A GUIDE TO APHANTASIA

No Picture Needed

A simple guide for anyone who works with, lives with, or cares about kids with Aphantasia

Teachers
Counselors
Parents

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“AF-an-TAY-zha”

— Adam Zeman, the scientist who coined the term

Stop for a second before flipping the page. This paper covers a situation you will likely face every single day rather than a rare condition you might only see once in a career. If my last three years of classroom observations and research play out the way they have, up to 1 in 5 of the people you work with every day are struggling to understand your words. Clients. Co-workers. The kid in the third row. The parent on the phone. The colleague down the hall.

They're already in the room,
already struggling,
and already hearing that they just need to try harder.

You are about to find out why just trying harder doesn't work. And what to do about it.

Something else you should read before moving on. The following are the last words I wrote for this paper. I wrote this paragraph hoping to find a home for it somewhere. You've discovered its home.

After writing over 12,000 words, I've come to a conclusion that is hard to admit. You should hear it before you continue.

It is almost impossible to write this paper in a way that works equally well for people who visualize and people who don't. I can't do it. As I write, I am picturing what I am describing. I am using visual words to describe a non-visual world.

The philosopher Thomas Nagel once asked, "What is it like to be a bat?" His point was that you can know everything about how a bat navigates by sonar and still have no idea what that experience actually feels like from the inside. I have the same problem here.

One person with aphantasia put it bluntly: "What you are saying might be true, but you are using words that are unavailable to me, and so it does not ring as true."

I cannot get out of my own head.
I cannot stop imagining what it is like to not have pictures in my head.
I cannot fully escape my own mind's eye, even when writing about its absence.

What I can do is name that limitation here, at the start, so you know I know.

In the end, I am like the traveler in HG Wells' story who found the Country of the Blind. I have spent this entire process trying to be a king of information, only to realize that my primary tool, my sight, is the very thing that prevents me from truly standing where many of my students stand. Instead of an academic overview, I am providing a perspective from the front of the classroom.

What This Paper Is About

Most of the ways we teach, support, and guide children assume a working mind's eye. Visualization. Mental imagery. Picture this. Imagine that. These techniques are so common, and work so reliably for most people, that nobody ever thought to question them.

Aphantasia is just the word for not being able to picture things in your head on purpose. A person with aphantasia, when asked to picture something, does not experience a picture.

> *No image at all. Just the facts without the picture.*

Most have always been this way, and most have never had a word for it.

In order to transform pedagogy, you have to first transform ideology. That sounds fancy, but it just means you have to change how you see the kid before you can change how you teach them. This isn't a research paper. It's a guide written by a middle school teacher who has spent more than thirty years in the classroom. I just want to give the right people a heads-up so they can try something else. When we keep handing a child tools that don't fit their hand, they stop trying to use them. This is about what happens when we finally stop.

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About the Appendix

This guide is accompanied by five one-page documents. There is one for teachers, one for counselors and therapists, one for parents, one for students encountering this idea for the first time, and one for partners and spouses.

These documents serve as ways to begin the conversation instead of summarizing the entire guide. Written to earn your read, not replace it. Each one ends with an invitation to come back here. I think you'll be glad you did.

At a Glance

? **What is aphantasia?**
The absence of a mind's eye. When asked to picture something, a person with aphantasia experiences darkness, not a dim image, not a blur. No internal visual screen at all. It exists on a spectrum from total absence to vivid, almost photographic imagery. Most people fall somewhere in the middle, a meaningful number are at the low end without knowing it.

≈ **Is it in any diagnostic manual?**
No. Aphantasia does not appear in the DSM-5, ICD-11, or any other diagnostic framework. It is a descriptive term, not a diagnosis. There is no formal screening tool, no referral to a doctor, no treatment. The goal is not to label. It is to adapt.

% **How common is it?**
Research estimates 1–4% of the population has full aphantasia. It's likely higher. The broader low-visualization spectrum likely affects 10–25% of any given group. Most of those people have never heard the word aphantasia and have no idea their experience is different from everyone else's.

! **Why does it matter for you?**
Most of the ways we teach, support, and guide children assume that picturing something is something everyone can do: visualization-based coping strategies, creative writing prompts, multi-step directions, reading comprehension exercises, mindfulness, and most popular memory techniques. If a child can't visualize, a lot of those tools don't work and nobody has told them why.

A Note on This Document

I am a middle school teacher. I have been in classrooms for over three decades. I am not a psychologist, or a clinician. What I am is someone who has spent the last three years digging into aphantasia because it explained something I could not explain any other way.

The patterns I describe show up in every room. A student who cannot mentally preview a new cafeteria will carry that anxiety to your classroom, your therapy session, and your kitchen table. The more people around that child who get it, the better.

Most of what follows is from my own classroom and conversations. I spent three years watching closely and I want to tell you what I saw. In previewing this paper, some people with aphantasia told me I was wrong about certain things. I took those seriously. But in most cases, when I could go back and forth with the person, it turned out to be a language mismatch, not an observation mismatch. We were describing the same thing with different words, or simply a misunderstanding of the meaning attached to some of my “visual words”. Which, given what this paper is about, feels about right.

One thing worth knowing about the research is that aphantasia is still a young field of study. The term was first used by Adam Zeman and colleagues at the University of Exeter in 2015, building on a case first described in their 2010 research. We are just on the edge of fully understanding aphantasia. It’s exciting to be here.

Close your eyes. Picture a red apple.

For most people, something appears. A shape, a color, maybe a stem. The image is not real, but it feels like seeing.

For a person with aphantasia, nothing appears. Not a dim outline. Not a flicker. The instruction to picture something produces only darkness, the way a monitor is blank when it is not receiving a signal. The person knows what an apple is. They know it is red. They know it is round. The knowledge is completely intact. Their brain just doesn't put it on a screen.

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What Aphantasia Is

Aphantasia is not a failure of knowledge. It is the absence of something most people never knew they had, because they never had to think about it.

If you're reading this and recognizing someone you care about, or maybe even yourself, you didn't miss something obvious. This just hasn't been named for most people. You're not late to this. You're early.

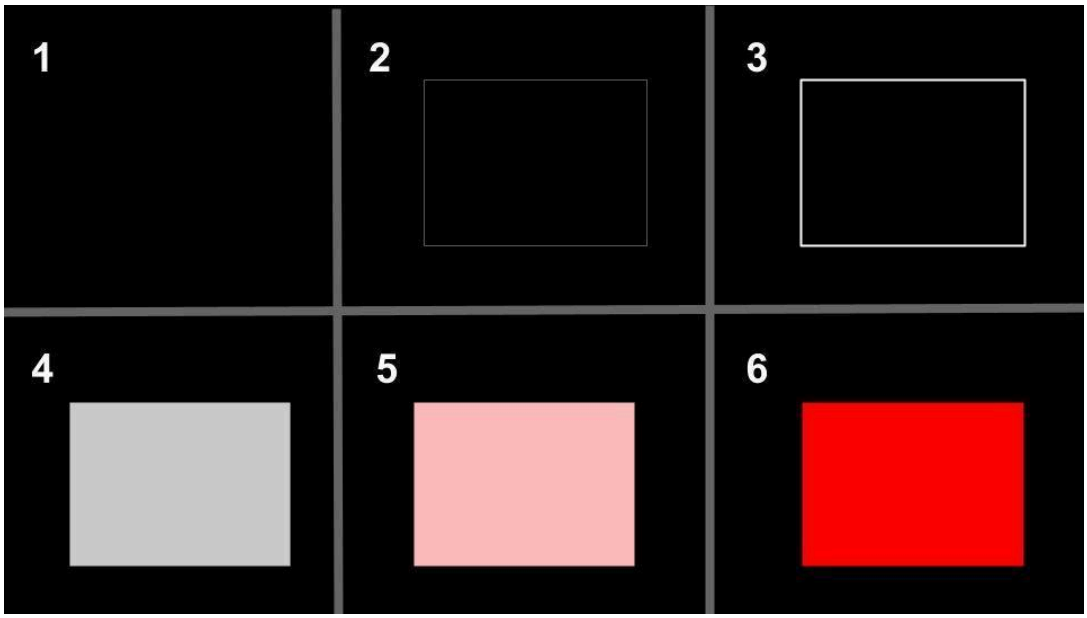
> *"The issue is not that they don't understand. It's that they can't access it the way others do."*

