

Student Resource

Provided to Supplement

The Guide to Assisting Students With Disabilities

Equal Access in Health Science and Professional Education

***Lisa M. Meeks, PhD
Neera R. Jain, MS, CRC***

Editors

Professionalism in Communication: A Guide for Graduate and Professional Health Sciences Students With Disabilities

Neera R. Jain and Lisa M. Meeks

For all students, the transition to graduate or professional school requires the use of many skills to adapt to the new environment. One's professionalism, especially regarding communication skills, is key to making an effective transition. It is essential that students with disabilities effectively communicate with faculty, colleagues, and other administration and staff in order to ensure access to approved disability accommodations.

This guide was developed to assist graduate and professional students in the health sciences to effectively communicate information about their disabilities and their classroom and clinical placement accommodations with faculty and administrators. The goal is to outline several key issues for students with disabilities, including: (1) the appropriate amount of information to share, (2) tips for professional communication, and (3) the students' roles and responsibilities in this process.

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL STUDY?

In graduate and professional schools, there is an expectation that students will demonstrate a higher level of self-direction and self-advocacy in their behavior and learning than they did during earlier education. Particularly in professional health sciences schools, the competency of professionalism is embedded in the curriculum to support the professional development of students as they become health care providers.

WHAT IS PROFESSIONALISM?

Professionalism encompasses a number of aspects of professional behavior, including professional relationships, work habits, ethical principles, and external standards. In the health sciences, these skills are seen as critical in developing the ability to form relationships with patients and other health care team members that are based on respect, integrity, and responsiveness to others' needs. It is also seen as integral to students becoming professionals who can apply ethical standards to their practice.¹ Research demonstrates that lapses in the professionalism of health sciences students are predictive of similar difficulties in future professional behavior.²

HOW DOES PROFESSIONALISM APPLY TO STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES?

Students with disabilities are, of course, students first. They are held to the same standards of behavior as all other students. Standards of professionalism are maintained for all aspects of a student's interactions and behaviors in the academic environment, which includes accessing disability-related accommodations and supports.

Communicating with faculty regarding your status as a student with a disability is an important step in accessing accommodations. Like any other communication with faculty, it is a reflection of professional conduct. For many students, this can be an anxiety-provoking task. Students may be reluctant to share information about their disabilities out of shame or fear of stigma from school administration, peers, or faculty. Some students may have had negative experiences in the past and, as a result, may display behaviors that reflect their reluctance to access accommodations. Other students are new to discussing their needs with faculty, either due to the structure of their undergraduate environment or due to a new diagnosis or exacerbation of an existing condition, and may be unsure of what to say and how to say it. This can lead to poorly executed communication from the student, including: (1) late notification of a need for accommodations; (2) sending brief or excessively lengthy and detailed communication; (3) taking an overly defensive, emotional, or aggressive stance in communication; or (4) simply not reaching out to ask for assistance.

In a health sciences school, poor communication leads to potentially strained relationships with faculty. Additionally, failure to clearly communicate accommodation needs can contribute to unnecessary stress and burden for both faculty and students. All students should strive to maintain a professional relationship with faculty members, as they will soon become part of

¹<http://meded.ucsf.edu/ume/md-competencies>

²Papadakis, M. A., Teherani, A., Banach, M. A., Knettler, T. R., Rattner, S., Stern, D. T., Veloski, J. J., & Hodgson, C. S. (2005). Unprofessional behavior in medical school and subsequent disciplinary action by state medical boards. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 353, 2673–2682.

their professional network and may be called upon for references for jobs or other future pursuits.

It may seem unfair that students without disabilities do not have to think about or manage this extra layer of responsibility. However, it is a reality of having a disability and being in a graduate program. It also mirrors the process that people with disabilities follow in the workplace to access accommodations for a job. Practicing and developing professional communication skills regarding accommodations as a student will help you to refine your ability to communicate concerning your disability-related needs as you enter the workplace.

WHAT ABOUT DISCLOSING A DISABILITY TO FACULTY?

Students with disabilities may arrive at graduate or professional schools lacking a good understanding of their disability and having difficulty communicating their needs. They often share feelings of uncertainty about how much information to share, and with whom to share this information.

Students are not obligated to disclose personal health information, nor the origin of their disability, to faculty, administrators, or other program personnel in order to access accommodations approved by the disability services (DS) office.

Students studying the health sciences may feel compelled to share details about their diagnosis as a way of justifying their need for accommodations. Students might also believe that disclosing the nature of the disability will result in a more empathetic understanding of their needs, given that many of their faculty members are health professionals.

