

# MESA COLLEGE

## How to Describe your Learning Disability to Your Instructors

FREQUENTLY, COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES ASK FOR SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO DESCRIBE THEIR DISABILITIES TO INSTRUCTORS.

The decision whether or not to disclose a learning disability is a very personal matter and one that varies from individual to individual. Some students are reluctant to disclose their disabilities for fear that disclosure may negatively bias their instructor's perceptions of them. These students may also feel that they can successfully compensate for their disabilities in a particular class. Although compensating for a disability may appear admirable, it can also backfire if a student fails the first exam. At that point, a distraught student has to approach the instructor, knowing that it is probably too late to change his/her first exam grade. As a general rule, it is better to disclose to instructors and to do so early in the semester, rather than to say nothing about the disability.

A few general suggestions for students concerning disclosure are presented below:

- **Make an appointment with your instructor during his/her office hours to discuss your learning disability and possible accommodations you may need in the course.** You may choose to use the telephone to set up the appointment or you may prefer to arrange an appointment with the instructor immediately after the first class. Do not tell your life story to the instructor at that time- just set up an appointment. Before your appointment with the instructor, you may want to practice what you are going to say with a member of the DSPS staff. He/she can assist you by suggesting how best to approach instructors and how to be a self-advocate.
- **Before describing your learning disability to an instructor, you may have to educate him/her as to what a learning disability is and is not.** Many college instructors do not expect to have students with learning disabilities in their classes. If instructors are not familiar with the DSPS services offered on campus, give them some background information. That should further establish your credibility.

- **Describe your learning style in simple language.** Let your instructor know about your abilities as well as your weaknesses. Provide him/her with concrete examples of how your learning disability may affect you in that particular class. Tell him/her that you have gone through extensive diagnostic testing. Your instructor may ask you to provide him/her with documentation of the disability. Decide, in advance, how much personal information you feel comfortable divulging. You are not required to show copies of your diagnostic evaluation to anyone, unless you choose to do so. You may prefer to have the instructor contact a staff member from the DSPS office if additional elaboration appears necessary; however, these staff people will not disclose any confidential information about you to anyone without your permission. Anticipate any special needs you may have, in advance, and develop a plan of actions with your instructor for the course (e.g., Will you need more time on exams? Will you need to find a notetaker who is willing to share class notes? Will you need to take your exam in a quiet room with a proctor? Will the instructor permit you to use a calculator or a dictionary during the exams?). As a courtesy, ask instructors for permission to tape-record their lectures.
- **What if the instructor is not sympathetic to your needs?** At some point in every student's career, he/she encounters an instructor who is not receptive to his/her unique needs. Those instructors have often had limited direct contact with persons with disabilities. If you are meeting with resistance from an instructor, discuss the situation with a DSPS staff person who can assist you in resolving the issue. You should avoid any direct confrontation with the instructor.

Adapted from Loring Brinckerhoff, Ph.D.  
McBurney Resource Center  
University of Wisconsin- Madison