

Aira: Overview and Benefits for Students

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Introduction

This document provides an overview of [Aira](http://aira.io) (aira.io), a service that provides 24 hours of assistance to individuals who are Blind or Visually Impaired (BVI). Operated by either a smartphone app or Aira's Horizon Kit, Aira can be powerful both in and out of the academic environment. Though released in the United States, the service's coverage has expanded to include a variety of countries, including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, and the United Kingdom.

Dubbed "Explorers," users can call or text their questions to an agent. Hired and trained to work with people who are BVI to accomplish a variety of activities (from identifying packages to navigating through a grocery store), Aira's agents carefully observe but never force suggestions on an explorer. In fact, Aira is often deemed a "visual interpreter," following the procedures used when interpreting in conference rooms and financial agencies. For example, an agent helping someone travel through Macy's to find cologne would not suggest buying one brand over the other. In such circumstances, agents are able to read the information located on a bottle and perform additional research if needed. Furthermore, street crossings must be done by the explorer. While such elements as the shape of a curb can be explained, agents may not indicate when it is safe to cross a street. Visual directions, whether indoors or outside, however, are perfectly appropriate and can make the service extraordinarily powerful. All in all, agents' main goal is objectivity.

How to Connect

To access the service, first-time Explorers have two options: They can either download the native Aira application on their phone or use the service's own equipment. The app serves as the backbone to calls and messages, enabling explorers to speak or write to an agent. Due to smartphones' built-in camera, users can also use their phone to contact an Aira agent. The video comes from the back camera, making it simple to adjust the view without turning the handset. Available to members who elect certain plans, Aira's technology—called the Horizon Kit—is packaged with smart glasses as well as a tether cable and Samsung Galaxy J7 Prime smartphone. Having this setup gives Explorers a few advantages, including the ability to read printed material via Chloe, Aira's own artificial intelligence.

Onboarding Session

A user's first Aira call will not cut into any allotted minutes, in part because a newly-subscribed member is assumed not to have much familiarity with the service. The other reason relates to how subsequent calls will be handled. During the first call, an agent is automatically notified of an Explorer's status. The agent, with the Explorer's consent, begins the onboarding session. Spanning about 30 minutes, this training includes how to use the service, a layout of the mobile app, and a profile of the explorer that will be available to agents who pick up the line.

Every user has a profile that contains specifics about whether they travel with a cane or guide dog, emergency contact information, documentation of any health concerns, and the amount of detail that agents must give (this ranges from little information to thorough accounts of one's surroundings).

Agents can also take an approach that tries to satisfy all of these choices, a fact that the Explorer must make clear when presented with the option. In other words, agents will not provide too little or too much detail. The reason for these choices may not be immediately apparent. In a classroom setting, having little information can be useful when an instructor is writing on the board and the student only needs to have the material read or the drawings described. Likewise, vividness is necessary if that same student tours a library and uses Aira exclusively for such trips. Of course, the naturalness of interactions always factors into any call; an explorer can always ask an agent to vary the description when needed. During the final portion of the onboarding session, users have the option to do an activity or "task" with the agent to experience the effectiveness of the service. This includes taking a stroll through a park or having a series of boxes and canned goods read at home. Additional time is given for such activities, considering that some take longer than others.

Special Features for Academic Settings

Although the onboarding session covers Aira's features, many of them deserve specific attention. Aside from reading or explaining what they see, agents can track an Explorer's location via a dashboard, which enables them to give accurate directions. Having access to maps simplifies this process and makes navigating complex buildings such as airports completely doable. The agent's ability to create a folder in Google Drive is also important, as it may include any material relevant to the explorer's needs. Special handouts, classroom numbers, and pictures, for example, can be saved for any agent to view. Because class schedules can easily be obtained, a student could take a photo of the document and ask for that document to be stored in his or her folder. This would help an agent properly guide the student to a classroom that he or she has not yet visited. Similarly, a college student would be able to find a professor's office without the hassle of asking multiple people for assistance.

An Explorer only needs to hold a phone or look at an intended item until a photo is taken, which means that multiple photos can be snapped. Each photo appears on an agent's computer screen seconds after it is captured. This makes reading textbooks convenient, especially when they have complex figures. More impactful is the ability to save chapters, making it possible for a student to call Aira at any time and request them to be read. Enhancements can also be applied to a photo, allowing for clarity and—for an explorer—more ease in terms of the camera. Best of all, agents are capable of labeling photos and placing them in the app's built-in inbox. An Explorer could then upload them to social media or send them via a text message or email.

Remotely controlling a computer only adds to the service's potential, relieving students from having to fret over enormous accessibility pitfalls. Using TeamViewer, agents can access graphical interfaces on websites and unlabeled buttons in software programs. Answering questions that require dragging and dropping becomes a breeze, as does tackling an assignment made up entirely of drawings. While the Explorer is on the line, an agent could easily resolve these and other issues, which still allows the Explorer to hear and disconnect the session if necessary. Should access to a computer be difficult, emailing the agent or asking them to research a subject is also possible.

Other Academic Uses

Suggestions regarding the use of Aira in academic settings are listed below to demonstrate the numerous opportunities the service affords students who are BVI. Some of these examples come from real-world uses of Aira. With the help of Aira agents, students can:

1. Operate touchscreens, such as those found on printers or vending machines.
2. Complete graphically-based assignments, as well as those that feature charts or diagrams.
3. Format essays to meet the standards of MLA, APA, etc. Note that agents may not suggest new concepts or alter a paper's stance; they can only modify the visual components of that paper.
4. Create PowerPoint presentations, provided that the material is already written, or the student knows what to incorporate.
5. Have a movie or television episode described.
6. Read printed text found on boards, books, and syllabi.
7. Receive assistance when on a field trip. Students can have museum panels read, ask an agent to describe animals and their activities in zoos, request that the scenery in a parade or circus be explained, etc.
8. Locate, either online or physically, a bus used for public transport.
9. Have a physical exercise described, or get assistance utilizing gym equipment.

Plans and Free Usage

Currently, Aira has three monthly plans, which are outlined on the [Aira Pricing page](https://aira.io/pricing) (aira.io/pricing). Some organizations and businesses offer a free unlimited Aira call when users are on their premises, known as Aira Access locations, including:

- Boston International Airport
- Colorado Talking Book Library
- American Foundation for the Blind

Those who are not Explorers can sign up as guests in these locations, which gives them the opportunity to experience a handful of Aira's capabilities. One of these relates to programs and devices designed by Vispero. If a guest or member of the service had one of the company's products and faced a certain technical issue (for example, a stop in speech), they would be able to call an agent for free to find a solution.

If a user is searching for a job, [Aira's Employment Program](https://go.aira.io/employment) (go.aira.io/employment) allows Explorers to use the service for free if they are doing anything relevant to their job search: searching job listings, checking the format of a resume, or buying clothes appropriate for an interview.