

*They face obstacles,
but their strength of spirit and resolve keeps them on course
to achieving their college education.*

***Listening to
Students with Speech Limitations***

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**Listening to
Students with Speech Limitations...**

“I was in an accident in 2007 with trauma to my head. My short-term memory is gone, and I have to try extra hard to get things into my memory. I’ll forget things, or say things backward. At times it’s difficult. I know where I was before the accident (where I could remember things naturally), and now it takes me a really long time. It’s frustrating....”

—49, head trauma, dyslexia, academically challenged—I didn’t have all the tools I needed to start off.

“I have problems articulating myself. It was worse when I was a kid.

Written assignments work for me. I am a good writer not a good speaker.”

—18

“I have difficulty speaking due to illness. It’s something I’m having to get used to. It can be frustrating.”

—No student specifics given

“I see the other kids talking, no problems, but I find it very hard. Stuttering is something I grew up with, but bullying made it worse. In college, people are nice, but I still find it hard. I don’t talk much and my social life suffers.”

—male, 24, junior

Students with Speech Limitations

Millions of people in the country have speaking difficulties. The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders reports that in our nation, 7.5 million people have trouble using their voices, 6 to 8 million people have some form of language impairment, and more than 3 million people stutter.

In the National College Health Assessment by the American College Health Association (Spring 2020), 0.8% of college students of thousands surveyed reported having a speech or language disorder.

While different people will have different preferences, typically the best terms to use for people with speech difficulties at the level of disability is: “person with a speech disability (or the specific name of the speech disability”).

Speech problems can include difficulty in finding or producing words, or in vocal quality and speech fluency.

Common Speech Difficulties

The range of speech problems include:

Dysarthria—

Occurs when muscles needed to produce the proper sounds for words are impaired in movement (e.g., in tongue, lips, vocal cords, and diaphragm). People with dysarthria know what they want to say, but are unable to always articulate the sounds needed due to muscle weakness or paralysis.

Apraxia—

Occurs when faulty transmission of messages from the brain to the mouth results in inability to move the lips or tongue to produce the proper sounds to form words. People with apraxia know what they want to say, but their brains don't relay properly instructions to coordinate the movements of the vocal apparatus needed to say those words.

Aphasia—

Occurs when the language region of the brain is damaged, potentially causing difficulties in identifying the words needed to convey a message and putting words together to form sentences, as well as other speech difficulties and/or problems in listening, reading, and writing. People with aphasia can't always think of the words for and/or properly articulate the sounds needed for saying what they want to say. Aphasia can be accompanied by one or both of the speech difficulties described above.

Voice Disorders—

Occur when the vocal cords are in some way compromised, potentially resulting in such things as hoarseness or breathiness in speaking, limited volume or duration of speech ability, and vocal interruptions or spasms. Some people with voice disorders may experience pain, vocal exhaustion, general fatigue, and/or shortness of breath.

Stuttering—

Occurs when speech fluency is disrupted at a higher level than average, causing repetition or prolongation of a sound of a word, vocal disfluencies (e.g., “uh...”), or even blockage, when the person gets stuck on a certain word or sound, and while the mouth is opened to speak, low to no sound comes out, sometimes for a number of seconds.

(Based on The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, [“Health Information: Voice, Speech, and Language.”](https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/voice-speech-and-language)
<https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/voice-speech-and-language>
 and
 the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, [“Adult Speech and Language Disorders.”](https://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/AdultSandL.htm)
<https://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/AdultSandL.htm>)

Speech difficulties may be developmental in nature or caused by injury or illness, such as Cerebral Palsy, Muscular Dystrophy, stroke, brain injury or tumors, Multiple Sclerosis, ALS, and other neurological disorders. Some speech difficulties have as yet no known exact cause, such as stuttering, although it is theorized that genetics play a role.

Speech problems may also be accompanied by hearing and/or learning disabilities.

