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ENG 5383
Rhetorical Tradition
Seminar Paper
December 6, 2023

Disability Rhetoric and Ableism on Campus and in University Writing Centers

This seminar paper will address Disability Rhetoric and Ableism on campus and in society, the rhetoric(s) of university writing centers, and the rhetoric of the Disability and Access Office website and University Writing Center Website at UT-Austin. According to Dr. Allison Harper Hitt, 15% of the U.S. population is disabled. People with disabilities are now considered to be the largest minority in the country. (Hitt) This paper will explore the issues important to disabled students, and elucidate, compare, and contrast the rhetoric of ableism and disability. The ideas in this paper will discuss solutions for students who use disability offices and writing centers.

Other topics discussed in this paper are diagnostics, remediation, multimodality, accessibility, disability disclosure on campus, and assistive technologies. Exploring solutions to these issues is part of this paper, to help disabled students in writing centers and disability services offices, offering a communication tool kit for tutors, students, and staff.

Introduction

Terminology

Although it is common to put this in the appendix the author will place these terms here so the reader will understand the terminology.

Diagnostics, this term is used when explaining a disability or health problem, that leads to remediation, academic support, and assistive technology.

Ableism is a term with different meanings. Fiona Kumari Campbell describes ableism as “a network of beliefs, processes, and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human.” (Hitt, 44) This perception occurs inside one’s mind and is experienced as normal. Ableism also means discrimination against disabled people.

Accessibility is equal access for all, an environment, or classroom that is easy to approach with assistive technologies, and products like speech-to-text and Read Aloud.

Metacommunicative Awareness is understanding how to interpret and exchange communication with others.

Brainstorming means using mind maps, assistive technology, peer-to-peer communication, and collaborative learning.

Multimodality is a type of rhetoric and composition. It describes different ways of learning and communicating information be they aural, textual, linguistic, visual, or spatial. Wikipedia defines it as: “the application of multiple literacies within one medium. Multiple literacies or "modes" contribute to an audience's understanding of a composition. Everything from the placement of images to the organization of the content to the method of delivery creates meaning.” Multimodality also includes meaning-making, different modes of meaning-making can make space for a student trying to learn something new. Multi-modality could take the form of a note taker, copies of lecture notes, a transcript for a video or the ability to be tested orally instead of in writing. (Dolmage, Hitt) According to John Murray Coles Multimodality is “a compositional form which coincidentally, happens to be closer to the way humans think” than a discursive text.” (Coles)

Critical multimodality is a concept that gets closer to how humans really think because it is a unique ‘compositional’ (Murray, 113) It is a kind of paraphrasing and allows people to understand and think better instead of just using a discursive or wondering text. (Dolmage)

Medical model of Disability was a way of defining a person with a disability stating that it was the person’s fault, and they were seen as inferior, cognitively different, and it is outdated.

Social Model of Disability This model “argues for a shift from an emphasis on the individual to an emphasis on society. Disability then, is no longer seen as something that a person has, but instead becomes something that is done to a person.” (Babcock, Daniels, and Daniels, 2015, p. 21) (Charlton, 8) We see disability through a societal lens. It is also a method for finding out a person's cognitive, learning, and neurological ability. It explains how a person's social and physical environment impacts or disables an individual. (Charlton, 7)

Assistive technology means captions, audio/video recording, text-to-speech and speech-to-text software, Kurzweil Read Aloud, or any technology that helps a disabled student.

Universal instructional design is a type of universal design that has to do with technologies, communication, and the surrounding physical, built-in environments. It assists in the creation of writing center tutoring pedagogy, facilitates all learning abilities, helps students and tutors interact in the writing center, uses technologies and teaching methods, and facilitates interaction in the writing center.

Universal design is a mode of becoming. In Dolmage’s text, Ronald Mace calls **UDL** “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, and without the need for adaptation by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.”

(Dolmage, 115) Universal design in the modern university appears in multimodality, assistive technology, architecture, accommodation, creating spaces, building community, media, and creating better educational techniques.

