

# Accessibility in Online Education: Planning Tools & Resources for Students

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## ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSION ARE PRIORITIES IN ONLINE LEARNING.<sup>1</sup>

Where possible, it is expected that Faculty and instructors will make every reasonable effort to ensure accessibility, inclusion and diverse learning styles and needs are taken into account in online education. Student support staff also play a critical role in supporting these priorities.

## SELF-REFLECTION STRATEGIES

**Consider how your accommodation needs may be the same, or different, in an online environment.** Online learning has many advantages, and can be helpful in many cases in removing disability related barriers to learning for students (e.g. students with mobility issues who may have difficulty attending class in person). At the same time, other barriers may continue or change in an online environment (e.g. students with concussions, acquired brain injuries who have difficulty with computer screen time online).

**Consider your online learning strengths and needs.** For many students they have never been in a fully online learning environment; anticipating potential learning strengths and barriers in these settings may be difficult. A good first step is to try the online course platform as soon as possible, access the various course materials, and reflect on the similarities and differences to an in person classroom setting. You can then begin to assess whether

your current accommodation plan may need modified, or if it will work in its current form.

It may be that in an online learning environment you do not need any accessibility accommodations at all and flourish as a learner. It may also be that the combination of course content and a modified course structure create a different learning experience that will require a re-evaluation of your current accommodation plan. Take the time to work through different material and different online learning interactions as you assess your current accommodation plan. Online tools are also available to help you further explore your learning strengths and needs (e.g. <https://floeproject.org>). Critically, if something is not working, reach out for help early.

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## SELF-ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES

**Discover Yourself As An Online Learner.** It may be helpful to try a practice (i.e. not for credit) online test or exam to better understand yourself as an online learner and assess your testing strengths/obstacles in this setting. If your courses do not offer such evaluations, check your course textbooks to see if they contain links to online practice tests. You can also search for multiple choice, short answer, and matching quizzes in various disciplines on flashcard apps like [Quizlet](#) and practice answering questions online - and then reevaluate

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<sup>1</sup> This document was originally developed and produced by University of Toronto Accessibility Services. We gratefully thank them for sharing

your current accommodation plan's effectiveness in online education settings

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## ONLINE STRATEGIES FOR ACCESSIBILITY

**“Show up” to class.** Treat online classes like an in-person class: set dedicated time each week for each online lecture. You may be tempted only to review lectures right before the exam, but learning takes time the same as in any educational setting.

Take notes on online lecture content like you would in class, for example, and put concepts in your own words; illustrate ideas with examples. Create your own practice questions and summarize course content as you review.

**Be your own secretary and manage your time.** In addition to scheduling time to attend online classes, set dedicated time aside each week to review lecture notes, practice problems, create flashcards, and work on assignments. Without the regular structure of in-person classes, use a schedule and an agenda to structure when you do your work. Schedule downtime, relaxation, exercise, and social time and prioritize self-care.

**Minimize distractions.** Studying in an online classroom can mean easy distractions on your computer, on your phone, or at home. Minimize distractions by using website blocking apps or focus apps (like [StayFocusd](#) or [Freedom](#)) and log out of your social media accounts while you attend your online classes. If difficulties with focus and concentration are critical aspects of your disability, this is especially important.

A quiet study space helps when attending online classes.

**Engage in participation.** If online discussion groups and forums are available on platforms like Quercus, Piazza, or Top Hat for your courses, ask questions and discuss topics with your peers, your TAs, and your instructors.

**Test yourself** Create flashcards using apps like [Anki](#) and [Quizlet](#). Use practice questions, or homework questions to test your knowledge

For problem-based disciplines that usually have tutorials - like Math, Statistics, Computer Science, Physics, Economics and Chemistry - schedule time each week to complete practice problems, problem sets, or homework questions. If you get stuck, review the lecture content and your textbook to find possible solutions and utilize online discussion groups and forums to get and give support.

**Location is Everything.** Look closely at your testing environment and determine its appropriateness for you as a student and as a learner; consider whether it is conducive to the testing environment you may need and whether it meets your accessibility related needs (e.g. privacy, confidentiality, noise, distractions, necessary adaptive software, furniture needs). Consider alternatives where possible, and determine ‘nice to have’ and ‘have to have’ from an accessibility accommodations perspective. Consult with accessibility services staff where necessary.

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## ONLINE EDUCATION ACCESSIBILITY PLANNING

**Faculty / Instructors are a great first place to start.** The Accessibility Services office remains available to students to help navigate systems, provide advice and assist with faculty and instructor conversations about accessibility related needs. At the same time, if you are comfortable doing so, instructors also are a great first place to start if ‘classroom’ accommodations need to be modified, and often are able to respond more quickly to requests for accommodation. For example, if you need slides provided in larger fonts, it is appropriate to ask an instructor directly, but only if you are comfortable doing so.

Remember you never have to provide medical information or disclose a diagnosis to an instructor to receive accommodation; in fact, it is expected you will not disclose this information. Instead, discuss strengths and strategize on removing barriers or obstacles that you may be experiencing in the context of the specific course or program.

For any changes in testing related accommodations, or changes to course evaluations, it is best to contact your Accessibility Counsellor as soon as you have concerns so that your official accommodation plan can be modified, if necessary.

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## CONTINUITY PLANNING

**Navigating Potential Changes in Course Delivery Options.** While some courses work equally well, if not better, in online formats, it is the reality that not all courses designed for in person delivery will shift seamlessly into an online learning environment. It is our expectation that students will make every reasonable effort to assess their needs and reach out for support in a timely way, and that faculty and staff will make every reasonable effort to support an accessible and inclusive learning environment.

The reality is that despite everyone's best efforts, the outcome may not be what everyone had hoped. Alternatives may need to be considered (e.g. petitions for exam deferral), particularly where there is no realistic way for a student to demonstrate core competencies or expected learning outcomes online. Staff will make every effort to reduce unnecessary barriers in paperwork and documentation in circumstances where petitions and other related requests are required for alternative pathways to course completion.

**There is no 'one size fits all' solution.** Depending on what the concern may be in a

course you are trying to complete, there may be any one of a number of solutions. Assuming 'nothing can be done' or that 'only one solution is available' is usually not the best place to start a discussion or a search for solutions. Faculty and support staff are best positioned to give you the information you need to figure out next steps and make well-informed decisions about courses, programs and accommodation options.

As part of continuity planning, alternative options will be put in place that may not necessarily be available at other points in the year. Connecting early with University Faculty and support staff will ensure you have the information you need to make the right decision for you as a student.

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## GETTING THE SUPPORT YOU NEED

**Learning Commons Staff/ Academic Advisors / College Supports and Accessibility Advisors.** There is no wrong door to knock on. There is no wrong question to ask. While each individual and office has unique roles and responsibilities, staff and Faculty will work to refer or transition you to the right person if they are not able to answer your question or provide you with the appropriate support. Your accessibility counsellor is a great first place to start if you have questions about your accommodation plan and Departmental Offices / Academic Advisors are the best place to start with questions about academic policies and rules, including petitions.

**Additional Supports.** Resources such as [Good2Talk](#) remain available to students who may need additional opportunities for personal, non-academic support.