

# Writing Explicit, Unambiguous Accommodations

## A Team Effort

MARYANN BYRNES



*Academic accommodations are intended to increase access to education for students with disabilities. Although the concept seems simple, implementation is challenging because of the ambiguous wording of some accommodations. This article reviews confusing aspects of frequently encountered accommodations. Research-based guidelines for writing explicit, functional accommodations are suggested and illustrated with student examples.*

**Keywords:** *instruction accommodations; access to general education; curriculum practices; inclusion; team issues; IEP process*

Consider two fourth-grade students. Ed has an emotional/behavioral disorder and needs to be able to leave the class to see his counselor. Lydia, who has a specific learning disability in the area of written language, needs to be seated near supportive peers who can help with note taking. Even though different seating arrangements are required to provide access, the individualized education programs (IEPs) for both Lydia and Ed list only *preferential seating* as an accommodation. How would teachers know where Ed and Lydia should sit?

Accommodations stimulate energetic discussions in IEP meetings. Occasionally, special education teachers wonder why accommodations are not implemented by general education teachers. Some struggles may occur when there is confusion about the intent of a particular IEP accommodation. Practical, research-based guidelines for writing accommodations, emphasizing how to avoid the pitfalls of ambiguity, provide a solution to this problem.

## Accommodations Overview

Although educators frequently use the term very broadly, accommodations reflect a legal directive to provide educational access to students with disabilities. Both Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 require organizations to provide reasonable accommodations so individuals with disabilities have equal access to programs, activities, and services. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), reauthorized in 2004 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, empowers IEP teams to identify accommodations that facilitate access to instruction. Beginning with its 1997 reauthorization, IDEA and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 require IEP teams to consider accommodations for large-scale assessments.

Academic accommodations have been defined as “practices and procedures in the areas of presentation, response, setting, and timing/scheduling that provide

equitable access during instruction and assessment for students with disabilities” (Thompson, Morse, Sharpe, & Hall, 2005, p. 17). Accommodations can be necessary for students on either a 504 plan or an IEP. Accommodations are not intended to make school easier but to make learning and assessment accessible to students with disabilities.

Like a curb cut in the sidewalk, an appropriate academic accommodation removes a barrier to performance, reducing the impact of a disability (Thompson, Morse, et al., 2005; Ysseldyke et al., 2001) so that a student can more accurately demonstrate what he or she knows and can do (Thurlow & Bolt, 2001). Think about a math test taken by a student with a specific learning disability in reading. A poor score on this test might reflect content knowledge but might also reflect the student’s difficulty reading the written directions or the problems presented. Students without a reading disability would not encounter this challenge. An accommodation directing that test material be read aloud to this student compensates for the effect of the disability and enables him or her to more accurately demonstrate math knowledge (Fletcher et al., 2006).

A well-chosen accommodation is often described as creating a “level playing field” (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001; Thompson, Lazarus, Thurlow, & Clapper, 2005; Thompson, Morse, et al., 2005), defined as “a state of equality; an equal opportunity” (“Level Playing Field,” n.d.). When barriers posed by a disability are removed, students with disabilities have an equal chance to participate in education.

## Accommodation Confusion

Creating this level playing field does not seem to be an easy task. Confusion about accommodations has been documented by a number of studies. Parker (2006) found that general education teachers had difficulty discriminating learning strategies from accommodations. Secondary general education faculty studied by Maccini and Gagnon (2006) were also unsure and implemented fewer accommodations in teaching and testing than did their special education colleagues.

Perhaps some of this difficulty stems from differing views of the exact meaning of some accommodations. Byrnes (in press) found that general education and special education teachers held very different interpretations about the meanings of three frequently encountered accommodations: (a) extended time, (b) scribing, and (c) preferential seating.

If one term (e.g., *preferential seating*) refers to a range of classroom changes, it is understandable that teachers could be confused about how to accurately implement a particular accommodation. To ensure that

students with disabilities have effective access to learning, teams must be explicit in selecting and describing the accommodations deemed necessary.

