

# **Classroom Accommodations for Students with Low Vision: Complete Guide**

If you have just learned that a student in your classroom has low vision, you may be feeling a mix of concern and uncertainty. You want to do right by this child, and you may be wondering whether you will have to rebuild your whole classroom or learn a new skill set overnight. Take a breath. You do not.

Most classroom accommodations for students with low vision are small, practical adjustments. Where a student sits, how you light the room, what format a handout comes in, and how much time a test allows. Done well, these changes are the difference between a student who struggles to keep up and one who learns right alongside their classmates.

Here is the single most important thing to know: there is no standard checklist that works for every student. Low vision looks different for every child, so the right accommodations depend on this student, their specific vision, and the tasks they need to do. This guide walks you through how to build that plan, step by step.

## **How Low Vision Affects Learning in the Classroom**

Low vision affects learning mainly by limiting how much visual information a student can take in quickly and comfortably. Vision is how most classroom content is delivered, from the board and printed handouts to screens, facial expressions, and demonstrations, so reduced vision touches nearly every subject.

But low vision is not one condition. Two students with the same acuity measurement can need completely different support. Understanding the type of vision loss helps you predict where a student will run into trouble.

Reduced central vision, common with macular conditions, makes reading standard print, seeing the board, and recognizing faces difficult even when side vision stays strong.

Reduced peripheral vision, as with glaucoma or retinitis pigmentosa, makes moving around the room, tracking a line of text, and noticing visual cues harder even when detail vision is sharp. Reduced contrast sensitivity washes out whiteboards, faded worksheets, and pencil on white paper, so material that looks fine to you may be nearly invisible to the student.

Visual fatigue is easy to miss. Many students see well for short stretches but tire quickly, so their performance in the last class of the day may not reflect what they actually know.

This is why accommodations start with understanding the individual, not with a generic list.

## **Start Here: Build the Plan With the Student and the TVI**

Before you change anything, start with two conversations: one with the student, and one with the Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI) assigned to them. These two sources will tell you more than any general guide can.

The TVI has assessed how this student uses their vision and can recommend specific print sizes, seating, lighting, and technology. The student, especially by middle and high school, often knows exactly what helps and what gets in the way. Ask them directly, and take the answer seriously.

# Classroom Accommodations for Students with Low Vision: Complete Guide

These accommodations are usually written into a formal plan, either an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or a 504 plan. The plan is not just paperwork. It is what guarantees the student receives the materials and support they are entitled to under the law, and it gives you a clear reference when you are deciding what to put in place.

The difference between the two plans matters in practice. A 504 plan lists accommodations, the environmental and procedural changes that give a student access. An IEP does that too, but it can also provide specialized instruction and services, such as time with a TVI or ordering accessible textbooks through a state agency. A student who only needs access changes may have a 504 plan, while a student who needs to learn braille, magnifier skills, or orientation and mobility usually needs an IEP. If you are unsure which plan a student has, the special education coordinator or the TVI can tell you what it authorizes.

## Physical Classroom Accommodations

Physical accommodations change the environment itself: where the student sits, how the room is lit, and how it is arranged. These are usually the fastest and least expensive changes you can make, and they often have the biggest immediate impact.

### Seating and Positioning

Preferential seating means letting the student choose where they see best, not automatically parking them in the front row. A student with central vision loss may actually see the board better from an angle or from farther back where they can use a magnifier. A student who reads with a video magnifier may need a seat near a power outlet more than a seat up front. For the full decision process, see our guide to [preferential seating for students with low vision](#).

Flexible seating helps too. The best spot for board work may not be the best spot for group work or screen time, so let the student move as the activity changes. Ask the student where they can see, then let their answer guide the decision.

### Lighting

Lighting is one of the most overlooked accommodations and one of the most powerful. Some students need more light, while others are highly sensitive to glare. The same overhead lights that help one child can create disabling glare for another.

Control natural light with blinds so sunlight does not wash out the board or bounce off desks. Add an adjustable task lamp at the student's desk if they need more light for close work. Keep lighting consistent, since moving between bright and dim areas forces the eyes to readjust and slows the student down. For a full walkthrough, see our guide to [classroom lighting accommodations for students with low vision](#).

### Classroom Layout

A predictable room is an accessible room. Keep furniture in consistent places so the student can build a reliable mental map, and keep pathways clear of backpacks, chairs, and stray boxes. For a full walkthrough, see our guide to [arranging a classroom for students with visual impairments](#).

Use high-contrast markings on steps, door frames, and the transitions between areas. Store materials in the same labeled spot every time so the student can find what they need independently, instead of asking for help at every turn.

