

Assessing A Student's Need for Assistive Technology: Where to Start?

When the question of a student's need for AT leads to an assessment, the first action is to identify a team of people to address that question. If the school district already has an identified team, then a request for their assistance is made. If no one is designated to function as an AT Assessment team, or only one person has been designated, then a team of people with sufficient knowledge to make an appropriate and useful decision must be assembled.

While the number of the team members and their specific expertise will vary with the magnitude and complexity of the question to be answered, there are some specific considerations in selecting the members of the team. It is important that someone on the team understands curriculum. This is often a special education teacher or the regular classroom teacher. If the question involves speech or language, then someone with expertise in language development is needed. This is most typically a Speech/Language Pathologist, but might also be a teacher of the hearing impaired, if that would be appropriate based upon the student's unique needs. Often there are questions about positioning or motor ability. In this case a Physical or Occupational Therapist is needed. And, of course, one or more of these individuals must have knowledge about specific assistive technology that might be appropriate to address the student's needs. There may be any number of other individuals, as needed. For instance if the student has a vision impairment, there would need to be a Vision Specialist involved. If the student has Autism, someone with a background in Autism will be needed. The Wisconsin Assistive Technology Initiative has also developed a manual for addressing the needs of students with AT needs who are on the Autism Spectrum. You may wish to refer to this guide located on the www.wati.org or <http://dpi.wi.gov/sped/at-wati-resources.html> site. While there may be a core group of people in a school district who routinely address questions about assistive technology, the specific team working together to determine an assistive technology solution will be made up of individuals who collectively can address all of the student's unique needs.

Finally, one or both of the parents, and when appropriate, the student must be active participants in the information gathering and decision-making. If the student can contribute and understand information, then they should participate in meetings along with their parent or parents. Typically a group of three to six or seven individuals will meet to begin the information gathering and decision making stages of the AT Assessment Process. The AT Assessment Directions/Procedure Guide is a basic outline of the steps that need to take place.



WATI Assistive Technology Assessment Directions/Procedure Guide

School District/Agency _____ School _____

Student _____ Grade _____

Team Members _____

	Date Completed	Comments
<p>Gathering Information:</p> <p>Step 1: Team Members Gather Information Review existing information regarding student’s abilities, difficulties, environment, and tasks. If there is missing information, you will need to gather the information by completing formal tests, completing informal tests, and/or observing the student in various settings. The WATI Student Information Guide and Environmental Observation Guide are used to assist with gathering information. Remember, the team gathering this information should include parents, and if appropriate, the student.</p> <p>Step 2: Schedule Meeting Schedule a meeting with the team. Team includes: parents, student (if appropriate), service providers (e.g., spec. ed. teacher, general ed. teacher, SLP, OT, PT, administrator), and any others directly involved or with required knowledge and expertise.</p> <p>Decision Making:</p> <p>Step 3: Team completes Problem Identification Portion of AT Decision Making Guide at the meeting. (Choose someone to write all topics where everyone participating can see them.)</p> <p>The team should quickly move through: Listing the student’s abilities/difficulties related to tasks (5-10 minutes). Listing key aspects of the environment in which the student functions and the student’s location and positioning within the environment (5-10 minutes). Identifying the tasks the student needs to be able to do is important because the team cannot generate AT solutions until the tasks are identified (5-10 minutes).</p> <p>(Note: The emphasis in problem identification is identifying tasks the student needs to be able to do, the relationship of the student’s abilities/difficulties and characteristics of the environment of the student’s performance of the tasks.)</p>		

Step 4: Prioritize the List of Tasks for Solution Generation

Identify critical task(s) for which the team will generate potential solutions. This may require a redefining or reframing of the original referral question, but is necessary so that you hone in on the most critical task

Step 5: Solution Generation

Brainstorm all possible solutions.

Note: The specificity of the solutions will vary depending on the knowledge and experience of the team members; some teams may generate names of specific devices with features that will meet the student's needs, other teams may simply talk about features that are important, e.g., "needs voice output," "needs to be portable," "needs few (or many) messages," "needs input method other than hands," etc. Teams may want to use specific resources to assist with solution generation. These resources include, but are not limited to: the AT Checklist, the ASNAT Manual, *Closing the Gap Resource Directory*, and/or an AT Consultant.