The Spectrum

Aphantasia exists on a spectrum. The standard research instrument is the Vividness of Visual Imagery Questionnaire (VVIQ), developed by David Marks in 1973 and adapted for aphantasia research by Zeman's team. In my classroom, I use a simplified 1 to 6 version, asking students to rate what they experience when they try to picture a red square.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Complete darkness. No image at all. *Aphantasia*	Vague sense of form. No color or detail.	Faint outline. Hardly any color.	Clear but not photographic.	Vivid. Color and detail present.	Photographic. Full color and clarity. *Hyperphantasia*

My observation is that scores of 1 to 3 represent a range where visualization is absent or limited enough to matter in a classroom. These are also the students who tend to struggle in school in ways that are hard to explain until you understand what's going on. The students at the low end are working with a different set of tools entirely, and most of them have no idea. This is the actual test I use on the first day of each marking period:



Students close their eyes, try to picture a red square, then open their eyes and pick the number that best matches what they experienced. It takes about 30 seconds. The answers remind me that not everyone walks in with the same tools.

Hyperphantasia: The Other End

The far end of the spectrum is called hyperphantasia. That’s extremely vivid, involuntary, near-photographic mental imagery. This also carries its own classroom and clinical considerations. The same spectrum that produces aphantasia at one end produces hyperphantasia at the other. Most people have no word for where they fall.

Born with it vs Losing It Aphantasia

Most people with aphantasia were born with it and have never experienced mental imagery. This is called congenital aphantasia. They have no reference point for what they are “missing” because they have never had it.

A smaller group developed aphantasia after an event: brain injury, stroke, severe illness, or in rare cases surgery. They know exactly what they lost. That is a different experience entirely, and it can carry grief in a way that congenital aphantasia typically does not.

When Memories are Facts, Not Films

About 1 out of 3 people with aphantasia also experience Severely Deficient Autobiographical Memory, or SDAM. Yes, even the scientist who coined the term regrets calling it that.

With aphantasia, a person does not form mental images when remembering. The pictures are missing, but other parts of the memory may remain. They can still know that an event was stressful, exciting, or annoying, and they still have a sense that it happened to them.

SDAM is different. A person with SDAM can often remember the facts of what happened, sometimes very accurately, but may have much less access to the emotions felt at the event. They may know a day was important or difficult, but it can stay more like information than a personal memory.

In the real world, this can look like a specific type of social awkwardness. When a friend asks, "What was your favorite part of the trip?" or a boss asks, "What was the highlight of your last three years here?", an SDAMer might draw a total blank. It's not that they didn't have a good time; it's that they don't have a "favorites" folder to scroll through. One person described it perfectly: *"You ask me what my favorite film is, and suddenly it's like I've never even watched a single one."*

Because of this, "How was your day?" can be a high-stress question. Without the episodic "film" to replay, the honest answer is often just, "It was fine." They aren't being secretive or angry; they just live so fully in the *now* that the *then* has already been archived as data. As another person put it, it can feel like having a "dog's brain" by accident, happy to see you, ready for the current moment, but not really dwelling on what happened four hours ago.

That is why photos and physical reminders can matter so much. A picture from a big moment, like a smile after a championship game, can help anchor what was felt even when the feeling does not return on its own. It gives them a way to "catch a ride" on someone else's memory to find their own files.

If you are a parent wondering about your child, it can help to remember that this isn't about effort, attention, or caring. These are simply different ways brains access experience. A child with aphantasia or SDAM is not missing the importance of their life. They may just connect to it differently.

And for some students, both may be present. In those cases, memories may feel especially distant, without clear pictures and with limited access to the emotions that

went with them. A prompt like "write about a time when..." may feel less like an invitation and more like a door that won't open.

Details don't stick without context. Give them the big picture first. Then watch what they can do with it. Semantic (patterns) vs Episodic (details) memory. I need you to go read about that difference on your own.

And yes, visualizers read this section and might say that it feels like a loss, but SDAMers have the power to look at the big picture and not get bogged down with details. And you know the person who shows up fresh to every challenge? That person who never holds a grudge? Yup. You might have just figured out why.

Visual Aphantasia Doesn’t Mean No Inner Life

Some people with aphantasia have perfectly vivid inner experiences in other channels. They hear music in their head. They have a strong internal monologue. They have spatial awareness and a sense of movement. Others don’t. The absence can extend to sound, smell, touch, or inner speech. Everyone’s mix is different.

And yes, many people with aphantasia have visual dreams, even though they can’t generate imagery while awake. The voluntary and involuntary systems are different. Aphantasia primarily affects the voluntary one.

Research suggests about 30% of people with aphantasia primarily lack only visual imagery, while others experience reduced imagery across multiple senses too. It's a spectrum inside a spectrum.

What stays consistent is that spatial ability is largely independent of aphantasia. People with aphantasia perform about the same as everyone else on spatial tasks. Don't think they're 'lost' just because they can't see the map in their head. Their sense of direction works just fine.

What Aphantasia Is Not

Not a diagnosis. Aphantasia stays out of the medical handbooks because it is a variation of the human experience rather than a disease. This term identifies a specific mental process instead of a clinical illness. The move here isn’t paperwork. It’s changing how you work with the kid in front of you. It is to adapt.

Not a learning disability or disorder. Students with aphantasia have full intellectual potential. The intelligence is completely intact. A 2025 study out of the University of Oklahoma confirmed this directly. Students with aphantasia showed no

significant differences from their peers in deep or strategic approaches to learning, and are just as likely to seek meaning, make connections, and think critically. The tools the world keeps handing this child were simply built for a different kind of brain. That is a problem with the tools, not with the child.

Not the result of trauma. Congenital aphantasia exists from birth and has no connection to past traumatic events. Trauma can independently affect access to imagery and produce some overlapping presentations, but assuming trauma is the cause of absent imagery in a person who has likely never had imagery is a clinical misstep worth avoiding.

How Common Is This?

Research puts full aphantasia at roughly 1 to 4% of the general population. But we should focus on the large group of people with unreliable mental images instead of only looking at those with no imagery at all, not just those at zero. In my experience that means anyone scoring a 1 to 3 on the red square test. This group is substantially larger, and the impact on daily life is similar across that range.

Published Research Estimates	Informal Classroom Screening
1–4% full aphantasia (score of 1 on VVIQ-derived scales)	Average 14% of students score 1–3 across multiple years and 3 different grade levels
Low-visualization spectrum not yet well studied	Some marking periods as high as 25% score 1–3; rarely below 10%
Likely underdiagnosed due to lack of awareness	My numbers are also undercounts. Older students mask their score

My classroom data is not a study. I get the numbers through informal screening. What I can say is that the consistency across years is hard to ignore.

Why the Numbers Are Probably Higher: The Masking Problem

Older students have figured out the correct answer. They say they see the image because that is what everyone else seems to say.

“6 is the correct answer whether I could see it or not.”

With adults, it can take a 30-minute conversation (sometimes more!) to get past a lifetime of learned vocabulary about imagination. Many people with aphantasia describe their experience as being bad at visualization, not that their minds work differently.

> *“"What do you see when you close your eyes?" gets a practiced answer. "What actually happens when you try to picture something?" opens a completely different conversation.”*

Take a breath.

That was a lot, right?

You just learned that a good portion of the people you know are navigating a world that looks nothing like yours. You just realized that the "mind’s eye" you’ve relied on your whole life isn't a universal human standard, it’s just one way of being.

You need to make a vital distinction before you keep reading. Most people approach this with perspective. That’s just sympathy. We look at a kid who can't visualize and think, *"If I couldn't see the map, I’d be frustrated, too."* But that’s still a visualizer's thought.

The meat of this paper is about Perception. Where true Empathy lives. We have to stop trying to "imagine" their darkness and realize that their "light" simply comes from a different source. Patterns. Facts. Sympathy ends up trying to fix the kid. Empathy fixes the lesson.