The DS office carefully protects a student's confidential medical information and has protocols in place to ensure a student's privacy. Accommodations are "vetted" in advance with the respective schools to ensure that technical standards are not compromised. As such, faculty members are strictly prohibited from inquiring about the nature of a student's disability or requesting additional documentation (e.g., doctor's notes, documentation of illness, medical evaluations). No additional "justification" of a student's disability or need for accommodation is necessary or warranted.

We caution students against engaging in a dialogue about medical or disability status with faculty and administration, aside from the DS office. Faculty and students, particularly in the health sciences, can easily slip into an in-depth medical dialogue about diagnosis, prognosis, and course of treatment when discussing a student's disability. Conversations of this nature place both the student and faculty in a vulnerable position and can invite unwanted medical advice and future questions about status and well-being. Students may leave a conversation of this nature feeling that they have shared too much. Although faculty members often have good intentions, future interactions may become focused on the student's medical status instead of the student's learning and education.

When a student is determining whether or not to share medical information, the student should consider *why* he or she is sharing. Sharing

information of this nature can be perceived as an attempt to elicit sympathy or seek favoritism, or as a mechanism for explaining subpar performance. Formal accommodations should eliminate the need to discuss specifics about a disability and allow faculty to keep assessments strictly performance-based. The DS office is available to assess eligibility for additional accommodations, including modifications to policy and procedure, when necessary, and consult about appropriate disclosures.

WHEN FACULTY ASK PERSONAL QUESTIONS

We have discussed what happens when students willingly share too much information, but what happens when faculty do not recognize boundaries and ask questions of a personal nature? When this occurs, it is usually done without malicious intent and out of a general concern for the student's well-being. Good intentions, however, do not trump the need to keep conversations professional and for the student to vocalize his or her desired privacy.

Although a difficult conversation to initiate, *it is important for students to set a professional tone with faculty regarding their status as a student with a disability and their desire to keep personal information confidential.* The perfect time for students to set boundaries with faculty is during the initial disclosure of status as a student with a formally registered disability. For guidance on the first contact with faculty, see Section I, "First Contact." Students can set the tone in their e-mails by focusing on their accommodations and not their disability diagnoses. Also, by maintaining a formal and professional tone in their initial e-mails, they set up expectations for future communication.

EMOTIONALLY LOADED COMMUNICATION

Emotionally loaded statements made by students in communication with faculty, including attributing feelings about accommodations, disability, and associated malicious intent to others, is less than professional. Although it is understandable that students may have concerns about how they are perceived, it is not productive to attribute feelings to others. Instead, students should remain focused on their own circumstances and moving toward a positive resolution.

The subsequent sections present examples of straightforward, appropriately assertive, and objective communication. We recommend that students avoid emotionally loaded statements in communication about accommodations, such as the following.

- "I know you must be upset. . ."
- "Please don't think I'm lazy. . ."
- "You've been ignoring me!"
- "You seemed angry when. . ."
- "I know it's a real pain for you to make these arrangements for my accommodations. . ."
- "Could I ask you for a favor?"

- “I feel horrible asking this, but. . .”
- “Please forgive me for asking, but. . .”
- “I assure you that my condition is real. . .”

It is important to keep in mind that students are entitled to accommodations that have been approved by the DS office. Students should not apologize for a disability, or for the need for accommodations. These adjustments have been determined reasonable, and are tools to facilitate equal access to learning. They should not be considered a burden, unfair advantage, or benefit to students with disabilities.

SCHOOL PROCEDURES AND FACULTY RESPONSIBILITIES

Students are responsible for following the procedures for accessing accommodations outlined for their school or program each quarter or semester. Students should note the process for their school or program in the student handbook and make sure to follow these procedures carefully.

Professional communication and responsible behavior in accessing accommodations is a two-way street. In addition to the student’s responsibility to follow procedures and communicate effectively in a timely manner, it is also expected that faculty will respond in kind. Students who find themselves in a situation where a faculty member is not responding in a timely or respectful manner should contact the DS office or the DS liaison to obtain assistance.

DISCRIMINATORY ACTIONS

If students feel that they have been discriminated against due to their status as a person with a disability, there are formal channels to address this. Each university is required to have a published procedure available to make a claim of discrimination on the basis of disability. Generally, the university’s Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance officer or equal opportunity office manages these claims.

Although we recommend that students first seek to resolve a situation within their university, students also have the option to make a formal complaint through the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights,³ or through private legal means.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS AND REMINDERS FOR COMMUNICATION

1. It is important that communication **be clear and concise**.
2. It is essential that students **communicate and follow up in a timely manner**.

