

CREATING ACCESSIBLE EVENTS TOOLKIT



When a group of people gets together for an event, it can be difficult to include everyone and accommodate each person's needs. Whether you're an event planner or simply someone trying to bring people together, you may not know how to make your event inclusive and accessible to individuals with disabilities both visible and invisible. This guide will walk you through principles of accessibility and how they apply to different people involved with events (attendees, speakers, volunteers, and staff/organizers). It provides practical strategies, and gives you helpful checklists, templates, and tools to make your event more accessible.

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GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Before we talk about specific people or areas, we want to lay out some guiding ideas you can use to keep accessibility and inclusivity at the heart of anything you do. If you read nothing else in this guide, these suggestions will point you in the right direction.

1. Accessibility is not a checklist.

There are plenty of checklists and templates included in this guide. Those things can be accessibility aids in and of themselves. They're great! But if all you're doing is checking off boxes, you will not create an accessible space. Focus on an attitude and set of values instead of checking things off a list and use the lists when you need to remember specifics.

2. Include disabled people.

The best way to notice when something is inaccessible is to include people who will experience it that way. Include disabled people from the beginning of your planning process. This could include hiring disabled staff, creating a committee to support the event, sending out surveys or asking for feedback from disabled individuals, or seeking out disabled speakers. Historically, disabled people have not been paid for their time and expertise. If you do not have a budget to pay for consultants or staff, brainstorm other ways to compensate disabled people for their expertise (for example offering a free event registration).

3. Communicate often and clearly.

You will not be able to remove every barrier from your event. However if you communicate well, you can help people to plan ahead and be prepared. Share as much information as you can in advance, and be open about the barriers that still exist. It shows the community that you are aware, and working on improving. You'll see more specific information about keeping your communications accessible on page 6. Use them in all your communications.

4. Have a clear point person for accessibility.

Having one person who is responsible for accessibility makes it clear to everyone who can answer questions and help with accessibility. It also makes it obvious to staff who is responsible for working on accessibility, which in turn makes it less likely that something will be forgotten. It can also help your accessibility lead prioritize working on accessibility.

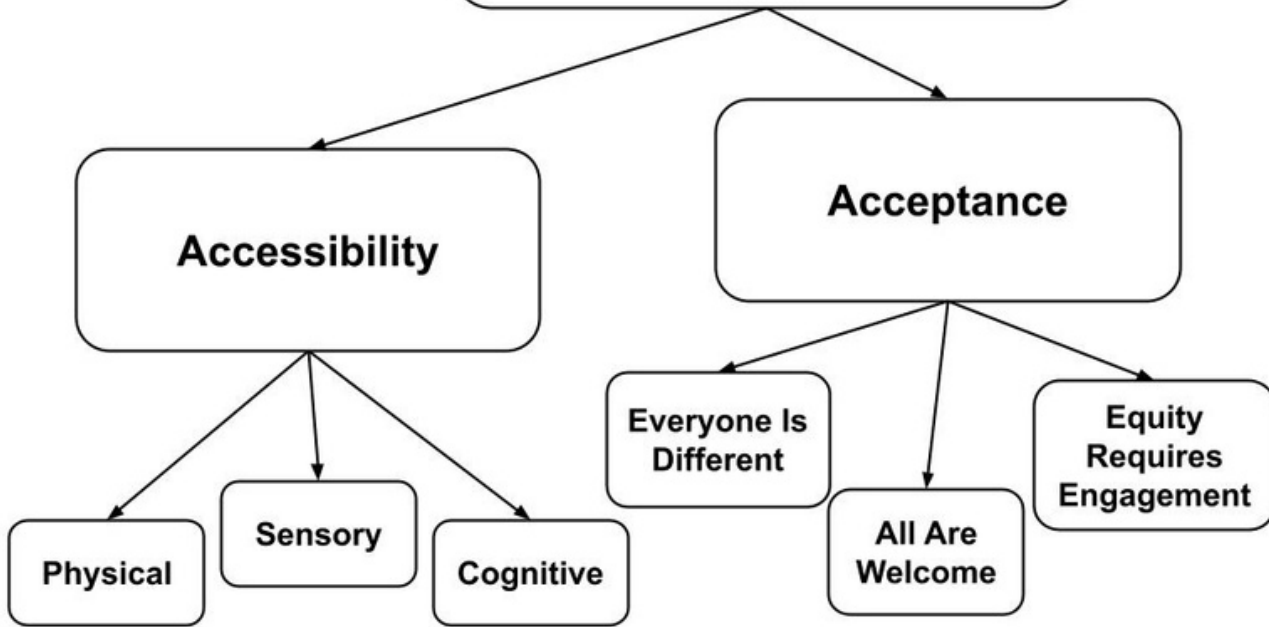
5. Offer a variety of options.

No single accommodation will work for everyone. People have different needs: one type of seating may be perfect for one person and completely inaccessible to another. Try to offer different options so that you'll have something that works for each person.

6. Think outside the box.

There may not be a solution already available for the problems you run into. Be willing to try something new, work with the resources you have, and offer things that look odd or unexpected if they will make your space more accessible. Remember that accessibility goes far beyond having wheelchair ramps. Access can mean everything from offering pronoun stickers for nametags to providing clear information about the event to help reduce anxiety to bathrooms with adult changing stations.

Inclusive Community



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Being inclusive is about more than just providing accommodations that allow people to access a space. It also means creating a welcoming environment through acceptance. You can organize an event with ramps, sensory friendly spaces, and plenty of other accommodations, but if people feel that they are not respected, welcomed, and included as they are, your event will not be inclusive. One of the most important things you can do to promote inclusivity is to focus on acceptance. Listen to folks with disabilities, invite them to participate, and make it clear that their presence is valued. As you read through this guide, think about how you can incorporate both accessibility and acceptance.



