# Stand Up For Your Rights:

# General Skills

## A guide to standing up for your rights.



## About this guide

This booklet aims to give you some hints and steps for dealing with barriers you may face, while participating in the community as someone who is blind or has low vision. The first aim is to assist you to be a self-advocate.

Should you find you’ve gone as far as you can under your own steam, we also provide resources and contacts which will assist or support you to work towards a resolution.

## What is self-advocacy?

Self-advocacy is simply speaking out or acting for yourself to address an issue of concern. It might be a business refusing you service with a dog guide; refusing you goods or services because you don’t have a driver’s licence; refusing you insurance because you are blind; or a company which has a poorly designed web site you can’t easily use because your screen access technology can’t work with it.

Some situations amount to discrimination under the Disability Discrimination Act (the DDA), and you could consider lodging a complaint with the Australian Human Rights Commission. But as well as this, there are also some things you can do to attempt to resolve the issue yourself.

No matter what the situation, there are a number of steps you can follow to help you address the problem effectively for yourself.

## Useful personal tools

As someone who is blind or has low vision, it really helps to have a few skills and qualities in your tool kit:

* A means of note taking, such as a voice recorder, computer or thick black texta and paper – you’ll need it to keep records.
* The willingness to disclose your blindness or low vision – to explain why something presents a barrier for you.
* Networks with others who are blind or have low vision – as a source of support and useful suggestions.
* The ability to be assertive without coming across as angry and aggressive – nobody likes dealing with angry or aggressive people.

As an example, Shiva commented:

“It took a while for my new workplace to get used to making accommodations for me. They often forgot to send me the agenda for meetings via email and would have a hard copy in small print waiting for me when I arrived at the meeting. I gently and consistently reminded them and eventually they got the gist. They soon learnt that when they sent things to me electronically, I was able to participate and would get an answer or report back to them promptly. It was difficult to remind people all the time without getting frustrated, but I realised that working with a person with low vision was new to them and that it was important for me to foster good working relationships with my colleagues.”

## Steps in self-advocacy

### Know your rights

The best tool to have in your kit is to know your rights. You have rights whether you’re a restaurant goer, a student, a traveller or going about any other aspects of your life. Should you face barriers because of your vision impairment, these barriers can be addressed by an organisation’s equal opportunity policy, various complaints mechanisms (such as ombudsman) and under disability discrimination laws both federal and state.

There are also several steps you can take yourself to address the barrier.

### Acknowledge your reaction

It’s very normal to feel angry, frustrated, hurt or even disgusted when you are refused service or don’t have your special needs catered for. Particularly when you know that there are laws like the DDA which are supposed to prevent these things happening.

The first trick in self-advocacy is to acknowledge these feelings and try to put them aside so you can take a logical approach to trying to resolve the problem.

If you’re really emotional - stop, and take three deep breaths. It sounds trite, but it really works!

If you lose it, you’ll lose your negotiating power.

As an example, Ian commented:

“I used to find that I got too angry when something went wrong. My face would go red and I never seemed to be able to find the words I needed to address the situation. I now find it easier to advocate for myself. Sometimes I chat to a friend first just to make sure I am being logical and fair. I like to write down what happened and the outcome I want to achieve just to get it straight in my head first before I deal with the situation.”

### Pick your timing

When you’re highly stressed about a situation it might not be the best time to act. At the same time, you don’t want to calm down to the point where you lose your motivation to deal with the problem.

So take a moment to think about whether this is a situation you need to address now, or whether it can, and should, wait until later.

For example, you might be told by a supermarket that they won’t assist you with your weekly shopping and that you should ‘have a carer with you’. Your shopping may not be urgent at that moment, but you need to do it regularly.

In this instance, you could ask yourself how urgent is your shopping, and is it something you want to take up now when you are not as calm as you might be, or wait until tomorrow when you’ve slept on it and the store general manager is available to speak with.

Another example could be going to a restaurant in an area where there are not many restaurants open and you’re hungry, but the restaurant refuses you entry with your dog guide.

In this instance you may need to eat and there may be few other options, so you may have no choice but to deal with the situation there and then.