This is a good time to take a break. Get a cup of tea. Walk away for a second. Once you flip this page, there’s no going back to the 'simple' version of teaching. You’re about to trade a comfortable assumption for a much more powerful truth.

Come back when you’re ready to get to work.

The 6% That Haunted Me Every Summer

For most of my teaching career, my classroom was unusually visual. We built WWI battle scenes. We made puppets and put on plays. Edited and produced 100's and 100's of videos. Kids worked without step-by-step directions because I wanted them to develop independence. Most kids loved it. The results were not subtle. Roughly 94% of students loved the class or were enthusiastic about it. The other 6% did not.

What haunted me was the shape of that data. There was almost no middle ground. Kids loved it or they didn't. And I could not figure out what I was doing differently for that 6%, because I was doing the same thing for everyone.

Three years ago, someone with aphantasia walked into my life. And in the space of one conversation, it explained everything.

My class was intensely visual. It assumed that students could simulate and picture and imagine. I came to believe that I had found the reason behind the 6%. Now, I'm not in the business of diagnosing people after the fact, but the pattern I saw with kids who did not like my class fit. I was asking them to do something they literally could not do the way I assumed they could, evaluating them on it, and then wondering why I kept getting a "lack of effort."

I stopped asking students to picture things and started asking them to list, describe, and sequence. Instead of telling kids what to do, I wrote it down where they could see it. Every student in my room got clearer instruction. The 6% became visible and reachable. And I started writing this document.

David Foster Wallace tells a story about two young fish swimming along, passed by an older fish who asks, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" They keep going. Then, eventually, one turns to the other and asks, "What the hell is water?" Wallace was quick to clarify in that same speech that he was not the wise old fish.

Neither am I.

The most obvious things in our lives are often the hardest to see. The habits we live inside, the assumptions we carry, can remain invisible until something forces them into view. For thirty years, I was that young fish. I was swimming in a visual world, teaching in a visual language, and moving through my classroom with a mind's eye I didn't even know I had. I didn't realize I was in water because it was the only thing I had ever known. I had no idea I was wet.

You Know This Person

Before patterns and strategies, I want to describe someone you have almost certainly encountered. You may have known them as a student, a client, or your own child. You had words for what you saw, but they were probably the wrong words.

You probably called it...	What was actually happening
Unmotivated	Work started fine, then stopped cold at the exact moment imagery was required. Not about effort. It's about access.
Stubborn	Couldn't picture what different would look like. Not won't change. Genuinely can't simulate it.
Anxious for no reason	No mental preview of what was coming. Every new situation begins from zero.
Not trying / not listening	Directions evaporated. No internal whiteboard. They heard every word. Nothing stuck.
Unfocused	Checked out the moment the task went internal. Picture this. Imagine that. Nothing to work with.

> *"The goal and the technique are not the same thing."*

Most of the time, in teaching and in therapy and at home, we don't think of what we're doing as a technique. It just feels like how you do the thing.

You tell a student to picture the scene in the book. You ask a client to imagine their safe place. You prompt a kid to visualize standing on the free throw line. These don't feel like choices. They feel like obvious moves. And they are obvious moves, because they work. They work reliably, for most people, most of the time. Nobody ever had a reason to question them.

Techniques that work for most people become invisible as techniques. The teacher who has been picturing scenes while reading since age six doesn't experience "visualize this" as a technique. It's just reading. It never occurred to them that someone might read differently and arrive at the same depth of understanding.

The goal is comprehension. The goal is calm. The goal is confidence. Visualization is one road to those destinations. A road that works well for most travelers. But not all of them.

> **The Tell**
> *They start the task willingly. They work through the factual parts without complaint. Then they stop at the exact moment imagery is required. Not reluctance from the beginning. A specific, consistent, predictable point of failure.*
> — A pattern repeated across years of students

That isn't laziness. It isn't avoidance. This kid has probably been told they're not trying for years. They were trying. Nobody handed them the right tool.

If a kid is just avoiding work, they'll usually do it if the stakes are high enough. But here is the difference. An avoidant student will often produce when they are motivated enough, a student with aphantasia tries harder and still hits the same wall. Extra time usually doesn't solve it. Neither does pressure, encouragement, or consequences. The barrier is not working harder. It is access. **You can't motivate someone into seeing something that isn't there.**

In Their Own Words

"6 is the correct answer whether I could see it or not."
— On why screening numbers probably undercount

"If I have too many options, I don't want to do anything."
— On decision fatigue

"Tell me ahead of time something will need to be recalled."
— On what actually helps with working memory

"I only listen to the basic facts."
— On their own listening strategy, unprompted

"If you want me to see something, you need to tell me what to see."
— On what "picture this" feels like from the inside

"I didn't know minds worked differently until someone finally asked."
— On how long this had been invisible

How They Experience the World

The most useful way I've found to look at this is to see it as two different ways of storing data.

Some brains are built like a photo album,
and others are built like a filing cabinet.

Most of our teaching is designed for the photo album. We expect the kid to flip through mental images to find the answer. But the kid with aphantasia isn't missing the info. They just have it saved as a list of facts. They still have the information. They just access it differently. They remember the facts like bullets on an index card.

The Photo Album Brain	The Filing Cabinet Brain
Experiences stored as sensory-rich images	Experiences stored as structured, factual data
Problem-solving: scan mental pictures	Problem-solving: retrieve relevant files of facts and patterns
Memory is reconstructive. Narrative and imagery shift with each retelling	Memory is specific: facts, names, dates, sequences tend to remain stable
Creativity starts with visualization: see it, then make it	Creativity starts with concept and pattern: know it, then build from there
Guided imagery and visualization feel natural	Word-based, kinesthetic, and factual anchoring feel natural
Autobiographical memory has a felt, immersive quality	Autobiographical memory is more like a summary – "I know it happened" rather than "I am back there"

Neither system is superior. The filing cabinet full of note cards with bullet points has real, significant advantages: analytical precision, factual stability, strong systems thinking. It tends to perform well in logic, coding, research, and any domain where concrete data matters more than sensory simulation.

The problem is not the filing cabinet. The problem is that most common classroom practices, most therapy protocols, and most of the parenting advice that gets passed around quietly assume the photo album. Meanwhile, the student who doesn't think visually is sitting in the same room trying to use tools that were built for somebody else.

Where It Shows Up, and Why

Aphantasia doesn't make everything hard. It makes specific things hard. It makes any task that quietly assumes a working mind's eye hard. Once you know what you're looking for, you start seeing it in students you've taught for years.

Anxiety and Anticipation

This is the pattern I see most consistently across students and it is the one most likely to be misread as generalized anxiety or avoidance.

Most of us manage unfamiliar situations by previewing them. We picture where we are going, imagine who will be there, mentally rehearse what we will say and do. This preview is so automatic that we do not notice we are doing it. It is just what the mind does.

A person with aphantasia generally can't do this the way most people can. Every unfamiliar situation begins from zero. There is no mental movie to calm the nerves and no internal map to consult. They can't do a practice run in their head to see how it might go. They just have to walk in and find out. This is why new schedules or surprise changes can feel so much heavier for these kids. They aren't being difficult. They just didn't get to "live" through the event before it actually happened.

The Internal Experience

UNPREPARED: "I can't picture it, so I can't prepare. Everyone else walks in with a mental preview. I walk in blind."

INVISIBLE: "Nobody knows this is hard for me. I just look lost, slow, or unfriendly."

EXHAUSTED: "I figure out every route, face, and layout in real time while everyone else already knows."

ALONE: "Is something wrong with me? I didn't know minds worked differently until someone asked."

Their anxiety isn't 'all in their head.' It's a totally normal reaction to walking into a room with zero clue of what to expect. Telling them "it'll be fine" usually doesn't help much because that still doesn't tell them what's actually going to happen.

> *"The anxiety isn't irrational. It's what happens when there's no way to preview what's coming."*

Multi-Step Directions and Working Memory

Most people follow multi-step directions by holding them in their head as a kind of running mental list. Students with aphantasia don't have that.