³<https://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/CFAPPS/OCR/contactus.cfm>

3. **Most faculty members are very aware of the expected processes for accessing and providing accommodations**, and have experience working with students with disabilities.
4. **If students encounter any difficulties with faculty, they should contact campus resources** (disability services, or identified liaisons in your school) **immediately to avoid any delay or disruption to services**.
5. **Students must take responsibility for following up**. Many students find it helpful to set reminders on their calendars in advance, outlining when to send communication to faculty or when to follow up if they haven't heard a response, and to schedule periodic check-ins regarding upcoming exams.
6. **Students are not obligated to disclose personal information unrelated to accommodations**. Legally, students are not required to disclose the nature of a disability or to submit additional documentation (e.g., psycho-educational or other evaluations, medical records, letters from health care providers) to other university departments, faculty, or personnel once they have become registered students with the DS office.

I. FIRST CONTACT

The first contact with your faculty about your need for accommodations lays the groundwork for your relationship. It should be short and to the point. Most important, no in-depth disclosure about your disability is necessary.

This first communication should address your needs, including a request for information about when, where, and how your accommodations will be provided. Your university likely has specific guidelines for notifying faculty of your registration with the disability services office, and your need for accommodations. Most schools encourage students to notify faculty in advance of the semester or quarter, or at least 2 weeks in advance of an exam. Depending on the structure of your course (e.g., those with exams or quizzes within the first 2 weeks), it may be advisable to contact faculty in advance of the start of the class.

Some accommodations, such as a change in clinical site or the need for specialized equipment, alternate-format course materials, or sign language interpreters, require additional time to arrange. In these cases, the DS office and faculty should be notified well in advance. Part of professional communication is allowing for the time necessary to coordinate your accommodations. Your student handbook or DS procedures guide should outline expected timelines for arranging such accommodations.

Timely communication with faculty is the first step in establishing a good working relationship. Most faculty convey that the only issue they have regarding students with disabilities is the failure of students to communicate their needs in a clear and timely manner.

Example of a Well-Written First E-Mail

Dear Professor Smith,

My name is XXXX and I am a student in your Adult Med/Surg course.^a I am writing because you have received an e-mail from the nursing school liaison confirming my registration with Student Disability Services and outlining my approved accommodations for your course. I am hoping to speak to you to discuss how I will access my exam accommodations. Per my accommodations, I require 150% time for my exams, as well as a private room.^b

Could you please advise me on when and where I should report for my exams?^c If you would prefer, I would be happy to meet with you in person to discuss this. Generally, once we have finalized the plan, I send a reminder to my faculty of my needs 2 weeks in advance of my exams to confirm the arrangements.^d

If you have a course coordinator or proctor whom you prefer I contact, or whom you would like copied on these e-mails, please let me know. I look forward to working together to facilitate these accommodations.

Thank you in advance for your assistance.

Best regards,

^aThis introduction informs the professor who you are, and introduces you as a current student first.

^bReminding professors that they have already received communication about your circumstances will prompt them to look back in their e-mails to refresh their memory about your case.

^cYou ask for the specific information needed to access your accommodations.

^dTaking responsibility to remind your professors that you require accommodations 2 weeks before an exam will help to avoid any confusion or miscommunication on the day of the exam, when you are hoping to stay focused on the exam material.

Example of a Poorly Written First E-Mail

Dear Professor Smith,

I am a disabled student^a in your Adult Med/Surg course this quarter. I have a lot of needs^b because I have a significant learning disability,^c and I hope that I will do okay in your course.^d I was only diagnosed 3 years ago.^e

I need extended time for my exams.^f

TY,^g

^aThere are different philosophies regarding the language used to refer to people with disabilities. Some people choose to refer to themselves as a disabled person first, such as “I am autistic” or “I am a disabled student,” denoting that the disability is an inherent part of their cultural identity. Others choose to use person-first language, such as “I am a person with autism” or “I am a person with a disability,” denoting that they are a person first and having a disability is one of a number of qualities that describes them, not the only descriptor. You may find it helpful to think about how you would like to refer to yourself, what it means to you, and what message it conveys to others. This can be a valuable exploration into your personal disability identity and philosophy. There is no “wrong answer” to the question, “how will I refer to myself?”

^bReporting to faculty members that you have “a lot of needs” can leave the impression that working with you will take up a good deal of their time and energy. Instead, specifying your approved accommodations better conceptualizes your needs for faculty. Some students feel guilty for taking up faculty time and will communicate this in e-mails. Using an apologetic tone is not necessary. Accommodations are available to allow students equal access to a program, and should not be considered a burden or excess work. It is best to proceed in a matter-of-fact manner.

