

Improving Access to Archival Spaces

This guide highlights important considerations that faculty members should take into account when working with students with disabilities to increase access to archival spaces. It also provides tips on interacting effectively and being proactive regarding the accommodation process.

Barriers to Access

- Many of the barriers to accessing archival spaces for students with disabilities are primarily associated with access to the actual information housed in archives.
- Much of the printed information in archives is located in large books, some of which cannot be physically scanned or removed from storage.
- Printed materials generally use small font sizes and, due to the often fragile nature of these documents, can be very difficult to place onto a flatbed scanner.

Increasing accessibility of archival spaces: Case study of a student who is blind or visually impaired

- Use a non-flatbed scanner (for example, the iPal), which takes a photo of the printed page, and does not require the user to physically lay the page down to be scanned.
- Employ an assistant to the archives (see [Hiring Lab Assistants for Students with Disabilities](#)). This assistant would aid the student in locating material on her/his topic, reviewing relevant materials, and record any information the student would be required to review at a later date.
- Permit a student who is blind a longer period of time to explore the archives, since the student may require additional time to scan or have materials read to her/him.
- Describe the layout of the archives, and assist the student in reading any materials.
- Where possible, be flexible regarding the touching of artifacts (creating replicas of item) and develop protocols to enable the student to physically handle artifacts.
- If funding permits, gradually start to digitize materials in the archives – this not only works to preserve the archived materials, but also enables the material to be scanned and converted into an alternate format.
- For students requiring an orientation to the library, collaborate with the campus services provider and/or the Canadian National Institute for the Blind to facilitate a tour or orientation to the space.
- Where artifacts cannot be touched, take a digital photograph of the object that cannot be scanned; this will allow for the creation of an “alt text” (a tag that, with the use of a screen reader, describes the object/content of the photo).
- If necessary, and feasible, modify the physical space to accommodate individuals with mobility challenges who may be using mobility devices.