

Understanding Barriers to Accessibility

What is accessibility?

Accessibility is a general term used to describe the degree to which a product, device, service, or environment is available to be used by all intended audiences. According to the Government of Ontario, there are five identified barriers to accessibility for persons with disabilities. These barriers are attitudinal, organizational or systemic, architectural or physical, information or communications, and technology.

As an educator, you have a responsibility to accommodate students with disabilities under the *Ontario Human Rights Code*. Requests for accommodation are made on an individual basis by students through the Office for Students with Disabilities and require medical and/or formal documentation.

Under the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*, you also have a responsibility to learn about accessibility for persons with disabilities and how it relates to the development and delivery of accessible programs and courses. To create an accessible learning environment, educators must be aware of the barriers that affect student learning and educational opportunities, and they must proactively remove the barriers that are within their control.

What are the five barriers to accessibility?

1. Attitudinal

Attitudinal barriers are behaviours, perceptions, and assumptions that discriminate against persons with disabilities. These barriers often emerge from a lack of understanding, which can lead people to ignore, to judge, or have misconceptions about a person with a disability.

Examples of attitudinal barriers include:

- Assuming a person with a disability is inferior.
- Assuming that someone with a speech impairment cannot understand you.
- Forming ideas about a person because of stereotypes or a lack of knowledge.
- Making a person feel as though you are doing them a “special favour” by providing their accommodations.

As an educator, there are a number of ways you can help remove attitudinal barriers. You could:

- Avoid making assumptions about a student's disability or capabilities; many persons with disabilities talk about being frustrated with people assuming what they can or cannot do.
- Encourage students with disabilities to come forward and speak to you about the way they learn and what may be "disabling" in your course, classroom, or teaching. Remember that students with disabilities do not have to disclose their disability to their professors or to anyone else in the academic environment in order to receive accommodations.
- Respect the privacy of students with disabilities.
- Insist on professional, civil conduct between and among students to respect people's differences and create an inclusive environment.
- Engage in the accommodation process at your university in good faith and implement appropriate accommodations.

2. Organizational or systemic

Organizational or systemic barriers are policies, procedures, or practices that unfairly discriminate and can prevent individuals from participating fully in a situation. Organizational or systemic barriers are often put into place unintentionally.

Examples of organizational or systemic barriers include:

- A program that requires students to take a full course load.
- Office hours conducted in person only, or not allowing students to access their professors or administrators by phone, e-mail, or other means of communication.
- Having poorly defined or unclear learning objectives for a course.
- Requiring students to express their understanding of course content in only one way.

As an educator, there are a number of ways you can help remove organizational or systemic barriers:

- Identify and clearly express essential course content and provide flexibility so that students can express their understanding of essential course content in multiple ways.
- Encourage students to speak to you about accessibility issues in the classroom or about your course.
- If you are involved in designing or developing new or revised facilities, services, policies, processes, courses, or curricula, ensure that these are designed inclusively, with the needs of persons with disabilities in mind.ⁱ

3. Architectural or physical

Architectural or physical barriers are elements of buildings or outdoor spaces that create barriers to persons with disabilities. These barriers relate to elements such as the design of a building's stairs or doorways, the layout of rooms, or the width of halls and sidewalks.

Examples of architectural or physical barriers include:

- Sidewalks and doorways that are too narrow for a wheelchair, scooter, or walker.
- Desks that are too high for a person who is using a wheelchair, or other mobility device.
- Poor lighting that makes it difficult to see for a person with low vision or a person who lip-reads.
- Doorknobs that are difficult to grasp for a person with arthritis.

As an educator, you may not have the ability to make adjustments to the physical environment of your classroom. The best solutions may be outside your scope of responsibility – they may have significant costs to the institution and may need to be phased in over time through building renovations or the purchase of new furniture or equipment. Despite these challenges, you may be able to participate in intermediary solutions that can help overcome physical barriers. Some examples could include:

- Reserving seating for students with disabilities in a classroom that may not be fully accessible.
- Making lighting adjustments in the classroom, such as eliminating glare by closing blinds or drapes.
- Turning off any noisy machinery, such as projectors, while they are not in use.
- Using a microphone in a large classroom.
- Arranging to meet a student in an alternate location if your office is not accessible.
- Requesting a classroom change if you cannot meet the learning needs of your students.

4. Information or communications

Information or communications barriers occur when sensory disabilities, such as hearing, seeing, or learning disabilities, have not been considered. These barriers relate to both the sending and receiving of information.

Examples of information or communications barriers include:

- Electronic documents that are not properly formatted and cannot be read by a screen reader.

- Lectures that are confusing and poorly organized.
- Language that is not clear.
- Print that is too small or in a font that is difficult to read.
- Videos that are not captioned and don't have transcriptions.

As an educator, you have a significant amount of autonomy in selecting, creating, and distributing your course materials. When possible, make your course materials available in multiple formats, and make each format accessible to the greatest number of students. Some examples could include:

- Make your lectures notes, slides, and other handouts accessible and electronically available to students.
- Consider allowing students to audio-record lectures, or create your own audio podcasts of your lectures and make them available.
- Provide all students with an organized, well-written, and complete syllabus.
- See the resources in the [Educators' Accessibility Resource Kit](#) on Creating Accessible Lectures, Using PowerPoint, and Using Word Documents and/or PDFs.

5. Technology

Technology barriers occur when a device or technological platform is not accessible to its intended audience and cannot be used with an assistive device. Technology can enhance the user experience, but it can also create unintentional barriers for some users. Technology barriers are often related to information and communications barriers.

Examples of technology barriers include:

- Electronic documents without accessibility features, such as alternative text (Alt Text), that screen readers read to describe an image.
- Handouts or course material that is available only in hard copies.
- Requiring students to use a website that does not meet accessibility standards.
- Learning Management Systems or course websites that cannot be accessed using screen-reading software.

As an educator, you have a significant amount of autonomy in deciding if and how you use technology in your courses. There are a number of ways you can help remove technology barriers:

- Select digital textbooks where appropriate.
- Create digital course packs in easily convertible electronic formats.

- Use captioned videos or provide transcripts for video and audio files
- See the resources in the [Educators' Accessibility Resource Kit](#), such as Creating Accessible Lectures, Using PowerPoint, and Using Word Documents and/or PDFs, to learn how to create accessible lectures and accessible documents.

Getting started

Consider working with a curriculum developer or education specialist at your university in the faculty development office or teaching and learning centre, or with staff in the Office for Students with Disabilities to learn how to make your courses more accessible. Learn from your peers and discuss what works well.

More resources on the barriers to accessibility:

Government of Ontario, Ministry of Economic Development, Trade and Employment, [Understanding Barriers to Accessibility](#)

University of Toronto Scarborough, AccessAbility, Teaching and Learning Services: Universal Instructional Design, Creating an Accessible Curriculum

University of Ottawa, [A Guide for Professors: Minimizing the Impact of Learning Obstacles](#)

To obtain this document in an alternative format, contact:

Hannah Yakobi
Council of Ontario Universities
180 Dundas Street West, Suite 1100, Toronto ON M5G 1Z8
Tel: 416-979-2165
E-mail: hyakobi@cou.on.ca
Fax: 416-979-8635
Web: www.cou.on.ca

Created June 2013

ⁱ Ontario Human Rights Commission. [The Opportunity to Succeed: Achieving Barrier-Free Education for Students with Disabilities](#). Consultation Report (October 2003), p.69. Cited in University of Toronto Scarborough, [Universal Instructional Design, Creating an Accessible Curriculum](#), AccessAbility, Teaching and Learning Services.