# Blind Performer Fact Sheet: Alternative Techniques and Approaches for Acting, Dance, and Music

***Performers, Directors, Stage Managers, Performing Arts Industry Professionals***

A resource of solutions to create an equal, integrated, and inclusive performing environment based on collective experience of blind and low-vision people.

The following pages highlight acting, dance, music, stage orientation, and forms of other performance accessibility including reasonable accommodations, auditions, rehearsals, cues, markers, and materials.

## Create an Inclusive and Accessible Space

Find answers about appropriate performance adaptations in the broad range of performing arts spaces. Explore the various sections to find what works for you.

* **Performers:** Learn new tips and approaches and share this resource with industry professionals to build collaborative and inclusive working relationships
* **Industry Professionals:** Support Blind Performers by incorporating techniques documented here.

### Blind Performer Information and Inclusion

In this document, the term "blind" encompasses low to no vision—anyone who requires alternative techniques (or blindness skills) in their life. Blind is a word we believe has power and it includes individuals with varying degrees of blindness.

We are seeking to be treated as equals parts in the entertainment industry and be given consideration based on our talent and not the basis of our disability. Some techniques may be different, but we don’t need to be treated as separate.

About the NFB Performing Arts Division

The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) is the transformative membership and advocacy organization of blind people in the United States. The Performing Arts Division is part of the NFB and made up of professional and hobbyist performers.

After compiling a list of advice from the members of the NFB Performing Arts Division, a committee of fact checkers and editors produced this resource taking a problem-solution approach to accessibility in the performing arts.

## Acting

General Advice

* The director and blind performer should allow their creativity to guide them in coming up with adapted techniques on set and in rehearsals.
* Putting creativity first allows techniques and ideas to grow organically based on the set and characters.
* Discuss ideas and work through them together. Doing so ensures that both parties' needs are met. Direct communication is best.

Movement on Stage or Set

* Verbal or written blocking directions, as well as entrance and exit points should be provided to blind performers as soon as possible. They may choose to have a friend, cast, or crew member go over blocking once given.
* Blind performers may choose to walk through a scene before filming to know exactly where the camera is going to be located.
* If a character is more comfortable with working on set in their power and using an assistive device such as a cane or guide dog, that can be incorporated into the scene.
* Blind performers can act on complicated stage sets with many levels and platforms meant for climbing. Before and after rehearsals, the performer may choose to review the set to feel more comfortable.
* In situations where a person needs to meet marks or move around a set, the blind performer should be allowed a reasonable amount of time to orient to the performance space prior to auditions and shows. The amount of time varies based on the complexity of the set's design and layout, but should be agreed upon by the performer, director and stage manager or an appointee. The performer may choose to walk-through with a cane, guide dog, human guide, or other means.
* Stage markers (that do not conflict with the set design) may be arranged between the performer and director or set crew. These markers assist in orientation during performances and rehearsals (e.g. color contrasts for low-vision performers, floor markings such as large bumps, thick tape, sand paper, taped-down wires or rope, strategically placed rugs or furniture, walls, and other objects.) These markers will not distract the audience, and can serve as a guide for entrances, exits, and stage position. They can also note site lines.
* To create high contrast in rehearsal spaces, use brightly colored thick gaff tape on a dark floor and vice versa to create borders, center stage, spike marks etc.; it can also be used on top of stools or blocks to create a contrast on furniture as well.
* Various props can be used on set to act as an assistive tool to ensure the individual moves as safely and fluidly as possible within the character’s body. (e.g. Someone playing a maid can use a duster or broom and make character choices to guide the movement and intentions of the character while serving the mobility needs of the actor playing the role.)
* In more densely populated scenes, it may be more difficult for the blind actor to navigate the set fluidly. If playing a sighted character, the individual may need to work out an arrangement with the surrounding characters, as well as the director to manage a convincing and organic portrayal of the character’s body. (e.g. linking arms during a party scene with a date, intentionally playing an intoxicated character, dusting off another character’s back as they walk, having specific sounds or voices established in the scene to listen and aim toward, fussing with another character’s skirts or tails as they enter, hand-in-hand for character couples, etc.)
* Lighting cues, such as stage spotlights, direction of the sun, camera lights, etc. may also help both visually and tactilely.
* Sound cues, such as music speakers, orchestra, gun shots, battle cries, outdoor surrounding sounds, etc. may be helpful for stage orientation and judging travel distance on set.
* For quick movements or changes of place, performers should practice often to solidify distances in muscle memory.
* During black outs between scenes, the performer should be aware of their closest exit point. The performer should communicate with a couple of crew members or castmates to arrange assistance if necessary. If in a hurry or during an emergency, the performer may coordinate with another actor nearby to take an elbow when exiting, particularly for quick scene changes.

