**Suggested Practices for Syllabus Accessibility Statements**

*Introductory Narrative*

In the summer of 2011, Shannon Madden and Tara Wood, two graduate students interested in Disability Studies, began a discussion of how best to write the “disability” portion of our syllabi statements. Though seemingly transparent, the disability statement functions rhetorically and has some pretty high-stakes consequences in terms of classroom atmosphere, student success, and teacher-student relationships. However, finding the right brand of craftsmanship for the statement is no easy feat. Now is the time to move beyond meeting legal obligations, obligations that resulted from years of hard-fought battles for civil rights, and into thoughtful construction of inclusion statements that develop richer ways of positioning accessibility rhetorically.

So we went about the process of seeking advice from individuals we recognized as being thoughtful about such rhetorical positionings. We sent emails to scholars we have admired and learned from, we contacted institutions that offer graduate programs in Disability Studies, we posted inquiries to listservs, and we combed the responses in the hopes of synthesizing a document we would title “Best Practices for Disability Statements.” In our process of winnowing down our rich responses to retrievable bullets, we realized that “suggested” might be more appropriate, as many individuals have very different approaches to this rhetorical situation.

It’s worth noting that many of our respondents also shared our concerns for carefully and rhetorically crafting “disability” statements in a manner that accounts for the rich scholarly insights of Disability Studies. They indicated discomfort with their own “disability” statements and/or their home institutions mandated approaches to representing accommodation policies. It is within the spirit of this exigency that we offer up what we hope is a helpful document for easing just such discomforts.

*Perspectives & Examples*

**Create your own** (even if it’s in addition to an official required statement at your home institution). This type of personalization allows you to position yourself rhetorically as an instructor interested in creating an inclusive atmosphere and one who is willing to work with students on an individualized basis to maximize their accessibility to your class. It also suggests to your students that you are willing to go beyond the minimum legal or institutional requirements to provide them with access to learning. For an excellent resource on how to discuss the statement with your students in the classroom environment, see Margaret Price’s *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* pages 90-91. Regarding the example below, it’s important to provide a bit of preliminary historical context: when Dr. Price arrived at Spelman, the statement began with “Spelman College is sensitive to students' special needs." After several years of working with the Office of Disability Services and the Curriculum Committee, the statement was re-written. All of this history is to say that if you are teaching at a school that is forcing you to use language you find ableist or otherwise problematic, in addition to creating your own narrative, you might need to work with various campus offices to enact institutional change.

Example from Margaret Price *(note that the first paragraph here is the portion required at Spelman and the second paragraph is Dr. Price’s narrative):* Spelman College is committed to ensuring the full participation of all students in its programs. If you have a documented disability (or think you may have a disability) and, as a result, need a reasonable accommodation to participate in this class, complete course requirements, or benefit from the College’s programs or services, contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) as soon as possible. To receive any academic accommodation, you must be appropriately registered with ODS. The ODS works with students confidentially and does not disclose any disability-related information without their permission. The ODS serves as a clearinghouse on disability issues and works in partnership with faculty and all other student service offices. For further information about services for students with disabilities, please contact the ODS at (404) 270-5289 (voice), located in MacVicar Hall, Room 106.

I assume that all of us learn in different ways, and that the organization of any course will accommodate each student differently. For example, you may prefer to process information by speaking and listening, so that some of the written handouts I provide may be difficult to absorb. Please talk to me as soon as you can about your individual learning needs and how this course can best accommodate them. If you do not have a documented disability, remember that other support services, including the Writing Center and the Learning Resources Center, are available to all students.

**Be aware of its location on your syllabus** As Amy Vidali argues in her response essay “Embodying/Disabling Plagiarism” from *JAC* 31 (2011), on classroom syllabi, a section on plagiarism and a section on disability accommodations generally appear “somewhere past the first page,” and their inclusion late in the syllabus represents them both as “mere policy matters” (260). Representing them as policy, Vidali argues, “downplays the complex morality issues involved in plagiarism...as well as the challenges and benefits of teaching a diversity of bodies” (260-61).

Perspective from Shannon Madden: Drawing from Vidali’s work, my most recent syllabus includes the accommodation statement at the beginning of the policy document directly after the course overview and objectives, and I also use that space to outline objectives and guidelines for class discussion and to caution students against using hurtful and offensive language in their writing or toward others. Positioning the statement near the beginning of the document allows instructors to demonstrate their interest in providing an inclusive and accessible classroom for all students.

**Be aware of the header** Naming the statement an “Accommodation Statement,” “Inclusion Statement,” or “Statement of Commitment to Universal Design for Learning” resists the potentially disparaging rhetorical positioning of “Disability Statement.” However, there are fine lines to walk here as well; in resisting the traditional “disability” terminology, instructors also risk effecting a kind of erasure so that students who do not know what UDL means, for instance, may not recognize the UDL statement as referring to what the university elsewhere refers to as “disability.”