It's not that they weren't listening. The directions just evaporated the moment they were given, with nothing to hold them. Written directions work. Physical demonstrations work. If you give them the steps one by one, they're fine. It's the 'dumping' of directions that kills them.

> *"What looks like not listening is often directions that evaporated the moment they were given, with nothing to retrieve them from."*

Memory and Recall Strategies

Many memory tricks are built for people who see pictures. People tell you to "picture a giant grocery list" or "visualize a map" to find your way. If your screen is dark, those tricks do not help much. Not every memory strategy needs replacing, but the ones that depend on a movie in the head usually do. There is a difference between remembering an event and remembering a fact. A kid with aphantasia may not be able to mentally re-enter a third birthday party. That does not mean they are forgetful. They simply have a different filing system.

What does work

Spatial location. Don't ask them to picture where a word is on a page. Let them know where it is. They do not need to see the map to know the coordinates.

Using the body. Muscle memory is still memory. Tracing a letter with a finger or acting out a science process can work because the body remembers even when the mind's eye is blank.

Rhythm and sound. A beat or a rhyme can help information stick. You do not need to see a rainbow to remember ROY G BIV. If it has a sound or a rhythm, it has a better chance of staying put.

Writing it down. If you write it down, the information lives outside the head. It becomes something they can look at instead of something they have to chase in their mind.

Grouping. Connect new stuff to things they already know. Put it in a category. File the new fact right next to a familiar one in that internal filing cabinet.

The knowledge sticks fine once it lands. It just needs a different way in. Once something is in there, it tends to stay. A lot of folks describe their memories as more like a list of facts than a story. The names, the dates, the sequences hold. They know what happened. They just don’t replay it. Studies consistently show that people with aphantasia complete spatial and reasoning tasks at the same level as typical imagers, simply by using non-visual routes like analytical, kinesthetic, and structural strategies that bypass imagery entirely.

People sometimes describe having a very accurate memory rather than a vivid one. That's not a lesser version. It's what happens when the brain adapts.

Research confirms what experienced teachers sometimes sense but can't quite name: the knowledge is in there. Studies comparing aphantasic and non-aphantasic participants found no significant difference in factual, semantic recall. The gap only appears when memory requires re-entering the experience rather than reporting the facts.

The information is usually there. The problem is retrieval, not intelligence.

"Remember when we did the experiment?" pulls up nothing. "What were the steps of the experiment?" might surprise you.

Creative Work and Writing

The instruction model most of us were taught, "see it first, then write it," is a genuine barrier for students with aphantasia. Creative essays stall at two paragraphs not because the student lacks ideas but because they lack a mental scene to describe.

This is not a creativity deficit. Being creative and having a vivid imagination are not the same thing. Creativity is about what you make. Imagination, the way most people use the word, is about the internal process that gets you there. Aphantasia removes one road. It does not close the destination.

I've read accounts from people with aphantasia working across every creative field. There are artists, animators, writers, designers, scientists. The mind's eye is not required for creative output. The process looks different. Instead of seeing it first and then making it, they iterate. They draft. They prototype. They build their way to the thing and often bump into the right idea rather than executing a mental vision of it.

Ed Catmull, co-founder of Pixar, has aphantasia. So does Craig Venter, who mapped the human genome. So does Michelle Sagara, a fantasy author who has spoken openly about writing entire novels without being able to picture a single scene in her head. So does Zelda Williams. So do a number of working artists, animators, and novelists.

They describe their creative process not as visualizing the finished thing and then making it, but as discovering it through the making. They find the work on the paper, on the canvas, in the clay. The idea develops during the work instead of existing fully formed beforehand. That's not a lesser version of creativity. For a lot of people, it is the one version that works for them. It did for Blake Ross, Mark Lawrence, Derek Parfit, Oliver Sacks, Glen Keane, Matthew Yglesias, Katherine Yaochen Du, Jae, and Andrew Weir...Have you seen the movie *Project Hail Mary?*

Reading Comprehension

Watch for this pattern. The same student who aces the vocabulary test will struggle on the reading comprehension questions about the same chapter. The nonfiction test goes fine, but the fiction test makes them seem they are below grade level.

Students with aphantasia typically track plot, character motivation, and logical cause-and-effect with accuracy. Their comprehension can be excellent. Their answers sound plain and factual rather than descriptive. Not because they did not read carefully, but because they did not experience the book visually.

There is a more specific reason fiction is harder than nonfiction. Comprehending action-based language requires mentally simulating the movement. When a sentence describes someone grasping a handle and pulling hard, most readers unconsciously run a physical simulation of that action. That simulation is part of how meaning lands. Without it, comprehension becomes a little flatter. The words are understood. The action behind them is not fully felt.

This is the same reason word problems in math can trip up a student who just aced the straight calculation. It is not the math. It is that the farmer's field and the train leaving the station both ask you to simulate a physical scene before the math even starts.

> *""What did you picture?" is not just unanswerable for these students. It is quietly confirming, year after year, that there is something wrong with the way they read. There is not."*

Art and Spatial Tasks

Being asked to imagine what the finished piece will look like before starting is a concrete barrier, not a minor inconvenience. For many people without mental imagery, spatial awareness works more like a coordinate system than a 3D map. Space tends to be static. Objects exist at addresses, not in a fluid mental environment they can rearrange.

In art, aphantasia shifts the process from projection to discovery. Without a "mental blueprint" to follow, these artists often work from the inside out, building a piece incrementally as it appears on the canvas rather than copying an internal image. This lack of a visual memory template often leads to vivid fantasy or abstraction, where the artist isn't recreating a remembered scene, but seeing the concept for the first time as they create it.

Have a kid with aphantasia make a smiley face. Guess what they will start with.

> *“The subject is not the barrier.*
> *The visualization requirement is.”*

What You Might Notice

What follows are patterns that show up in daily life, at home, and in relationships. Some of these will land harder for parents. Some will land harder for clinicians. All of them are real.

These tendencies are not universal. It shows up differently across individuals, and every pattern listed here can have other causes. This is a field guide, not a diagnostic checklist.

Personal Organization

Spaces tend to land at one of two extremes: very chaotic or very structured. Without being able to picture where things go, organization either falls apart entirely or gets compensated for with a rigid system.

Clothing choices show up in a consistent pattern: strong attachment to familiar items, resistance to new clothing, a preference for laying clothes out the night before, and real difficulty buying things for other people. The people who do this aren’t being difficult. They’re reducing a decision that requires imagining something that doesn’t yet exist.

Why Some Decisions Feel Impossible

Simple choices can feel exhausting or paralyzing, particularly choices that require imagining a future state. To a family member or friend, it looks like an easy question. To them, it is genuinely not.

This is not indecisiveness. They cannot mentally try out future outcomes the way many people do. It also explains a pattern people around them often misread as negativity. Best case can't be conjured. Worst case is simply a fact. The pull toward worst-case thinking isn't pessimism. It's the only scenario the brain can actually produce.

Feels Impossible (Requires Mental Simulation)	Feels Easy (Concrete and Factual)
Choosing a haircut: no mental image of the result	Choosing a phone model: specs are concrete and comparable
Buying furniture: can't picture it in the room	Scheduling and logistics: numbers and sequences, no imagery needed
Picking a new restaurant: no internal reference for what to expect	Ordering at a familiar place: known experience, no imagination gap, loves seeing the menu before going
Picking an outfit for an unfamiliar event: can't picture how it will look	Research-based decisions: facts and data replace the mental picture

The Shoes Problem

Your child knows exactly where their shoes are, but they don't see them there. They have a brilliant, invisible GPS that tracks locations as facts. Here's the catch. If you move their shoes, it can feel like their internal map has to be completely updated and that recalibration is real work.

This may partially explain why moving an object can trigger a reaction that looks wildly out of proportion to what just happened. It is not about the shoes. Same goes for their spot at the table, their seat in the car, their hook for their bag, and yikes! Don't change the living room furniture!

For these kids, space is static. An object's location is part of its identity. Asking them to imagine it on the other wall is like asking a computer to run a file that doesn't exist yet. They need to see the bed move in the real world to update their data. Show, don't describe.

