

CVI Classroom Accommodations: Teacher & Parent Guide

Children with cortical visual impairment can learn. They can participate, make progress, and thrive in school settings. What they need is a visual environment designed to work with their brain rather than against it. For most students with CVI, the classroom as it is typically set up – busy walls, fluorescent lighting, dense printed materials, constant transitions – is one of the most visually challenging places they encounter all day.

This guide is for teachers who want to understand what CVI looks like in the classroom and for parents who want to know what to request. It covers specific, implementable modifications organized by category, along with guidance on IEP accommodations and strategies for keeping home and school aligned. For background on what CVI is and how it affects visual processing, see our [CVI overview](#).

Understanding CVI in the Classroom

CVI affects how the brain processes visual information – not how the eyes capture it. A student with CVI may have eyes that are structurally healthy, but their visual cortex struggles to make sense of complex visual input, particularly when it arrives quickly, in a busy environment, or alongside competing sensory information.

This matters for how teachers interpret what they see. A student who does not look at the whiteboard is not being inattentive. A student who cannot find their pencil on a cluttered desk is not being disorganized. A student who performs differently on Tuesday than they did on Monday is not being inconsistent for behavioral reasons – CVI vision genuinely fluctuates based on fatigue, environment, and the complexity of what is being asked.

For a detailed explanation of the specific visual behaviors associated with CVI, see our guide on [CVI symptoms and characteristics](#). Understanding the “why” behind these behaviors makes every accommodation on this list more effective.

The single most important principle for classroom support: reduce visual complexity first, then layer in instruction. Everything else follows from that.

Environmental Modifications

Environmental changes have an outsized impact on students with CVI. They cost nothing, require no equipment, and can begin immediately. Start here before introducing any technology or formal accommodations.

Reduce Visual Clutter

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A visually complex workspace is not just distracting for a student with CVI – it is genuinely hard for their brain to process. The goal is to reduce the number of things competing for visual attention so that the important item stands out.

- Place a solid-color mat or folder on the student’s desk as a background for all work materials. A plain black, dark blue, or other non-patterned surface eliminates visual noise under worksheets and objects.
- Keep only current materials on the desk. Put everything else away. Even a second worksheet visible to the side can compete for visual attention.
- Limit wall decorations and displays in the student’s immediate sightline. Busy bulletin boards and word walls right next to the work area are particularly challenging.
- Use a study carrel or dividers during focused individual work to create a visually controlled space. This is not isolating – it is supportive.

Seating and Positioning

Where a student sits and how they are positioned affects their visual access throughout the day. Seating placement should be intentional and consistent, not rotated on a schedule like other students.

- Seat the student with windows behind or to the side – not in front of them. A window in the background creates a bright, competing light source that can make everything else harder to see.
- Place the student close to the teacher and the primary instruction area for verbal cueing and easier proximity to materials.
- Position the student away from high-traffic areas. Movement in the peripheral visual field is a known CVI characteristic – nearby activity is highly distracting for many students with CVI.
- Assign the student a consistent seat for the year. Predictable environments reduce the visual processing demands of daily orientation.

Lighting

Lighting significantly affects what students with CVI can see. Many students with CVI are attracted to bright light sources, which can pull visual attention away from instruction rather than toward it.

- Reduce overhead fluorescent lighting in the student’s area if possible. LED lighting or dimmed natural light is generally preferable to harsh overhead fluorescents.
- Eliminate glare on the student’s work surface. Glossy desk surfaces and laminated materials can create problematic reflections.

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- Consider a small adjustable desk lamp for close work. Controlled task lighting that illuminates the materials without creating glare can significantly improve visual access.
- Keep lighting consistent when transitioning between activities. Abrupt changes in lighting require visual adjustment time that can disrupt the student's attention and performance.

Material Adaptations

Adapted materials reduce the visual complexity of what the student is asked to process. The goal is not to make materials simpler in terms of content, but to make them visually clearer so the student's cognitive effort goes toward learning rather than visual processing.

Printed Materials

- Enlarge text to 18 to 24 points as a starting point, but consult the student's TVI for their specific optimal font size. Larger is not always better – extremely large text can actually make it harder to read multiple words in sequence.
- Increase line spacing and word spacing. Crowded text is harder to parse for students with CVI.
- Use the student's preferred color for highlighting key words, answer choices, or important instructions. Work with the TVI or family to identify this color.
- Limit content per page. One question or one activity per page is ideal for students in lower CVI Range phases. For Phase III students, simplified layouts with more white space are often sufficient.
- Use black text on white or cream paper. Avoid patterned backgrounds behind text, even subtle ones.

Visual Presentations

- Reduce the amount of information per slide or whiteboard section. Slides with multiple images, dense bullet points, and varied font sizes create visual complexity that students with CVI struggle to process.
- Use high-contrast images and text. Black on white or bold color on white is far more accessible than pastel or low-contrast presentations.
- Describe visual content verbally. Do not assume the student is seeing what is on the screen – narrate what you are pointing to.
- Allow extra viewing time before moving to the next slide or section. Visual latency – the delayed response to visual input – means students with CVI need more time to process what they are seeing.

