



# Jump-Start Student Learning with Technology

By Eric Endlich, PhD, IECA (MA) and Joan Green, MA, CCC-SLP

I recently had the honor of interviewing Joan Green, MA, CCC-SLP, Washington, DC-area speech-language pathologist and author of *Assistive Technology in Special Education: Resources to Support Literacy, Communication, and Learning Differences*.

**Endlich: Why is it important for independent educational consultants (IECs) to be familiar with assistive technology?**

**Green:** To help determine a good fit for a student, everyone needs to be sure that there are appropriate resources and services available. We take assistive technologies such as hearing aids and eyeglasses for granted, but they are critical for learning. There are other technologies that many of us may use and benefit from, but students with diagnosed disabilities need them to access the curriculum, stay engaged, and demonstrate knowledge.

Technology plays a vital role in every student's college experience. If IECs and counselors aren't aware of how technology can be used to help overcome barriers and take advantage of strengths, then it is more difficult to truly assess whether or not the environment will be a favorable one for the student.

Families expect college experts to know how students can use technology for vital tasks such as taking notes, staying organized, writing essays, studying, and interacting with other students, TAs, and professors. Some students do best if they can watch recorded lectures at their own pace prior to discussion sections. Others do best when they can have access to digital notes or slides prior to lectures. It's important to know whether students are permitted to record lectures and student interactions so they can learn in the moment and not be concerned with taking notes. These questions are important whether classes are held in person on campus or virtually.

**Endlich: What is the best way for IECs to come up to speed, so that they can advise their students more thoughtfully?**

**Green:** Reading this article is a great first step, as is connecting with colleagues who are well-versed in the use of technology to support college students. Also, reaching out and asking the office in charge of implementing student accommodations and learning support how they support their student body with the help of technology.



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Computers, tablets, and phones now come with built-in, powerful tools for students who learn differently. Are your students aware of the tech features they need to access content and be effective self-advocates? Students often need help setting them up and figuring out strategies for effective implementation.

I've written several books on this topic, and I provide online coaching and courses for families and professionals. I frequently speak on this topic online.

**Endlich: Which students should IECs be talking to about this subject?**

**Green:** Students who need help with organization and time management, as well as those who have reading and writing challenges. Many—but not all—of these individuals have had IEPs and 504s. Private high schools may have provided learning support informally.

Students who are at risk for getting overwhelmed and stressed, or who may have medical conditions that limit endurance, are also ideal candidates for using tech to make life easier in college.

**Endlich: When can students implement this technology on their own, and when do they need to request it as an accommodation?**

**Green:** If students require specific features provided by assistive technology, or certain benefits such as extended time on tests or priority registration, then they need to make sure they will have access to those features and accommodations in college.

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There are tools, like digital calendars and using text-to-speech and speech-to-text, that all students may benefit from, but that students may require assistance using to increase success. If the university is flexible in letting the student use whatever means they need to access content and show what they know—and if they provide videos and notes ahead of time, and accessible content to everybody proactively—then maybe students don't need an accommodation. It may suffice if they are entering college with confidence about how to set themselves up with these tools, and if they are already strong self-advocates.

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Even if courses are online, sometimes not all digital content is accessible to individuals who have reading and vision-related disabilities. Some universities are fine with everybody using features available on the devices we already use. So why not use them in order to help with reading and writing and organization? Other places have frowned on the use of technology because it presented yet another source of distraction for students.

**Endlich: What kind of impact are you seeing of the pandemic on how students are interfacing with technology?**

**Green:** There's a scramble now for students, as well as educators, to become more tech-savvy very quickly. The use of technology is no longer in question.

COVID-19 has forced us to rely on technology for classes. The traditional in-person lecture format has been replaced, at least for now.

It's really helpful if students develop skills such as using notifications and reminders to use their time efficiently, setting up effective digital management systems to quickly find what they need online, splitting their screens to participate in online sessions, taking screenshots to capture images on the screen, and capturing notes that are synced to audio and visual content.

In a negative sense, many of us are in Zoom meetings all day; it's tiresome. We're not getting physical exercise or seeing people in person. And you miss the camaraderie; you don't get a lot of the social-emotional benefits.

**Endlich: Can you give me some examples of really useful tools that many people don't know about?**

**Green:** The first two are speech-to-text and text-to-speech. You can have text highlighted and read out loud to you with different voices and at different speeds. If you're on an iPhone, often you just set this up in the accessibility settings. You can just select words and have it read out loud. If you're in a Google Document or Microsoft Word, it's a feature that's already there. In the newest Edge browser,

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even PDFs can be easily read aloud. A lot of people don't realize that that exists, as well as the ability to just talk and have the words turn into text, whether you're in Microsoft Word or Google Docs or sending a text message. It's just a matter of configuring the settings.

I'm very focused on distance learning. If you don't have multiple monitors, it helps to be able to split your screen, so you take notes on one half and participate on the other half. A split screen is also helpful as you read an article and type up an essay so you don't have to keep switching back and forth between tabs. Many students that I'm seeing aren't that tech-savvy with a lot of these skills.

**Endlich:** You've mentioned the importance of notetaking. What's important for people to know about notetaking and how they can develop that skill?


**Green:** A lot of people who might have ADHD or reading, writing, or language problems struggle to process information and learn while they're taking notes. And if they try to write something down, they miss content. Much of what we're doing these days is listening to lectures. In distance learning, many professors may end up flipping the content: not giving live lectures, but providing videos so students can learn at their own pace. They can capture a screenshot, stop the video and take notes, and then continue. And if there is synchronous learning—having real-time live debates or conversations, I like that much better. Students get together and have that socialization and interaction.

**Endlich:** So students who have trouble processing, who can't listen and take notes simultaneously, actually do better with asynchronous distance learning, because they can pause, take notes, and absorb the material better. People may complain that online learning is not as good, but for some students, it may actually be beneficial.

**Green:** And people with physical/health-related issues can learn at their own pace. So for some students that's good. I look for the silver linings. This is going to make people realize that a lot of these technology features are good for everybody. They just become assistive technology when without them you're unable to learn.

**Endlich:** Any other important advice for IECs?

**Green:** Technology can be a student's friend and help them to be much more successful in college. These tools are included in our devices now. You don't have to spend hundreds of dollars to get a good dictation software or text-to-speech package, but you do need to know how to use it. So it's really helpful to have some support at the university to enable these features, and to work with a student on fine-tuning to make it more successful. And that can be done from a distance or in person.

*Learning how to learn more* about these supports is critical. Once students know that they might want to do something like dictating to Google Docs, then they just search for a video tutorial. Look at this with a problem-solving approach. Because there's so much information—you just have to know what to look for. 

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