Social and Emotional Patterns

The Empathy Thing

There is something remarkable that happens when you combine deeply felt emotion with the inability to replay past experiences as a vivid movie. You get someone who can walk into another person's reality without the emotional baggage and visual noise of their own history. They don't filter someone else's pain through a mental slideshow of times it happened to them. They just meet you where you are.

> *"A lot of people with aphantasia describe being the person everyone comes to with their problems. I don't think that's a coincidence."*

Many report being exceptional listeners. With no internal imagery competing for attention, they are genuinely present when listening.

Many report deeply felt emotions. The absence of imagery does not mean the absence of feeling.

Many report strong analytical clarity. Problem-solving grounded in what is known and factual. At their best when the problem is concrete and the pressure is real.

Consistent execution once the skill is loaded. It will take longer for these kids to get the hang of a new skill. Without mental rehearsal as a shortcut, repetition is how it gets filed. But once it is filed, it stays. Parents and teachers sometimes misread the slow start as resistance. It is not. It is loading. Once it loads, it never has to again. The dancer, the builder, the softball player. A little longer to get it, but once they got it, they got it.

A Few More Strengths Worth Knowing

There is some evidence that for people with aphantasia distressing images replay less often and less vividly. The research isn't settled yet, but the pattern is there. The facts inside their memories, names, dates, sequences, tend to stay stable and reliable over time. Rules, structures, and logical sequences come naturally. And without a mental movie running in the background, what is actually in the room tends to get their full attention. They also tend to gravitate toward patterns and big ideas rather than isolated facts, which is a different kind of intelligence than school usually measures, but a real one.

The Translation Gap

Most of the misreading of people with aphantasia is not a failure of care or attention. It is a failure of vocabulary. The behaviors that result from aphantasia look exactly like behaviors that result from other, more familiar causes.

What It Looks Like	What Is Often Actually Happening
Unmotivated	Struggling with representational access. Cannot generate the internal sensory data the task demands. Effort is not the variable.
Stubborn / inflexible	No internal simulation of "what different would look like." Cannot mentally test alternatives before committing.
Anxious for no reason	No mental preview available. Every unfamiliar situation begins from zero.
"Not trying"	Trying harder than it looks. Extra time and encouragement do not change the output because effort is not the barrier.
Not paying attention	Directions evaporated. No internal whiteboard to hold multi-step sequences.
Creative block or writer's block	No mental scene to describe. The opening instruction ("picture it first") produced nothing. The student stopped there.
Resistance to therapy homework	Visualization-based homework assigned to be done alone at home probably won't get done. Not laziness. The tool doesn't work without someone in the room to guide it.

Here's the catch...

All of the behaviors in this table have many possible causes. ADHD, depression, anxiety, learning differences, and trauma can produce similar presennot a diatations. Aphantasia is one lens, not the only one. But it stands out because the difficulties aren't random. They only appear when a task forces a student to use their mind's eye. When you see that same specific wall being hit over and over, you start to see the pattern.

Is it Aphantasia or something else?

Clinicians and experienced teachers will rightly ask: how do I tell this from dissociation, trauma-related blocking, avoidance, or other presentations that affect imagery access? What follows is not a diagnosis tool. It is a starting point.

Is the absence of imagery present across neutral, positive, and distressing topics, or only certain ones?

Aphantasia: no imagery across all content, including pleasant, neutral, and mundane subjects. Trauma-related blocking: imagery may be absent or fragmented for specific material; other topics remain imageable.

Has this been present since childhood, as far as they can tell?

Aphantasia is typically lifelong. Sudden or recent loss of imagery may suggest neurological change, psychological change, or acquired aphantasia following illness or injury.

How do they describe it: "I've never been able to picture things" or "I used to, but it's gone"?

"Never" is more consistent with congenital aphantasia. "Gone" warrants further exploration.

Are other sensory channels present internally?

Many people with aphantasia have internal verbal thought, spatial awareness, and kinesthetic memory without any visual component. This is still aphantasia.

Does the difficulty appear specifically in visualization-dependent tasks, or broadly?

Aphantasia produces consistent, predictable, topic-independent impairment in visualization tasks. Trauma typically produces topic-specific avoidance with otherwise intact imagery in other domains.

Just because a kid has aphantasia doesn't mean they haven't been through something hard. You can absolutely have both. Someone can have had no mind's eye their entire life and still carry real trauma on top of it. Untangling the two takes clinical judgment, and that judgment is better when aphantasia is part of your vocabulary.

What You Can Do

The shift is the same in every setting.

The Fundamental Shift

From: "Picture it / imagine it / visualize it"

↓

To: "List what you know / describe what you have / map it on paper"

None of these changes lower the expectation. They simply remove the visualization barrier between the student and the task.

Language and Prompting

The words we use are often the entire barrier. Small changes in phrasing eliminate the wall without removing the goal.

Instead of…	Try…
"Picture the setting…"	"Describe the physical details the text gives us."
"Imagine the character…"	"List their traits based on what you know."
"What do you see?"	"What do you know?"
"Visualize the steps."	"Let's map the steps on paper."
"Imagine your safe place."	"Describe a real place using sensory details you already have."
"Picture yourself succeeding."	"What specifically will you do first, second, third?"
"Imagine you are a WWI soldier."	"Based on what we've read, list the conditions a soldier would face."
Abstract metaphors without a concrete anchor	"Think of it like the rules of chess." Systems analogies work. Imagined scenes do not.

Structure and Sequencing

Externalize multi-step directions: write them, display them, hand them out. Do not rely on verbal delivery alone.

Give instructions one step at a time in tasks that require sequential execution.

Provide physical models, examples, and reference materials before construction or creative tasks begin.

In therapy, use written scripts and step-by-step fact sheets for exposure preparation and coping rehearsal.

For goals, write them as concrete observable behaviors, not imagined outcomes.

Preview and Preparation for Unfamiliar Situations

This is among the most practical interventions available, and it costs almost nothing.

Before any new situation, provide photos, floor plans, descriptions. Walk through the sequence in words. “You will walk in the door, the lobby has chairs on the left, you will check in at the desk on the right.” Specific and sequential is what works. Vague reassurances are not enough.

Name who will be there, what the room looks like, what they will be asked to do. Not “it will be fine.” Facts.

For new classrooms, new therapists, new schools, new camps: a real preview is not optional. It is the difference between a good first day and a bad one.

Building the Filing Cabinet

The most practical, concrete thing you can do, and it costs almost nothing. Abstract instruction without a concrete anchor produces nothing to file. Give them data, not imagination to perform.

In the classroom	At home
Field trips and movies before a unit, not after. The experience becomes the filing cabinet.	Before any new place: photos, descriptions, sequence. They need facts more than reassuring words.
Physical models and examples before construction tasks. No reference, no start.	Before a new routine or chore: demonstrate it, do it together. Expect more reps than you’d think.

In the classroom	At home
Concrete examples connecting new material to things they've already touched or experienced.	Real objects and real places as anchors. Not imagined safe places. An actual object they can hold.
For creative tasks: start with what they know. List every fact. Then build from there.	When they say "I don't know," the translation is: I don't have enough data yet. Give more data.

When the Strategy Requires a Mind's Eye

I'm a middle school teacher, not a clinician. What follows are my best attempts to translate the core principles into therapeutic contexts. I'd welcome corrections from anyone who actually knows what they're doing in a clinical setting.

When you would normally...	Try this instead
Ask them to imagine their safe place or a calming scene	Ask them to identify a real place, person, or object that actually helps. Describe it using what they already know: what they'd hear there, what it smells like, what the surface feels like. Real and remembered, not invented.
Picture yourself doing the feared or hard thing	Write out the actual steps of what will actually happen: factual, concrete, in sequence. Replace the mental movie with a fact sheet they can hold onto.
Picture yourself succeeding	Name the specific thing they will do first, then second, then third. Action sequence instead of imagined feeling.
Mindfulness with a visual scene	Sensory anchoring in the room they're already in: what they can hear right now, what they can feel, the weight of their body, the temperature of the air. Present and physical, not imagined.
Homework: practice your coping visualization before bed	Any homework that requires generating a mental image alone at home probably won't get done and it isn't laziness. Replace it with a written card they read, a script they say out loud, or a physical action they take.
Goals framed as imagined outcomes	Goals framed as concrete observable behaviors. What will you do? When? What happens first?