^cDisclosing your disability is not necessary in this context.

^dSaying that you “hope you do okay” or similar language reads as if you are trying to elicit sympathy. This type of communication can be perceived as less than professional. Moreover, you, like any other student, have met the admissions requirements for the program, and are as qualified as any other student to be in the class.

^eThis may seem basic, but we’d like to remind students that using emoticons and emojis in your e-mails is less than professional. We recommend that you refrain from using them in your communication with faculty.

^fThis statement is not specific—how much time does the student need? It does not refer back to the official approval notification that the faculty member should have already received from your school liaison.

^gClosing an e-mail with an informal salutation does not convey a professional tone. Even though you are a student, you are expected to communicate as a professional adult in all situations, including e-mail. We recommend that you refrain from using abbreviations common to “Internet speak” such as LOL, SYS, TY, and ROFL, as they are not sufficiently formal for this type of writing.

II. FOLLOW-UP E-MAIL

A. Follow up to no response

There are two types of follow up e-mails to the first contact that students generally send to faculty. The first is intended to follow up should you not hear back within a reasonable period of time.

If there is no response to your initial e-mail, it is generally recommended that you follow up within 3 to 5 business days. This follow-up e-mail should include the previous e-mail and be approached as a gentle reminder that you are waiting for a response.

Example of a Well-Written Follow-Up E-Mail

Dear Professor Smith,

I hope this e-mail finds you doing well.^a

I am following up on the communication below in order to finalize arrangements for my approved accommodations in your course.^b For clarity and ease of reading I've put my questions in bullet format.^c If it would be helpful for us to meet in person instead, I would be happy to do so. Please let me know which works best for you.^d

- QUESTION 1
- QUESTION 2
- QUESTION 3

Thank you!

Best,

^a Begin with a friendly tone.

^b Inform the professor about your needs, and reference your initial e-mail, which is copied below.

^c Make e-mail communication easy by bulleting or numbering items.

^d Make yourself available in case the professor has more questions or wishes to see you in person.

Example of a Poorly Constructed Follow-Up E-Mail

Dear Professor Smith,

I am very worried about the upcoming exam^a because I haven't heard back from you about the e-mail I sent last night!^b I really, really need the accommodations^c and I think I will fail your exam without them.^d

As you should know, I'm entitled to these accommodations under federal law. I hope I don't need to make a complaint about not getting my accommodations.^e

Sincerely,

^aDoes not communicate confidence.

^bYou are anticipating an unreasonably short turnaround ("e-mail I sent you last night").

^cThis sentence makes it appear that you are desperate for the accommodation. The writing style is also informal.

^dAccommodations are intended to level the playing field—not to ensure that students pass. This argument also appears unprofessional and emotionally charged.

^eIt is generally not helpful to remind faculty of legal obligations at this juncture. This statement as written appears threatening. It is more helpful to use a collaborative tone, and reach out to the DS office or your school liaison for support if collaborative efforts are not successful.

B. Follow up to confirm arrangements

The second type of follow-up e-mail is more general in nature and is used to confirm details for accessing accommodations. It should be simple and concise, confirming any agreed-upon details from your previous conversations.

Example of a Well-Written Follow-Up E-Mail

Dear Professor Smith,

I am writing to confirm the arrangements for accessing my accommodations in the upcoming Adult Med/Surg exam scheduled for December 5.^a As we discussed previously, I will take the exam in CL 214 at 8:30 a.m. Because the standard time for the exam is 60 minutes, and I am allotted 1.5 times the normal administration time, I should have 90 minutes, completing the exam by 10 a.m.^b

Please let me know if there have been any changes to these arrangements.^c

Thank you, again, for your assistance.

Best regards,

^aGives very specific information about the test day, time, and location. The professor can extract the information if needed and forward to any proctors.

^bReminds the professor of the approved accommodations and states the end time, helping the professor plan for proctors.

^cInvites the professor to respond if there are any changes.

Example of a Poorly Constructed Follow-Up E-Mail

Dear Professor Smith,

I'll be at the test tomorrow. Let me know if anything has changed.^a

Best,

^aVery casual; does not elicit cooperation in the tone, or communicate your understanding of any arrangements previously made.

III. COMMUNICATING CONCERNS AND COMPLAINTS

Sometimes, despite everyone's best efforts, something goes wrong in the process of accessing your accommodations. It is important to raise concerns as soon as possible so they can be addressed expeditiously. Ideally, if there is a concern during an exam (e.g., a student who is approved for a private room is placed in a shared room, or there is a noise complaint), you should notify your proctor in the moment so it can be addressed immediately. However, if there is a concern that is not or could not be addressed in the moment, you may want to inform the professor in writing. It is recommended that you copy the DS office on this e-mail so that the DS office can provide technical assistance to your faculty or school regarding the incident.