WHY PRIORITIZE ACCESSIBILITY?

If you haven't spent time working on accessibility before, you may find it overwhelming. It can be easy to think "no one will really care if I skip this." However there are plenty of incredibly important reasons to make sure your event is inclusive and accessible.

- Accessibility is what allows disabled folks to participate. Approximately one quarter of Americans has a disability, and any person can become disabled at any time. If you exclude disabled people, you're losing a significant portion of your audience.
- Disabled people have important contributions. When they cannot access spaces and events, everyone misses out on the wisdom and experiences they can share.
- Many people have invisible disabilities: you don't know if someone is disabled simply by looking at them. When you provide accommodations for anyone who needs them, you include those with invisible disabilities.
- The curb cut effect: there's good evidence that when you create spaces that are accessible, many other people benefit in addition to disabled people. Everyone wins!
- If you are prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion work, you need to include disability. It is part of human diversity, and disabled people deserve the same equity and inclusion as other minority groups.

It's also important to start thinking about inclusion early. There are a few reasons for this. If you plan a whole event and then try to add accessibility at the end, it will be much more difficult and much less effective. When you incorporated disabled people into the process from the beginning, you'll end up with a more thoughtful event at the end. Finally, disabled people are not just attendees: they exist in every area of your event and space. All of them deserve inclusion.

YOUR FIRST STEPS

As you read through this guide, you might find yourself overwhelmed. There are a lot of things to consider when it comes to accessibility. Don't get discouraged. Any work you do to make your event more accessible is better than doing nothing. If you can't follow every recommendation in this guide, think about what does feel achievable to you and start with that. You can always add more in the future.

If you're struggling to figure out where to start, know that there is no right answer. Pick one thing that sounds exciting or interesting and start there. No event will ever be perfectly accessible to all people. That's ok. Your community will notice when you start spending time, effort, and thought on accessibility, and know that you're taking the attitude of inclusion.

MORE THAN RAMPS

When you think of accessibility, your thoughts might immediately go to physical accessibility: ramps, accessible bathroom stalls, or specific parking spaces. However accessibility goes much further than mobility and physical challenges. As you think about accessibility, provide accommodations for as many types of disability as you can. When you're thinking of accessibility, it can help to keep this list of common types of disabilities on hand as a reminder.

- Communication disabilities
- Social disabilities
- Medical disabilities (chronic illnesses, autoimmune disorders)
- Developmental disabilities
- Intellectual disabilities
- Learning disabilities
- Mobility disabilities
- Sensory processing disabilities
- Vision impairment/blindness
- Hearing loss/deafness
- Mental illness
- Brain injuries



BUDGETS

While many accommodations are low-cost or free, some can quickly become expensive. Hiring American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, printing in alternate formats, and providing any assistive equipment does require funding. If you are working with a limited budget, there are things you can do to still provide the most accessible event possible.

- Seek out grants: many disability specific organizations offer grants to improve the accessibility at your event.
- Think creatively: just because you have only seen an accommodation provided one way doesn't mean it's the only way. For example if you have attendees who struggle to use spoken communication, you can provide notecards for them to write questions or comments during sessions.
- Use technology: if you cannot hire someone to provide CART (Communication Access Realtime Translation, or live captions), can you use an auto-captioning feature from a free or low-cost program like Zoom?
- Put in the time: sometimes spending extra time researching or brainstorming will help you find lower cost or free options. Other times you can find an accommodation that only requires time.
- Be open about what you cannot provide: letting people know allows them to prepare.
- Engage with volunteers and community members: the people who use the accommodations may have resources you are not aware of. Ask them if you're struggling to be accessible on a budget.

CREATING ACCESSIBILITY FOR ATTENDEES



This guide is not the first resource for accessibility and events. Most guides focus on attendees. They are probably the first people you think of when you consider accessibility, and since they are the "customers" their needs are very important. Because many resources already exist, this guide will only give a quick overview of what to consider when thinking about attendees, then link to other resources that will provide a more in-depth look at how to incorporate accessibility.

This section includes:

- Venue
- Sensory Needs
- Best Practices
- Accessible Communications
- Online Accessibility

If your event is going to include in-person elements, one of your first and most important choices will be where you hold it. Think about accessibility as you tour venues. Are hallways wide enough for individuals using wheelchairs? What is the sensory experience of the venue like? Is there public transit to the venue? If you are planning on hosting an event outdoors, remember to consider the weather: not just a plan in case of rain or snow, but also a way for folks to cool down if it is too hot. Don't forget to consider food: if you're providing food, can you meet dietary requirements and if you're not, is there food nearby? As you select a venue, include at least one person with a disability who can specifically pay attention to accessibility. This will help you notice potential problems earlier.

There are also a variety of checklists and resources to help you remember everything. Here are some of our favorites:

- [Autistic Self-Advocacy Network](#)
- [University of Kansas](#)
- [Guide to Sensory-Friendly and Accessible Event Planning](#)
- [ADA Checklist](#)
- [Augsburg University](#)
- [Cornell University](#)

There are also ways that you can make a venue more accessible.