Multimodal composition means texts that combine two or more modes such as written language, spoken language, visual (still and moving image), audio, gestural, and spatial meaning (The New London Group, 2000; Cope and Kalantzis, 2009) (Dolmage, 99)

Normative and non-normative bodies refer to bodies that are normative-meaning non-disabled. (Hitt, Charlton, Dolmage)

Accessible design is a way of considering different places and asking how they can be accessible to all people. It can be used in the physical design of a campus, a classroom, or a syllabus.

Exclusion means failure when the disabled are not accepted, and they cannot get their needs met.

Plain language and open access are accessibility issues. Language that is not plain can be intimidating. (Dolmage) Sometimes when academics do research, they do not use plain language. It is only fair that plain language is used when researching the disabled because it can communicate what they experience, and it can allow them an opportunity to read what's been written about disability.

Dolmage quotes Einstein "Make everything as simple as possible, but not simpler." (Dolmage, 32) This gives rise to empathy, accessibility, and inclusion.

1. The Rhetoric of Disability Studies, Ableism on Campus and in Society

Disability Rhetoric and Ableism on Campus

Disability studies and rhetoric are interdisciplinary, and they can include medical disability, rehabilitation, mental and or learning disabilities. It has its own rhetoric. Disability studies can criticize the way disability is portrayed. It can also explain the struggles the disabled have. According to Academic Ableism

(Dolmage, 2017) This is a kind of diagnostics and study of causes and effects of disability, like a scientific field of study. (Dolmage) The field challenges the way people look at disability, as if a disability is a terrible condition that must be overcome, which is not realistic. This can be emotionally oppressive and abusive and drive disabled students deeper into shame and feelings of inadequacy.

Disability rhetoricians should avoid negative rhetoric so they don't typecast the disabled and oppress them by using 'social and economic hierarchies within

academia' that could oppress them even more (Dolmage). Uplifting rhetoric should be used.

Let's understand what is currently happening on our college campuses regarding disability. Without the use of correct disability rhetoric, physical spaces, and places, like architecture, academia can feel oppressive, exclusive, and intimidating to a disabled person. The language and rhetoric of inclusion should be used. These structures can give feelings of superiority, like perfectionism, and the impression that academia is a utopian place where everything must be perfectly studied and written, a place where the world of theory and the marketplace of ideas are sacrosanct, and elite.

Ableism has been used to describe disabled people negatively as 'less than'. Dolmage discusses how universities are "rhetorically constructed" meaning a "rhetorical space" and that rhetorical power can shape students. He defines rhetoric as it pertains to this field as "the strategic study of the circulation of power through communication" (Dolmage, 8). Dolmage says there is a "circulation of discourse through the body" and disabled students should be considered when anyone uses disability rhetoric on campus and the "social and financial power structures on campus" (Dolmage, 8). These spaces should use disability-affirming rhetoric, making all welcome. These rhetorical elements allow people on campus to understand that "classrooms shape larger communities" (Dolmage, 8). The perceptions created in the classroom are transferred into mainstream society.

There has been intimidation and steep steps to the ivory towers for the disabled. One hundred years ago university was meant only for the highest parts of society, a landing and launch pad for the elite. (Dolmage) Disabled people have been researched and studied over the years, but they have not been able to have the same educational opportunities as the academics that have "studied" them. Dolmage compares this to a type of disability eugenics. The disabled were put into asylums 100 years ago and have struggled to move forward. "Disabled people have been research sources. Higher Ed has been built upon such research" (Dolmage, 4) Academics have studied the disabled, and they have been given plenty of research.

In Charlton's "*Through My Eyes: How Writing Centers can Bridge the Gap for Students with Disabilities*" he states that students with disabilities were seen as being different in a bad way when the old medical model was used to interpret disabilities. "Disability was seen as a medical issue that needed to be treated via medication or therapy" (Charlton, 6). He discusses how ableism and discrimination on campus used to be, and he acknowledges how things began to change with the Social Model of Disability. In 1983 Mike Oliver, a British academic, produced this idea and practice. Oliver states that "under this model, every learner falls on a continuum based on his or her cognitive or neurological ability. Disability is not seen as fixed or inherent to an individual but being viewed more often as being on

a different point in the learning continuum" (Charlton, 8). This model also points out that disability is something that happens TO a person, not just something a person has, which is more realistic. The social model lets disabled students figure out how they can contribute to society. It teaches that the disabled can know their abilities and that society's perception of a disabled person plays a role in disabling a person.