When communicating a complaint, it is helpful to inform your faculty about the facts of the incident as you understand them, note your concerns about what happened, and propose or inquire about a desired solution. Although a situation may have been upsetting, it is helpful to try to use a neutral tone, and be as clear and objective as possible. Using a neutral tone does not take away from what you have experienced. In fact, you may feel quite upset and troubled by what happened. However, your communication is a means for reporting and documenting your concerns. Taking a neutral and collaborative tone helps to create a "paper trail" around your concern, and demonstrates and documents your professional approach in the process. Using a neutral tone also tends to be the most successful in eliciting cooperation, and can go a long way in resolving your concern.

Note that although we recommend that students attempt to address concerns informally first, there are always formal means by which a complaint or concern can be addressed. See your university's policies for resolving complaints and concerns for more information.

Example of a Well-Written E-Mail Regarding a Concern/Complaint

Dear Professor Smith,

I am writing to inform you of something that happened during my exam today, and request that you assist me in resolving it.^a

As you know, I am approved for a private room as an accommodation for my disability. During my exam, there was an active construction project outside the window. I tried to inquire about relocating to a quieter space, but was unable to reach you.^b There was consistent noise throughout my exam, which was particularly distracting due to my disability.^c

I fear that my performance was significantly impacted by this noise. I would like to discuss this impact and determine what can be done to address this unfortunate situation. I believe that given the poor conditions of my exam room, I should be permitted to retake the exam under better conditions.^d

In the future, I think it would be helpful if I were permitted to bring noise-cancelling headphones into the testing room. I plan to ask Student Disability Services about the availability and reasonableness of this as a formal accommodation.^e It would also be helpful to ensure that the phone number I am provided to ask questions and address concerns during future exams is closely monitored so such concerns can be addressed in the moment.^f

I have copied the Disability Services Director and the Disability Services liaison in the School of Nursing on this e-mail in the hopes that they may be able to assist us with addressing the situation.^g

I'm looking forward to resolving this issue and putting preventative measures in place for future exams.^h

Best,

^aYou solicit your professor's assistance with a neutral tone.

^bYou describe the situation clearly and objectively; you explain why you are informing the professor after the incident occurred.

^cYou explain why this situation is particularly problematic given your disability status and related needs.

^dYou explain how you were impacted by the circumstance, and propose a solution to the issue.

^eYou propose a reasonable solution going forward, and your plan to reach out to the DS office to explore this further.

^fYou note the expected arrangement (that you can contact the faculty during the exam with questions or concerns), and explain what changes you feel would address the circumstances you faced. This points out what went wrong without calling out the professor in a confrontational manner.

^gBy copying the DS director and your school liaison, you solicit their assistance in resolving the situation. The DS office and your liaison are key resources for you and your faculty to ensure that the situation is appropriately resolved.

^hYou maintain a professional, collaborative tone while stressing that the situation needs to be addressed.

Example of a Poorly Written E-Mail Regarding a Concern/Complaint

Dear Professor Smith,

I tried to call you during the exam but you didn't answer. There was so much noise that I couldn't concentrate, and I'm pretty sure I failed the exam. This noise kept me from using my accommodations so I think I should be allowed to retake the exam ASAP.^a

Please respond to tell me what you'll do about this!!!^b

Sincerely,

^a In this version, you are expressing your frustration, but not including key details. You don't orient the professor to the exam you are referring to, and do not paint a full picture of the situation you experienced.

^b This statement is confrontational and demanding; it doesn't convey a collaborative tone. The DS office and/or your school liaison are not included on the e-mail to solicit their assistance in resolving the situation.

IV. COMMUNICATING ABOUT A CHRONIC HEALTH CONDITION

If you have a disability with symptoms that ebb and flow over time and find it difficult to attend an essential activity, or find that an exacerbation of symptoms impacts your ability to complete an assignment by a set due date, you should request consideration of flexible attendance and deadlines as an accommodation from the DS office. You should speak with your DS provider to determine if and when flexibility is warranted.

If you have an approved accommodation that allows for flexibility, communication is essential. It is best to work with your DS provider to establish concrete expectations for attendance per the approved accommodation, along with a clear understanding of the consequences or actions that may result for absences beyond the agreed-upon change to course policy.

As a general rule, when such an accommodation is approved, a reasonable number of absences and/or instances of tardiness beyond the standard course policy will be predetermined as a reasonable accommodation. The number approved will depend on the course structure and requirements, and will be predetermined in an interactive discussion among you, the DS provider, faculty, and the school.