- Use tape to create "lanes" in the hallways for moving and standing, and to create wheelchair or floor seating in rooms
- Share information with attendees about how they can improve accessibility, for example using scent-free products
- Create a quiet space where people can take a break and recharge: it helps to include fidgets or other sensory items there
- Don't oversell your event: crowding can be extremely inaccessible
- Offer a space for breastfeeding/pumping
- Provide plenty of signs to help people find what they need
- Ask your venue to adjust the sensory experience: turn off blow dryers, use non-scented products, and turn off ambient music
- Set aside a quiet space for prayer, especially if your event is during a specific holiday or festival like Ramadan
- Offer spaces for service animals to eat and toilet

SENSORY NEEDS

While looking at the venue, many organizers do a good job of looking for barriers to physical accessibility, but forget about sensory processing disabilities. As you look at the venue, think about the sensory needs of your attendees. Areas to consider:

- Loud sounds
- Background music
- Light sources (fluorescents)
- Places to get away
- Scents (food, soaps, etc.)
- Physical space to move around
- Alternate seating (on the floor, standing)
- [See a full checklist here](#)

BEST PRACTICES FOR ACCESSIBILITY

This list is not all-inclusive, but does offer some essential things you can do to make your event more accessible.

- Allow direct support professionals/personal care attendants to attend for free.
- Provide accommodations without requiring proof of disability.
- Have a way for people to request accommodations when they register. Share the contact information for your accessibility lead.
- Provide many seating options, including chairs large enough for fat participants and space for wheelchair users.
- If you are providing food, check in about dietary restrictions and work to meet them as well as you can. Clearly label food with any allergens as well as gluten free, vegetarian, vegan.
- Have everyone use microphones when they are speaking in a large group, both presenters and those asking questions.
- You are legally required to allow service animals access to your event.
- When planning spacing and layout, leave enough room for someone in a wheelchair to navigate the space.
- Offer multiple ways to register (paper, online, over the phone).
- Create a list or project plan of your accessibility plans so you can use it again in the future.

Social Narratives

Social narratives are short stories that include information about what a person can expect in a given situation to help them prepare and reduce anxiety. They might include basic information about the event, what behavior is expected, where things are located, when to arrive, and what others may think or do in the situation. They are generally used to support autistic individuals. Typically, they are used with younger children, but the information they provide is useful for all ages and can be helpful for people with other disabilities as well.

[Click here to access a template for event social narratives.](#)

[Click here to see an example of an event social narrative.](#)

Accessibility Overview

It's very helpful to provide all of the information about accessibility for your event in one place. An easy way to do this is to create a document that shares what accommodations are in place, what can be requested, and what barriers still exist.

[Click here for a worksheet that will help you create your overview.](#)

[Click here for an example of an accessibility overview.](#)



ACCESSIBLE COMMUNICATIONS



When you host an event, there are many things you have to communicate. Communications includes marketing, sharing information with attendees, volunteers, and speakers, and even how you share information the day of the event. To be inclusive, all of these communications need to be accessible. There are also many disabilities that are communication based, which means spending time to create accessible communications is essential to building an inclusive event. Think about accessibility for all types of communications, including:

- Documents (including PDFs, Word documents, or any other format you may share)
- Websites and online tools and/or services
- Event invitations and session registration
- Videos
- Social media
- Images and graphics
- Emails
- Phone calls
- In person conversations

Marketing Materials and Public Communications

- Use inclusive language.
 - Be inclusive of all genders
 - Have a harassment policy and code of conduct
- If necessary and possible, translate into other languages.
- Use plain language and avoid jargon or acronyms.
- Share as much detail as possible in advance of the event.
 - You can do this through a social narrative.
- Share information about accessibility and accommodations in advance.
- Use a simple sans serif font in at least 12 pt size.
- Share things like slides or handouts in advance.
- Feel free to repeat the same information in multiple places and formats.
- Videos should include captions.

During the Event

- You cannot tell visually if someone has a disability. Don't make assumptions, and assume competence.
- Be patient: some people may require more time to process or communicate.
- Always speak directly to the person you are addressing, even if they have an interpreter or assistant with them.
- Remember that some people use Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) devices and may type instead of speaking out loud. Give them time to speak and don't make assumptions about their abilities or intelligence.
- Use plain language when speaking.
- Have printed copies of important materials.
- Have one person in charge of accessibility who can help problem solve with complex or difficult needs.
- If you're struggling to understand someone or think you may be misinterpreting, ask for clarification.
- Use straightforward, literal language whenever possible. If you use jargon or acronyms, define them.

After the Event

- Follow up with a request for feedback and specifically ask about accessibility.
- Share links to any videos, materials, or resources mentioned during the event.

ONLINE ACCESSIBILITY

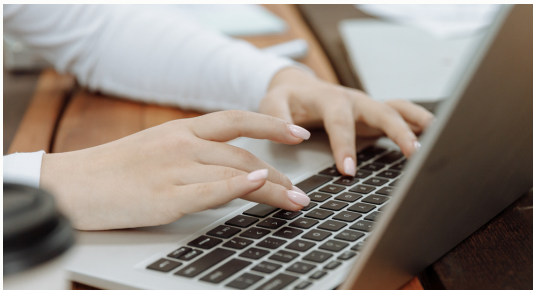
As most information is accessed online, you'll want to spend a good amount of time becoming familiar with the best practices for online accessibility. Covering all of online accessibility is beyond the scope of this guide, but we'll address the major points. [Click here](#) to see a more in-depth guide to online accessibility.

Throughout your online presence, keep these principles in mind:

- Use colors with high enough contrast ([see a contrast checker here](#)).
- Include [alt text](#) for images.
- Use structure like headers so that it's easier for screenreaders.
- Ask someone who uses a screenreader to test out your content to make sure it's accessible.
- Add captions for videos.

You can also [click here](#) to access a resource that will check your website for accessibility.

