



Illinois State Board of Education

Special Education Services Department

Accommodations for Students who are Visually Impaired: Frequently Asked Questions

This document is intended to provide non-regulatory guidance on the subject matter listed above. For specific questions, please contact the Illinois State Board of Education.

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Accommodations for Students who are Visually Impaired: Frequently Asked Questions

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Introduction

For the purposes of this document, the term “visually impaired” is used to refer to the IDEA eligibility category under which students with low vision or blindness receive special education services.

Students with visual impairment may require classroom and assessment accommodations to give access to information and curricula. Students may need few or many accommodations depending on that student’s present levels of performance and functional needs. The goal of accommodations is to allow student access to curricula without decreasing the academic level of expectation of the student.

Several accommodations typically utilized by students with visual impairments can also benefit the instruction of sighted peers and even adults in the room. Utilizing classroom accommodations for everyone’s benefit is one approach to Universal Design for Learning.

In the answers to questions provided below, you will find examples of classroom and assessment accommodations that students with visual impairments might use. It is not an exhaustive listing, and not every student will need every accommodation mentioned. Each accommodation is accompanied by a short statement explaining the rationale for its use.

Many of the cited accommodations require a certain level of forethought or conscious effort on the part of the teacher which can take practice. General education teachers should receive support from a teacher of the visually impaired, orientation and mobility specialist, and other team members. Students should also receive direct instruction in self-advocacy to ensure regular access to accommodations. While it is the teacher’s responsibility to be sure all accommodations are in place, students can also develop a reasonable level of responsibility in their education.

For More information, see the *Illinois Best Practices Guide for the Education of Students with Visual Impairments* available on the [ISBE webpage](#).

A. General Questions on Accommodations

A-1. Are students who are visually impaired entitled to accommodations?

Students who are visually impaired who qualify for special education via an IEP or who have a 504 Plan are entitled to specially designed instruction and supports which allow them to access curricula. Accommodations are one such method through which educators can help students access instruction. Accommodations are meant to meet the needs of the student in a developmentally appropriate manner and do not lessen expectations or academic levels of the student. Given challenges with communication and accessing information in the environment, accommodations are often required to help students access curricula.

A-2: How should the necessary accommodations for a student be determined?

The multidisciplinary IEP team should utilize assessment and evaluation data to determine the student's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAPF) to inform the need for specific accommodations. Teams can consider information provided by the Functional Vision Assessment (FVA) and the Learning Media Assessment (LMA), additional disabilities, family factors, and other considerations to add accommodations to the IEP. It is best practice to include educators and specialists with knowledge of the population when creating the IEP for a student.

Educators can utilize the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) four-step decision making process to help determine the types of accommodations needed by the student ([CCSSO: Accommodations Manual](#)).

A-3: Do my students' accommodations stay the same throughout their educational careers?

Some accommodations may be consistent for students such as the use of assistive technology and braille; however, other accommodations may change based on the student's progress and changes in functioning levels. It is important for teams to evaluate the effectiveness of accommodations throughout the school year and through the yearly review or re-evaluation process.

A-4: Who is responsible for setting up and providing accommodations?

Depending on the accommodation, it is typically the classroom teacher's responsibility to ensure accommodations are available for students. It is a collaborative effort, however, to create and maintain accommodations among general education teachers, teachers of the visually impaired, related service providers, and other specialists. Some accommodations can be maintained by the student such as consistent use of a cane with the development of self-advocacy and self-management skills.

B. Learning Materials and Assistive Technology

B-1: What guidance can ISBE offer regarding the preparation of learning materials for visually impaired students?

The team will complete or refer to an FVA to measure the student's use of his or her vision. The team also uses an LMA to determine the best channels through which students can access information with a focus on literacy. The FVA and LMA will determine how a student best accesses instructional information and informs teams how to prepare materials for the student.

The following accommodations and technologies should be considered in the decision regarding the appropriate means to support a visually impaired student:

- **Braille** - Some students with a visual impairment will use braille to access written information. Teachers can use assistive technology to transcribe materials into braille prior to instruction. The student might also have instruction transcribed into braille in real-time (addressed below with assistive technology).
- **Adjustments to print size** - Some students will need larger print materials. Teachers can create large print materials or make materials available electronically, so the materials can be adjusted to the student's specific needs.
- **Contrast** - Some students need materials prepared with attention to contrast. Print and background color should have a clear contrast for accessibility (e.g., black on white, white on black, yellow on black). Avoid using colors like yellow, red, orange, and green against light backgrounds.
- **Placement** - Teachers should consider the physical placement of instructional materials. If you are referring to a visual on the board or projected on the wall, provide a copy to the student for closer viewing.
- **Audio recordings** - Audio books or other recordings can help students access information through an alternate sensory channel.
- **Tactile materials** - Teachers can prepare tactile cues which help inform the student such as particular items or textures indicating items on a schedule or locations on a map.

