

# GUIDE TECHNIQUES

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Guide techniques, also called sighted guide or human guide, are practical and easy-to-learn techniques where one person—the guide—helps another person who is blind or has low vision to safely get around. Guide techniques require active participation by both parties; the guide and the person being guided act as a team. The guide is responsible for ensuring the safety of the person who is blind or has low vision by:

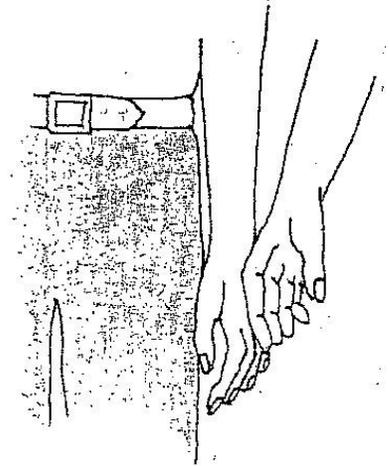
- providing information about the environment through specific body movements and concise verbal descriptions
- detecting and avoiding obstacles or potential hazards
- moving at a pace that is safe and comfortable for the person being guided

In turn, the person being guided participates by:

- maintaining contact with the guide in a manner that does not hinder the guide's movements
- following and reacting to the guide's body movements and verbal instructions
- providing the guide with precise information regarding the type and extent of assistance needed. If the person who is visually impaired is an experienced traveler, this might include informing an inexperienced guide of the correct methods to use.

## Initiating Contact

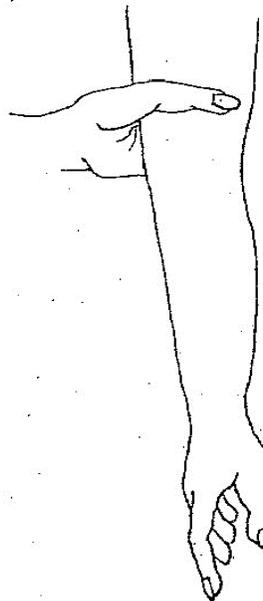
When you approach the person who is blind or has low vision, first tell them who you are and ask if they would like assistance. If they want your help, say something like "Here's the back of my hand," and initiate physical contact by gently placing the back of your hand against their hand. This enables the person to slide their hand up your arm, locate your elbow, and hold your arm slightly above the elbow.



## Standard Grasp

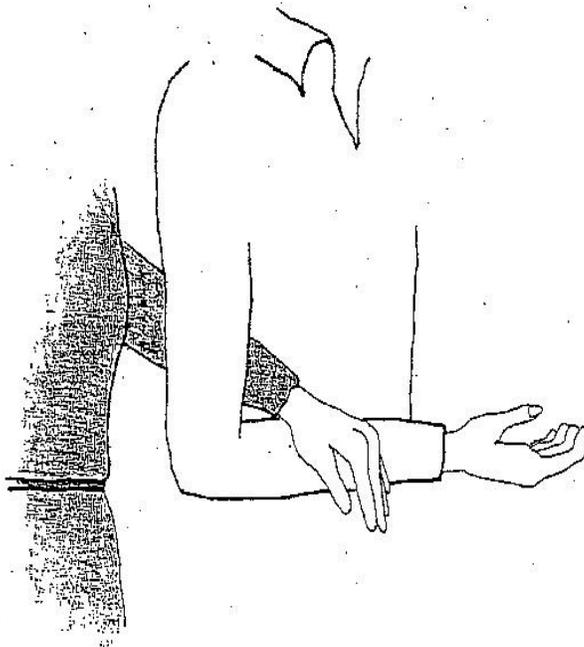
The person with impaired vision grasps the guide's arm just above the elbow. Their thumb is on the outside of the guide's arm, and their grip should be firm enough to maintain contact without causing the guide discomfort.

For a small child, you can adapt the standard grasp by having the child hold your wrist. The grasp is the same: the child's thumb should be on the outside of the guide's wrist. Or simply have the child hold your hand if it is easier for the child.



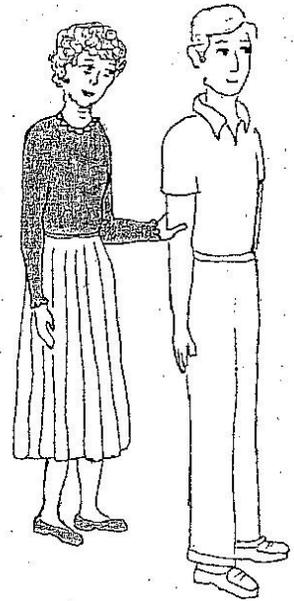
## Support Grasp

For some individuals, the standard grasp is insufficient. People with a physical limitation or with balance issues may need more support than the standard grasp provides. If this is the case, have the person you are guiding link their arm through yours. The underside of the guide's lower arm should be facing upward. (see drawing) This position takes the strain off the guide's shoulder and back, and gives the person being guided a greater sense of stability and security. Since the amount of space between both people is decreased when using the support grasp, the guide should walk at a slower pace.