Not sure what alt text is? When you post an image, whether it's to social media, in an email, or on your website, those who use screenreaders will only know that an image is there. Alt text is a tag you can add to describe the image to your audience.



Writing Alt Text



Making Accessible PDFs

MAKING INFORMATION EASY TO ACCESS AND UNDERSTAND

When you add information to your website, it can be easy to create large blocks of text that are hard to read. Use headers to create a visual organization so that people can easily find what they're looking for. You can also create a table of contents and link to headers within a page. Information like cost, location, date and time, how to register, and a contact person should be at the top of your page and the easiest to find.

SPEAKERS



Your speakers are an important element of your event, because they are both people who need accessibility and people who will provide accessibility. To support them, provide resources that address their needs and help them support others.

Many event organizers assume that their speakers will not be disabled, or that if someone is speaking then they have the skills to manage any barriers themselves. Few resources exist to help event organizers provide accommodations to speakers.

When organizers forget to include their speakers when they consider accessibility, it damages the quality of your event and makes it inequitable. You're losing out on some great speakers and content by not including those who might require accommodations. Creating strong support structures for speakers not only means that disabled speakers are now much more likely to be able to present at your event, it also helps all of your speakers create stronger presentations.

This section includes:

- Recruiting Speakers
- Accommodations for Speakers
- Speaker Guide
- Communication Plan for Speakers
- Accessible Panels

SEEKING AND ACCEPTING SPEAKERS IN A MORE ACCESSIBLE WAY

Accessibility and inclusion start when you begin the process of choosing your speakers. Whether you are hand-selecting speakers or opening an application form, keep accessibility principles in mind when you're designing your process. Also consider who you are reaching out to: can you send the application form to people with diverse abilities and support needs? Speak openly about accepting disabled speakers and providing accommodations to speakers. It will encourage more folks to apply. If you're struggling to reach audiences with diverse abilities, try asking past attendees from a variety of backgrounds who they would like to see speak.

Examples:

- Offer a way to work on the application over time, so that applicants can save and come back.
- Use plain language in the application
- Make documents screen reader friendly
- Include a place in the application form to request accommodations and a point person for accessibility they can contact if necessary
- Share examples of past applications
- Share information about the supports you have available with the application form
- Have a contact person that applicants can reach out to for feedback, clarification, or support in creating their application
- Offer multiple ways of filling out the application (you could have an online form, allow people to call and do it over the phone, or offer and in person option)
- Share information about how many presentations you can accept
- Once speakers are accepted, provide a training session overviewing best practices and what you want to see from speakers
- Offer one on one support to speakers who may need help with organizing their presentation
- In many cases, having professional degrees is not the only way to gain expertise about a subject. If this is the case in your field, make it clear that you accept proposals from people with lived experience, work experience, or other forms of expertise.

INFORMATION TO PROVIDE IN ADVANCE

- Deadlines (both for the application and any after they are accepted)
- Payment information: you should always pay your speakers and be upfront with them about what payment is available or not
- Expectations, times, and information for event day
- Contact person
- Accommodations you have available
- Topics you would like to see
- Presentation length
- How many presentation slots are available
- How speakers are selected, and what makes a person more likely to be selected
- Responsibilities of a presenter
- Information about the audience

ACCOMMODATIONS FOR SPEAKERS

- Work with the speaker to create an outline of their presentation (for example the speaker can provide bullet points or a paragraph sharing what they think they want to talk about and the event organizer can help break it into an outline).
- Have one person clearly identified that the speaker can reach out to with any questions or concerns. All communication should come from this person.
- Only require the speaker to be at the event for their session.
- Have someone at the event who can help facilitate the session. They may introduce the speaker, share how the speaker would like to handle questions, and manage any tech issues.
- Be straightforward with expectations: is it ok for your speakers to bring fidgets? To sit down while they present? Can they arrive early so that they can avoid crowds while they set up? Is there a way for them to leave their presentation without running into crowds? Can they wear sunglasses? What level of formality of dress do you expect? This can help speakers to know how what supports they need to bring.
- Offer to help your speaker create a title or description for their presentation. Not everyone has a background in marketing, and it can be intimidating to write this copy.
- Assign someone to assist the speaker while they are onsite.
- Provide a quiet space before and after the presentation to decompress.



- If you want speakers to share information about the event, provide them with graphics, sample text, and a specific request.
- Allow a speaker to request a specific time or day to present if necessary.
- Have a meeting or call beforehand for the speaker to ask questions and for the organizers to run through the flow of the day.
- Offer a time to let the speaker do a practice run of their presentation with someone watching.
- Be clear about what the technology set up will look like, and have someone on site who can help them get set up with the technology.



SPEAKER GUIDE

A speaker guide is an incredibly helpful resource you can provide to your speakers with all the information they'll need. Include details about how to make their presentations accessible, FAQs about the event, and deadlines they need to keep in mind. Ideally, you'll have this guide ready when you are recruiting speakers so that potential speakers can use it to decide if they would like to apply.

WHAT TO INCLUDE

Start with the basics:

- When is the event and their presentation
- Where is it taking place, and where will they need to be to check in and present
- How will they check in
- Do they need to register, and if so how do they do so
- Any deadlines
- Accessibility info for the day of
- Parking information (note: speakers should not have to pay for parking)

You may also want to include a checklist of reminders for them to review before the day of their presentation, for example have they spell checked their slides and shared about the event on social media?



[See an example](#)

INFORMATION FOR SLIDES/HANDOUTS

- Share information on how to create an accessible slide deck, for example good color contrast, font size, and captions.
- You can create a Powerpoint template if you want everyone's presentations to be consistent and ensure accessibility.
- Remind speakers to add alt text to PDFs.