The creation and facilitation of better disability rhetoric will bring social justice for the disabled who are on campus to stop discrimination and injustice. Concerning disability oppression, Dolmage cites Richard Marback as "claiming that a location can be seen as a "nexus of cultural, historical, and material condition, of oppression and can become a "physical representation of injustice" (Dolmage, 9). "Simply put, one can read inequity and inequality in the buildings, and spaces of the university" (Dolmage, 10). Without the use of correct disability rhetoric (as mentioned above), physical spaces and places (like architecture) can feel oppressive, exclusive, and intimidating to a disabled person. Inclusive language should be used. These physical spaces, feelings of superiority, like perfectionism, and exclusivity, and can give the impression that academia is a perfect utopian space where everything must be perfectly studied, written about, ordered, and where the world of perfect theory and the marketplace of ideas are sacrosanct and elitist.

Another hurdle is the expectation to 'overcome'. "In higher education, there is an expectation for students and instructors to overcome mental and psychiatric disabilities. Disability disclosures of mental illness are risky in academia, where it is "often still devoted to the mythos of the good man speaking well, the professor as the bastion of reason, the *cogito ergo son*." (Hitt, 16) These rhetorics of overcoming are other hurdles Dr. Hitt mentions. These situations create more oppression, anxiety, and discrimination. The traditional pattern is to try to fix the disabled student. "We diagnose, label, and accommodate, trying to fix our students rather than trying to fix our practices." (Hitt, 12) Students usually disclose everything to a disability specialist in a disability services office, based on the outdated medical model, from here they receive a diagnosis and receive traditional accommodations instead of the student stating what they need. Fixing practices means accessibility, multi-modality, and Universal design. "Disclosure is a rhetorical negotiation, a complex and ongoing process, a symmetrical power dynamic" (Hitt, 70) This process can leave a student traumatized and anxious.

Dr. Hitt encourages writers to find a healthy way to cope with disabilities by "developing ways to overcome ableist pedagogical expectations that are informed both by theories of multimodality and disability studies" (Hitt, 13).

More and more students with disabilities are going to university now. If the topic of disability studies comes up the rhetoric should be clear, concise, and

positive. Disability discrimination has been compared to sexism, homophobia, and racism. “Disability is also used to shore up other stigmatization very importantly, the categories of gender, race, and sexuality have relied upon the attribution of biological inferiority, for instance. This is another way disability drifts. I will show how academia has used ableism to marginalize specific groups of students (Dolmage, 10)”. This can also lead to additional feelings of exclusion.

Many people who study disability studies use old medical models of disability, which should be replaced with the social model, where capabilities, not just deficits, are explored. The medical model leads to emotional oppression and abuse, and it can drive disabled students deeper into feelings of inadequacy. There needs to be a rhetoric to defend the disabled in positive terms. Current disability rhetoric should also avoid negative disability rhetoric so they don't typecast the disabled and oppress them by using the ‘social and economic hierarchies within academia’ that could disable and oppress them even more.

Academia should be a place where we can pursue high ideals/education and open some wounds and share and give empathy and receive empathy. Academia gives us technical skills and prepares us for the larger culture and the world of work.

1.

To Declare disability or not and Accommodations

This is a major recurring theme in all disability rhetoric literature. It is a huge problem for both universities, faculty, staff, and students. Many students don't declare a disability at all, thereby robbing themselves of help, space, meaning, and identity, for fear of discrimination, and being treated differently. People with invisible disabilities are not recognized and revered as much as people with physical disabilities. Dolmage states that the invisibly disabled are oftentimes seen as “faking it”. This contributes to additional oppression and a rhetoric of disability discrimination, another reason why disability rhetoric should be affirming. Accommodation should lead to appropriate accessibility.