As an example, Sarah commented:

“My partner and I went to a restaurant with my Seeing Eye Dog and were told we could not dine there because of the dog. When it was explained he was a Seeing Eye Dog and legally they could not refuse us, the waiter still refused to let us dine in the restaurant and insisted we left.”

Sarah insisted in speaking with the manager of the restaurant who apologised for his staff’s behaviour and invited them to stay.

### Identify who to talk with

Identify the best person to talk with or write to about the situation. It might be the person you are dealing with at the time; a shift supervisor; or it might be the person who has made the policy which is making things difficult for you as someone who is blind or has low vision.

Find out the person’s name, position and contact information and note it down as soon as possible.

### Prepare your approach

Pick your battles and meter your energy!

Picking your battle is the key to maintaining the energy for good self advocacy. There are many barriers we face not only as a person who is blind or has low vision, but in life generally. We can’t fight every battle that crops up. We also can’t put the same level of energy into each issue we want to address.

For example, if you go into a bank with a friend and a teller asks your friend, ‘Can she sign?’

You might feel humiliated, annoyed or even angry. At this stage, you might either decide to leave it, because you don’t have time, or commit yourself to addressing it.

If you decide to address it on the spot, you could simply ask the teller firmly but politely to please speak to you directly.

If you prefer not to address it at the time, you could go away and begin the process of making a complaint and escalating it to the Banking Ombudsman. The first approach will educate the teller and make you feel you’ve stood up for yourself. The second approach will take much longer, involve much more effort and you may find, after all your effort of lodging the formal complaint, that it’s not even covered by the Banking Ombudsman.

It may not always be the best approach to speak out at the time; however it is often worth taking the simplest approach in the first instance.

As an example, Mohamed commented:

“At university, my lecturer did not provide me with notes in a format I could access. Rather than create a scene at the time in a full lecture theatre, I waited until after the lecture and spoke with him in his office to explain how this disadvantaged me. From then on, he always emailed me the notes.”

## Acting to address the problem

### Write down what happened

It helps you to keep the problem in perspective, be clear about the sequence of events as it could be needed as a record in the future.

Include:

* Where you were
* When it took place (noting date and time as this could be important for future steps)
* What happened
* What you said or did next (noting the content of conversations) even if on reflection you think you might have handled it differently
* Where you left things

### Gather other perspectives.

You could consider talking to others about what happened and their thoughts about what you might do about the situation. This could include colleagues, friends or even a Vision Australia Advocate. You might find it particularly helpful to discuss your issue with another person with a vision impairment who may have encountered a similar situation. You can then reflect on whether you still want to pursue it.

### Think about what outcome you want.

Once you’ve talked to others and have heard some other perspectives, you need to consider and note down what you want from your self-advocacy efforts.

You might:

* simply want an apology
* want an agreement that the policies and practices that cause the problem are changed or fixed
* want the organisation to receive some training about the needs of people who are blind or have low vision

### Try to be realistic about your thoughts about what you want.

Whatever it is, you need to consider what’s the very least you will accept in the event that you don’t get all you want.

### What you want may change as you go through the process.

For example, you go into a business and encounter a completely automated queuing system, with a touch screen producing tickets with numbers and the ticket number is flashed up on a screen when it is your turn.

You want to try and address this problem.

You might first want to demand the business abolish the system because you as a blind person can’t use it.

However, all the other customers might love it, because it makes things quicker.

So you may need to try and be a bit more practical about other ways to tackle the problem.

You might want, for example:

* an arrangement put in place so that when you access the business, you don’t have to make a song and dance to get served
* the organisation to start looking at installing a queuing system that is accessible
* the organisation not to implement such changes without consulting with people with disabilities
* a gesture of an offer of free goods or services
* all of the above

Some of these may be absolutely essential and if you don’t get them may lead to you making a discrimination complaint – however there may be others which are not deal breakers.

### Be confident!

Using the pointers in this document will help to make you a more effective self advocate, and assist you to feel more confident in your ability to address the barriers you may face as somebody who is blind or has low vision.

### Other resources

* Vision Australia’s The DDA made simple
* Vision Australia’s Self-Advocacy Education brochure

## For further information

For more information, copies of this document in your preferred format, or for advocacy support and advice, please contact the advocacy team on:

Telephone: 1300 84 74 66

Email: advocacy@visionaustralia.org