ACCESSIBLE PRESENTATIONS

- Use captioning. Powerpoint has an auto-caption feature
- Use plain language
- Use an accessibility checker on your presentation
- Speak slowly and include processing time if you ask questions

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN FOR SPEAKERS

Before you select speakers:

- Share information about accessibility during the application process or when you reach out.
- Identify someone as the point person for speaker communication/accessibility: if anyone has questions during the application/negotiations phase, they should know who to contact. This person should also be the main point of contact for speakers leading up to the event.

Once you have selected speakers:

- Personalize rejection emails: share some information about what you liked about the presentation, why it wasn't selected, or how to improve the proposal
- When you send acceptance emails, share a timeline of what you will need from your speakers throughout the process: will they need to send a bio, headshot, description/title, powerpoint slides, etc? When will you need these? Also include information about their main contact, what accommodations you are offering, and what to expect during the process. This is the time to share your speaker guide with any information about making their presentation accessible.
- If your speakers sign contracts, include important due dates.

Leading up to the event:

- Communicate regularly with your speakers: this may include sending reminders of materials you need, letting them know they can set up a practice time, sharing information and resources, etc.
- If you have a social narrative or other accessibility tools for the event, share it with your speakers so that they have all the information about the event in advance.
- Send reminder emails one and two weeks before the event with information about when to arrive, who to check in with, and what they can expect. This is also a good place to share general accessibility information: for example if you have a quiet space speakers can use before or after their presentation, where is it and how do they access it?

After the event:

- Follow up with a survey to your speakers so you can improve in the future.
- Thank your speakers



You can use your communications to help break down the process of creating a presentation into smaller steps, supporting your speakers with their executive function. Send reminders when speakers should have an outline, when they should begin working on slides, or to remind them of the supports available.

ACCESSIBLE PANELS

If you're interested in having a panel serve as one of your sessions, there are a few things to keep in mind to make sure that the panel is accessible for the speakers and the audience members. It will require more time and work on your end, but the final result will be a panel that truly stands out and supports everyone involved.

Speaker Selection

Who you choose to speak on your panel will communicate to the audience whose voices you think are important. These principles help with inclusivity:

- Include a diverse group of people with different backgrounds, and relationships to the subject.
- Ask for feedback and suggestions of speakers from a variety of people in your community.
- Panels can be a space to include people who are not comfortable giving a full presentation or who may need more support. The structure of the panel can help them learn skills for larger presentations. Don't discount someone who may need supports. Instead, think of how you can support people with good insight to be successful.

Your Moderator

Most panels will include a moderator to keep conversation flowing and help the speakers stay organized. The moderator plays an incredibly important role in making a panel accessible.

- This is the individual who will structure the panel, serve as the point of contact for the speakers, support them with accommodations, and answer questions.
- They should be intimately involved in selecting speakers, and the person to reach out to explain the panel. Having one person communicate throughout the process will make it easier for speakers.
- This should be someone with strong executive function/organizational skills, a good ability to tactfully let folks know what topics are out of bounds, and the ability to gently redirect conversations. They will also need to balance many personalities.
- The moderator can also track accommodation requests, create materials, and build the slideshow.

PLANNING CHECKLIST

- Speaking one on one with each panelist will help the moderator get a sense of whether they're a good fit for the panel and how they balance with each other. You might choose to have multiple meetings: one get to know you and one after you've selected the speakers to talk through the topics. The get to know you time is a great chance to set expectations, share details about the panel (like when and where, topics and goals of the panel, what accommodations are available, what support you can offer), and answer any immediate questions.
- If there are topics that you do not want to discuss, or limits on what you want to get in to, share that clearly up front. For example if one element of the topic is particularly controversial and you don't want to open that area of discussion, let people know in advance that it's not something you plan to talk about.
- Ideally you would have a meeting to talk through the questions and topics you want to discuss. You'd send your questions/topics ahead of time, then talk through the person's thoughts together. The moderator can take notes and compile them to see where there's overlap and where elements are missing. If something is missing, ask a specific speaker to cover it.
- The moderator can then lay out the order they want the questions to go in, approximate amount of time they want to spend on each, and what order they would like people to respond in.
- At this point, it can be very helpful to create an outline. The moderator may want to review the notes they took while discussing with each panelist and share which points they would like each panelist to hit in their responses to each question. This is also a great time to ask for questions.
- It can also be incredibly helpful to have a meeting with the full panel to run through the flow of the panel. This helps people get to know each other, see how long things will run, and understand their place in the panel. This doesn't have to be a full practice of the panel, but instead it can be a run through of the outline and flow.
- Send all your information in writing before the event: this should include an outline of the panel, if there are slides (panelists should be able to edit or make adjustments), basic details like date and time, handouts and intros, and any accommodations.
- Make sure the panel knows when to meet and who they're looking for on event day. Leave plenty of time between this meeting and when the panel starts so that no one is rushed, everyone can say hello, and people can address any final concerns.



SUPPORTING PANELISTS

In many ways, your panelists are speakers and you can support them with the same strategies we outlined earlier in this section. However there are some elements to being on a panel that are unique and can require specific supports. Here are some suggestions for ways to make a panel more accessible to panelists.