Accommodation is the process of being tested for disabilities, presenting documentation, and interviewing with a disability specialist so a student can receive the help, extra time on tests, or assistive technology they need. The office of disability services doesn't test people for disabilities. Disabilities services offices ask for applications from students, and existing documentation from a psychologist. They also ask for a letter from the student. This letter is supposed to contain an explanation of how the student feels that their disability will hold them back or debilitate them in class. Dolmage calls these “mitigating circumstances” (Dolmage, 80) Disabilities service offices will refer the student to a local psychologist if they need to be tested for a disability.

This documentation is required by law. This rhetoric of accommodation can lead to further feelings of oppression and discrimination because the student must be “compliant” and follow procedures. The intake process is brief and disability counselors don’t have time to get to know the students. Also, the student is expected to follow the pedagogical and teaching and learning principles set by the professor, and fellow students assume “disabled students are getting a free ride or faking it or cheating” (Dolmage, 80) The fellow student discourses and rhetoric towards or about the disabled students gives rise to a rhetoric of negativity, exclusion and oppression. There are certain disability rhetoric attitudes across the academic disciplines. Dolmage also explains that disability declaration accommodation request forms are quite complex and students who need further explanation, help, or details oftentimes don’t get it. (Dolmage, 82) A rhetoric of accommodation-seeking requests should be used to assist students further.

In Strayhorn’s “Battling Ableism: How Colleges Can Foster a Sense of Belonging for Students with Disabilities” he also states that ableism is a form of oppression and that it is “dehumanizing because it devalues, subordinates and harms people living, working with and learning with disabilities, and it keeps people from thriving (Strayhorn, 2) This results in unwelcoming campus environments which leads to more students not declaring disability with disability service offices, and as a result more students not asking for help. “This is not indicative of equal access. It is estimated that only 37% of students with disabilities inform their institutions, as a way of seeking formal accommodations” (Strayhorn, 3) This is a common pattern.

In “*Advocacy in Disability Accommodation*” Rachel Bryson and Peter call chime in and see the same situation. Typically, students identified with disabilities have a visual impairment like blindness, hearing, orthopedic mobility speech-language impairment, or a type of mental, emotional, or psychiatric condition. “Students with less apparent disabilities encounter a variety of barriers in their pursuit of higher education” (Bryson and Call, 248).

As you can see declaring a disability is an obstacle for a disabled student. University websites have had to update the information and the way information and rhetoric is presented. The site I will analyze below has made things easy and worry-free for students.

2. The Rhetoric of University Writing Centers, Pedagogical Techniques, Technology, and Accessibility

Writing centers are essential for today’s disabled students. They offer many solutions, help, and techniques. Writing centers started as parts of English departments where English faculty would tutor students. Budget cuts, time constraints, and the need for peer-to-peer tutoring and multimodal collaborative

learning changed that in the late 1980s. (Charlton) The literature the author researched states that writing centers have become open to all students, especially those with disabilities, and this has brought a change in writing center rhetoric along with it.

Some writing centers are more focused on the student and not the diagnosis in their rhetoric. Dr. Allison Harper Hitt accurately describes disability rhetoric in writing centers. “To come over is to reconstruct writing spaces that are accessible and inclusive to students and non-normative rhetorical practices, presenting students with multiple access points for engaging, learning, and composing. Whereas the rhetorics of overcoming rely on the medical model processes of diagnosis, disclosure, cure, and overcoming. For individual students, coming over involves the valuing of disability and difference and challenging systemic issues of physical and pedagogical inaccessibility” (Hitt, 19). Writing centers have updated their rhetoric and practices. Dr. Hitt discusses how to improve them. She mentions types of UD, pedagogy, and writing practices for students, “Mind mapping is a way of exploring messy, complex, and recursive thoughts. Here, rather than outlining linear ideas, it is a way to explore thought clouds and inside idea bubbles” (Hitt, 34) This offers an efficient way to create and record ideas.