Here at Sacramento State

Some students’ speech difficulties may be such that they are eligible for accommodations as they pursue their higher education. According to the California State University Policy for the Provision of Accommodations and Support Services to Students with Disabilities, one of nine categories of disabilities established for reporting purposes in the California State University system is: “Communication Disability: Limitations in the speech and/or hearing processes that impede the educational process and may necessitate accommodations, support services, or programs.”

At Sacramento State, there are two students with communication disabilities as a primary disability, according to the Fall 2020 Census.

Accommodations are individually determined by SSWD, in consultation with the student and professor, because the impact of the student’s disability will vary greatly. Accommodations may or may not involve some course modifications when these do not interfere with the essential requirements or constitute a fundamental alteration.

What We Can Do

Students with speech difficulties or disabilities might face real obstacles in campus life and the classroom, where class discussions, student presentations, and group projects are common.

In addition to providing all accommodations required for the student with speech disability, below you will find further suggestions for the classroom setting and beyond for any student with speech difficulties.

1. Understand where the student may be coming from. Students who may have had the speech difficulties for much or all of their lives may be quiet in class. Growing up, their verbal ability may have impacted social relations with their peers, making them withdrawn or shy and in the habit of avoiding speaking situations. For other students, if the speech disability arises from a more recent illness or condition, then they may feel a real sense of frustration in not being able to articulate their thoughts the way they once could and may not yet have developed coping strategies for when they struggle.
2. Understand the great reluctance or nervousness that some students might feel in expressing themselves in class, groups, or in one-on-one conversations with you, for the reasons stated prior. A supportive climate and warm, approachable instructor or staff member demeanor can do much to help the student feel more confident in speaking.
3. Prevent misconceptions from forming. People with a speech disorder are sometimes misperceived as unintelligent, so your genuine praise of the student's outside accomplishments or great in-class comments, contributions, projects, and so forth can go a long way toward preventing such misconceptions from arising and can help the student to feel more comfortable and accepted in the classroom or other campus setting.
4. Cherish the fundamental need all human beings have to be heard and understood, and do your utmost to honor the student's communication. For many of these students, the choice to speak is a significant one, given the anxiety and effort speaking might entail.
5. Show your usual good, natural listening and respectful demeanor when the student speaks, and the rest of the class or any other students involved in the conversation will follow suit and be patient and more comfortable with the speech difficulties of their classmate.

Be okay with long pauses while the student may be struggling with finding the words or voice to speak. Avoid completing the student's thought or sentence to "make things easier," and wait to see if the student has more to say after a pause, rather than immediately offering your own comments and not realizing the student may not be finished making the point.

Wait quietly for the student who stutters to complete the point, rather than urging them to slow down, relax, or start over, which often makes things worse.

6. Be okay with instances when you don't understand or aren't sure that you completely understand what the student is saying. The student has likely encountered such situations, and will appreciate your attempt to truly understand rather than feign it.

Explain what you didn't understand and wait for the response or attempt your own paraphrase of what the student said and then request confirmation or correction.

Ask the student a "yes" or "no" question in relation to what they said to clarify or ask the student to say the question or comment in a different way.

Look to nonverbal communication to better understand meaning, that body language that can say things better than words, oftentimes.

Remember that focusing on what is said rather than how it's said helps understanding, and the longer you know the student, the more accustomed you will become to the way the student communicates and the easier understanding will become.

7. In class discussion:

Be sure to allow sufficient wait time when posing a question to the class, if the student with speech difficulties wishes to answer. Alternatively, it is often helpful for all students, and especially someone with speech difficulties, to be given time to think and jot down also allows the student time to think and prepare.

Be in the habit of repeating or paraphrasing when others in the group or the rest of the class can't hear a student's contribution, or incorporating the question or remarks into your responses, such as the quiet students or the students in the back. Then when the student with speech difficulties speaks, you can repeat or paraphrase as a matter of course if the student's question or comment is not clear, and everyone can better understand and benefit from that student's contributions in class discussions.

