

■ Making E-Mail Accessible for Students with Disabilities

One industry source estimates that over 31 billion e-mails are sent each day around the world. E-mail is so widely used in education that most, if not all, students are assigned an e-mail address during the registration process. In distance education, e-mail is especially important because it may be the only way that students can communicate directly with instructors.

E-mail is widely used by students with disabilities, in part because it is one of the few information technologies that incorporates universal design principles. Students who are deaf or hard of hearing routinely use e-mail to communicate more effectively. Students who are blind or have low vision can easily read e-mail through screen readers or other assistive technologies. Students with mobility impairments can use e-mail to discuss issues with instructors around the world or across the street.

Instructors should be aware, however, that e-mail may pose barriers for some students with disabilities. The following are tips that instructors should use to ensure that their e-mail messages are accessible and usable for all students.

■ Text-only versus HTML E-mail

Most e-mail programs provide users with the option to send messages in one of two different formats. The first, and most familiar, format is "text-only" or "plain text". Text-only is the most accessible and usable format for e-mail messages. The second format utilizes HyperText Markup Language (HTML). HTML e-mail messages can be made accessible for people with disabilities; however, making HTML messages accessible tends to be more time-consuming than sending text-only messages.

Also, some e-mail programs may not recognize HTML messages. This may cause some students – with and without disabilities – to receive messages in HTML code, which is much less usable for everyone. Other students may receive the HTML e-mail as an attachment, which they may or may not be able to open. Some students, including those who use handheld devices, may not be able to receive HTML messages at all. Others may have to wait longer to receive those messages through slow dial-up connections. Instructors who use HTML messages should make sure that these messages are accessible and readable for all students.

■ Writing Accessible and Usable E-mail

There are several common-sense ways for instructors to make e-mail more accessible and usable for all students.

- **Make subject lines clear.** Make sure that students know that the message relates to their course. Avoid blank subject lines or subject lines that could be confused with spam e-mail. Research indicates that shorter subject lines are better.
- **Put the most important information first.** The best way to make sure that students read the information you want them to have is to put that information first. Putting new or important information at the end of an e-mail may cause students to discard the message, especially if they have read the information previously.

(continued on the next page)

■ Making E-Mail Accessible for Students with Disabilities - *continued*

■ Writing Accessible and Usable E-mail - *continued*

- **Make messages short and to the point.** The shorter and more direct a message is, the more effective it will be. Shorter messages are easier for most people, including people with learning disabilities, to read and understand. Trim out extraneous data in e-mails whenever possible.
- **Be careful when forwarding e-mail.** Often, when you forward e-mail, the header of the previous e-mail carries over into your message. These headers may contain multiple e-mail addresses from other recipients, which may appear before the content of the message. This is especially annoying for students who use screen readers, because they cannot easily skim past the headers to get to the content.
- **Avoid using graphics if possible.** When sending HTML e-mail, avoid graphics that are simply decorative in nature. If graphics are necessary, make sure that they are labeled for students who are blind or have low vision, or students who can only read text-only e-mails.

■ Resources

For more information about sending effective e-mail, visit the following websites:

- Yale University:
 <http://www.library.yale.edu/training/netiquette/>
- Purdue University:
 http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/pw/p_emailtt.html