# Classroom Accommodations for Students with Low Vision: Complete Guide

## Accessible Materials and Formats

Accessible materials are the ones a student can actually read, which means they need to be ready before the lesson, not scrambled together during it. The goal is simple: the student gets the same content as everyone else, in a format they can use.

The right format depends on how the student accesses information, whether that is enlarged, digital, audio, or tactile.

## Large Print

Large print means enlarging text so the student can read it comfortably. There is no single correct size. Eighteen point is a common starting point, but the right size comes from the student's TVI assessment and may be larger for subjects loaded with symbols, like math. For creation and sourcing details, see our guide to [large print materials in the classroom](#).

Font choice matters as much as size. Clean sans-serif fonts with strong contrast, true black on white, are easier to read than decorative fonts or faded photocopies. Print single-sided so ink and highlighter do not bleed through and distort the page behind them.

## Digital and Electronic Materials

Digital files are often the most flexible accommodation because the student controls the size themselves. A worksheet delivered as an accessible Word document or a properly tagged PDF can be enlarged, reformatted, or read aloud on the student's own device.

Share slides and documents before class so the student can follow along on their own screen instead of straining to read the board. Make sure any PDF is a real, accessible document and not a photo of a page, which cannot be enlarged cleanly or read by text-to-speech.

For the step-by-step workflow, see our guide to [creating accessible PDF documents for students](#).

## Alternative Formats

Some students access information better by ear or by touch. Audio textbooks and text-to-speech let a student listen to reading assignments, which cuts down on eye strain during long passages.

Braille remains essential for students who read it, and tactile graphics turn charts, maps, and diagrams into something a student can feel. A single student may use several of these formats, switching depending on the task in front of them.

## Assistive Technology in the Classroom

Assistive technology gives students independent access to material they could not otherwise reach. The right tools depend on the student's vision and the task, and they often work best in combination rather than alone.

[Screen magnification software\(opens in new tab\)](#) enlarges everything on a school computer or tablet. Handheld and desktop video magnifiers, sometimes called CCTVs, enlarge printed pages, worksheets, and objects under a camera. Text-to-speech reads digital text aloud for reading-heavy assignments. Screen readers serve students with very limited vision who

# Classroom Accommodations for Students with Low Vision: Complete Guide

navigate primarily by audio. Tablets and smartphones double as portable magnifiers and reading tools that many students already know how to use.

Match the tool to the student, not the other way around. A device that helps one student can slow another down, which is why the TVI and, when available, an assistive technology specialist should guide selection. Families exploring options beyond the classroom can see how the same [assistive technology for low vision](#) is used at home and at work, and how [handheld and desktop magnifiers](#) compare for different tasks.

## Teaching Strategies That Cost Nothing

Some of the most effective accommodations are not devices or documents at all. They are small changes in how you teach, and they cost nothing. These habits help the student with low vision and usually make your instruction clearer for the whole class.

- Say what you write, reading the board aloud as you write it so the student gets the information by ear as well as by sight.
- Provide board content and notes in advance, so the student reads along on their own copy instead of copying from a distance.
- Allow extra time for reading and writing tasks, since accessing print through magnification or audio simply takes longer.
- Use high-contrast markers like black, dark blue, and dark purple, and avoid red and green, which are hard to tell apart and overlap with color blindness.
- Call on the student by name rather than pointing or nodding, so they know it is their turn to speak.
- Check in privately and often. Ask what is working and what is not, then adjust. This one habit is what separates accommodations that look good on paper from accommodations that actually help.

## Testing and Assessment Accommodations

Testing accommodations exist so that an exam measures what a student knows, not how well they can see the test. They are usually listed separately from classroom accommodations because tests are often taken in a different setting.

Extended time, often time-and-a-half or double time, accounts for reading with magnification or audio. The test can be provided in large print or an accessible digital format. A separate room with controlled lighting reduces glare and distraction. A reader or an audio version serves students who access text by ear. Simplified answer sheets, such as one question per page, cut down on visual searching. And students should be able to use the same assistive technology on the test that they use every day.

Whatever accommodations a student uses on tests should match what they use in daily instruction. A student should never meet their testing tools for the first time on exam day.

## Matching Accommodations to the Type of Vision Loss

This is where most accommodation guides stop short. They hand you a long list without explaining that a student with tunnel vision and a student with a central blind spot often need almost opposite support. Matching the accommodation to the type of vision loss is what turns a generic list into a plan that works.

# Classroom Accommodations for Students with Low Vision: Complete Guide

For a student with reduced central vision, the priority is enlarging and clarifying detail. Larger print, magnification, high contrast, and getting closer to the target all help. These students often read better when material moves to them, so a magnifier or a digital copy on their own screen usually beats a spot in the front row. They may also look slightly to the side of what they are viewing, which is normal, not inattention.