Consider alternative modes of contribution, such as class online discussions, written work, one-on-one discussion, and so on, if you require class participation. Online course discussion, in particular, is a realm where students with speech difficulties are especially likely to contribute freely and fully.

8. Keep in mind:

The student with certain speech difficulties may hurt or be exhausted after sustained conversations, discussions, presentations, oral exams, and the like. For example, students with some voice disorders experience pain and/or fatigue in relation to talking. Other students with extreme stuttering will likely be thinking hard about every single word before they say it, to make sure they can say it or to contemplate easier alternatives to word choices harder for them, and this can take an inordinate amount of focus and energy and put great stress on the student.

9. In reading and written work:

Take into account that some speech disorders may cause or be accompanied by problems with writing ability, and may impact vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Placing a premium on content, rather than mechanics, when grading can be very helpful to the student.

Reading ability, too, may be hindered, potentially impacting the ability to follow directions for assignments, answer questions correctly, or understand information provided in course lessons, handouts, webpages, or textbooks.

10. In group projects:

Get them off to a good start by helping groups to build a foundation of support for one another and a structure where individual group member's skills, abilities, traits, and roles in the group are utilized and valued.

Ensure that the group understands that a group presentation, if an outcome of the project, is graded solely/largely on content (rather than delivery), if this is the case. This will usually mitigate any potential concerns of the other students regarding evaluation of the presentation in terms of delivery by their group member with speech difficulties.

11. In class presentations:

Keep in mind that giving a presentation can be nerve-wracking for just about any student, but may be especially agonizing for the one with speech difficulties.

Offer the following helpful advice for students with speech difficulties who will be presenting to the class:

Timed presentations will likely present a problem because speech difficulties often slow the speaker down, so try to make sure the student has a narrow topic selection and manageable number of main points.

Practicing the speech multiple times (8-10 rehearsals) will also help the student to get a sense of timing, and will help their delivery to come out more smoothly.

Visual aids that contain the key points or terms of the presentation will help greatly in the audience following along (e.g., handouts or slides with an outline of the main points or key terms of the presentation).

Understand that, alternatively, the opportunity to give a one-on-one speech to you or record a presentation to give to you, might be appreciated—and, in some cases, may be mandated by the student's accommodations.

12. In test situations:

Keep in mind that oral exams may be especially difficult for the student with speech difficulties, in terms of both stress and performance, which may negatively impact grades.

Consider if alternative arrangements might be made that test the student's abilities without the spoken component.

13. For fieldwork:

Discuss in advance all aspects of performing the fieldwork or experiencing the field trip in order to anticipate where the student might encounter barriers; implement accommodations and/or make adjustments as needed.

With regard to student accommodations: Please note that students will give professors an official approved accommodation letter from SSWD and at that point those accommodations for the student's disabilities are required. If professors feel any of the accommodations constitute a fundamental alteration of their course, they should consult with SSWD to discuss their concerns and potential alternatives for access.

With regard to the suggestions here for all students with speech difficulties: You might want to remind yourself every single time you are about to enter a classroom or meeting with the student until practices such as these become customary. While some of the suggestions may seem to be primarily common sense, sometimes the things that should be entirely evident can fall to the wayside due precisely to that fact.

(With appreciation to all who work with students with disabilities on our campus,
including Services to Students with Disabilities, for assistance.)

Campus Resources

Services for Students with Disabilities (SSWD)—

Offers a wide range of support services to ensure students with disabilities have equal access and opportunity to pursue their educational goals. Application instructions are provided on the website for students with mobility or other physical disabilities, blindness/visual impairment, psychological disorders/cognitive disabilities, learning disabilities, and ADD/ADHD, and students who are deaf/hard of hearing. Services and accommodations for students may include, but are not limited to: specialized educational materials, adaptive equipment, adaptive computer training and use, note-taker services, testing accommodations, consultation with faculty for students with special academic needs, library assistance, disability management advising/counseling, on-campus housing accommodation, and graduate and professional program assistance and information referrals. Students with questions and faculty with inquiries or wanting to make a referral are welcome to contact or come by the office for more information.