B-2: What are examples of assistive technology a teacher of the visually impaired should consider?

Students with visual impairment most likely require some type of assistive technology (AT) that can range from “low” to “high” tech. Some AT for students with visual impairments may include the following:

- Braille captioning
- Speech to text, text to speech
- Talking calculator
- Talking clock, Braille clock
- Closed circuit television (CCTV)
- Magnifiers
- Lamps
- Tools to reduce light in the visual field
- Canes
- Tactile cues and maps

Please note: This is not an exhaustive list of AT supports that your student may require.

C. Classroom Environment

C-1: What should a teacher of a visually impaired student be mindful of with regard to the classroom environment?

A student with a visual impairment might require certain measures to be in place in the classroom environment for the dual purpose of safety and accommodation of the student’s needs.

Provide **clear and safe travel paths**. Students should be able to move about the classroom and school environment safely. Keep the classroom clear of clutter. Use different textures to indicate changes in locations (e.g. carpet vs. tile). Use tactile cues to define locations. Use texture or color to highlight edges of furniture or shelves. Tack or tape down cords and edges of rugs or runners. Set up landmarks in the classroom to which the student can refer.

Students with visual impairments may need different **lighting** conditions based on the type of visual impairment they present. Some students need access to bright light, while others need low light and elimination of glare. Natural lighting is preferred most of the time. For students sensitive to light, facing them away from windows or light sources is helpful. Students who need additional light can use small lamps at their desk. Some students may also wear sunglasses or visors.

Provide **preferential seating** by seating students in areas that are most beneficial for them by considering factors such as access to outlets, space for assistive technology, and distance to the board.

Classroom organization is a consideration that allows for less distraction and greater access to materials and supplies. Keep the classroom free of visual clutter and try to keep instructional tools and materials in consistent locations.

Consider the **noise level** in the environment as students may rely heavily on their sense of hearing to access information. Reduce acoustic distractions like fans or open windows. You can add tennis balls to the legs of furniture and carpeting to reduce excessive noise.

C-2: Can you identify some non-environmental supports that would be useful to visually impaired students in the classroom?

Some students utilize the support of a **note taker or a transcriber**, such as real-time braille transcription, to access and later refer to instructional information.

Teachers can offer **verbal descriptions** of pictures in books, things happening in the environment, and other contextual information.

Some students might need **extra time** in formulating answers to questions or in starting work as they process information through alternate sensory channels. Students may also need extended time on assignments and tests as it takes time to process information and produce work which is, in turn, accessible by the teacher.

Accept work produced in alternative formats. Students may need to present work in ways other than traditional “pencil and paper” formats. Some students will use a slate and stylus to produce braille. You can also allow students to use assistive technology and electronic tools to produce work. Another strategy is using multi-sensory formats such as the use of audio. Some students may utilize a human transcriber as well.

Students may use **accommodations for assessments** similar to the ones used for classroom assessments. Testing materials need to be prepared appropriately. Consider the goal of the assessment when deciding what types of accommodations the student can use during the test.

C-3: Are guide animals permitted in the classroom?

Some students may use a guide animal, such as a dog or miniature horse, to navigate the environment. The guide dog is not considered an accommodation that is listed in the IEP because it is not the responsibility of the school to decide whether a student needs a guide animal. The school must allow the student to use a guide animal at school, per the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) if the child has one. Schools may need to record that a student uses a guide animal in the IEP and address a plan for the care of the animal while in the school. Please see the 2013 [ISBE Guidance Document on Service Animals](#) for more information.

D: Resources

[American Foundation for the Blind](#)

[American Printing House for the Blind](#)

[The Chicago Lighthouse](#)

[Illinois State Board of Education: Deaf, Hard of Hearing, Deaf-Blind, and Visually Impaired](#)

[Illinois Vision Leadership Council: Cortical Visual Impairment Resources](#)

[National Center on Deaf-Blindness](#)

[National Federation of the Blind](#)

[Paths to Literacy](#)

[Perkins School for the Blind: 10 Fascinating Facts about the White Cane](#)