For a student with reduced peripheral vision, detail may be sharp but the field is narrow, so the priorities shift to navigation and orientation. Clear, consistent pathways, extra time for the eyes to adjust between bright and dim areas, and warning before changes in the environment matter more than raw magnification. In fact, over-enlarging text can backfire here, because very large print pushes words outside the student's narrow field and forces more scanning.

For a student with low contrast sensitivity or light sensitivity, the fix is often about the surroundings rather than the size of the print. Bold black-on-white materials, glare control, a reading guide or typoscope to block excess light, and a bold border around the target area can do more than magnification. Two students with identical acuity can need different lighting, so let comfort, not a chart, set the level.

Whatever the condition, confirm the specifics with the TVI. A student's diagnosis is a starting point, not a prescription, and how they use their remaining vision is what should drive the plan.

## A Quick-Reference Guide to Classroom Accommodations

Use this table as a starting point for conversations with the student, the family, and the TVI, not as a checklist to apply wholesale. Match every accommodation to the student's specific vision and tasks.

| Area                 | Common accommodations                                                                                          | Best for                                                  |
|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Seating and position | Let the student pick where they see best; flexible seating; a seat near a power outlet for a magnifier         | Board work, group work, using optical or video magnifiers |
| Lighting             | Blinds to cut glare, a task lamp for more light, consistent levels from room to room                           | Glare or light sensitivity; students who need extra light |
| Materials            | Large print (often 18 point or larger), accessible Word or tagged PDF, single-sided, sans-serif, high contrast | Handouts, worksheets, textbooks                           |
| Technology           | Screen magnification, handheld or desktop video magnifiers (CCTV), text-to-speech, screen readers              | Independent access to print and screens                   |

# Classroom Accommodations for Students with Low Vision: Complete Guide

| Area     | Common accommodations                                                                          | Best for                           |
|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Teaching | Read the board aloud, share notes in advance, allow extra time, call on the student by name    | Every class, at no cost            |
| Testing  | Extended time, large-print or digital test, separate room, a reader, the same daily technology | Quizzes, exams, standardized tests |

## When Classroom Accommodations Are Not Enough

Classroom accommodations solve access problems. They do not solve every problem, and it helps to be honest about their limits.

Accommodations cannot replace direct instruction in the skills a student with low vision needs to learn separately, such as using a magnifier efficiently, touch typing, orientation and mobility, or self-advocacy. Those skills come from a TVI and specialists through the Expanded Core Curriculum, not from a change in seating.

Accommodations also fall apart if they are written into a plan but never actually put in place, or if they are applied without checking whether they work. A large-print packet the student cannot comfortably read is not an accommodation. It is a box checked. If a student's vision is changing, or the current plan is not working despite genuine effort, that is the signal to reassess with the TVI and the family, not to pile more items onto the list.

## Take the Next Step

Every student with low vision deserves equal access to their education, and you do not have to build that access alone. Whether you are a teacher setting up your classroom or a parent getting ready for an IEP meeting, the right guidance makes the plan stronger.

[New England Low Vision and Blindness](#) helps teachers, families, and IEP teams choose and set up the assistive technology and accommodations that fit each student. To talk through a specific student's needs, [Schedule No-Obligation Consultation](#) with our team. For families looking beyond the classroom, our [independent living services](#) help students carry these same skills into daily life at home.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What are the most common classroom accommodations for students with low vision?

The most common are preferential seating, large-print or digital materials, controlled lighting, extended time, and access to magnification technology. Most students use a combination, chosen with their Teacher of the Visually Impaired based on their specific vision. Start with seating and materials, since those are fast to change and affect every subject.

### Are classroom accommodations for low vision expensive?

Many cost nothing at all. Preferential seating, reading the board aloud, providing notes in advance, extended time, and high-contrast markers are free. Larger costs, like a video magnifier

# Classroom Accommodations for Students with Low Vision: Complete Guide

or screen-magnification software, are typically covered by the school district when they are written into the student's IEP or 504 plan.

## **Should a student with low vision always sit in the front row?**

No. Front-row seating helps some students but not all. A student with central vision loss may see better from an angle or farther back with a magnifier, and a student using a video magnifier needs a seat near a power outlet. Ask the student where they see best and let their answer decide.

## **Who decides which accommodations a student receives?**

The IEP or 504 team decides, with input from the student, the family, the classroom teacher, and the Teacher of the Visually Impaired. The TVI's vision assessment guides specific choices like print size and technology, and the student's own feedback is essential, especially as they get older.

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## **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 assessment.

## **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](https://NELowVision.com) or call 888-211-6933. You can also email us at [info@NELowVision.com](mailto:info@NELowVision.com).