Location: Lassen Hall 1008

Phone: (916) 278-6955

[SSWD Website](https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/centers-programs/services-students-disabilities/) <https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/centers-programs/services-students-disabilities/>

Assistive Technology Lab (ATL)—

Provides technological services to students with disabilities referred by SSWD counselors/specialists, including: a lab with alternative access to computers for students with disabilities to work on coursework and a training room for students to receive instruction on the adaptive technology appropriate to the student's disability (such as screen magnification and reading, scan/read programs). The ATL also provides consultation and assistance to faculty to convert course textbooks, syllabi, exams, class web content, slides, and handouts into alternative formatted instructional materials for students (such as Braille).

Phone: (916) 278-7915

ATL Computer Lab: Academic Information Resource Center 2011

ATL Training Lab: Academic Information Resource Center 2010

Maryjane Rees Language, Speech and Hearing Center—

Offers speech, language and hearing services for people with communication challenges and/or cognitive disorders, including but not limited to: hearing loss, reading disorders, speech sound disorders, stuttering, cleft palate, voice disorders, and conditions associated with stroke, brain injury, concussion, progressive disorders, and other neurological impairment. Services are free to all, and those interested may get further information on the website, call, or stop by.

Location: Folsom Hall (7667 Folsom Blvd.) Room 2203 Phone: (916) 278-6601

[Center Website](https://www.csus.edu/college/health-human-services/community-services/language-speech-hearing-center.html) <https://www.csus.edu/college/health-human-services/community-services/language-speech-hearing-center.html>

TRiO Student Support Services Program (through SSWD)—

Provides to students with disabilities, who meet TRiO eligibility requirements and are in need of academic support to better stay and succeed in college, services that include: supplemental instruction, tutoring, adaptive equipment, readers, note-takers, proctors and test arrangements, specialized instruction materials, individualized counseling, transition coaching, assistance with graduate school admission, and more.

Location: Lassen Hall 1008

Phone: (916) 278-6955

[TRiO Website](https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/centers-programs/services-students-disabilities/student-resources.html) <https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/centers-programs/services-students-disabilities/student-resources.html>

Counseling (Student Health and Counseling Services)—

Helps students to cope with such things as stress, academic difficulties, cultural adjustment, relationship issues, anxiety, depression, bereavement, post-traumatic symptoms, questioning sexuality and coming out, eating disorders, addiction and alcohol abuse. The privacy and confidentiality of all who use Counseling Services is maintained fully within the bounds of law and professional ethics.

Location of Counseling Services: The WELL, Second Floor

Phone: (916) 278-6461

Location of Urgent Care Clinic: The WELL, First Floor

[Counseling Services Website](https://www.csus.edu/student-life/health-counseling/counseling/) <https://www.csus.edu/student-life/health-counseling/counseling/>

Students in an immediate crisis should contact 911 or the Suicide Hotline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

Students with urgent concerns who would like to see someone right away may walk in to receive counseling at the Urgent Care Clinic (WELL, First Floor) any time during its hours of operation or call to speak with the After Hours Nurse at: (916) 278-6461.

Students who want to receive counseling or explore if counseling is right for them may schedule an appointment by calling or coming in Counseling Services, or going online through the Patient Portal. This typically begins with a consultation appointment, where the student can talk about their concerns and receive support and feedback. Many students find that they feel better and their needs are met in just one session. Students who want to continue counseling may choose individual counseling in follow-up single session appointments (to meet their needs in the moment) or short-term individual therapy (more than one session with the same mental health clinician). Students may also join group therapy (with five to ten other students).