## Guidelines for Writing Explicit Accommodations

Neither IDEA nor Section 504 is specific about how to select accommodations. Individualized education program teams have little formal advice about this essential decision for assessment (Edgemon, Jablonski, & Lloyd, 2006), let alone instruction. This important element of an educational plan appears to be very perplexing.

To reduce the confusion of ambiguous accommodations, a set of guidelines for selecting and writing explicit accommodations provides a concrete plan to increase educational access. Built on a model proposed by Ofiesh, Hughes, and Scott (2004) for selecting assessment accommodations for postsecondary students with learning disabilities, these guidelines include the following five steps: (a) state the disability, (b) describe the educational impact of the disability, (c) consider upcoming educational tasks, (d) identify barriers related to the disability, (e) write unambiguous accommodations. Table 1 demonstrates these steps for Ed (the student with an emotional/behavioral disorder) and Lydia (the student with a specific learning disability in written language), highlighted at the beginning of this article.

### Step 1: State the Disability

Each IEP includes the name of the student’s disability. Use this as a beginning point to discuss accommodations, anchoring the conversation in issues of disability and access.

### Step 2: Describe the Educational Impact of the Disability

Describe the characteristics of the disability that affect the student’s education. The audience is general education teachers, parents, and students. Tell the reader exactly how the student’s disability impacts his or her school experience. What functional difference does the disability make? What about the disability makes learning challenging?

Consider each student as an individual rather than by category. This is especially important because some disabilities, such as health impairments, emotional/behavioral disabilities, and learning disabilities, include an array of disorders. Use descriptions rather than disability labels or academic jargon (e.g., *processing*

**TABLE 1**  
**Writing Explicit Accommodations for Ed and Lydia**

Step	Ed	Lydia
1. State the disability	Emotional/behavioral disorder	Specific learning disability in written language
2. Describe the educational impact of the disability	<p>Possesses strong content knowledge</p> <p>Has difficulty concentrating when distracted by thoughts and concerns related to traumatic life events</p> <p>Anxiety sometimes triggered by reading material content</p> <p>Thoughts can return to home life if Ed is not engaged with a topic</p> <p>Can refocus after meeting with his counselor for discussion and/or time out</p> <p>Without support, Ed's anxiety can cause him to act out in class</p>	<p>Reading and comprehending grade-level material are areas of strength</p> <p>Responds readily and accurately to oral questions and written multiple-choice tests</p> <p>Struggles to put thoughts on paper in conventional sentences</p> <p>Written ideas often presented in phrases or incomplete sentences</p> <p>Works very slowly when required to take class notes or write short answer items or essays</p>
3. Consider upcoming educational tasks	<p>In fourth grade, Ed and Lydia will be expected to read longer text selections independently and interpret them; write essays and short reports; use text material in mathematics assignments; and begin to take notes in class. In this school, fourth-grade students are not required to plan time to write semester-long projects or conduct extensive Internet and library searches on specified topics.</p>	
4. Identify barriers related to the disability	<p>Increased amount of independent work may make Ed vulnerable to being distracted by his internal concerns</p> <p>Specially designed instruction will help Ed learn to manage this anxiety</p> <p>During this period, Ed will need his counselor to help him relax and focus</p> <p>Ed and his teacher have agreed on a silent signal he can use to indicate his need to see the counselor</p> <p>It would be helpful if he could leave the room without attracting attention to himself</p>	<p>Increased amount of written work and note taking will be a challenge given Lydia's written language disability</p> <p>Specially designed instruction will focus on improving written language skills</p> <p>During this period, Lydia will need to have some way to get written class notes and also to record her responses to class tasks and tests</p>
5. Write unambiguous accommodations	<p>Seating near the classroom door so Ed can unobtrusively leave to meet with his counselor</p>	<p>Seating near helpful peers who will share class notes</p> <p>Seating in a group of helpful peers who will scribe group assignments</p> <p>Easy access to a computer equipped with voice-to-print software</p>

*disorder*) that might not be clear to parents or general education teachers.