Facial Expression and Gestures

* Outside of rehearsal, blind performers may request feedback from sighted acting coaches, voice teachers, or trusted family and friends.
* Blind performers should use organic gestures and facial expressions from daily life. The key is using a natural reaction to an internal feeling in conjunction with the proper facial structure.
* Blind performers may choose to have a repertoire of well-rehearsed standard gestures and expressions. Performers should feel free to use authentic facial expressions they would use in everyday situations naturally.
* Blind performers should dive deep into the character and connect their wants and needs with those of the character's, sealing the movements into the emotional memory.
* For the blind performer to copy a gesture, expression, way of walking etc., the director may need to show the action tactilely to the performer. It helps to discuss the end goal of the action and allow the blind individual to connect with it emotionally. For example, the blind performer may have never seen a queen's walk. Words like graceful and regal represent the right idea, but additional, more specific verbal cues would be even more helpful. Descriptors such as smaller gestures, slower motions, relaxed shoulders, straight back, etc.
* The blind individual may need to touch the director's legs, shoulders, or head if verbal cues are not enough. Show the performer both the incorrect and correct way to position the body. It usually helps to end with the correct position.

Audio Cues

If a performer requires a cue for situations such as time limit alerts, a quick orientation cue from on or off set etc., the performer should speak with the director, castmates, or backstage crew to come up with a creative solution that works.

E.g., a ruffling sound from a fellow castmate to alert the performer of how to orient themselves from that sound, an offset voice or sound to alert the performer to which way exactly they might need to make a solitary and quick exit, a clapping or other previously arranged sound to alert the performer of an approaching Time restriction etc.

## Dance

Rehearsals and Classes

* Instructor should be as verbal as possible. Using movement vocabulary (arch, undulate, slide), and real-life comparisons (as if closing a door with your hip) when necessary. Angles, the face of a clock, and possibly print letters are other useful verbal cues.
* Instructors should use the same verbal cues for repeated movements after they have been established with the blind performer. They may be thought of as "code words" between instructor and student.
* Further movement clarification may be done by feeling instructors’ feet, arms, body position, etc.
* If previously agreed upon, instructor may move student's arms, feet, etc. into proper positions to ensure correctness.
* An assistant in the class or choreography session may also help by making adjustments with the dancer, either through verbal or hands-on instruction. It is best if the assistant is familiar with the material.
* Assistants may also work with students one-on-one, but they must be proficient in the routine ahead of time.
* The blind dancer may stand front and center to be closer to the instructor during class.
* If it is appropriate, blind dancers may express interest in being a model so that they may learn the instructor’s desired pose or movements in a hands-on way as the rest of the class learns visually.
* Low-vision dancers may choose to take a video of the dance from the front and back of the ensemble to use in practice at home.
* The instructor, an assistant, a recording or a metronome may keep count for the blind dancer when first learning a routine. This allows the dancer to focus on correct movements. Outside counting is especially necessary when the style of music or dance is new for the student. Until the student is able to mentally count the beats correctly, they should be focused on the movements and have someone else do the counting in the beginning. Sighted students are watching to learn counting so blind students should receive that information auditorily. If verbal cues are short enough, instructors may choose to say something like: "Hip, tap, 3, left, 5, right, 7, 8" in place of counting certain numbers.

Orientation

* The instructor may verbally label walls to orient students using different points in the room (e.g. numbers, letters, cardinal directions, the mirror wall, door wall, etc.) Establish where each wall is located in the first class and when giving instruction. For turns, reference which wall students start out facing and where they should be at each point in the turn. Specify whether students are turning clockwise or counterclockwise and show them how fast to turn by using the beats of the music.
* Open the blinds to let some sun in, as students may see or feel it on their skin to help with orientation. (It might be referred to as the window wall.)
* Leave the speaker in the same position for each class. Avoid moving it around because students can learn to use it as (the speaker wall" or "speaker corner" for orientation.
* It may be useful for a student to stand near the corner of a rug to stay oriented or return to a position.
* During Solo performances, students may choose to exit the stage independently by having friends yell their name in the wings while the audience claps.
* Props may assist in orientation. For example, a towel, blanket, or rope held with a dancer on each end may suit the routine, but also function as a tether to guide the blind dancer or help maintain spatial orientation.