Validation: The Thing That Costs Nothing and Changes Everything

Many people with aphantasia have spent decades assuming they are broken. Bad at creativity, bad at mindfulness, bad at the kind of imagination they were told was normal. They have been quietly penalized for something no one ever realized was different about how they think.

Before you name aphantasia to a student, it helps to know what you are not naming. You are not naming a learning disability. You are not naming a creativity deficit. You are not naming a ceiling on what that kid can become or make or imagine in the deepest sense of that word. You are not handing them a reason to stop trying. Aphantasia is not a thing that happens to people who were supposed to be great and then weren't. Some of the most visually inventive artists, some of the most narratively gifted writers, some of the most original thinkers have no mental imagery at all. Not thinking visually does not mean thinking less deeply.

What you are naming is a difference in how information moves and lives in the brain. That's it. A difference that, once named, starts to explain a lot of friction that the student has been quietly absorbing as personal failure.

> *"You're not alone. I've had a lot of students just like you. This whole time, you weren't failing, you were working without the right tools. Now we know, and starting tomorrow we're going to do this differently. I'm going to show you ways to do this that actually work for your brain."*
>
> — A sentence that has changed how some of my students understand their entire school history

You are trying to understand, and that is a good thing. But tread carefully. The things you think someone can't do just might be the things you inadvertently convince them they can't do. Naming aphantasia should explain the past, not shrink the future.

Kids don't want to be fixed. They want to acquire the tools to fine tune themselves.

Don't sell a student with aphantasia short. Knowing what causes friction is not the same as deciding in advance what a kid can't do. Use what you know to smooth the path to the kid doing what they previously thought was impossible.

And hold these two things at the same time: don't assume a student has aphantasia simply because they show many of the behaviors in this document. Those behaviors have other causes. And don't assume a student doesn't have aphantasia just because they don't show those behaviors. Some kids built their workarounds so early and so well that the struggle became invisible. To everyone, including themselves.

If You're the Person at Home

Most of this is going to play out at the kitchen table. In the car. In the doorway when they won't go in. On the morning they have a meltdown about what to wear. Not in a classroom. Not in a session. At home, with you.

There is a decent chance your child has been quietly thinking they're bad at something that was never built for them in the first place.

The Anxiety That Seems to Come From Nowhere

Your child is not anxious about the thing. They're anxious about not knowing what the thing will be like. There is no mental preview available. Every new situation genuinely begins from zero.

The fix is almost embarrassingly simple. Give them facts. Not "it will be fine." Not "you'll love it." Facts. When we get there, we'll walk through this door, and here's what will be inside. Photos help. Specific details help. Sequences help.

That's not overprotecting them. That's giving their brain the data it needs to function. It's the difference between sending them in blind and giving them a map.

The Meltdown About the Shoes, the Outfit, the Seat

When you moved the shoes, you didn't just move the shoes. You invalidated their internal GPS for that location and they have to reboot. When they can't pick an outfit, it isn't about the clothes. It's that choosing requires picturing the future, and that isn't available. When they insist on the same seat, the same route, the same everything, that's not rigidity. That's the filing cabinet protecting itself from having to update everything at once.

Strategies that help: reduce options, give reference points, give advance notice before anything changes. Not the same explanation louder. Different form. A picture. A list. A walk-through.

> *"I'm so glad I know this now, because it helps me understand how brilliant your brain is at finding other ways to solve problems."*
>
> — Something worth saying out loud, once you know

In Practice

Situation	What helps
When anxiety shows up	Show photos. Describe what will happen in order. Ask what specifically they don't know about what's coming. Then answer it concretely.
For decisions	Reduce options. Give reference points. Restaurant A has pizza, restaurant B has tacos. We've had tacos there before and you liked them. Known experience makes decisions navigable.
For learning	Try a different form, not the same explanation louder. A physical demonstration, a diagram, a written sequence, an example they can hold.
For creative tasks	Start with what they know. Let's list everything we know about this. Then build from there.

Talking to a Teacher Without a Diagnosis

You don't need a diagnosis. You don't need a letter. You just need to know your kid.

> *“"My child thinks in facts, not pictures. When you ask them to imagine something, it doesn't work the way it works for most kids. If you can show them, write it out, or give them a concrete example instead, they'll surprise you.""*

That's it. Some teachers will nod before you finish the sentence. Others won't. Tradition in schools is stronger than change, and a single email or a short conversation may not move the needle much. That's okay. This information probably blew you away the first time you heard it too. Be patient. Be persistent. Keep saying it.

What We Don’t Know Yet

Two things come up in conversations enough that I want to address them directly, even though I don’t have tidy answers.

First, does aphantasia tend to co-occur with autism, ADHD, or other neurodivergent profiles? Online communities report a lot of overlap, and it matches some of what I’ve observed. But large, well-controlled studies don’t exist yet. Don’t assume they’re linked, but don’t be surprised if they show up together.

Second, can imagery be trained? There is no strong evidence right now that such practices reliably produce visual imagery in people with lifelong aphantasia. This document is not about trying to fix aphantasia. It is about adapting to it. Those are different goals, and adaptation is the one you can act on today.

A Note on the Research

The scientific study of aphantasia is young. The term itself was only coined in 2015. It started with a patient who lost his ability to see images after a heart procedure. When researchers asked if anyone else felt that way, over 2,500 people raised their hands.

The main test we have is called the VVIQ. It was developed back in 1973. It is the best tool we have right now, but it has a major flaw. Kids are good at faking the right answer. They know they are supposed to see something, so they say they do. But the problem runs even deeper than strategic answering.

One person described taking the test and scoring as a visualizer because they assumed their conceptual knowledge of a sunset or a face counted as a blurry image. It doesn’t. But nobody told them that. They spent decades thinking their list of facts was what everyone else meant by pictures. That is not a slow reader. That is someone encountering an idea that rewrites their autobiography.

When you have spent your whole life using the same words as everyone else, never realizing you were describing a completely different experience, finding out the truth doesn't just inform you. It can rewrite you. Or not. Depends on the person.

I have tried to be honest throughout about where the evidence ends and where my years of paying close attention begin. Both matter. Neither substitutes for the other.

The Final Takeaway

I wrote this document because the information in it changed how I teach, and I believe it can change how people in other rooms work too. Not because aphantasia is everywhere and explains everything. Because it is common enough to be in nearly every classroom and caseload, invisible enough to be chronically misread, and simple enough to address that it is genuinely frustrating we have not been addressing it.

If nothing else from this guide stays with you, I hope this does.
The goal and the technique are not the same thing.

Techniques that work for most people become invisible as techniques. The teacher who has been picturing scenes while reading since age six doesn't experience "visualize this" as a technique. It's just reading. It never occurred to them that someone might read differently and arrive at the same depth of understanding.

It happens because nobody ever had a reason to question it. When a technique always seems to work, it becomes invisible and the only way.

Aphantasia makes that invisibility impossible to maintain.

When you say "picture a peaceful place" and a student sits there with nothing happening, you are not looking at a student who can't relax. You are looking at a student whose brain has nothing to attach that instruction to. The problem usually isn't the goal. It's the method being used to reach it.

This applies far beyond reading and writing. It shows up in test prep, mindfulness exercises, memory strategies, creative work, and anywhere else we hand students a tool simply because it worked for us.

Schools often reward students who can quickly reconstruct vivid mental scenes and replay information on demand. Memorization confused with understanding. Teaching for actual understanding, regardless of how a student stores information, helps everyone in the room.

The goal and the technique are not the same thing.

Once you realize those are separate, a lot of things start making more sense. It is not a harder version of your job. Just a wide angle view of who is already in the room and what they need from you. .

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— APPENDIX —

A Note on the title

No Picture Needed

The very last thing I did with this paper was change the title. Some people with aphantasia objected to the original title. “When ‘Imagine This’ Is Not Possible,” It led with the absence. Here is why I wanted to keep it.