Hands-On Materials

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- Add tactile markers to math manipulatives, puzzle pieces, and sorting materials so that touch can supplement vision during activities.
- Use high-contrast borders on materials to help the student locate the edges of objects.
- Present manipulatives one at a time on a solid-color background rather than in a group.
- Introduce familiar objects before novel ones. CVI makes it harder to visually recognize new items – building familiarity over time improves visual access.

Instructional Strategies

Pacing and Timing

How instruction is paced matters as much as how it is presented. Visual latency and visual fatigue are real factors in how a student with CVI performs throughout the day.

- Allow extra processing time after presenting visual information. Pause before asking the student to respond or move on.
- Break visual tasks into shorter segments. A worksheet with 20 items will exhaust a student with CVI far faster than the same worksheet broken into four segments of five.
- Schedule the most visually demanding work for the student's best time of day. Ask families when the student tends to perform best visually – morning versus afternoon often varies significantly.
- Build in visual rest breaks during extended work periods. Looking out a window, closing the eyes briefly, or switching to a non-visual task gives the visual cortex a chance to recover.

Multi-Sensory Approach

- Pair visual information with verbal description. When presenting a picture, a diagram, or a visual demonstration, narrate what you are showing and pointing to.
- Allow tactile exploration alongside visual. Handling an object before being asked to look at it helps the brain build a full sensory picture.
- Use movement to attract visual attention to key materials. A gently moving object or a light tap on the material can prompt a student with CVI to shift visual attention there.

Assessment Modifications

- Offer oral testing options when written responses require sustained visual effort that exceeds the student's current capacity.
- Provide extended time on all visual tasks as a standard accommodation.

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- Reduce the number of items per page on all tests and quizzes.
- Use familiar test formats rather than novel layouts. A student with CVI who knows what a quiz looks like can use visual memory to support processing; a new format adds a layer of visual complexity that disadvantages them unfairly.

IEP Accommodations for CVI

CVI qualifies for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the visual impairment category. A student with a CVI diagnosis has a legal right to an IEP that addresses their visual processing needs. The most important thing to know: a Teacher of the Visually Impaired must be part of the IEP team. A general special education teacher, even an excellent one, does not have the specialized CVI training needed to design an appropriate visual program.

When requesting IEP accommodations for CVI, bring your child's CVI Range assessment to the meeting. Generic "low vision" accommodations are not the same as CVI-specific accommodations. The CVI Range score determines which strategies are appropriate for your child's current phase.

Sample IEP accommodation language for CVI:

- "Student will receive all printed materials enlarged to [font size] pt with increased line spacing on white or light-colored paper."
- "Student will be provided preferential seating in a location with controlled lighting and reduced visual complexity, to be determined in consultation with the TVI."
- "Student will receive extended time (1.5x or 2x) on all assessments and tasks requiring sustained visual attention."
- "Student will be provided scheduled visual rest breaks during extended academic tasks."
- "Testing materials will be adapted to present no more than [X] items per page with high-contrast formatting."
- "Student will have access to a tablet with accessibility settings (contrast, color filters) for academic tasks."
- "Environmental modifications as specified in the CVI program developed by the TVI will be implemented in all classroom settings."

For families with children approaching school age, read our guide on [CVI early intervention](#) to understand the transition from Part C to Part B services at age three and how to avoid gaps in support.

Working Together: Teacher-Parent Communication

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Consistency between home and school is one of the most powerful factors in a CVI student's progress. When the same strategies are used across environments, the child's brain does not have to re-adapt every time the setting changes. That consistency requires communication – specific, regular, two-way communication between parents and teachers.

What parents can share with school: preferred colors, optimal viewing distance, best time of day for visual tasks, which environments are hardest, and strategies that work at home. If your child has had a recent CVI Range reassessment, share the results with the teacher and TVI.

What teachers can share with parents: how the student performed visually today, what triggered good or difficult visual performance, and whether current accommodations seem to be working. A brief weekly note or communication log is often sufficient. Video examples are uniquely valuable. If you are a parent who wants the school team to understand what CVI behaviors look like at home, a short video is worth more than a verbal description. If you are a teacher who is unsure whether what you are observing is CVI-related, a short classroom recording shared with the TVI can help clarify the picture quickly.

Invite the TVI to consult directly with classroom teachers. A brief consultation – even 30 minutes – can help teachers understand the CVI Range report and implement recommendations with confidence rather than guesswork. For more on the therapeutic support that pairs with classroom accommodations, see our [CVI treatment guide](#).

Take the Next Step

At New England Low Vision and Blindness, we support families and educators navigating CVI in school settings. Whether you are preparing for an IEP meeting, trying to understand your student's CVI Range score, or looking for guidance on which accommodations to prioritize, our team is here to help you build a plan that works.

About This Document

This white paper was created by New England Low Vision and Blindness. Portions of the content were generated using AI technology and reviewed for accuracy. However, the information is provided “as is” and is not intended as a substitute for professional advice or a comprehensive product assessment.

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About New England Low Vision and Blindness

New England Low Vision and Blindness is a leading provider of assistive technology, training, and support for people who are blind or visually impaired. We serve individuals, schools, and organizations across the Northeast with personalized solutions that empower independence and improve quality of life. To learn more or [schedule a no-obligation consultation](#), visit NELowVision.com or call 888-211-6933. You can also email us at info@NELowVision.com.