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Technical Assistance Center

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Table of Contents

Introduction 2

Lesson Goals..... 2

Personal Readers and Magnification Devices 3

 Personal Readers 3

 Magnifying Devices 5

Financial Management..... 6

 Paying Bills 6

 Reviewing Financial Records 7

 Handwriting Guides..... 7

Summary 9

Suggested Activities..... 9

Resources 9

Lesson 12: Accessing Printed Information

Introduction

Accessing printed information is one of the most common challenges for people who are blind or have low vision. Printed information is all around us. Our daily lives are full of signs that advertise restaurants, grocery stores, movie theaters, and other services and businesses. Street signs, highway markers, traffic control signs, and bus stop signs help people navigate their surroundings. Mail, flyers, and announcements alert us to complete activities and tasks.

Electronic information has changed the way society functions, making the amount of printed information available endless. Want to know what is on the restaurant's menu? Search it on your phone, and in seconds, you have the answer. Planning a trip to Niagara Falls? Go to Google Maps or input the route into your GPS. Today, most businesses communicate with customers via websites and social media.

Before vision loss, you may have used computers and mobile devices in your daily life, and now you may think you can't access those tools. With available accessibility features, you can keep using most of the electronic devices you previously used. Paying bills online, sending e-mails, responding to text messages, or checking your calendar can be done on a smartphone or tablet. With advances in technology, printed information is currently more accessible to people who are blind or have low vision.

This lesson will discuss both non-optical and optical tools for accessing printed information. Lesson 19 will explain how to use smartphones, tablets, and computers to accomplish tasks.

Lesson Goals

- Learn to access print and handwritten documents using personal readers, magnification devices, and video magnifiers
- Learn to manage monetary transactions using debit and credit cards
- Learn options to pay bills using checks and bank transfers
- Learn methods to access financial records using large print, magnification, or automated phone systems
- Learn to communicate via handwritten correspondence using handwriting guides

Personal Readers and Magnification Devices

While most print communication tasks can be handled with electronic devices, your mailbox likely still contains bills, invitations to events, greeting cards, handwritten notes with photos, and junk mail. Paper forms may need to be completed. Restaurants have print menus that are difficult to read in dim lighting. When paying with a debit or credit card, the bill's print and signature line may be hard to see. There are labels to read and items to find while you are shopping.

Personal Readers

As the examples above indicate, there are situations when it's faster and more convenient to access printed information with another person's help, rather than an electronic device. These situations may involve engaging the help of a designated person or asking for help on a situational basis. For example, consider your print mail. It's frustrating to spend time scanning six documents or taking pictures with your phone, only to discover three of them are junk mail. However, a personal reader can quickly scan each envelope and separate the junk from the items you need to read.

Although having a reader is not the right solution for everyone and is not always feasible, it is helpful for some people. Whether you hire someone as a reader or use volunteer services, treat the relationship like a professional one, even if the reader is a friend or family member.

If you decide to hire a reader, there are a few things to keep in mind. When first meeting an applicant who is a stranger, even if they are recommended by someone you know, make sure you have someone with you. Do not meet alone with anyone you do not know personally. As you interview potential readers, you may wish to discuss the following topics. These topics can be modified if the applicant is a friend, family member, or neighbor:

- Carefully explain the job duties and expectations to the applicant. For example, tell the applicant how often a reader is needed, how many hours the reader is needed for each session, the type of materials the applicant will be reading, and salary (if applicable).
- Ask about the applicant's educational background and the types of books they enjoy reading. The answers may give you an idea of their vocabulary level.
- Ask about the applicant's experience reading aloud. You will want a

reader who reads well out loud.

- Have every applicant read aloud to you during the interview. Provide at least three different types of documents about one-page in length for the applicant to read aloud.
- Ask about the applicant's current job or work history to learn about their work habits, availability, organizational and problem-solving skills, and ability to maintain confidentiality.
- Ask why the applicant is interested in reading for you.

When you find an applicant you'd like to hire, discuss the following:

- Request three references, unless you know the applicant personally.
- Discuss the privacy measures you expect from the reader. It may help if you make sure to protect yourself, your home, and your personal information.
- Agree to a short trial period (three months, for example). During this time, both you and the reader can decide if the working relationship is a good fit.
- Set a definite time and location for meetings. It doesn't have to be in your home. Let the reader know that punctuality is extremely important and use the scheduled time for reading and related tasks.
- Establish a clear cancellation policy.
- Keep a log of the reader's hours that both of you initial after each session.
- If the reader is paid, both of you should keep financial records and review them monthly.