Teams would be wise to also consider a student's areas of strength as well as how cultural, linguistic, or ethnicity characteristics influence education. Such student characteristics may be important as the team describes the disability and selects accommodations.

### Step 3: Consider Upcoming Educational Tasks

Although some disability characteristics might remain relatively constant (e.g., level of hearing or

visual acuity), curriculum expectations change across grades. Although students are not expected to read fluently in kindergarten, they are expected to use reading as a tool in later grades. Young children participate in short, structured tasks; older students will be required to manage their time to accomplish longer tasks in a range of subject areas.

In collaboration with general education colleagues, educational activities the student will encounter during the duration of the IEP should be reviewed. Understanding the curriculum expectations for the next school year prepares the team to decide which barriers must be addressed (Bolt & Thurlow, 2004).

## Step 4: Identify Barriers Related to the Disability

It is tempting to discuss accommodations as generalities, seeking whatever might help the student do better in class. However, if the goal is to level the playing field, the team's task is to locate the bumps in that field.

Before accommodations are selected, it is essential to explore situations in which the student's disability blocks equal access to upcoming educational activities (Ysseldyke et al., 2001). Information from the previous three steps will help identify the barriers that must be addressed. These discussions are good opportunities to build on the respective strengths of educators and therapists.

## Step 5: Write Unambiguous Accommodations

Once a barrier is identified, it is time to write an explicit, unambiguous accommodation that levels the playing field. Describe exactly the actions the team believes must be taken to remove barriers related to the impact of the disability. Precisely where should this student sit if this change makes learning more accessible?

Remember that the goal is not to change expectations but to help the student participate without the effects of the disability. Accommodations are not intended to make learning easier but to make learning accessible.

Team members, including students and parents, should discuss exactly what each understands is meant by every proposed accommodation. Reword, or define, terms that are unique to a specific grade or school. This process ensures the meaning of each accommodation is shared. As can be seen from the examples for Ed and Lydia, explicit accommodations do not need to be lengthy, just specific.

### Explicit Alternatives to Preferential Seating

The prevalence of some ambiguous accommodations can seem overwhelming. Teams may need help replacing the ambiguous with the explicit; it takes practice to generate specific descriptions. An extensive array of explicit alternatives for one common, ambiguous accommodation is contained in Table 2. Similar charts can be created for other accommodations that have multiple interpretations.

Several disability characteristics—attention, behavior, academic, health, and sensory—are listed in Table 2. Each of these might require different seating. The impact of the

disability characteristic is described briefly and paired with an explicit seating accommodation that enhances access.

Although not every student requires preferential seating, this accommodation was selected because it generated the largest number of conflicting interpretations from educators in one study (Byrnes, in press). Notice that there are six different descriptions of how attention difficulties can impact the school experience. Each calls for a particular interpretation of preferential seating.

The importance of eliminating ambiguity is apparent throughout Table 2. Some preferred seats are very different from others. One student will need to be close to the door, while another must be seated away from the door. Using the ambiguous phrase *preferential seating* might actually increase a student's difficulties instead of increasing access.

Each explicit alternative increases the likelihood that teachers will know precisely where the student should sit. Linking an explicit accommodation to disability characteristics will help everyone understand how the accommodation removes a barrier to learning.

### Maximize the Value of Explicit Accommodations

The value of explicit accommodations is not limited to clarity in the IEP meeting. Their effectiveness is seen in daily implementation of a student's plan. Team members can adopt four practices to increase the likelihood that accommodations will be implemented as intended. These require attention to (a) the number of accommodations selected, (b) specificity about use of accommodations, (c) the process for reviewing accommodations, and (d) special considerations during transitions.

### Keep Lists of Accommodations Concise

Individualized education programs often contain accommodations that some think might be good to have rather than what is appropriate to the student's disability. Remember that accommodations are legal entities. Educators are mandated to implement them. Explicit, functional accommodations targeting the impact of the disability are easier for people to understand, remember, and implement.