Hitt also writes about another method for disabled student writers, decomposition, which is the process of breaking down ideas or objects into smaller pieces. Instead of looking at the moving pieces of an essay, decomposition looks at each part individually. “Decomposition is an opportunity to resist normative writing practices and embodied multimodal pedagogy that makes space for disabled composing processes that have been deemed inappropriate or unwelcome in spaces of higher education.” (Hitt, 36). This is a way for student writers to resist the Rhetorics of Overcoming.

Recommendations

According to “*Caring for Students with Disabilities: Redefining Welcome as a Culture of Listening*” by Leslie Anglesey, there is a need for writing tutors to listen, so that disabled writers can process feedback and function better and write better, whether they are auditory information processors or they read silently. Empathy and true listening are serious skills. (Anglesey) This can change a writing center’s ethos, mission, and everyone’s way of thinking, so hopefully, more writing can get done. Anglesey states that many disabled students have different types of body language and tutors must be aware of this. For instance, shrugged shoulders or silence is not necessarily a signal of disinterest. It may be a way of coping with disability or communication problems. This active listening and empathy are another way to use universal design to create a safe space for student

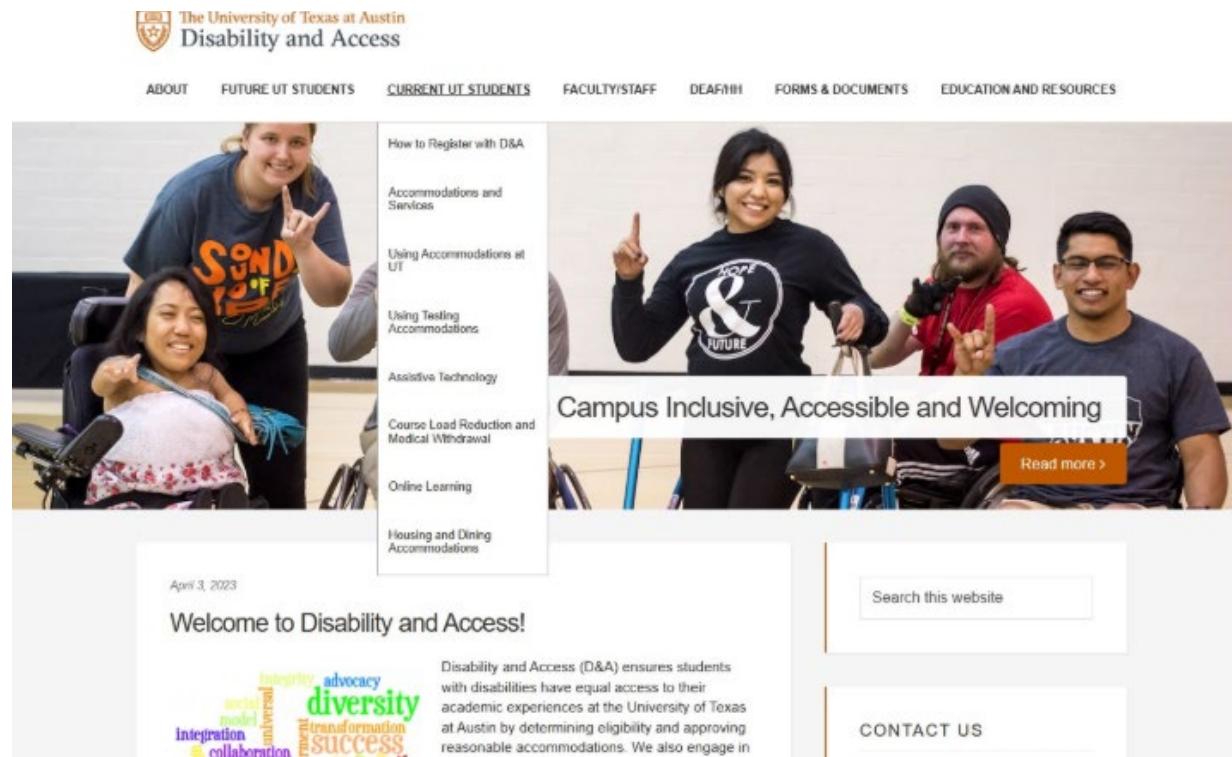
writers with disabilities. “Instead of creating a home within our writing Centers for projects for a projected user, listening allows writing consultants to access more of the guest's ideas and allows consultants the flexibility like we are seeing in new types of houses and vehicles” (Anglesley, 12). These suggestions will improve the experiences of the disabled in writing centers. Listening must turn into a point of access.

