

# UNIVERSAL DESIGN LEARNING (UDL) AND ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS- FOR INSTRUCTORS

## What is Universal Design Learning (UDL)?

Universal Design Learning (UDL) in the university setting is a “set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn” by creating “instructional goals, methods, materials and assessments that work for everyone—not a single one-size fits all solution” ([UDL in Higher Ed](#), n.d., para 3). UDL takes into consideration that students have a variety of learning styles and needs. The three principles of UDL are: multiple means of representing information, multiple means of expressing what they know and multiple means of engagement ([UDL On Campus](#), n.d.).

From an accessibility standpoint, UDL is the “preferred approach to removing barriers or making one-off accommodations” ([Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018, section 8.2](#)). According to the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC, 2018), UDL involves the following:

- Developing flexible ways to learn
- Creating an engaging classroom environment
- Maintaining high expectations for all students while allowing for multiple ways to meet expectations
- Empowering teachers to think differently about their own teaching
- Focusing on educational outcomes for all, including persons with disabilities

## How does UDL impact testing accommodations?

If you decide to use UDL for assessments (e.g., exams, tests), there are a few considerations that need to be made to ensure your assessment fulfills the duty to accommodate students with disabilities.

In some instances, it is appropriate and beneficial to provide all students in your course with additional writing time for assessments, such as double time. However, this approach is best used for the following types of assessments:

- Assessments with multiple choice/short answers.
- Assessments where the baseline time to complete the test has been well established so you can clearly demonstrate that additional time has in fact been added.
- Assessments that have a reasonable time frame, meaning, student are not required to compromise other time commitments (e.g., other academic work) to complete the test.

In some instances, providing universal extra time may prove problematic for ensuring the duty to accommodate has been upheld and therefore may not be advisable. These examples may include:

- Assessments with essay questions, large written component and/or that use open book. If students without disabilities can fill up the time by polishing or doublechecking their work, then students with disabilities are at a disadvantage (as they are using the time to simply complete the test) and an additional accommodation of additional writing time would be appropriate. Moreover, a student may require the use of other accommodations to complete these tasks, such as the use of assistive technology. Accommodations such as assistive technology, scribes etc., may take additional time or require access to different resources during an examination, which may not be reflected in UDL.
- Assessments where the baseline time to complete the test are not well established. Without evidence of how long it will take the majority of students to answer questions, the instructor is at risk of being unable to demonstrate

that the additional time provided was sufficient to a student who required additional writing time as an accommodation.

- Assessments where additional time is provided to students to complete a task such as uploading their tests to a website. In this instance, the additional time provided is to troubleshoot technology challenges. It is a disadvantage to students with disabilities if they are expected to use this time to complete their test, without the additional time to budget for technical challenges.

## Do I still need to provide accommodations if using UDL for assessments?

It depends on the accommodations of the student, and the design of your test. The OHRC (2018) specifies that accommodations are individualized to an individual's disability-related needs. As such, **there may be instances that even with the use of UDL, a student may require additional accommodations.**

Let's use an example where you have added an additional 15 minutes per hour to your test as part of UDL principles. If a student's accommodation plan only requires an additional 15 minutes of writing time per hour, OR only a 15-minute supervised break, then no additional accommodations will likely need to be required. However, if a student requires additional writing time of more than 15 minutes per hour (e.g., they require an additional 30 minutes, or they require an additional 15 minutes per hour AND a 15-minute supervised break), then they would require, as part of their accommodation plan, additional writing time (e.g., an additional 15 minutes per hour above and beyond additional time added to your test). Moreover, if a student requires testing accommodations other accommodations beyond additional time (such as the use of technology, alternate format, or the use of a scribe), then these accommodations would still be required.

If using UDL in your course, particularly for assessments, it is best to consult with AccessAbility Services if there are students in your course who require accommodations.