How you frame your statement requires thoughtful consideration of reception; choosing a particular label always already functions as a means of potential inclusion or exclusion. Because these labels (“disability,” “accessibility,” “learning styles,” “accommodations”) run the risk of aligning with particular identities in your classroom, the statement requires a rhetoric that acknowledges the seeming inevitability of erasure but strives for full inclusion anyway.

Perspective from Dale Katherine Ireland: I encourage you to start with changing the title of the statement to "accessibility statement"--rather than a "disability statement"--because I think "accessibility" rhetorically positions the statement in a more inclusive manner for students and faculty.

**Incorporate course components that provide flexibility for different learning styles** The fact that a student is not a language-centered learner or is not good at school does not mean s/he is disabled, and teachers must be aware that students at all levels of skill and ability learn in very different ways. Providing space in the official course document for differences in learning style can help communicate to students both that the course is accessible to students who are not print-centric and that other ways of knowing are valued and valuable in the classroom.

Perspective from Wendy Harbour: I actually go beyond the SU [Syracuse] statement, to be sure my syllabus statement includes some specific examples.  Research has suggested that many students don't think of themselves as "disabled" or needing to identify as such.  And because there is such stigma associated with some disabilities (especially psychiatric disabilities), I make an effort to mention that on my syllabus.
To be sure people talk to me about \*any\* issue - whether or not they see it as a "disability issue," I add a statement about "life circumstances," as well.

So here's one example of the full statement (I vary it a bit with each course):

Disability Accommodations and Life Circumstances:
This class seeks ways to become a working and evolving model of inclusion and universal design for all participants. Individuals with disabilities of any kind (including learning disabilities, ADHD, depression, health conditions), who require instructional, curricular, or test accommodations are responsible for making such needs known to the instructor as early as possible.  Every possible effort will be made to accommodate students in a timely and confidential manner.  Individuals who request accommodations must be registered with the Office of Disability Services (804 University Avenue, Room 309, 3rd floor, 443-44998), which authorizes accommodations for students with disabilities.

Students are encouraged to approach Wendy Harbour with any other life circumstances that may affect their participation in the course.  These may be personal, health-related, family-related issues, or other concerns.  The sooner your instructor knows about these, the earlier we can discuss possible adjustments or alternative arrangements as needed for homework, exams, or class.

P.S.  Just as a side note...the vast majority of my students find they don't need accommodations in my class because I try to universally design it with a great deal of flexibility.  A nice side benefit for instructors and students!

**Include a collaborative element that foregrounds the teacher-student relationship in a positive way** Teachers who foreground the relationship with their students as collaborative can not only make the course accessible to and flexible to the needs of all students but can also help students claim agency and feel empowered by their learning experiences. Teachers who openly admit their willingness and desire to learn from their students and to construct a productive learning atmosphere together with their students will help all students, not only those with so-called disabilities, to maximize their learning potentials.

Example from Stephanie Kerschbaum: Student Learning: Your success in this class is important to me. If there are circumstances that may affect your performance in this class, please let me know as soon as possible so that we can work together to develop strategies for adapting assignments to meet both your needs and the requirements of the course.

In order to receive official university accommodations, you need to receive documentation from the Americans with Disabilities Act Office or the Academic Enrichment Center. The ADA office provides services for students with physical and emotional disabilities and is located at 413 Academy Street. You can contact them via email at ada@udel.edu or phone at 302-831-4643. The AEC provides services for students with documented learning disabilities or ADHD, and they are located at 148-150 S. College Avenue and their phone number is 302-831-2805.

**Consider including something about universal design for learning** Many teachers and researchers are dedicated to viewing accommodation as a pedagogical issue rather than as a legal obligation. Many such teachers rely on the pedagogical principles that can be taken from Universal Design. For resources on pedagogical application of principles from Universal Design, see Jay Dolmage’s essay, “Mapping Composition: Inviting Disability in the Front Door.” Dolmage also compiled a bibliographic resource on UDL, which you can find in *Disability and the Teaching of Writing: A Critical Sourcebook*, edited by Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Brenda Jo Brueggemann.

Example from Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson: Accommodations: In the spirit of Universal Design for Learning, I will strive to provide an environment that is equitable and conducive to achievement and learning for all students. I ask that we all be respectful of diverse opinions and of all class members, regardless of personal attribute. I encourage persons with disabilities or particular needs that impact on performance to meet with me to co-design accommodations, if necessary, beyond those listed under UDL. I ask that we all use inclusive language in written and oral work. Students with disabilities may also want to register with the Office of Disability Resources, located at 19 Campus Ave. Bldg.

**Consider indicating alternative modes of assessment** For students with disabilities, demonstrating knowledge or competence with course content can be difficult due to the constraints of typified assessment processes. For example, if part of your grading scheme includes active participation in class discussion, and you have a student who experiences discomfort when speaking in front of large groups, it might become necessary to adjust your method of assessment for this student.