3. How rhetoric and pedagogy are communicated through university websites-The rhetoric of accommodation and remediation.

The UT Austin Disability and Access site contains all the right terminology, information is quick and easy to access, and it reflects the ethos appropriate for disabled students. The sites, figure-ground design, typeset, font and colors, and drop-down menus are accessible, and they have no barriers to information. Plain language is also employed in the Disability and Access site and Writing Center sites. UT has done an excellent job using UD, multi-modality, and accessibility in these sites. The writing center site has “Chat with Us”, an accessibility tab, and success stories. It lists tutoring styles, and it has appointment-setting options. It also refers to the UWC and Praxis sources in this paper. Nothing on the site forces a disabled student to declare a disability. It is judgment-free. They also have a podcast.

In conclusion, disabled people can succeed despite ableist narratives and discrimination, but only if new ideas are, and continue to be, employed. University disability offices and writing centers can facilitate these ideas. We can learn and experience diversity through accepting and teaching disabled students. Disabled people teach us empathy and gratitude, and how gratitude reciprocates.

Appendix



The screenshot shows the homepage of the University of Texas at Austin Disability and Access (D&A) website. The header features the university's logo and the text "The University of Texas at Austin" and "Disability and Access". The navigation menu includes links for "ABOUT", "FUTURE UT STUDENTS", "CURRENT UT STUDENTS", "FACULTY/STAFF", "DEAFHH", "FORMS & DOCUMENTS", and "EDUCATION AND RESOURCES". Below the menu, there are two large images: one on the left showing a student in a wheelchair with a friend, and one on the right showing three diverse students. A sidebar on the left contains links to "How to Register with D&A", "Accommodations and Services", "Using Accommodations at UT", "Using Testing Accommodations", "Assistive Technology", "Course Load Reduction and Medical Withdrawal", "Online Learning", and "Housing and Dining Accommodations". A "Welcome to Disability and Access!" message is displayed with a timestamp of "April 3, 2023". The footer includes a search bar, a "CONTACT US" link, and a "Read more >" button.

The University of Texas at Austin
Disability and Access

ABOUT FUTURE UT STUDENTS CURRENT UT STUDENTS FACULTY/STAFF DEAFHH FORMS & DOCUMENTS EDUCATION AND RESOURCES

How to Register with D&A
Accommodations and Services
Using Accommodations at UT
Using Testing Accommodations
Assistive Technology
Course Load Reduction and Medical Withdrawal
Online Learning
Housing and Dining Accommodations

April 3, 2023

Welcome to Disability and Access!

Integrity advocacy diversity
social model universal integration transformation
collaboration success