- Send the questions you will ask in writing to all panelists far in advance of the event. Ideally, you'll make time to discuss how each panelist will answer as well as clarify any points of confusion.
- Establish with all your panelists how they can indicate during the panel that they have a point they want to make. This helps keep them from interrupting each other.
- Have your moderator tell all the panelists how they'll indicate who should speak at any given time, and how they'll indicate it's time to move on.
- Allow people to bring supportive sensory items like sunglasses, fidgets, or alternative seating. If you want to go the extra mile, provide some fidgets to your panelists.
- If your panelists are overwhelmed by crowds, offer a way to enter and exit the space from behind the scenes.
- If someone is struggling with how to outline their thoughts, you can talk through a subject with them and help them decide the order and flow.
- Panelists may have a hard time writing their bio. You can set aside a time to speak with them. Ask about their background, what they think makes them a good fit for the panel, and how they like to refer to themselves. They may also want to share pertinent identities, work experiences, or education. You can write a draft and work with them to fine tune it.



VOLUNTEERS

Many events use volunteers to help keep costs down and ensure there are enough people to make the event run smoothly. Volunteering is often a way for individuals with disabilities on low incomes to gain access to events at reduced or free rates. It can also be added to resumes, making it a great opportunity for those who are struggling to find employment. You may find that many of your volunteers have disabilities, which makes it even more important to make the process accessible.

This section provides suggestions and reminders about how to create an accessible volunteer experience.

One common pitfall is only offering volunteer roles that include manual labor. There are many ways folks can volunteer, and when you make the process more inclusive, you'll find that you receive more support and do less work than before.

This section includes:

- Recruiting Volunteers
- Creative Volunteer Opportunities
- Communications Plan for Volunteers
- Training Volunteers

RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS

Just as with your speakers, you'll want to take a close look at your recruiting process for volunteers to ensure that it's not excluding anyone due to a disability. That means reviewing the materials you provide, giving accommodations even during the recruitment process, communicating clearly, and giving all the information someone might need to make the decision to volunteer. Volunteering is also a great way to make your event more equitable and accessible financially. You can offer volunteers a discounted or free rate to the event, giving those who are unemployed or underemployed the opportunity to attend.

GENERAL SUGGESTIONS

- Are all of your recruiting materials accessible? Have you added alt text to any images, used good color contrast, tagged PDFs, and provided large font options?
- Is there a clear person to contact with questions?
- Can volunteers request accommodations when they sign up as a volunteer?
- Have you clearly laid out what tasks need to be performed, what steps will be required for each task, and what a volunteer will need to be able to do to complete each task?
- Volunteers should be able to select which tasks or roles they fill
 - Be open to adjusting a role to fit someone's needs
- Minimize the number of steps required to become a volunteer
- If you need a background check or other additional steps, provide information as to why
- Allow multiple ways for volunteers to sign up (in person, online, over the phone, etc.)

INFORMATION TO INCLUDE IN MATERIALS ABOUT VOLUNTEERING

- Overview of the task(s) each role will complete, broken down into steps
- Any skills/requirements for the task
- Location
- Time commitment
- Training: will there be training? When? How much?
- Who will they be working with? Is there a staff member to help guide them?
- What are the benefits? Do volunteers receive a discounted rate or other perk?
- Any accommodations currently available

GETTING CREATIVE ABOUT VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Volunteers can be a rich resource. There are many people who are motivated to support your work, but who may not be able to donate or commit significant amounts of time. Your challenge is to create volunteer opportunities that are accessible and bite-sized.

A helpful way to approach that challenge is to break your tasks down into smaller pieces. As an example, you may think that "managing social media" is a single task. If you were assigning jobs to staff members, it's likely that one person would manage it. If you want to ask volunteers to help you, break it down into its component pieces. One person could create graphics or find images. Another person could write the text for the posts. Another person could create a schedule of when to post and on which channels. A final person could actually create the posts.

This has a few benefits:

- You can recruit volunteers with more advanced skillsets.
- You can build deep relationships between your volunteers and your event organizers.
- You can include more volunteers.
- You offer opportunities that don't require as many hours or as much work.
- Your community is more involved in creating the event, which helps them to buy in.

It does take extra time to brainstorm which tasks you can break up, and how to break them into component parts. You'll also need to follow up with your volunteers regularly to make sure they're completing the work they volunteered for. This strategy will work best when you can start well before your event and don't feel rushed. It's a good amount of work at the beginning, but once you have determined the tasks, it will help you to share the workload over the long term.



COMMUNICATIONS PLAN FOR VOLUNTEERS

Before you select volunteers:

- Create a schedule of when you need volunteers, how many for each role, and what the roles will be. Share this as part of your recruitment.
- Identify someone as the lead for volunteer communication/accessibility: if people have questions about how to volunteer, they can ask this person. This point of contact should stay the same throughout the volunteering process.
- Share detailed information about each task/instructions for your volunteers as well as information about any additional training.

After you have identified your volunteers:

- Assign roles and shifts as far in advance as possible. Share this information with your volunteers as soon as you have it. If someone is uncomfortable with what you have asked them to do, give them a method to swap.
 - It's a good idea to have some volunteers with experience in each area. If you have enough volunteers to overstaff (which is always a good idea since you're likely to have some volunteers drop), have an experienced volunteer act as a "floater" who can support multiple areas.

Leading up to the event:

- Share clear information about when volunteers should arrive, when they should check in, who they need to speak with, and any other details they might want to know about logistics (parking information is great to include. Volunteers should not have to pay for parking). If they need to dress a specific way, have any materials with them, or be aware of any challenges, let them know.
- Send a reminder the week of event day that includes the volunteer schedule and your instructions about each role.
- You can choose to train in advance or the day of the event: either way, make sure you let your volunteers know so they can be prepped for training. Include information about how to be inclusive in this training.
- If you have a social narrative or other accessibility supports, share them with your volunteers.
- Provide printed instructions for the task. If you can include visuals, it will be even more accessible.