Calls and Auditions

The dancer may request to come early to learn the dance one on one to ensure correctness and full participation. An assistant familiar with the dance or the instructor should be prepared to teach the routine.

Stage Navigation

* Dancers may need to practice navigating the stage quickly by rehearsing multiple times.
* Dancers may feel more comfortable navigating the stage with or without an assistive device such as a cane.
* Dancers may wish to practice navigating the stage with or without a cane before or after rehearsals.
* Dancers may prefer to have a fellow performer help them with stage navigation. Examples include bumping arms with another performer, locking arms with another performer, holding hands with another performer, holding a shoulder or arm of a performer in front of the blind performer, and using another dancer as a visual cue.
* The dancer may wish to receive audio feedback from other performers on stage such as verbal feedback when to stop or snapping fingers, rubbing clothing and other sounds in the space so the blind or low-vision person knows how to hit a mark.

## Music

Reading

* Musicians may request sheet music ahead of time for site reading. This is a reasonable accommodation for them to convert it into an accessible format.
* Performers who use braille music should be given time to review the music before sight reading, especially if they require both hands to play an instrument. (They will need to memorize what they read without the benefit of accessing it while playing.)
* Large print music on extra-large paper may be useful for musicians with low vision.
* Audio recordings may be helpful when learning music. Performers and directors may discuss versions of the piece and how various artists have interpreted the work in their recordings.
* Musicians who read braille or large print music may benefit from using the music in conjunction with the recording. Recordings may be useful in quickening the learning process because scales, arpeggios, and other structures in music are easily identified; however, printed music, and the ability to view the work as written by the composer or arranger to make stylistic choices, is an important skill for any performer, and blind musicians are no exception.

Performance

* Many blind performers listen for breathing cues or a whisper from the conductor or other performers around them to know when to begin.
* Tactile cues such as a nudge (for an unpredictable passage) may also be helpful.

## Material Accessibility (Scripts, etc.)

Auditions

* Directors should grant blind performers access to the script ahead of time (even for cold reads and auditions) as a reasonable accommodation. Performers may request scripts ahead of time (electronically should suffice) so that they can produce it in their own preferred accessible format.
* Performers should be allowed to familiarize themselves with the script for a cold read. Not necessarily with the purpose of memorization, but so that they may read the script fluently as sighted actors will naturally do.
* To minimize scanner or formatting errors between print and braille, it is often best to have a computer document, possibly on a thumb drive or SD card, to be accessed by the individual. Emailing or texting the text or document is also an option.
* If a document cannot be given to the individual in advance or during the audition or job due to a lack of the resource at the time, giving them a few minutes to put the document in an accessible format should be permitted (e.g. Retrieve an electronic copy via a thumb drive, scan and read document with available technology to them, step aside with someone so as to quickly dictate or memorize the text, etc.)
* If this is a prepared or published role or work, the electronic copy will be helpful in advance. The individual can work out how to get it in a more accessible format for themselves, or to see if it already exists. They may be able to retrieve it in a different format from the publishers, or access a copy through the National Library Service, Bookshare, Learning Ally, or a similar service.
* Directors should allow performers to bring a braille display, large print script, hardcopy braille, audio file player, etc. on set for reading.

Rehearsal

* Performers should memorize script as early as possible.
* Performers may use hard copy, digital, audio file, human reader etc. to rehearse and memorize lines. It is up to the performer to request the alternative format for the material so the individual may access the material in a suitable manner.

## Finale for Now

Blind performers can in the performance space, whether it be acting, dancing, music, or another art form. Together, blind artists can live the life they want to as an entertainer.

Keeping open and clear communication at the forefront will ensure everyone is able to successfully do their best work with your creative vision while comfortably honoring the blind performer’s artistic autonomy.

Thank you for reviewing this document. If you have questions or interested in connecting for more resources, reach out or share feedback to the NFB Performing Arts Division at nfbpad@gmail.com.

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