The title was for the teacher who uses that phrase every day without thinking. The parent who keeps saying it and wondering why it doesn’t land. The counselor who built a whole toolkit around it. Those are the people who need to be stopped mid-stride, and that title stops them.

One reader put the real issue better than I could.

> We do not have an imagination problem. We have a language problem. Because everyone assumes their inner experience is the same and we do not take the time to talk about it. Visualizers make up the majority of the population, so their language has become standard. We have grown up immersed in a visualizer’s world and we have learned to apply their language to our experience.
>
> It’s exactly the same as the way my blind friend says, “See you later.” She will see me literally never, but we will catch up, meet up, hang out later. She could say something a tad bit more accurate, it’s just easier for her to use the idiomatic language and move on. She understands it’s a metaphor.
>
> Another way a teacher could talk about this with their class is: “‘Picture this’ is a metaphor for the thought process. Some people see their thoughts, Some people think in words, some hear their thoughts, some folks don’t use symbols in their thought process at all. You might hear someone else say, ‘consider this,’ ‘ponder this,’ or ‘with this in mind.’ These are entirely interchangeable phrases and you should understand them to all mean the same thing.”
>
> — b_cavendish, Reddit

That’s exactly right. This isn’t an imagination problem. It’s a language problem. And that’s why I flipped at the last second to **"No Picture Needed."** It puts the focus back where it should be. It is a reminder that while some might visualize information, it was never a requirement for understanding. The brilliance of a thought isn't found in the image it produces, but in the truth it uncovers. And for that, no picture is needed.

— APPENDIX —

For Teachers

You Already Know This Student

They started the assignment willingly. They worked through the factual parts without complaint. And then, at one specific, predictable moment, they stopped. Not dramatically. Not with an excuse. They just stopped.

You've had a word for it. Unmotivated, checked out, not trying. None of those words are quite right.

There's a name for what you've been seeing: aphantasia. It's the absence of a mind's eye. When you ask this student to "picture a scene," nothing appears. Not a dim version. Nothing. They are not being difficult. You are asking them to use a tool they don't have access to in the first place.

This is not another thing to diagnose or document.

Aphantasia doesn't require an IEP, a referral, or a new paperwork system. It just requires understanding that the goal and the technique are not the same thing. This student isn't refusing to visualize. They genuinely can't. The goal is still completely reachable. The technique just needs to change.

The fix is smaller than you think.

The full guide includes simple language swaps that take ten seconds:

> "List what you know" instead of "Imagine how they feel."
>
> "Map the steps on paper" instead of "Visualize the process."
>
> "Describe what the text gives you" instead of "Picture the setting."

This affects more students than most people realize. In a typical classroom, there is a good chance that at least one child is sitting through your instruction without the ability to create the internal images your words require. Most have been told, in one way or another, that the problem is effort. It isn't.

You got into teaching because you wanted to reach every kid. This is one more way to do that. And this one is long overdue.

H.G. Wells wrote a story called "The Country of the Blind." It’s about a man who stumbles into a valley where everyone has been blind for generations, and he is not. He assumes he'll have the advantage. He assumes that he'll be the king. He won't need to learn anything. He already has the superior tool.

He's wrong. The villagers have built a complete, functioning world on entirely different inputs. They know every stone, every path, every voice. They have language, culture, memory, and community. They don't experience themselves as missing anything, because they never had anything to miss. They don’t believe sight is even possible. It's the sighted man who can't function and is considered crazy. He keeps describing things no one can use. He keeps insisting that his way of perceiving is the way.

Of course, he never does become king.

I realize it's an imperfect comparison. But Wells wasn't really writing about blindness either

A kid with aphantasia has been navigating the world the way the villagers navigated their valley. They built their systems early, quietly, and without anyone naming what they were doing. They are not waiting to be fixed. They are waiting for someone to finally speak their language.

Upon learning a kid has aphantasia you might think something is missing. You're right that something is different. But you’re wrong about who can't see.

— APPENDIX —

For the Student

Your Brain Runs on Facts, Not Photos

Close your eyes. Picture a red apple. If you see nothing, you're probably thinking, "Wait… people actually see something?"

Yeah. Some do.

If you don't, that has a name. It's called aphantasia. All it means is your brain doesn't make pictures on command.

Some people think in pictures. You don't. You think in facts.

When you think of a dog, you don't see one. You just know what a dog is. It’s like your brain pulls out an index card with all your dog facts on it. Four legs. Fur. Eats anything. Sloppy kisses. Makes you smile. That's how your brain works.

You've probably noticed that when a teacher says "imagine this," your brain just stops. That's not on you. That just doesn't fit how your brain works.

You can still do all the same stuff. Math. Reading. Writing.

You just need it explained a different way. Steps instead of scenes. Facts instead of pictures.

If you need to, you can just say: "I don't really picture things. Can you show me or write it out?"

And here's the part nobody usually says. While other kids are trying to picture it, you're already thinking through how it actually works. You skip the movie and go straight to the answer.

— APPENDIX —

For Counselors

When a Student Can't Picture It

A child who cannot mentally preview a situation may not look obviously different at first. They may seem anxious, avoidant, stubborn, or checked out. But in some cases, what you are seeing is not resistance. It is a missing access route. That route has a name: aphantasia.

Aphantasia is the absence of voluntary visual imagery. That matters because many common coping tools quietly assume a working mind's eye: visualize a safe place, picture the future, rehearse the event, imagine it going well. For a student with aphantasia, those tools may not land. Not because they are unwilling, but because the method itself does not fit.

This is not a call to pathologize the student.
When an intervention doesn't work and the client won't do the homework, the trained response is to label them resistant. It isn't resistance. You are looking at a student for whom that technique simply does not work. The goal is still available: calm, readiness, confidence, planning. The route just needs to be more concrete. Facts, sequencing, external supports, verbal rehearsal, and written structure often work better than imagery-based interventions.

> *The better question isn't "Why won't they do it?" It's "What does this ask them to do inside their own head, and can they actually do that?"*

One question worth adding to your intake: "When I ask you to picture something, what actually happens? Does an image literally form?" The answer will tell you more than almost anything else in the room.

For clinicians who want to go deeper, Sassy Smith's *Unseen Minds: A Therapist's Guide to Multisensory Aphantasia and Invisible Cognitive Differences* is the clinical companion this guide cannot be. It does for therapists what these pages attempt for teachers and parents.

— APPENDIX —

For Parents

Why This Might Explain So Much

If your child has ever seemed to freeze when asked to “picture it,” “imagine it,” or “see it in your head,” there may be a very simple reason, they may not be able to do that at all.

That is called aphantasia. It means your child does not make mental pictures the way many people do. They can still be smart, creative, loving, funny, and fully capable. They just may be working with a different kind of inner wiring.

This can show up in surprising ways.

A child may do fine with facts, but struggle with things that ask them to imagine a future, picture a scene, or mentally rehearse a situation. They may seem anxious before new events, resistant to certain directions, or frustrated by tasks that seem easy to everyone else. Often, they are not being dramatic. They are trying hard at a task that depends on a tool they do not have.

That is not a problem with the child. It is a mismatch with the method.

Once you know what is going on, you can help.

Tell them the steps out loud. Write things down. Show them. Let them list, sort, point, compare, or physically move through the task. A little less “picture it” and a little more “let me show you” can make a big difference.

If this sounds like your child, you are not late, and you did not miss something obvious. You just found a better explanation. And that changes what you can do next.

Craig Venter is the scientist who led the effort to map the human genome, and guess what? He has aphantasia. In Sadie Dingfelder's book *Do I Know*, Venter reflects on what it meant to grow up this way. While aphantasia was a major disadvantage in grade school, he says his facility with big-picture thinking helped him distinguish himself as a scientist and a manager. In his own words: "The way my brain works has probably contributed more to my success than any other trait I have. It's not just that you can't see pictures. It's that your whole way of looking at the world is different from most people."

Different doesn’t mean deficient. Help them find the places where different becomes the advantage.