Your preparation responsibilities before meeting with the reader for a session may include the following:

- Have all materials ready at least 15 minutes before the scheduled session.
- Be prepared to work and avoid chit-chat until the scheduled session is over.
- Turn off your phones during the reading session unless an important call is expected.
- Thank the reader even if they are paid. Everyone likes to be appreciated!
- Do something special every month to show your appreciation for a volunteer reader.

Whether or not you hire a personal reader, there may be situations where another person will need to help you access visual information. Shopping or other errands often are easier if you request help. Most customer service staff is happy to assist with shopping, especially if you frequently shop in the same stores. In this situation, the best tools are a smile and a friendly personality. Even if you aren't usually outgoing, do your best to engage with the person to make them feel comfortable. Humor is a good way to help the person relax.

If you are grocery shopping, have a shopping list ready to give to the person assisting you. Make sure your list follows the layout of the store. If you have unusual items on your list, describe them to your helper. For example, note that the gluten-free cereal is in an orange bag with a purple "GF" in the top right corner. If someone is especially helpful, give positive feedback to the store manager. The next time you go shopping, that person will want to help you again! If you shop when the store is less busy, your assistant will have more time to help.

At times, you may want to dine alone in a restaurant. If you cannot read the menu with a magnification device, ask the server to read the menu to you. It's a good idea to plan ahead and perhaps ask for the list of seafood or pasta options, for example, rather than asking to hear the entire menu. It also might be helpful to ask the server to read the bill to you at the end of your meal.

If you have an appointment where forms must be completed, let the office staff know you will need assistance and be punctual. If you have a personal reader or a family member to help, ask to have the forms mailed to you before the appointment so your reader can help you complete them. If you are comfortable using a tablet or computer, it may be easier to complete the forms electronically.

Magnifying Devices

If you have some vision, you can use a handheld magnifier to sort mail by enlarging logos on envelopes. Because of their size and portability, handheld magnifiers are great for quick, spot-reading tasks, like reading menus, store coupons, clothing tags, or business cards. A lighted stand magnifier may work for reading short documents or handwritten notes. Depending on the magnification you need for comfortable reading, some lamp/magnifier combinations may eliminate the need for help with reading

and identification. These three types of devices are rather inexpensive and can be used in a variety of situations.

Desktop electronic video magnifiers can be expensive, but they allow people with low vision to independently handle most reading and writing tasks. A portable electronic magnifier is small enough to take with you to doctors' offices and other appointments where documents need to be completed. These magnifiers can also be helpful in restaurants and stores.

Financial Management

Lesson 10 discussed how to identify coins and identify and organize currency tactilely. Although cash can be an efficient way to handle purchases, it may not be the most convenient or comfortable method. You may not feel safe carrying a lot of cash or exposing the contents of your wallet to strangers nearby. Using debit and credit cards can eliminate these concerns. Both require you to swipe or insert the card and sometimes sign a screen or receipt. A benefit of making purchases with a debit or credit card is that there is a permanent record of transactions, making it easier to find information when filing your taxes. For safety, you should never tell someone your debit card PIN. If you cannot complete a transaction independently with a magnifier or a device with accessibility features, purchasing with a debit card using the credit option is better.

However, each store is different, so it is important to feel comfortable with an alternative method. Start by asking the cashier for assistance. If you can locate the card processor and swipe or insert your card yourself, you can do that and then turn the processor to the cashier for them to select the necessary buttons and tell you if a signature is needed. Another option is to hand the card to the cashier to handle the transaction if a PIN is not needed. Either way, it is helpful to follow along and ask questions, such as your purchase's total amount. Later, you can call your bank or check the bank's app to ensure the transaction amount is correct.

Paying Bills

Some people do not feel comfortable paying bills online and prefer to use checks or bank transfers. There are several options for paying bills without using online banking. If you have low vision, you can ask your bank about large print or tactile checks. Even if you cannot read the print on a large-print check, the lines may be visible enough to fill it out correctly. A magnifier might help with this task. For people with limited or no functional

vision, tactile options like check-writing guides or raised-line checks may be good options. On tactile checks, each of the five areas on the check is marked with a raised line to identify where to write. A check-writing guide is a template that has cutouts for the five areas of a standard check. Place the guide on top of your check and write within the cutouts.