Step 6: Solution Selection

Discuss the solutions listed, thinking about which are most effective for the student. It may help to group solutions that can be implemented 1) immediately, 2) in the next few months, and 3) in the future. At this point list the names of specific devices, hardware, software, etc. If the team does not know the names of devices, etc., use resources noted in Step 5 or schedule a consultation with a knowledgeable resource person (that is the part of the decision-making that should require the most time; plan on 20-30 minutes here).

Step 7: Implementation Plan

Develop implementation plan (including trials with equipment) – being sure to assign specific names and dates, and determine meeting date to review progress (follow-up Plan).

Reminder: Steps 3-7 occur in a meeting with all topics written where all participants can see them. Use a flip chart, board or overhead during the meeting, because visual memory is an important supplement to auditory memory. Following the meeting, ensure that someone transfers the information to paper for the student's file for future reference.

Trial Use:**Step 8: Implement Planned Trials****Step 9: Follow Up on Planned Date**

Review trial use. Make any needed decisions about permanent use. Plan for permanent use.

Gathering Information about the Student

The process for assistive technology assessment developed by the Wisconsin Assistive Technology Initiative incorporates the SETT framework (Zabala, 1994) to help organize the often complex task of assistive technology decision-making. SETT stands for **S**tudent, **E**nvironment, **T**asks, **T**ools. By grouping the information into these categories, the task of selecting assistive technology becomes much more logical.

Without the SETT Framework, trying to gather and sort out all of the information necessary for assistive technology decision-making can be an overwhelming task. With it, the simplicity of gathering and grouping information allows the team to effectively use that information for competent decision-making.

Using the Student Information Guide

As you read through the Student Information Guide, the first thing you note is the questions about what assistive technology is currently being used and what has been used in the past. These are important questions. Unfortunately in our busy lives, it is possible for one service provider to be using assistive technology without others being aware of it. For example the Language Arts teacher may have discovered that Samantha writes much better with voice output on the computer. This may occur because all of the computers in her classroom are capable of providing text to speech. Students can choose to use it or not. She observes over the course of several months that Samantha regularly chooses to work using text to speech and that it has improved both the spelling and grammar in her written assignments. The other teachers and therapists may not be aware of this. Both the documenting and the sharing of that kind of information is essential.

The next section requires a file review to determine what assistive technology, if any, has been tried in the past and what the outcome of that use was. Turnover in staff can cause us to lose track of assistive technology use. Perhaps the most extreme example of this is the case of a team who spent several weeks trying to determine what augmentative communication device might work for a non-speaking student. The staff were all new and neglected to thoroughly review the file until early October, when they were startled to learn that a \$8000 dynamic display, voice output communication aid had been purchased for the student two years earlier. It was in a box, at the back of the classroom closet, safely stored away. Had someone not reviewed the file, they would have spent money on another device, when they already had a very powerful one available. The parent had told them on several occasions that there “used to be something that talked for him,” but they had not tracked down the critical information.

Now at the bottom of page 21, the team selects the sections that they feel they will need to complete. It is recommended that a team new to assistive technology assessment concentrate on only one area of concern at a time. So if the student has a learning disability and they are most concerned about writing. They would proceed to the section on Writing and answer the questions in that section. If they are concerned about more than one task, they may decide to complete more than one section of the Student Information Guide. It is up to the team to determine how many and which sections of the Guide will be helpful to them.

Each of the 12 content sections of the Student Information Guide contain questions relevant to determining the type of assistive technology and the features that might be necessary for a student to utilize assistive technology in the completion of the task. On pages 28 and 29 there are a series of questions about the student's abilities related to computer access. These two pages are not necessary to complete if the student has normal fine motor ability, but are critical if the student has a physical disability that includes fine motor difficulties that would impact their ability to keyboard. In the Section 4 – Motor Aspects of Writing, the first questions address the student's current writing ability. Because much of the assistive technology used to address writing difficulties involves keyboarding, the next question is about the student's current keyboarding ability. The next question is about any assistive technology currently used. Number five on page 31 is concerned with computer use and computer availability. At the bottom of page 31 there is a place to summarize the student's abilities and the concerns related to writing. .

Once the desired sections of the Student Information Guide are completed, the team moves on to page 44. The questions on this page are general and apply to every student. They include questions about behaviors that might impact the student's use of assistive technology any other significant factors that should be noted such as learning style, coping strategies, or interest that the team should remember and consider as they move on with the assessment process.