## What steps should I take if I wish to utilize UDL?

1. **Consult with the Centre for Teaching Excellence (CTE):** CTE offers advice and support on incorporating UDL into your courses. For more detailed information, please visit their [site](#).
2. **Communicate your approach with students in advance:** It is important to clearly communicate how your course is applying UDL approaches early on, so students are informed of how they will be supported and accommodated. It When communicating this, be specific about the adjustment. For example, if adding additional time to the test for all students, indicate exactly how much time has been added (e.g., extra 15 min per hour, or double time). To do this, you are encouraged to a) add a notice directly in course syllabus, b) verbally announce it to your class prior to any assessments, and c) post a notification of this on your course LEARN site. We recommend that you include at least one statements in writing. An example of how it can be explained is provided below:

*"This course is utilizing universal design for all tests. By providing double time to the whole class, I am better able to consider the accommodation and support needs of all, including students with disabilities, students with family responsibilities, and students impacted by other extenuating circumstances. As such, it is expected that an accommodation for additional writing time, and/or supervised breaks, will not be required because it is already built into the test design (Any other testing accommodations will be upheld, as per a students' accommodation plan). If you are registered with AccessAbility Services and have questions about whether your*

*accommodation is being upheld, please contact AccessAbility Services directly. I am happy to work with AccessAbility Services to ensure the test meets your accommodation needs.”.*

3. **Clarify that individual accommodations will still be upheld if required:** If a student requires an additional accommodation for their test and/or assessment, it is important to communicate that their required accommodations will be upheld, and that you will work with AccessAbility Services to ensure the test/assessment meets their disability-based needs. If students email you indicating that the UDL approach does not fully accommodate them, you may respond as follows:

*“This test/exam uses universal design by giving every student additional writing time for the test. The goal is to create an accessible situation where accommodation for additional writing time and supervised breaks is not needed because it is already built in into the test design. However, I understand that additional accommodations may still be required, and I am happy to work with AccessAbility Services to ensure the test/assessment meets your accommodation needs. Please contact your AccessAbility Services’ Accommodation Consultant to develop an accommodation plan for this test. I look forward to hearing from them about how your accommodations can be upheld.”*

4. **Document:** The onus is on the instructor to demonstrate that students with disabilities had an equitable opportunity to complete the test or exam and that their accommodations were upheld. This means there must be evidence showing students largely finish and submit the assessment within the original amount of time. Make sure you clearly document (for your own records) how UDL was utilized in your course in the event of a dispute. It is recommended that you keep record of how long the test has taken in the past for students to complete (ex. Most students have it completed by 1 hour) and show how you are making it inclusive for all (since most students have it completed by 1 hour, I am going to give all students 2 hours, giving all students double time to complete it). Or, if you are keeping the time allotment of the test the same, but are reducing the number of test questions, be prepared to demonstrate that you in fact reduced the amount of questions by say 50%. It may be helpful to present this information to students as well.
5. **Consult with AccessAbility Services:** AccessAbility Services notifies you of your students’ academic accommodations. If you are not able to uphold an accommodation, or if you are unsure about whether the course/ test format meets the requirements of an accommodation, please connect with AccessAbility Services as soon as possible. We are here to help you meet your duty to accommodate. You may also reach out to us at the beginning of the term if you have questions about your course layout and if it will meet a student’s individual accommodation needs.

## Who do I ask if I have questions?

- Contact the Centre for Teaching Excellence with questions about how to implement UDL in your course ([cte@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:cte@uwaterloo.ca) or by calling 519-888-4567, ext. 43353)
- Contact AccessAbility Services with questions about whether a particular student’s accommodations are being met by UDL ([access@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:access@uwaterloo.ca) or by calling 519-888-4567, ext. 35082).
- Refer to the [University’s Academic Accommodation Guidelines](#) for information and procedures on how to accommodate students with disabilities.

**Note:** This resource was adapted with permission from the University of Guelph’s [Universal Design for Assessments - Accessibility Services](#).