

# The Top Three Accommodations for Students with EF Problems

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**W**HILE STUDENTS WITH EXECUTIVE FUNCTION (EF) weaknesses have unique learning styles with varying levels of impact, there are three accommodations that are frequently recommended following formal evaluation. We believe these important accommodations deserve a brief explanation and some suggestions for how to implement them in a busy classroom.

## EXTRA TIME AND/OR REDUCED ASSIGNMENTS AS NEEDED

This is probably one of the most common accommodations made for students with EF problems regardless of the primary cause (for example, attention or anxiety). This accommodation works not only because it allows extra processing time, but also because it reduces stress.

Let's consider two questions that are rarely explicitly addressed in an intervention plan: When should a teacher provide extra time rather than reducing an assignment? Should a student receive extra time on an assignment after missing a deadline? These are great questions posed by sensitive teachers in the field, and fortunately the answers are fairly straightforward. Think of extra time and reduced assignments as points on a continuum. First, al-

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low extra time on tests and assignments as needed in order to allow students to demonstrate their understanding. However, if that extra time becomes so extensive that it begins to deplete the student, or cuts into other important parts of the student's day, consider reducing the assignment itself until a balance between the assignment and the student's ability is achieved.

As long as the essential elements of a unit or assignment are not eliminated, the modified assessment should still be a valid measure of student understanding. We believe that 100 percent extra time is too much for most students unless they have a severely reduced class load that allows them to make good use of the extra time. Even then, the value of such a lengthy assessment should be weighed carefully against the depleting effect of so much time spent on a single task.

Next, should a student receive extra time on an assignment after missing a deadline? While we believe a student with EF weakness may miss deadlines from time to time, we also believe it is poor practice to allow this to happen repeatedly. We like to view a missed deadline as a sign of



a missing strategy or habit and use that opportunity to re-explore that student's skills. A missed deadline is not a good example of "extra time as needed"—a proactive extension of time is a much more appropriate accommodation.

### COPY OF TEACHER NOTES

With updated educational research and good teaching practices, the problem of note taking is becoming less and less of an issue for many teachers and students. At one time it was thought that it was a student's job to take copious notes that were neat and well organized, all while internalizing the main ideas of a lecture. While this may be an admirable skill in some situations, we find that more and more teachers are beginning to offer handouts or electronic templates that highlight the major concepts using titles and subtitles as guides. Or, they may simply provide handouts that outline a new topic and use class time to engage in class discussion of that topic. That said, there are still times when note taking is an important skill to develop in the classroom. And wouldn't "giving copies of notes" deprive the student of the opportunity to develop that skill? Possibly.

If the student's evaluation results and teacher observations confirm that the student is capable of note taking, then we like to ask

students to take their own notes in class even though they will receive a copy of teacher notes afterwards. After class, they can compare their own notes to the teacher's model and see where they might improve. Over time, this activity becomes a form of guided instruction that helps students develop their own organization of ideas while taking notes.

We do like to emphasize, however, that while guided note taking may enhance organization of thought, this is not always true. Some students have so much trouble with working memory that listening, organizing, and taking notes all at the same time may just be too much and cause them to misunderstand the important points of a lecture. How can a teacher tell when this is happening? By checking for understanding orally during instruction. If a student cannot demonstrate their understanding orally in class, there is a chance that the task of note taking may be interfering. The student should simply be given a copy of the notes so they can engage through listening and asking questions instead.

### TESTING IN A SEPARATE ENVIRONMENT AS NEEDED

Testing in a separate environment is a fairly simple accommodation that allows the student freedom from distractions and from the anxiety of wondering, "Is somebody already on page two before me?" or "Is everybody ahead of me?" However, there are two sides to this accommodation that should be discussed with each student.

When a student takes a test in a separate environment, someone other than the student's teacher proctors the test in most cases. Both teachers and students tell us that this is not always helpful, since the proctor may not be able to address content-based clarifying questions during the test as effectively as the teacher. So, unless we are certain that a student's distractibility and anxiety are so significant that they outweigh these other concerns, we like to give students a choice on this accommodation.

What these three important accommodations for students with EF problems have in common is that they help students optimize learning and performance with an emphasis on building and demonstrating their true understanding of concepts. In the end, it is not always important to simply complete every activity in a timely fashion or engage in a particular measure of assessment. Rather, it is more essential that each student build a personal and complex understanding of the world and demonstrate their understanding in a unique and competent way. These accommodations, when applied sensitively, help students accomplish this in spite of their EF challenges. 🧠

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