Another way to pay bills is to have your bank set up automatic bank drafts or transfers. Most banks offer these services, but it's important to discuss with your bank because their process details may vary. For example, every month, you could have your utility bills, house payment, health insurance, phone bill, and internet bill automatically withdrawn from your checking account. The bills can be set up to be electronic rather than on paper, and the exact amount that is due will be withdrawn to cover the bill. Electronic options save you the cost of a stamp and reduce incoming mail to sort.

Reviewing Financial Records

Once they gain confidence with technology, many people who are blind or have low vision check bank statements and investments online; however, if you are not comfortable using the internet or are awaiting training, there are other options. Reviewing statements and bank registers with an electronic magnifier can make the task doable for many people with low vision. Some desktop video magnifiers allow you to divide the screen, letting you view your bank statement side-by-side with your check register. This option is a convenient way to reconcile accounts.

Most banks offer automated phone service for accessing account information. Balances and transactions can be reviewed for checking, savings, brokerage accounts, and loans. It may also help if you develop a professional relationship with someone at each of your financial institutions in case you have questions. Tell them about your visual impairment and ask what services or accommodations they can provide to manage your accounts. There may be services that typically carry a charge, like having a broker make a trade for you, that can be waived.

Handwriting Guides

Communicating in writing is often challenging after vision loss, but it is an important skill. Many people enjoyed sending birthday cards, mailing handwritten letters, or writing grocery lists before vision loss occurred. These tasks can still be accomplished. Signature and check-writing guides have been discussed in previous lessons. There are also guides for other

handwriting tasks. Specialty companies that sell products for people who are blind or have low vision offer templates for envelopes and stationery and a variety of full-page (8.5- by 11-inch) writing guides.

An envelope guide has four spaces for the addressee information and three spaces for a return address. The full-page guides come in several styles. One style is similar to check-writing and envelope guides, except it fits over unlined paper and has half-inch cutouts down the template. These guides are black, so the cutouts sharply contrast when used over white paper. You can attach them to a piece of paper with paper clips or clip the paper and guide onto a clipboard. Keep your place by attaching a paper clip to one side of the guide and move it from one cutout line to the next as you move down the page. A hinged writing guide is made like a folder, blank on one side with cutouts on the other. The paper fits inside. You can also find hinged guides for envelopes, checks, and greeting cards. The greeting card guides have several lines for text, followed by a shorter line for a signature. A hinged guide's advantage is that the page is held more firmly in place and is less likely to move as you write.

No matter which type of guide you choose, it takes practice to become comfortable writing with a guide. Some people find it helpful to use both hands, one to write, and the other to trail along and mark their place. Individuals with more vision may keep their non-dominant hand's index finger at the beginning of the line they are writing to help them track.

People with enough functional vision may not need writing guides. A ruler to keep handwriting straight or paper with bold lines are sufficient for these individuals. There are two common styles of bold, lined paper. One has very thick dark lines that are about 1 inch apart. This paper is designed for use with a bold pen. The other style has thinner lines that are a little closer together.

When a guide is not available, you can write a short note using a folding method like the one used for signatures. Fold your writing paper in small, 1- to 1.5-inch sections for the length of the paper. Each fold will act as a line on the page to write upon, making the folds whatever distance is comfortable to write within. When you unfold the paper, the creases will act as tactile guides for writing straight across the page.

Another common tool for reading and notetaking for people who are blind or have low vision is braille. Although braille will not be covered in this

lesson, it is a useful tool for accessing print, identification, and communication.

You may have noticed that recreational reading is not included in this lesson. The [Library of Congress Talking Book program](#) and other audio and large print reading options will be covered in Lesson 17.

Summary

This lesson described methods and adaptive devices used to access print information and handwriting and simplify communication and print tasks for people who are blind or have low vision. Think about other senses and strategies you could use for some of these tasks. For example, you use your sense of touch when you write with a guide or identify mail.

You may wish to spend time decluttering and organizing before you implement financial management approaches from this lesson. What else could you simplify and utilize to make daily activities easier? Approach things from a problem-solving mindset to help with your adjustment to these new skills.

Suggested Activities

Try the following activities to gain a better understanding of the information covered in this lesson:

- Identify which strategies you think will be most effective for sorting mail and reading documents. Try several of the suggested methods.
- Look into the services available at your bank that might simplify the task of paying bills.
- Practice writing with a variety of writing guides or create your templates.

Resources

To find items mentioned such as bold line paper, writing guides, and magnification devices, and the Talking Book program, visit the companies below:

- [Library of Congress Talking Book program](#)
- [LS&S Products](#)
- [Independent Living Aids](#)
- [MaxiAids](#)