When possible, you are encouraged to attend your classes. Flares in symptoms and other unexpected exacerbations can contribute to unexpected tardiness. Although some adjustment period is anticipated, you should adjust your schedule to reflect the need for additional time to ensure an on-time arrival for class and other obligations, generally within a 1- to 2-day period.

Although the amount of flexibility that will be provided as an accommodation is normally predetermined by the DS office in consultation with

the school, it is your responsibility, along with your faculty member, to set the expectations regarding notification. *You must determine, in advance, a protocol for notifying faculty when the accommodation needs to be activated* (i.e., when you experience an exacerbation of symptoms). There are several key points that you should discuss with your faculty. This discussion should occur in a meeting or by e-mail, and you should follow up to confirm faculty members' understanding of the process in writing. The following are examples of key points for consideration:

1. Whom should I notify if I am going to be late or absent from a required activity?
2. What is the best way to notify someone (e.g., phone, e-mail)?
3. If I am going to be absent from a required activity, what are my options for making up work?
4. If I am going to be late or absent for an exam, is the process any different?
5. Are there other instructors who should be notified about this plan (e.g., small-group leaders, co-instructors, preceptors, clinical instructors); if so, who will notify them?

You should write two e-mails: one that alerts the faculty to the potential for this need and the afforded accommodation, and a second for when a flare-up happens. Determining a protocol at the beginning of the course shows respect and consideration for faculty and reduces the need to negotiate accommodations in the middle of a potentially debilitating flare-up of symptoms.

A. Notification of the potential need for flexibility

Example of a Well-Written E-Mail: Attendance Flexibility Accommodation

Dear Professor Smith,

I am a student in your XXX course. I am also registered with Student Disability Services (please see my attached accommodation letter).^a

As part of my approved disability accommodations, I am afforded some flexibility around attendance should I experience an exacerbation of my symptoms. I cannot always predict the need for the accommodation in advance of an event. I'm writing to ask that we meet to discuss an agreed-upon protocol for communicating my absence/tardiness and the need to use my approved accommodation.^b An ideal protocol would include the best method of contacting you, and any alternative participatory method that might be available to me (e.g., remote attendance, weekend hours, research). I would also need to know how to proceed if I were to experience an exacerbation on the day of an exam.

(continued)

Example of a Well-Written E-Mail: Attendance Flexibility Accommodation (*continued*)

Please let me know when we might be able to meet. Once we determine the protocol I will e-mail you a confirmation to ensure that I understand what is expected. My hope is that I will not experience any exacerbations during this course, but I find it best to be prepared just in case.^c

Best regards,

^aYou introduce yourself as a student first to provide context to your e-mail, and provide the letter confirming approved accommodations that the faculty will expect in any discussion about accommodations.

^bYou take early action to schedule a time to discuss the protocol should you need to activate the accommodation.

^cYou communicate your desire to be prepared in the event that you require the approved accommodation, which in turn communicates your professionalism.

Example of a Poorly Written E-Mail: Attendance Flexibility Accommodation

Dear Professor Smith,

As part of my accommodations I am allowed to miss class. If I can't make it to class I'll let you know and will plan to make up the work.^a

Thank you!

Best,

^aAlthough it is friendly, this message does not have sufficient specificity. You have not included the verification of your approved accommodation. You have not communicated that you would like to understand the expectations should you need to exercise the accommodation. Your description of the accommodation is ambiguous and does not clearly communicate the approved accommodation, which is a reasonable level of flexibility. It may communicate instead that you are permitted to never attend class.

B. Notifying faculty that you will need to use the flexibility accommodation

An e-mail regarding a missed activity should remind your faculty members about the circumstances, inform them that you will be or were absent (be specific about what you missed), and communicate how you would like to resolve the incident, per your previous discussions.

Example of a Well-Written E-Mail Regarding the Need for Flexibility

Dear Professor Smith,

I'm writing to inform you that I am experiencing a significant exacerbation of my disability today, and as such will not be able to attend the lab session.^a Per our predetermined protocol I am e-mailing you with a potential solution/make-up scenario.^b I understand that Group B will perform the same lab on Friday. I would like to request that I be permitted to attend the lab session on Friday to make up for missing today's lab.^c

Thank you in advance for your consideration.^d

Best,

^aYou inform the faculty about the situation without including specific details of your condition—this is good, as it is not necessary to share specific medical information in these communications.

^bYou remind the professor about your previous conversations, which orients the professor to the agreement you made at the beginning of the quarter.

^cYou provide a reasonable make-up scenario that presumably was discussed in your initial conversation.