Example from Patricia Dunn: DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES (DSS) STATEMENT: If you have a physical, psychological, medical, or learning disability that may impact your course work, please contact Disability Support Services (631) 632-6748 or http://studentaffairs.stonybrook.edu/dss/.  They will determine with you what accommodations are necessary and appropriate.  All information and documentation is confidential.

Students who require assistance during emergency evacuation are encouraged to discuss their needs with their professors and Disability Support Services.  For procedures and information go to the following website: http://www.stonybrook.edu/ehs/fire/disabilities/asp.

Note from P. Dunn regarding disability and access: Please let me know if there is anything I can do to help you better access the materials in this course, and I will try to do it if I can. Also please let me know if you can think of a better way to assess what you know about the course content.

**Avoid the phrase hearing-impaired & be sensitive to the identity and culture of Deaf students** As suggested above with problems surrounding the term “disability,” rhetorical choices that indicate deficiency risk indicating to students that their ways of knowing are inadequate. Furthermore, labels can potentially be offensive and ableist, particularly for Deaf individuals who do not identify as “disabled.” Susan Burch and Alison Kafer’s recent edited collection *Deaf and Disability Studies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* is an excellent tool for understanding the complex intersections of not only these two disciplines, but also these two identities.

Perspective from MJ Bienvenu: 1) Not all Deaf people believe they are disabled, but rather are a linguistic minority culture.  We have a language of our own, ASL, and most of us are comfortable with written English; 2) Deaf is the word to use.  Hearing impaired is almost as offensive as the 'n' word.

*Additional Perspectives and Examples*

Jay Dolmage: Here in Canada, because we don't have the ADA, things are a bit different. Many universities have fairly strict rules around the statements used in syllabi.  At Waterloo, we are really only supposed to list the address of the Office for Persons with Disabilities.  I usually try to frame accommodations as something everyone will need, and something students can talk to me about individually, throwing in some U.D principles, but ALSO
framing this as something to go through the O.P.D for.

Here is the statement I use for the large first-year writing course at Waterloo:
Accommodations: We will all need some accommodations in this class, because we all learn differently. If you need specific accommodations, let Jay and your section instructor know.  We will make an effort to ensure that all students have multiple means of accessing class information, multiple ways to take part in class activities, and multiple avenues for being assessed on class work. You should also seek the accommodations you need through the Waterloo Office for Persons with Disabilities.

Paul Heilker: Disability Policy: If you need adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please see me as soon as possible during my office hours."

This template was circulated around the English Department by our Diversity Committee about five or so years ago, I think.  Most faculty tweak this general statement in some way.  Here's my current version --

"If you have information you wish to share with me about a disability, disorder, or neurodiversity issue, if you have emergency medical information you think I should know about, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please contact me privately as soon as possible."

Mariette J. Bates: Students with disabilities who need accommodation or think they may need accommodation are encouraged to contact Cristina Finan (cristina.finan@mail.cuny.edu) and to speak to the instructor as well.  All students are encouraged to let the instructor know what we can do to maximize your learning potential, participation and access to this course.   We want to make the course material accessible and we want you to succeed as student.  If you need to present what you have learned in an alternative format, please see the instructor to discuss this option.

Amy Vidali: Disability Inclusion Statement: If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, I encourage you to contact me so we can work together to develop strategies for your success. The office of Disability Resources and Services (DRS) provides support for students with disabilities, and you can find them at their website (http://hschealth.uchsc.edu/disabilityresources/) or by calling (303) 556-3450/**TTY** (303) 556-4766. To access their services, you will need to provide documentation of disability.

Other language you might include:

* Disabilities can be visible and invisible, and I am dedicated to ensuring that all students succeed in my course.
* I look forward to conversations about your learning styles and needs.
* Please contact me or DRS early in the semester, before exams and papers are due.
* You may contact DRS without notifying me if you would prefer to keep your disability confidential.
* It is the policy of the University of Colorado Denver to create inclusive learning environments.
* The University of Colorado Denver and I are dedicated to honoring the rights ensured by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disability Act.

Sue Wendell: Our university's office for students with disabilities looked after accommodations for students registered with them, sending written instructions to me. In addition, I asked students to fill out "contact" cards (small file-cards) in the first class with their phone numbers, and to write on the back any special accommodations they needed (such as, "allergic to peanuts") and whether these should be kept confidential.  Then, at the next class, I could announce, "Someone in the class is allergic to peanuts.  Please do not bring peanuts or products containing them into our classroom."  You get the idea.

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This document was created by Shannon Madden and Tara Wood in Fall 2011. Our primary audience is the Disability Studies-Special Interest Group, but we hope that it is distributed widely as a teacher resource across disciplines.