## Stance and Pace

As the guide, you may either extend your arm downward at your side or bend your arm at the elbow, whatever is comfortable for you. The arm of the person being guided is bent at the elbow, forming an L shape. Their forearm is parallel with the ground, while their upper arm is held close to their side. The guide should walk about a half-step or one step ahead of the person they are guiding. This distance between both people gives the person being guided time to react to sudden stops or changes in the guide's movements. It also helps prevent the person being guided from inadvertently stepping on the guide's heels.



If the person you are guiding is using a white cane, they can either just hold it or they can use their cane as you are walking together. If it is a folding-style white cane, the person might choose to fold it up while they are walking with the guide.



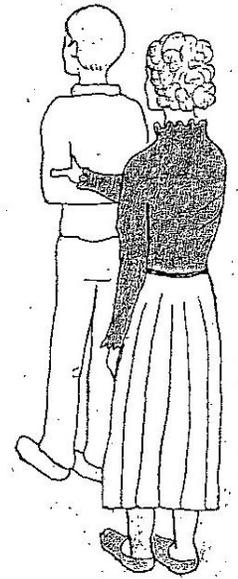
If the person being guided has a guide dog, offer your left arm since most likely their right hand will be free. (Guide dogs are trained to walk on their handler's left side, and the handler holds the dog's harness in their left hand.) The guide dog handler may then place their guide dog in a heeling (non-guiding) position. Also, please remember that a guide dog is not a pet; it is a trained service animal and should not be distracted. Refrain from talking to or petting the guide dog while you are guiding someone. A good rule of thumb is to always ask the guide dog handler for permission if you want to pet their dog, even when the guide dog is not in harness and working.

As the guide, you will be the one to set the walking pace according to the environmental conditions. However, do be sensitive to what your partner's body language may be telling you. For example, if the person you are guiding tightens their grasp or pulls back on your arm, ask them if they would like you to slow down. Encourage the person you are guiding to let you know if they want you to do something differently.

While acting as a guide it is not necessary to give a running commentary of every little thing you see. If the person you are guiding asks for specific information, by all means provide it. Otherwise, try to keep details to a minimum and offer only essential information. For example, tell your partner when you are approaching a curb or a stairway and whether the stairs go up or down. Be clear when giving directions; avoid phrases such as "this way" or "over there" which only cause confusion. Never just walk away from the person you are guiding. If you must leave for a moment, communicate this to your partner and find a safe, secure spot for them to wait for you.

## Narrow Spaces

To safely negotiate narrow spaces, use the following technique. As you, the guide, approach the narrow space, place your arm behind your back. This is a signal for the person you are guiding to move directly behind you. You, the guide, may need to verbally prompt your partner to step behind you. The person being guided should extend their arm straight out; this increases the distance between the both of you so the person being guided does not accidentally bump into the guide or step on the guide's heels. The person being guided should slide their hand down to the guide's wrist; this makes it easier to walk behind the guide. In turn, the guide should slow down the pace and take smaller steps. After passing through the narrow space in single-file fashion, resume the regular guide position.



## Doors

When you approach a door, tell the person you are guiding whether the door opens to the right or left and whether it opens toward or away from them. Guide, if you need the person you are guiding to switch sides, have them glide their hand across your back until they locate your other arm, then grip it in the same way: above the elbow, their thumb on the outside of your arm. If the individual is not holding a cane, they should slowly raise their free hand, their palm facing outward, to locate the door so they can help hold the door open as you both pass through. If the person you are guiding does not have the strength to hold the door ajar or does not have a free hand, slow down the pace and move carefully. Guide, try to avoid turning your body around; instead reach across with your free hand to hold the door open long enough for the both of you to pass safely through.

## Stairs

Guide, tell the person you are guiding when you are approaching stairs and whether they go up or down. Approach the stairs head on, not at an angle. You, the guide, should position the person you are guiding next to the handrail, then prompt them to reach out and grasp it. Pause for a moment before taking the first step. If the person you are guiding is unfamiliar with the staircase or seems hesitant, ask the person to slowly inch their toe forward and locate the base of the first step (if they are ascending stairs) or the edge of the first step (if they are descending stairs). After making sure your partner has a good grip on the handrail, you, the guide, will take the first step. Use alternate footsteps. The person who is being guided should remain one step behind you. When you get to a landing or to the bottom or top of the stairs, pause for a second, and inform your partner that there are no more stairs.



Photo Credit: <http://savh.org.sg>

## Seating

As you approach a chair, tell the person with the visual impairment which way the chair is facing in relation to them. For example, if you and the person you are guiding are approaching a chair at a dining table, you might say "The back of the chair is directly in front of you." You, the guide, will place your guiding hand on the back of the chair. This allows your partner to slide their hand down the guide's arm and locate the back of the chair. They can then pull the chair out on their own while simultaneously extending the other hand forward to locate the dining table. If you are approaching the front of a seat—such as a sofa—slowly guide the person so that the back of their legs are touching the front edge of the sofa, then tell them "The sofa is directly behind you." Your partner can then reach down and lightly sweep the sofa cushion with their hand to make sure nothing is there, then seat themselves. If the person you are guiding is frail or has balance issues, offer support when they are sitting down; otherwise, allow the person to seat themselves.

## TEAMWORK

If the person you are guiding is a family member, friend, coworker, or neighbor, you will quickly discover what works best for both of you. With good communication, a positive attitude, and teamwork, you will both soon be moving together like a well-oiled machine. Best wishes and safe travels!

“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.”

~Helen Keller