^dYou close with a professional statement of gratitude.

Example of a Poorly Written E-Mail Regarding the Need for Flexibility

Dear Professor Smith,

I'm sick today and can't go to lab.^a I'm SO, SO sorry!!!^b I don't really know what to do.^c I feel horrible. Is there anything I can do to make up the lab?^d

Thanks,

^aStating that you are "sick" does not alert professors that the issue is related to your disability. Faculty often have specific policies regarding illness, which are separate from your accommodation, and often require students to provide a note from a doctor. An accommodation of flexibility due to disability does not require the student to provide a doctor's note. Flexibility as an accommodation supersedes most attendance policies.

^bIt is not necessary to apologize for your disability or condition. Further, the format of this apology is not professional.

^cYou should have discussed the protocol for such circumstances prior to your need to access it. Stating that you don't know what to do can appear that you are helpless and unprepared. In fact, most students do have an idea of what they should or could do, and should communicate that.

^dAgain, this communicates that you have not previously discussed the accommodation and related need with the faculty, is informal, and relays a feeling that you are incapable of managing your circumstances.

Example of a Well-Written E-Mail Regarding Absence

Dear Professor Ali,

I was absent from lecture today.^a Unfortunately, it was necessary for me to use 1 of my 4 preapproved absences to attend to a flare-up in symptoms.^b As discussed previously, I will get the notes from a classmate and view the lecture capture to catch up on the material missed.^c

Please let me know if there is anything else I should do.

Best,

^aYou send an e-mail on the day of the absence to notify the faculty member.

^bYou reference your prior conversation and protocol—indicating that you have used one of the agreed-upon absences. You note that it is a disability-related issue without providing unnecessary details.

^cYou note the steps you will take to make up the work missed, as per your previous conversation.

Example of a Poorly Written E-Mail Regarding Absence

Dear Professor Ali,

I was out of class today. Can you please provide me the information that I missed? I was sick, and as you recall, I am allowed to miss class because of my disability.^a

Thanks,

^aIndicates no proactive protocol was established regarding absences. Saying you are “allowed to miss class because of your disability” is misleading.

Example of a Well-Written E-Mail Regarding Tardiness

Dear Professor Garcia,

I woke up today with a significant flare-up of symptoms related to my disability.^a Per our previous discussion, I’m writing to let you know that I will be late for my small group today.^b I have copied my small-group leader for the day to ensure that she is aware.^c

I am working out how to best manage my symptoms so I am able to be on time going forward. Please let me know if you have any questions.^d

Best,

^aYou reference the sudden onset of a flare-up, and that it is related to your disability. You don’t provide unnecessary details about the nature of the flare-up.

^bYou reference your previous discussion, and provide timely notice of your need to be late.

^cYou copy any other parties who should be aware of the circumstances.

^dYou note that you are working to manage your symptoms going forward.

Example of a Poorly Written E-Mail Regarding Tardiness

Professor Garcia,

I'm so sorry I was late to small group today.^a My symptoms are terrible and I had to take medicine in the middle of the night, which made me sleep in late, and it was really hard to get up in time.^b I hope no one is mad at me.^c Can you let my leader know so she doesn't think I am just lazy?^d

Sorry again.^e

Thanks,

^aIt is not necessary to apologize for your disability-related need.

^bIt is not necessary to provide details of your disability, or the nature of your flare-up of symptoms.

^cThis statement reflects a fear of stigma and judgment due to disability-related needs rather than the approved academic accommodations.

^dYou should copy your small-group leader if it is relevant for her to know of the circumstances. Suggesting that someone might think you are lazy is an emotionally loaded statement and is less than professional.

^eIt is not necessary to apologize.

V. DISCUSSING CLINICAL ACCOMMODATIONS

Our guidance regarding communication thus far also applies to communicating about accommodations in the clinical setting. E-mailing a professor about your needs, however, can be quite different from the face-to-face communication that occurs when working with an attending physician or preceptor. In these situations you may need to communicate about your disability-related accommodations on a daily basis.

It is important that you follow your school or program's procedures for accessing accommodations in the clinical setting; check your student or program handbook for guidance. Most programs follow a "top-down" approach, whereby you are responsible for notifying a lead faculty member, sometimes referred to as a block director, faculty of record, or clinical supervisor, of your approved accommodations. Together, you and the lead faculty member identify who else in the clinical setting needs to be notified of your accommodations.

If you will work with a single team during your rotation, the most effective communication may be to notify the team members as a group in advance. This is easily achieved via e-mail communication following the communication guidelines from previous sections.