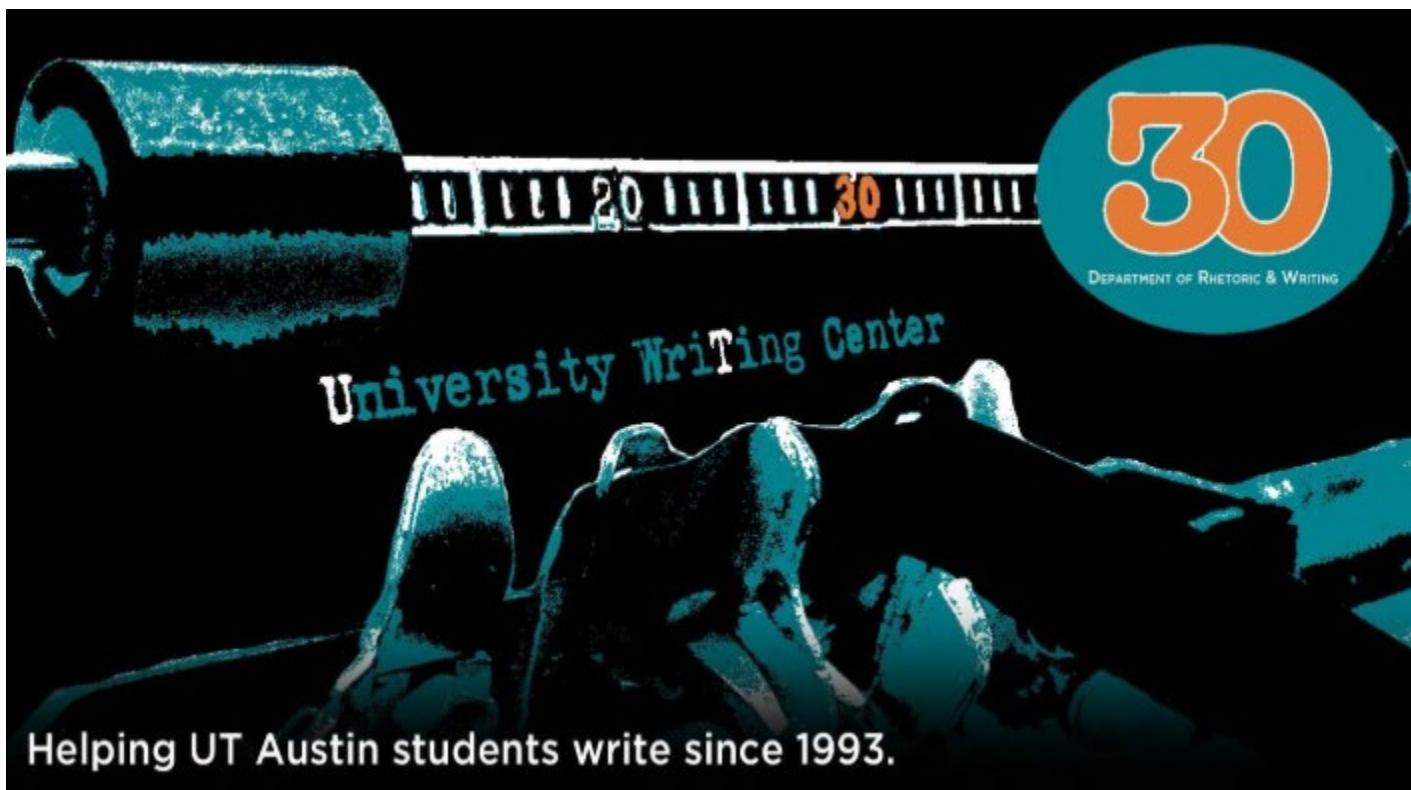
Disability and Access (D&A) ensures students with disabilities have equal access to their academic experiences at the University of Texas at Austin by determining eligibility and approving reasonable accommodations. We also engage in

Campus Inclusive, Accessible and Welcoming

Read more >

Search this website

CONTACT US



For more general information on working with people with different types of disabilities, please visit our [About Disabilities Page](#).

Working with Students Registered with D&A

Students who are registered with D&A can request individual Accommodation Letters for their instructors that outline the accommodations approved for that student by D&A.

Instructors should discuss the Accommodation Letter, and any associated handouts, with the student to clarify which accommodations the student may need to use in the class and how it will be provided. The student's assigned Coordinator can answer questions that may come up during this conversation or any point during the semester.

Below are a few general tips when talking with students with disabilities about their accommodations.

- Ask how, not if: Use phrases such as "How will be the best way for you to participate in class discussions?" or "How can I make sure the class materials are accessible for you?" Many students have experience when it comes to navigating their disability and using accommodations so it can be helpful to start the conversation by asking the student what has been helpful in the past, not if they can be successful in the class.
- Make sure you and the student have a conversation about the accommodations they need to use in the class and both you and the student know how the accommodations will be implemented. Consider sending a follow up email summarizing your conversation so both you and the student have a written document to refer to later in the semester if needed.
- Make a plan to keep lines of communication open: After you discuss accommodations the student would like to use, make a plan for how any changes will be communicated. It can also be useful to let the student know you will follow up with their Coordinator if there are questions.

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