Coordinator contact you or you can contact them at the number listed on my letter."

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## Tips for Becoming an Effective Self-Advocate (Cont'd)

- Your instructor may be unfamiliar with some accommodations and ask for clarification. This can be an opportunity for you to educate your instructor. For example, if you are approved for testing accommodations, you might clarify by stating, “SSD has limited space available for testing so instructors typically work with their teaching assistants and department to allocate space/time to proctor my exams. Otherwise, I can schedule my exams for your class at SSD.” Or, if applicable, you may need to provide your instructor with handouts associated with your accommodations to explain how they work.

Remember that your SSD Coordinator is available to address any questions or concerns that you or your instructors have related to your accommodations.

### 5. Communicate Effectively and Respectfully

Communicating effectively and respectfully involves being prepared, listening, and asking questions. Before talking to an instructor, ask yourself two questions:

1. *What outcomes do I want from this conversation?*
2. *How can I communicate to achieve those outcomes?*

Keep in mind that discussing your accommodations with faculty is an opportunity to make sure you can fully participate in the course and to build meaningful relationships with instructors.

#### CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING STRATEGIES:

- Indicate which accommodations you are requesting to use when you deliver your letters to instructors.
- Discuss any specifics about how to implement your accommodations in each class, and clarify responsibilities. For example, some instructors may want reminders from you about your accommodations a couple of weeks before an exam so they can make arrangements. Other instructors may direct you to test at SSD, which places responsibility on you to schedule your exams and discuss whether the instructor will confirm your exams online. Or, if you need a note-taker, determine how you will get notes (via the instructor or the SSD Student Portal). The conversation will depend on the accommodations you are seeking to use.

- Ask your instructors any questions you have and leave room for your instructors to ask you questions as well. Consider asking instructors about their course structure, including how exams are formatted/designed, or anything else that may apply to your accommodations so that you know what to expect for the semester.
- After meeting, you might follow up by emailing the instructor to thank them for their time and make sure everything discussed was clear. A follow-up email can be a good way to document what was discussed and can be referenced later if needed.

### 6. Explore Campus Resources

- Contact your assigned Disabilities Services Coordinator at SSD if you are unsure about how to use your accommodations or how to approach instructors to talk about your accommodations.
- Visit the Student Ombuds Office in the Student Services Building (SSB G1.104) for additional tips, questions, and resources. Check out their website for more information: <https://ombuds.utexas.edu/student>.
- Attend a workshop to learn more! SSD and Student Ombuds provide trainings and presentations related to self-advocacy and disability advocacy. Additional departments on campus offer workshops on effective communication throughout each academic year.

### 7. Practice

Self-advocacy is a skill that develops through practice. Watch SSD's example video for how to discuss Accommodation Letters with instructors: <https://diversity.utexas.edu/disability/using-accommodations/>. Try role-playing delivering and discussing your Accommodation Letter with your SSD Coordinator, or with a friend, partner, parent, etc.