However, sometimes a large and relatively unpredictable group of individuals (e.g., faculty, residents, and other team members) work with students. In these cases, *it is essential that you have the initial conversation with your lead faculty member.* This follows the top-down approach and ensures

that the people in charge are aware of your accommodations and can assist you with addressing concerns that arise. It is best to take direction from these individuals regarding who needs to be aware of your accommodations, and when. For example, if during a 4-hour surgery you need to take breaks every hour, you may need to notify the operating room charge nurse several days in advance to ensure pertinent members of the team are aware, and to set a protocol for leaving and reentering a sterile space. Your DS provider can consult with you and your lead faculty member to help determine who on the team needs to be notified.

In any of these circumstances, it is helpful, and may be necessary, to remind faculty and pertinent team members of your accommodations.

A. Initial notification of clinical faculty

Example of a Well-Communicated Initial Notification of Clinical Faculty

"Hello Dr. Lee, my name is XXXX, and I am registered with Student Disability Services.^a You may have heard about me from Dr. Jordon. Due to my disability, I will need to take a 10-minute break every 2 hours.^b I plan to take these breaks in the breakroom.^c I will plan my breaks around my patients' needs to ensure that they are met before I take my break."^d

^aYou remind the supervisor of a previous notification of your circumstances.

^bYou explain the accommodation you need in a direct manner, without extraneous details.

^cYou notify the supervisor about how you plan to implement the accommodation.

^dYou assure the supervisor that your accommodation will not interfere with your ability to provide patient care.

Example of a Poorly Communicated Initial Notification to Clinical Faculty

"Hello Dr. Lee. I'm a disabled student so I need to take breaks during the day. Is that okay?"^a

^aYou don't remind the faculty member of any previous notification of your circumstances. You don't explain the specifics of your approved accommodation, so the need appears ambiguous. Asking permission to access your accommodation is not necessary. The accommodation has already been reviewed and approved by the DS office and your school or program. Making a request instead of informing the faculty member opens the door for an unaware faculty member to try to negotiate the accommodation with you.

B. Clinical scenario where a reminder of your accommodations is necessary

Example of a Well-Constructed Response

Your clinical preceptor asks you to take a medication to the emergency room (ER), but is not facing you when she provides the instructions. You read lips, and need her to face you to ensure that you can understand the instructions.

"I'm sorry, but I didn't understand you. Remember, I need you to face me when you give me instructions so I can read your lips."^a

^aA short, polite, and succinct reminder of your disability-related need.

Example of a Poorly Constructed Response

Your clinical preceptor asks you to take a medication to the ER, but is not facing you when she provides the instructions. You read lips, and need her to face you to ensure that you can understand the instructions.

"Huh? I didn't catch that."^{a,b}

^aIn this example you don't seize a teachable moment to remind your preceptor of what you need in order to effectively function as a student. You may appear inattentive instead of reminding the faculty member of your needs.

^bAnother poor response would be to try to guess what the preceptor said, and act on a poorly informed assumption. It is also not wise to ask another student what was said. In order to get the most out of your experience, and endeavor to improve the situation going forward, you need to be able to effectively communicate with your preceptor.

VI. CONCLUSION

We hope this guide helps to clarify the "hidden curriculum" of communicating with professors regarding your disability and related accommodations. We have assembled some key take-away points from this guide.

We wish you success in your journey through graduate and professional school!

DOS AND DON'TS FOR WRITING EXCELLENT E-MAILS TO PROFESSORS

Do take a neutral, objective, and assertive tone in your communication.

Don't use emotionally loaded language, blame, or attribute emotions to others in your communication.

Do communicate early and follow up if you don't hear back. Elicit support from your campus DS office when you run into difficulties.

Don't wait until the last minute, or you are in danger of failure to self-identify at the DS office or inform your faculty of your approved accommodations.

Do use formal language in your e-mails to professors.

Don't use "Internet speak" or emoticons to convey your message.

Do share the approved accommodations you need to use in a course or rotation with your faculty.

Don't feel obligated to share your diagnosis, medical history, details, or other information with your faculty.

Do learn and follow the procedures set forth by your school for requesting and accessing accommodations.

Don't assume that you can get what you need outside of a formal process, or that the procedures will be the same as those at your previous academic institution.

Do take a collaborative approach to resolving concerns and complaints. Follow the formal process for grieving a complaint when necessary. Use campus resources to support you.

Don't become combative and try to resolve a difficult situation independently.

Do be proactive in planning for possible changes in your health status, and need for nuanced supports.

Don't assume that this time things will work out fine, and be caught off guard if they do not.

Do use positive and empowered language when discussing your disability and related accommodations.

Don't apologize for your need for accommodations.