### Specify When an Accommodation Is Needed

Some IEPs include statements that a particular accommodation should be provided "as needed." Teachers,

**TABLE 2**  
**Explicit Alternatives to Preferential Seating**

Disability Type	Impact of the Disability	Explicit Seating Accommodation
Attention	Distracted by classroom activity but responds to quieter environment	With easy access to carrel
	Easily drawn away from tasks, into the conversation/activities of others	Desk set apart from student clusters
	Easily distracted by sounds and movement	Away from the window
	Distracted by the sounds and activity of students at the computer	Away from the computer
	Unable to sit in one seat for more than a short period of time	In either of two assigned desks
	Responds well to regular reinforcement for on-task behavior	Close to adult administering reinforcement
Emotional/behavioral	Has difficulty attending in large group instruction	Near the center of instruction
	Easily influenced by the behavior of others	Near positive role models
	Makes uncontrollable sounds and movements	In location where this behavior does not distract others
	Sometimes teased by others because of unusual behavior	Away from provocative peers
	Bolts from room	Away from the door
Academic	Utilizes counseling services to manage bursts of anxiety	Near the door, for quiet departure
	Fears unexpected interactions with others	With back to wall
	Has significant difficulty decoding; makes good use of computer software that reads print	Near the computer, with earphones so voice output does not disturb others
	Can express thoughts orally but has difficulty doing so in writing due to decoding challenges	With access to scribe, in a location where their interaction does not affect other students
	Can express thoughts orally but has difficulty doing so in writing due to slow writing speed	Near peers who will provide class notes and record group discussions
	Is developing skill using voice-to-print software (rather than a scribe) for written tasks	Near the computer
Health	Develops allergic reaction to dust and pollen	Away from the window
	Develops allergic reaction to dust	Away from heating vent
	Needs quick access to lavatory on a frequent basis	Near the door
Sensory	Needs larger amount of room to move with walker	So that moving to and from the seat is not blocked by physical obstacles
	Has difficulty clearly seeing objects more than 5 feet away	Near the center of instruction, within the range of visual acuity
	Supplements available hearing through lip-reading	Near the center of instruction
	Uses a hearing aid to enhance acuity	Away from doors, windows, and noisy vent

parents, and students might disagree about what is needed. Be sure to write exactly what must be done to ensure the student has access. Relying on others to decide when an accommodation is needed invites confusion.

### Review Accommodations Regularly

Each time the IEP is updated, consider whether a student's accommodations remain appropriate. Students change and so does curriculum. Specially designed instruction might have helped a student attain skills, making a current accommodation unnecessary in the next year. For example, once a student has learned the skill of taking notes, there may be no need for a note

taker as an accommodation. In contrast, upcoming curriculum demands might require different accommodations. Lydia did not need a note taker in early grades but does require this accommodation later in school, when students are expected to use this skill.

While deliberating appropriate accommodations, seek those that promote independence so the student becomes more self-reliant. For example, using voice-to-print software might replace scribing by an adult.

### Clarify During Transitions

Although explicit accommodations communicate clearly what needs to happen to ensure access, it is

important to review expectations with new teachers, especially if the student transfers schools, even within districts. Similarly, if a new student's IEP contains an accommodation that seems ambiguous, take the time to clarify its intent with the teachers who wrote the IEP. This small investment of time will ensure that everyone understands what needs to be done to provide access.

## Summary

Instructional accommodations are intended by law to ensure that students with disabilities have equal access to education. They encompass the areas of presentation, response, setting, and timing/scheduling. There is little formal guidance about selecting and communicating the accommodations that will level the playing field and create this access.

Compounding the problem, terms used for accommodations can be interpreted in multiple ways. *Preferential seating* was used as one example of an ambiguous accommodation. Teachers have interpreted this one term to signal a wide range of locations, including the front of the room, the back of the room, and away from windows and heating vents. Educators on the same team could be implementing different versions of preferential seating. Choosing the wrong interpretation could unintentionally create more barriers than it removes.

Educators can reduce ambiguity and confusion by writing explicit, functionally based accommodations. A five-step set of guidelines is described and illustrated for two students with different disabilities.

