

NEURODIVERGENT STUDENT SUPPORT CHEAT SHEET

Practical communication, teaching, executive-function, and accommodation strategies for higher education

A practical reference for educators, helping professionals, and students in higher education. These strategies are starting points, not a diagnostic checklist and not a substitute for individualized assessment, formal accommodations, or institutional procedures. The same behavior can have many possible explanations. Explore before you explain.

1. THE 60-SECOND CHEAT SHEET & SELF-ADVOCACY GUIDE

- **Missed deadlines:** Don't immediately assume lack of motivation. Ask where the task became difficult; use milestones and a clear submission routine.

Student self-advocacy script: I got stuck transitioning from research to drafting. Can I submit an outline first to confirm I'm on the right track?

- **Difficulty starting:** Don't reduce it to procrastination. Shrink the first step: open the document -> copy the question -> write three bullet points.

Student self-advocacy script: I'm experiencing task initiation paralysis. I'm going to set a 5-minute timer just to write bullet points.

- **Doesn't respond to email:** Don't immediately interpret it as disrespect or executive paralysis. Send one concise message with one clear next action.

Student self-advocacy script: I got overwhelmed by my inbox. I'm catching up now and updating you on my progress.

- **Quiet in class:** Don't equate silence with disengagement. Clarify participation expectations and offer appropriate ways to contribute.

Student self-advocacy script: I process discussions better by listening during class and sharing my thought points on the forum afterward.

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- **Avoids group work:** Don't assume unwillingness to cooperate. Explore the specific demand: social, sensory, communication, role clarity, or task design.

Student self-advocacy script: I work best when tasks and roles are explicitly assigned. Could we clarify who is doing what?

- **Repeated questions:** Don't assume the student wasn't listening. Clarify the instruction and provide it in writing or as a short checklist.

Student self-advocacy script: I want to make sure I understand correctly. Could you confirm these two points in writing?

- **Looks away while listening:** Don't use eye contact as a proxy for attention or engagement. Movement/looking away aids regulation. Focus on demonstrated engagement and learning.

Student self-advocacy script: I process verbal information much better when I focus on taking written notes rather than maintaining eye contact.

- **Becomes overwhelmed:** Don't jump straight to 'calm down'. Reduce immediate demands, identify the next manageable step, then revisit.

Student self-advocacy script: I'm currently feeling overloaded. I need 5 minutes to step out and regulate before we continue.

- **Excellent work but exhausted:** Don't assume high performance means no support is needed. Consider effort, time, sensory fatigue, masking, and recovery cost; ask whether the approach is sustainable.

Student self-advocacy script: My current workload is causing severe fatigue and potential burnout. Can we review prioritization for this project?

- **Suddenly disappears:** Don't assume the student simply doesn't care. High-performing students may hit an autistic burnout crash. Use low-shame outreach and provide one clear next step.

Student self-advocacy script: I experienced a severe burnout crash recently. I am ready to resume with one small manageable step.

2. COMMUNICATION CHEAT SHEET (REDUCING FRICTION)

Instead of...	Try...
You need to manage your time better.	Which part of managing this task timeline has been most difficult?
Why didn't you tell me earlier?	Reaching out when stuck is hard. What made it difficult to reach out earlier, and how can we adjust from here?
You need to participate more.	Let me clarify what participation can look like in this class (written notes, chat, forum, verbal).
You should have read the instructions.	Let's identify which part of the instructions was unclear or ambiguous.
Calm down.	Let's slow this down and work out what you need right now.
Everyone else can do this.	Let's look at what is making this specific task difficult.
Feel free to drop by during office hours if you have questions.	My office hours are Tuesdays 2-4 PM. You can show up directly, book a 10-minute slot via link, or send a 2-sentence email question.

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3. CLASSROOM QUICK WINS & SENSORY ACCESS

- **Before class:** Share objectives, key materials, and assessment information early where possible. Keep essential information in one predictable location.
- **During class:** Chunk instructions. Pair important verbal information with written/visual information. Allow reasonable processing time. Avoid unexpected cold-calling without preparation time.
- **Participation:** Where appropriate, offer more than one way to contribute while keeping the intended learning outcome in view.
- **Sensory access:** Where feasible, consider seating options, reduced unnecessary noise, movement breaks, lighting, and appropriate sensory tools.
- **Cognitive/Sensory Fatigue:** Recognize that masking and navigating high-sensory lecture spaces drains energy rapidly.
- **After class:** Recap key actions, the next deadline, and where materials can be found. Give one clear route for questions.

4. EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING: FROM KNOWING TO DOING

- **Task initiation:** Make the first action concrete and small. Replace "Start your assignment" with "Open the document and paste in the prompt."
- **Planning:** Work backwards from the final deadline. Add milestone dates for topic, outline, draft, review, and submission.
- **Time awareness:** Externalize time with calendars, alarms, visual timers, visible deadlines, and transition reminders.
- **Prioritizing:** Use *Must* / *Should* / *Could*. When everything feels urgent, identify the one task that matters most today.

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- **Working memory:** Write down multi-step instructions. Use checklists, templates, exemplars, and consistent information locations.
- **Task switching:** Give transition cues such as "five minutes left, then we move on." Preview major changes where possible.
- **Monitoring:** Use brief milestone check-ins rather than waiting until the final submission deadline.
- **Completion vs. Submission:** Separate "work is finished" from "work is submitted": final check -> attach -> confirm -> submit -> save confirmation receipt.
- **Help-seeking:** Make the pathway explicit: who to contact, how, what to include, and what happens next.

5. ASSIGNMENT & ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES

- **Break large tasks into stages:** Understand -> Plan -> Start -> Draft -> Review -> Submit.
- **Clarify what is essential:** Distinguish assessed requirements from optional extras. Use clear rubrics, exemplars, and criteria.
- **Use milestone scaffolding:** Where appropriate, use staged submissions or check-ins to support planning and early course correction.
- **Check the actual learning outcome:** Before considering an alternative assessment route, identify what the assessment is intended to measure and follow institutional requirements.
- **Reduce accidental barriers:** Ask whether a demand is central to the learning outcome or an additional barrier created by task format, administrative complexity, or unwritten expectations.

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6. THE P x E x D QUICK FORMULATION

A 2-minute clinical and educational framework to evaluate complex situations:

- **PERSON:** What might be happening for this student? Consider strengths, processing style, attention, regulation, communication style, fatigue, masking, and the student's perspective.
- **ENVIRONMENT:** What around the student may be adding friction? Consider physical/sensory space, lighting, noise, communication clarity, LMS navigation, routines, policies, and flexibility.
- **DEMAND:** What exactly is the task asking the student to manage? Does it measure subject mastery or unassessed executive function, working memory, time pressure, social negotiation, or sensory tolerance?

THEN ASK: What can the student learn/adapt? What can the educator change? What can the system fix?

7. FIVE PHRASES WORTH KEEPING

- Can you help me understand what happened?
- Where did things start becoming difficult?
- What's the smallest next step?
- What would make this more manageable?
- What support would help you become more independent?

A NOTE ON ACCOMMODATIONS

"Same destination, different routes" is an effective way to approach access. An adjustment removes a barrier without removing the intended learning outcome, but what is appropriate depends on the course, assessment, professional requirements, and institutional policy. Formal accommodations should follow the institution's established process.

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SELECTED REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

- CAST — [Universal Design for Learning Guidelines](#)
- CAST — [UDL On Campus, Course Design & Executive Functioning](#)
- Carey, L. & Reid, A. (2024). *Supporting Student Executive Functions: Insights and Strategies for Educators*. CAST Professional Publishing.
- Ross, F., Dommett, E. J., & Byrom, N. (2026). A systematic review of higher education-based interventions to support the mental health and wellbeing of neurodivergent students. *npj Mental Health Research*, 5, 14.
- Koops, I., Duckett, P., & Gerace, A. (2025). Investigating the Outcomes and Quality of Support Programs for Autistic Young Adults in Higher Education: A Systematic Review. *Autism in Adulthood*, 7(4), 403-420.
- Neurodiversity in Higher Education. Open Educational Resource. Designed and developed by neurodivergent students. neurodiversityinhighered.ie

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