

Ten Steps to Becoming an Effective Self-Advocate:

Step 1: Accept your disability:

Before you can advocate for yourself, you have to admit to yourself that you really do have a learning disability. You aren't dumb. You aren't lazy. You have probably worked very hard to hide your learning problems (even from yourself). Now is the time to admit to yourself that you have some difficulties and may need some special help in order to be successful.

Step 2: Admit your disability to others:

You cannot be a successful self-advocate if you continue to hide your difficulties from others. Naturally, you can't expect teachers to provide appropriate accommodations if they don't know about your disability. But it is just as important to be able to admit your difficulties to your friends. When you can really be honest about your learning disability, you will find that you no longer feel so ashamed and embarrassed about your learning difficulties. You will be able to relax a bit more in school and spend more energy learning than hiding.

Step 3: Understand your learning style:

Hopefully, you now have a pretty good understanding of how your brain works and how your processing difficulty interferes with your education. School psychologists and teachers can offer you some ideas that they have about your learning disability, but only you can decide what makes the most sense to you. If the ideas offered in this course don't make sense, ask for help in understanding better. Or ask for other ideas about information processing that might "fit" you better. If you don't understand how you learn, you can't ask for accommodations that you really need.

Step 4: Realize how "other issues" might interfere with your self-advocacy:

You have learned about the common effects of a learning disability including low self-esteem, communication difficulties, and attentional problems. Think about how these issues might interfere with your ability to advocate for yourself. Are you too shy and withdrawn to ask for help? Do you get angry and aggressive when embarrassed or frustrated? Are you able to communicate your needs or do you need to ask someone (teacher, parent, friend) to help you ask for accommodations? Are you impulsive and tend to say or do things that you later regret? As with your learning disability, you need to be open and honest about any of these related problems before you can be an effective self-advocate.

Step 5: Know what you need:

Do the accommodations listed in this course meet all of your possible needs? Which ones do you think will be the most useful for you? Can you think of other accommodations that may be better? It is not possible to anticipate all of the needs which your learning disability will cause for you. You will need to constantly rethink the accommodations and possibly come up with some ideas of your own.

Step 6: Anticipate your needs in each class:

Don't wait until the final exam to start thinking about accommodations. Right from the start of each class you should be thinking about how you might be able to learn the material better. Maybe the teacher has a style that confuses you. Maybe there are too many distractions in the room. Maybe assignments aren't presented clearly. Begin talking with your teachers about accommodations as early as possible.

Step 7: Know your rights and responsibilities:

You have learned about your legal rights to an appropriate education and appropriate accommodations to meet your needs. But are you really prepared to argue your rights with a teacher that may be "reluctant" to provide appropriate accommodations? Do you know where to turn for support when your needs are not being met? And remember, accommodations are intended to counteract the negative effects of your learning disability, not just make school easy for you. Don't take advantage of your right to accommodations by requesting things you don't really "need".

Step 8: Be willing to compromise:

Some teachers will bend over backwards to "accommodate" for your special learning needs. Others will be less "flexible". Be ready to compromise in order to get at least some accommodation. You may also need to "prove" to some teachers that you really need help and are not just being "lazy". Maybe make a "deal" or "contract" with a teacher. If you do this, be sure to follow-through with everything you have agreed to do. This helps to build trust.

Step 9: Know where to go for support:

Sometimes even an effective self-advocate needs support. Maybe to help with a "difficult" teacher. Maybe to provide advice when you get "stuck". Or maybe just so you don't feel isolated and alone. Find someone who understands your learning disability and can provide support (or can even advocate for you) when needed.

Step 10: Plan for the future:

Many LD students just try to survive one day at a time and don't think too much about long-term goals. But to really advocate for yourself you need to think about where you want to be in one, two, five, or ten years. What kind of work do you want to do after your education? Do you want to go to college? When you have a very clear plan for the future, you will be better able to see the reason for your education today.

Here are a few tips when using these steps:

1. Have a very good idea of what you want and why you want it.
2. Rehears what you will say, maybe with a friend or parent.
3. Speak clearly.
4. Maintain eye contact (as much as possible).
5. Take your time when talking and ask for time to think if you need it.
6. Rephrase what you hear to be sure you really understand.
7. Be respectful.
8. Be careful of your body language (do you look or act angry, impatient, etc.?).
9. Be flexible and ready to compromise.
10. Make it very clear what you are willing to do in return for the accommodation (get assignments done faster, pay more attention in class, improve effort, etc.).
11. If there is resistance, ask to have a follow up meeting with a support person (case-manager, other teacher, parent, etc.).
12. Be very appreciative of any accommodation given (Say, "thank you.")