Steps 1 and 2 of the guidelines begin with the disability. Special education teachers can start by describing characteristics that affect classroom learning and assessment. Parents, students, and other educators can contribute their observations.

The next two steps of the guidelines focus on the curriculum in place for the duration of the IEP. In Step 3, general education teachers lead with their knowledge of upcoming expectations in curriculum and instruction. In Step 4, team members collaborate to identify barriers that might arise when the characteristics of the student's disability encounter the expected curriculum and instruction.

In Step 5 of the guidelines, team members write an unambiguous accommodation. This describes exactly what should be done to level the playing field and increase student access.

Reducing ambiguity by applying these guidelines helps all team members, including parents and students, expect the same action from each chosen accommodation. This shared understanding increases the likelihood that the

team's intentions will be implemented. When this occurs, students with disabilities have the best opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do.

## About the Author

**MaryAnn Byrnes**, EdD, is an associate professor in the Graduate College of Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston and immediate past president of the Massachusetts Council for Exceptional Children. Her current research interests include special education policy, assessment, and accommodations. Address: MaryAnn Byrnes, University of Massachusetts Boston, Graduate College of Education, 100 Morrissey Blvd., Boston, MA 02125; e-mail: maryann.byrnes@umb.edu.

## References

- Americans with Disabilities Act, 42, U.S.C.A. § 12101 *et seq.* (1990).
- Bolt, S. E., & Thurlow, M. L. (2004). Five of the most frequently allowed testing accommodations in state policy: Synthesis of research. *Remedial and Special Education, 25*, 141-152.
- Byrnes, M. (in press). Educators' interpretations of ambiguous accommodations. *Remedial and Special Education*.
- Edgemon, E. A., Jablonski, B. R., & Lloyd, J. W. (2006). Large-scale assessments: A teacher's guide to making decisions about accommodations. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 38*(3), 6-11.
- Fletcher, J. M., Francis, D. J., Boudousquie, A., Copeland, K., Young, V., Kalinowski, S., et al. (2006). Effects of accommodations on high-stakes testing for students with reading disabilities. *Exceptional Children, 72*, 136-150.
- Fuchs, L. S., & Fuchs, D. (2001). Helping teachers formulate sound test accommodation decisions for students with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 16*, 174-181.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, 20 U.S.C.A. § 1400 *et seq.* (2005).
- Level playing field. (n.d.). *Dictionary.com unabridged (v 1.0.1)*. Retrieved September 14, 2006, from [http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=level playing field&r=66](http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=level+playing+field&r=66)
- Maccini, P., & Gagnon, J. C. (2006). Mathematics instructional practices and assessment accommodations by secondary special and general educators. *Exceptional Children, 72*, 217-234.
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 USC § 6301 *et seq.* (2002).
- Ofiesh, N. S., Hughes, C., & Scott, S. S. (2004). Extended test time and postsecondary students with learning disabilities: A model for decision making. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 19*, 57-70.
- Parker, B. (2006). Instructional adaptations for students with learning disabilities: An action research project. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 42*, 56-58.
- Section 504, Rehabilitation Act, 29 U.S.C.A. § 794 (1973).
- Thompson, S. J., Lazarus, S. S., Thurlow, M. L., & Clapper, A. T. (2005). *The role of accommodations in educational accountability systems* (Topical Review 8). College Park, MD: Institute for the Study of Exceptional Children and Youth.
- Thompson, S. J., Morse, A. B., Sharpe, M., & Hall, S. (2005). *Accommodations manual: How to select, administer, and evaluate use of accommodations for instruction and assessment of students with disabilities* (2nd ed.). Retrieved June 22, 2006, from <http://osepideasthatwork.org/toolkit/accommodations.asp>

Thurlow, M. L., & Bolt, S. E. (2001). *Empirical support for accommodations most often allowed in state policy* (Synthesis Report 41). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

Ysseldyke, J., Thurlow, M., Bielinski, J., House, A., Moody, M., & Haigh, J. (2001). The relationship between instructional and assessment accommodations in an inclusive state accountability system. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 34*, 212-220.