After the event:

- Follow up with a survey to your volunteers so you can improve in the future.
- Thank your volunteers and let them know about any upcoming volunteer opportunities.



Example Volunteer Instructions





TRAINING VOLUNTEERS

One of the most important elements in making sure that volunteering is accessible is in providing good training for your volunteers. You may not have the ability to see your volunteers before your event. If that's the case, ask them to arrive early enough that you can give them training before their shift starts. If you have more complicated volunteering tasks, it's a good idea to schedule a training day in advance.

- Provide handouts or written instructions
- Provide answers to common FAQs they may get
- Make sure they know who they can send questions to if they don't know the answer
- Have someone identified during their volunteer shift they can go to for help

This is also a good chance to review the general accessibility info from earlier in this guide. Remind volunteers:

- Don't make assumptions about a person's disability and assume competence
- Remember that mobility devices and service animals are doing work: you shouldn't touch them without consent.

*Bonus Tip: you can use a similar training on accessibility for both staff and volunteers.

Day Of

Just as with your attendees and your speakers, be mindful of the spaces you create for your volunteers. Keep the same eye to physical accessibility, ask volunteers to use scent-free products, and offer places to take breaks or pause if necessary. Ask in advance if your volunteers will need specific accommodations.

Follow Up

- Send a thank you to your volunteers. This should include a way for them to provide feedback. The easiest option is a survey. Questions could include:
 - Did you feel you were properly trained and managed throughout the event? If not, please explain.
 - Did you feel you were given enough breaks / meals / water throughout the event?
 - Would you volunteer with us again?
 - Did you feel volunteering was accessible? Were there accommodations or modifications you would like to see in the future?
 - Did you receive enough communication throughout the process?



STAFF AND ORGANIZERS

If no one on your staff has disclosed a disability to you, you may be tempted to skip this section. Resist that urge. Whether you are aware of disabilities or not, focusing on accessibility at the very basic level of staff and organizers has major benefits. It helps you incorporate accessibility and universal design principles into each element of the event instead of adding them on as an after thought. Many of the accommodations you create will be helpful to able-bodied and neurotypical folks, and most importantly, it allows you to include disabled people throughout your planning process.

If you want your event to be accessible, it is essential that you include disabled folks in the organizing process. They will see things you won't. You could create a committee of community members to help plan, or check in regularly with trusted folks to give you feedback. Remember that disability covers many experiences, and including people with a variety of needs will give you the most variety of perspectives. Someone who is neurodivergent will have a different perspective than someone with a mobility disability, someone with hearing or vision impairment, or someone with an intellectual disability. The more feedback you can get from a variety of people the better.

This section includes:

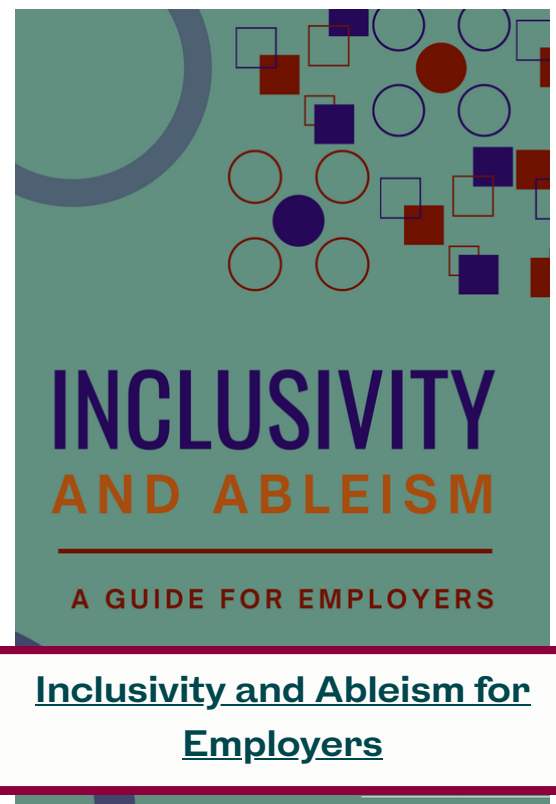
- General Accessibility Principles
- Accessible Meetings
- Communicating With Other Organizers

SUPPORTING DISABLED EMPLOYEES

This guide will not give you a full overview of how to support disabled employees. For more information on accessibility in the workplace, check out our guide to Inclusivity and Ableism for Employers, or contact our education department for additional training. These pages will give you some general strategies that can help you make the process of event organizing more accessible to your staff or any volunteers who are helping.

GENERAL ACCESSIBILITY PRINCIPLES

- Don't assume that anyone is able-bodied or neurotypical. Offer accommodations even if you don't know that anyone needs them.
- Learn. You can always read more about inclusivity and access.
- Discuss accessibility openly. Share with other organizers that you are working to make the process accessible and ask what you can do to support those around you.
- Make processes clear and consistent. Have them written down and easy to find.
- Don't get too hung up on the "right way" to do things. Often people with disabilities may have to take a different path, but will still reach the destination you're looking for.
- Use automation and technology so employees don't have to worry about managing small, repetitive tasks.



RESOURCES FOR MAKING AN ACCESSIBLE WORKPLACE

- [Ask JAN](#)
- [IncludeAbility](#)
- [Employer Toolkit](#)
- [Inclusion@Work](#)
- [Work Without Limits](#)
- [Accessible Zoom Meetings](#)

POTENTIAL CHALLENGE AREAS

- Executive function (organizing, prioritizing, time management)
- Sensory needs
- Meetings or other social/interactive times
- Different communication needs or unclear communications
- Physical spaces (especially when looking for venues)
- Anxiety or overwhelm
- Difficulty anticipating or knowing what comes next

CREATING ACCESSIBLE MEETINGS

If you are organizing an event, chances are you'll be meeting with other organizers regularly. This is one of the best places to set the tone for accessibility and inclusivity. Here are some recommendations for making meetings accessible.

