

AUDIO TEXTBOOKS AN IMPORTANT TOOL FOR THOSE WITH LEARNING-RELATED & LOW VISION PROBLEMS

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Abstract

Audio textbooks can be an important adjunct to the usual and customary care that optometrists provide individuals with learning-related vision disorders or low vision. In particular, audio textbooks enable students to greatly improve reading comprehension, keep up with their schoolwork and meet their educational potential. The nation's largest library of audio textbooks is Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic® (RFB&D®), a nonprofit, volunteer service organization. In 2002, a quarter of a million recorded books were circulated among RFB&D's 117,000 members in kindergarten through graduate school. Nearly 75% of these members have learning disabilities. The author discusses the eligibility requirements to become a registered member with RFB&D; the success stories of several students' struggles with dyslexia until they heard about RFB&D; the unprecedented navigation and convenience of the new CD ROM technology; how to learn more about the library's services or become a donor or volunteer reader at one of the 29 recording studios across the country.

Key Words

AudioPlus™, audio textbooks, dyslexia, learning disability, low vision, Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic, RFB&D, standard print, visual impairment.

Introduction

In addition to the usual and customary care optometrists provide individuals with learning related vision problems or low vision, they can also serve as an important resource for information about *audio textbooks*.

"Audio textbooks are an effective accommodation for many students with learning disabilities that affect reading. These students report that listening to the audio textbook while following along with the print version or listening to the audiobook by itself, greatly improves comprehension, helping the students keep up with their peers."¹

A major advantage of audio textbooks is their convenience, enabling users to independently pursue grade level work on their own, whenever and wherever they want.

The nation's largest library of audio textbooks is the Recording for Blind & Dyslexic® (RFB&D®), a nonprofit, volunteer service organization. It serves people who cannot effectively read standard print because of a visual impairment, dyslexia or other learning or physical disability.

RFB&D's master library has more than 93,000 titles on audio-tape and compact disc recorded by nearly 5,200 trained volunteers at 29 RFB&D recording studios across the country.

Volunteers are required to have expertise in the subject areas they read for RFB&D. This ensures that materials, even at the highest levels of study, are presented accurately and consistently.

RFB&D offers a wide range of topics in virtually every subject area including science, math, geography, economics, literature, and history. The collection extends across all academic levels, from kindergarten through graduate and professional school. It is also available to adults who no longer attend school but use audio books to pursue professional or personal interests.

Chances are, if a book is in your local school or college curriculum, whether it's *Harry Potter*, *An Introduction to Quantum Physics* or *Black's Law Dictionary*, it's in RFB&D's library, or may even be in the process of being recorded. Often, if a particular book or text has not already been recorded, RFB&D will record it on request.

To learn if the books needed by your patients for their schoolwork or recreational reading are available in the RFB&D library, telephone its member services offices toll free at 800-221-4792 or visit their online catalog at: www.rfbd.org/catalog.

Eligibility and Registration

Anyone with a documented print disability, such as a learning disability, visual impairment or other physical disability is eligible to become a registered member with RFB&D. Included are those with mobility limitations that interfere with reading such as turning pages or holding a book comfortably.

RFB&D offers two types of memberships: Student Individual Memberships

are paid by an educational institution on behalf of a student. Personal Individual Memberships are paid for directly by the student. To register, a membership application needs to be completed and submitted to RFB&D with a payment of a one-time \$50 registration fee and a \$25 annual membership fee. RFB&D members may then borrow audio textbooks for up to one year. If payment of the membership fee is a financial hardship, a waiver may be given.

RFB&D also offers three levels of Institutional Memberships for schools, school districts, colleges or other agencies and facilities serving students of any age with print disabilities.

Now Available on CD

In September 2002, RFB&D released an initial collection of digitally recorded textbooks on compact disc (CD). This provides members with unprecedented navigation and convenience. RFB&D's AudioPlus™ textbooks can be loaded to special players or standard multimedia personal computers equipped with appropriate software. The contents of a standard textbook can now be contained on a single CD so that students are able to navigate by page, chapter, or heading with the press of a button. Students can also bookmark areas of interest in the text for later reference. Standard audio textbooks require between eight and 12 four-track cassette tapes that can only be navigated in a linear way by forwarding or rewinding through a series of page indicator beep tones. CD playback hardware and software as well as desktop and portable cassette player models are available for nonprofit sale through RFB&D.

RFB&D now offers its most frequently requested titles on compact discs and is in the process of converting its library from analog to digital. RFB&D is continuously adding new digitally recorded titles to its collection. Since RFB&D's AudioPlus textbooks were introduced, members have ordered more than 14,000 books in this new format, and orders are expected to continue to climb as new playback options are being introduced.

Current Usage

In 2002, a quarter of a million recorded books were circulated among RFB&D's 117,000 members in kindergar-

ten through graduate school, nearly 75% of whom have learning disabilities.²

These students report that listening to an audio textbook while following along with the print version, or listening to the audiobook by itself, greatly improves comprehension, helping students keep up with their schoolwork and meet their educational potential.

Yale student Seth Burstein, cited in the book, *Overcoming Dyslexia*, endured years of struggle with dyslexia until he heard about RFB&D. "I could remember just about everything I heard," he is quoted as saying, "but I read too slowly to keep up, and so much effort was put into trying to get the words out that I had little comprehension afterwards. Once I began the recordings from RFB&D, everything changed. I was able to read along with the books at my leisure, absorb nearly everything I was reading and was no longer reliant on my parents to read to me. I started to feel better about myself. I really was learning the material, and I no longer made excuses to avoid doing my work because it made me feel bad. The tapes have changed my life. For the first time ever, I got straight A's."³

As reported by RFB&D's Winter 2003 issue of *Impact*, Shannon Ramsay, Los Gatos, California, who is blind, has used audio textbooks from RFB&D since she was in elementary school. She credits the organization for "saving" her life while she was a student at Stanford University, particularly by providing recordings of works by Plato and Aristotle along with theological texts. She graduated from Stanford with a major in political science, a minor in German and a 3.2 grade point average. She is currently studying public interest and international law at the University of California Law School.⁴

In a study published in *Teaching Exceptional Children*, a research team from Johns Hopkins University and RFB&D, reported that with audio textbooks, "Teachers have a new way to reach struggling students and the students are able to access difficult material with greater ease and independence."⁵

Further Information

For information about RFB&D's library services, individual or institutional memberships, playback devices and listening accessories, or to become a donor or volunteer at one of their 29 recording

studios across the country, visit their website at www.rfbd.org or telephone Member Services at 800-221-4792.

Summary

Audio textbooks are invaluable to individuals who cannot read standard print effectively because of a visual impairment, learning disability or other physical disability. Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic (RFB&D), a nonprofit organization with the nation's largest audio textbook library, provides recorded books at all educational levels in a broad range of topics that greatly enhance a person's academic performance and quality of life.

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Editor's note

Dr. Levoy has for many years, been a volunteer reader for Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic and can be reached at b.levoy@att.net.

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