— APPENDIX —

For Partners and Spouses

Why Some Things Are Harder Than They Look

If your partner has ever gone quiet when you asked what they wanted to do on vacation, or seemed stuck on a decision that felt simple to you, or couldn't picture the apartment before you moved in, there may be a very simple explanation.

They may have aphantasia. It means their brain doesn't generate mental pictures. Not dim ones. Not blurry ones. Just no image shows up.

This shows up in specific, predictable ways.

When you describe a vacation, you pre-live the joy. They don't. That isn't distance. It isn't a lack of interest. It's a different operating system. When they go quiet after you ask about the future, that silence isn't indifference.

Choosing a couch or rearranging a room requires simulating a future that isn't available to them. They aren't being difficult. They genuinely can't mentally preview it the way you can.

When you leave a beautiful place, you may carry the scene with you in a way they cannot always replay. The memory is still there, the feeling is still there, but the picture isn't something they can pull back up later.

Once you know, you can help in calmer, simpler ways.

Make the abstract concrete. Instead of "picture us there," describe the facts and the sequence. This is where we will stay. This is what we will do first. That is not over-explaining. That is the form their brain can actually work with.

Take photos. Since they can't recreate the image internally, photos become a way to revisit moments. A photo isn't just a souvenir. It's a way back.

Give advance notice before anything changes. Plans. Spaces. Routines. Adjusting takes real effort when there isn't a mental preview to work from. A little time helps more than it might seem.

If this sounds like your partner, you are not late, and you did not miss something obvious. You just found a better explanation. A better way to understand each other.

— APPENDIX —

A Few Other Things That Sometimes Travel With Aphantasia

What Else Might Be Going On

Anendophasia
Anendophasia is the absence of an inner voice. Most people have a running internal monologue, a voice in their head that narrates, plans, argues, and thinks in words. People without it don't. Thinking happens, but not in sentences. There is no voice reading these words back to you as you read them. Ideas arrive whole, or in fragments, or as a kind of knowing, but not as speech. From the outside this can look like someone who is very quiet, hard to read, or slow to verbalize what they are thinking. From the inside it is simply how thinking has always worked, which means most people who have it never knew there was another way.

Anauralia
Anauralia is the absence of a mind's ear. Most people can hear music in their head, replay a conversation, or imagine what something will sound like before it happens. People with anauralia cannot. There is no internal soundtrack. When they try to remember a song, they may recall the lyrics as text, or know the melody exists, but they cannot actually hear it play. This is the auditory equivalent of aphantasia, and like aphantasia, most people who have it assumed everyone else worked the same way until someone told them otherwise.

Alexithymia
Alexithymia is difficulty identifying and describing emotions, especially your own. It is not the absence of feeling. The feelings are there, but it can be hard to name them, notice where they show up in the body, or explain them to someone else. A person might know something is wrong but not be able to say what it is, or freeze when asked, “How are you feeling?” From the outside, this can look like emotional unavailability or indifference, but it usually is not. The feeling is present; what is limited is the ability to recognize and describe it. The feeling is there, but the person may not be able to label it.

— APPENDIX —

What It Is Like to Remember a Puppy

A view from inside

A view from inside...

You are asked to think back to the last time you held a puppy. Maybe it was a friend's puppy. Maybe it was at the park. Here is what that moment might look like from the inside, depending on how your mind works.

People who visualize: can replay memory like a movie in their head "I can remember walking into the park and seeing the puppy running toward me like I'm back there again. I see the dog is bounding toward me, fur catching the light. I can hear the panting, feel the weight of the little paws on my chest, those sharp little teeth, the sloppy kisses on my cheek. The joy of the moment floods back. Reliving it makes me so happy."

Aphantasia: "I know what happened, but I don't see it in my mind. I remember holding a puppy at my friend's house. I know it was excited to meet me, small and warm and kept licking my hand. It climbed into my lap and was little. It was fun meeting the puppy. I can tell you what happened, but I don't really see it in my mind. I just know the details."

SDAM:"I know what happened, but I can't really relive the emotional experience of it. I know I held a puppy once, probably at a friend's house or maybe at a park, but I can't really pull the moment back. I know it happened, but it feels more like something I learned than something I can re-live."

Anauralia:"I know what happened, but I don't hear it in my mind. I remember the puppy and what was happening, but I don't hear the barking, panting, or little noises in my head when I think about it. It's like the sound part is missing."

Anendophasia: "I know what happened, but I don't have an inner voice talking about it. I remember holding the puppy, but there isn't much inner narration going on as I think about it. I just know the memory is there, without a running voice in my head."

Alexithymia: "I feel something, but I can't easily tell what it is or put it into words. I remember the puppy, and I know it was a big deal, but if you ask me how it felt, I'm stuck. I know I wasn't bored, but I can't tell you if I was joyful or overwhelmed or peaceful. I just don't have the labels."

— APPENDIX —

The Reality of Sharing

What I Actually Do

The Students

I do not lead with a diagnosis. I give the initial assessment, listen to how they answer, and watch their behavior in class.

Sometimes, with specific kids, I let them in on what I'm seeing. I keep it simple. "You may need a different kind of support when we do things that rely on visualization. I have built tools into this class to help with exactly that. Use them."

It is sometimes difficult to get them to realize that some of their struggles exist solely because of the tools they are using and not because they are deficient.

I only use the word aphantasia with a few students. Very, very, few. Usually, those are the ones I have had for all three years of middle school, and only when they are mature enough to use the information and ask me to name it. In this job, you cannot have a student running home and a parent saying, "Mr. Bogush said what?!"

When I give the assessment, I simply say it helps me understand how they process things so I can be a better teacher for them.

The Parents

I have told exactly four parents in my career. It is a gray area, and I treat it that way.

The first time was a disaster. It was a phone call where I did not have my story straight, and it did not go well. The second and third times were better because I did them in person and had a script. By the fourth time, I knew the arc of the conversation so well that mentioning it felt as casual as saying their child loves chocolate ice cream.

I was not delivering a problem. I was offering an explanation and a way forward.

In person is always better. Having a practiced story matters. Going slowly matters most of all. The conversation will last more than 30 minutes.

The Teachers

Since my personal discovery, I have shared this information with some of my colleagues. And as of this marking period I have mostly stopped sharing this with colleagues.

I expected everyone to react the way I did, to have it change how they see students, but teachers are carrying an enormous load. One staff member put it plainly: unless you are going to tell me what to do, I do not want to know.

That is not cynicism. It is an honest description of the job. One more thing to be aware of, with no clear action attached to it, lands differently when your day is already full.

I used Claude.ai in the process of writing this guide. It helped me organize sections, come up with section headings, and stress-test arguments over and over again. The observations, the classroom data, and the conclusions are mine. I take full responsibility for everything here.

It also had a hand in helping me write the summaries on the appendix page "A few Things That Travel With Aphantasia." After weeks of writing I'm not sure I had the energy to do it myself. I felt the need to include these after reading Sassy Smith's book *Unseen Minds: A Therapist's Guide to Multisensory Aphantasia and Invisible Cognitive Differences*. You don't need to be a therapist to benefit from it.

This paper has been read and reread and edited and reedited so many times. I am pretty sure I have never cared so much about anything I have ever written. And that is why I want your feedback. Be frank. Be honest. Tell me where I have overstated or understated things. Tell me where I am just plain wrong. This is a living document and will be updated as I develop my understanding of aphantasia.

> "None of this requires a label. It just requires deciding the kid in front of you is worth figuring out. Some of the most useful things I've ever done for students, they never even knew were happening."
>
> *— Some teacher who hopes he can live up to who his kids believe he is.*

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— APPENDIX —

Still looking for more?

https://aphantasia.com

http://nopictureneeded.com

One Video

Craig Venter credits his aphantasia for his phenomenal success as a scientist

http://youtube.com/watch?v=nIYee-O8gDA&t=1s

One Book

Do I know you? By Sadie Dingfielder

A lot more than just Aphantasia, but it takes care of the perspective vs perception problem visualizer might have.

Sadie Dingfelder

Check out the resources page on nopictureneeded.com for more