In Advance

- Tell people who will be at the meeting and what their role is.
- Share expectations in advance: how are people expected to behave? Can they eat? What will you be covering?
- Schedule more time into meetings to allow people to process and talk through ideas.
- Ask in advance if anyone needs additional support like captioning, ASL (American Sign Language), or a support person present.
- Make it clear who will be running the meeting and how others can contact them with questions or additional topics for the meeting.
- Communicate what the structure of the meeting will be and if participants need to prepare anything in advance.
- If you'll be making any major decisions, share what they are in advance so participants are ready.

After

- Follow up with notes and to dos (including who is assigned to each task and when it is due).
- People might like to contribute to the meeting afterwards. Give people an opportunity to email you or speak to you at another time.
- Share the next meeting date and time.
- Make it clear who can answer questions if people have them.
- Share any decisions that will be made at the next meeting, so participants can prepare.

During the Meeting

- Have a designated note-taker.
- Be clear about what topics are on the table to discuss and what isn't.
- When asking for feedback or opinions, give time for people to process before they respond. If you have anyone who uses AAC (Alternative and Augmentative Communication), ASL, or typing, make sure you give them time to share their responses, and keep a particular eye on them to note when they'd like to share.
- Have only one person speak at a time. To make this easier, establish a process for who will speak when, and how to indicate that you'd like to speak.
- Have a clearly marked process for tasks that need to be completed, who will complete them, due dates, and reminders. Whenever you assign a task in a meeting, give it a due date.
- Give instructions and information in multiple ways, including written.
- Record your meetings so those who were not there can watch later.
- Where possible, give people tasks that they're interested in.
- Allow people to take breaks if necessary.
- Explain what will happen after the meeting (how you will follow up).
- Limit extra sensory input during the meeting (for example if you are on Zoom, have participants mute when they aren't speaking).
- If you are in person, allow multiple seating options or the option to stand.
- Do an access check in.

COMMUNICATING WITH OTHER ORGANIZERS



A common place that we forget about accessibility is in our communication with coworkers and peers. Different disabilities can lead to different communication styles and needs. To help keep everyone on the same page, we recommend these principles of communication:

- Clearly share with your team the scope of the project: what needs to be done, by whom, and when.
 - Use plain language. [This checklist can help.](#)
 - Repeat important information more than once, in a variety of formats.
 - Allow for plenty of processing time: don't expect people to have answers or responses immediately after a prompt.
 - Recognize that other communication styles may feel uncomfortable to you: autistic communication can be blunt and may feel rude. Assume the best of others and ask for clarification when you're unsure.
 - Work with your team to build expectations, especially around how criticism or difficult topics will be discussed.
- Work together to find a communication method that works for everyone: you may have to use a few. This might be Slack, email, and/or a project plan.
 - Keep this year after year and share it with new folks so it is easier to catch up and see what tasks need to be done.
 - Send reminders of deadlines and tasks. There are many ways to automate this.
 - When introducing a new task, make sure you include all the information about each element of the task so people understand what is expected of them. What will it look like when it's complete? Who can they ask for help? Are there resources or documents they can use and where can they find those?

HELPFUL DOCUMENTS AND RESOURCES YOU CAN PROVIDE

One tactic for improving communication is providing resources and documents in one easily accessible place so that team members can double check anything they may need to. This could include:

- Agendas
- Schedules
- Notes
- Flow documents
- Org chart
- Project plans
- Written processes
- Resources like graphics or boilerplate language
- Deadlines and to do lists

EXAMPLES, CHECKLISTS, AND RESOURCES



We linked a variety of resources throughout this guide. Find them all here, plus a few additional resources!

Informational Resources

- [Social media accessibility](#)
- [Accessible presentations](#)
- [Common disabilities](#)
- [Plain language](#)
- [How to make PDFs accessible](#)
- [The Curb Cut Effect](#)
- [Accessible communication](#)
- [Accessible marketing](#)
- [During the event communication](#)
- [Online accessibility overview](#)
- [Alt text](#)
- [Alternative and Augmentative Communication \(AAC\)](#)
- [Access check ins](#)
- [Guide to Accessible Events](#)

Accessibility Checkers

- [Contrast checker](#)
- [Web accessibility](#)
- [Online accessibility suite](#)

Venue Selection Resources

- [Autistic Self-Advocacy Network](#)
- [University of Kansas](#)
- [Guide to Sensory-Friendly and Accessible Event Planning](#)
- [ADA Checklist](#)
- [Augsburg University](#)
- [Cornell University](#)

Employers

- [Inclusivity and ableism for employers](#)
- [Ask JAN](#)
- [IncludeAbility](#)
- [Employer Toolkit](#)
- [Inclusion@Work](#)
- [Work Without Limits](#)
- [Accessible Zoom Meetings](#)
- [Accessible meetings](#)

Templates and Worksheets

- [Accessibility planning worksheet](#)
- [Agenda template](#)
- [Flow document](#)
- [Social narrative](#)
- [Project plans](#)

Checklists

- [Writing alt text](#)
- [Accessible PDFs](#)
- [Website accessibility](#)
- [Sensory needs](#)
- [Plain language](#)
- [Events checklist](#)
- [Venue](#)

Samples

- [Social narrative](#)
- [Speaker guide](#)
- [Volunteer instructions](#)
- [Org chart](#)
- [Flow document](#)
- [Accessibility overview](#)