

Making Your Conference Presentation Accessible to People with Disabilities

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As you prepare for this year's conference, we'd like to encourage you to make your presentation accessible to people with disabilities. This is probably a new idea to you. It's natural to think of accessibility in terms of physical space, but not in format of presentations. But consider for a moment how frustrating it would be to attend a conference, and miss most of what is said. That's what happens to many of our colleagues.

Disabilities are not always obvious. People may have visual or hearing impairments. They may have learning disabilities or other types of print impairments that make it difficult to process written text. Fortunately, there are some simple steps that you can take to ensure that your presentation is accessible to everyone in your audience.

Use a Microphone

In oral presentations, use a microphone whenever you can. We realize that you may not always have a choice about whether a microphone is available. But to the extent that it is possible, use a microphone so everyone can hear you. Also, when there is audience participation, encourage people asking questions to speak into a microphone. If a microphone is not available for the audience, you should repeat the question into yours.

Present in Multiple Formats

When you are speaking, you should also have visuals available (e.g., overheads, slides or PowerPoint). That way your presentation is both visual and auditory, thereby increasing the likelihood that people who do not hear well, will at least be able to see it and people who don't see well, will at least be able to hear the information. This is a good teaching practice anyway, even when presenting for people who don't have disabilities. Finally, be sure to read out loud text that you have on your visuals. Do this even when you have a graph, cartoon or picture. Tell the audience what the picture says. This will also help if your session is being taped.

Use a Large Font, Bulleted Text, and Lots of White Space

Give some thought to your overheads or slides. It's best if they are written in at least a 28 point font. Overheads and slides are also clearest if they are black print on a

white background. Try not to pack too much information on each slide. These are hard for everyone to read.

For poster presentations, similar rules apply. Some presenters try to put way too much information on their posters. Your audience will be able to better process your information if you don't try to cram too much information into a small space. Use a large font, bulleted text, and lots of white space. This will be much easier for everyone to read.

Have Handouts/Papers Available on Disk

Handouts are always a good idea for helping people remember what you say. But for people with visual, learning or print impairments, typical paper handouts aren't particularly helpful. Having your handouts available on disk will allow attendees with disabilities to use software to read them. If you forget to bring disk copies of your handouts (1 or 2 copies on disk are usually enough), you can also offer to e-mail this information.

Any text on disk is better than nothing. But if you really want to be helpful, there are some additional steps that you can take. Many people with disabilities have computer programs that will read text out loud. You can format your text on disk in such a way that it takes maximum advantage of these programs. First, it's helpful if you can have your handouts or papers in Word since this is a pretty universal format. Some still use text, but many more are using Word, and if necessary a Word file could be easily converted to a text file. Formatting paragraphs with a blank line between each helps to permit reading by paragraph. The font size and style make no difference, as the person's access technology will adapt it. Any figures and tables should be labeled as such, and it also really helps to have a note indicating "end table" or "end figure" at the end to permit a reader to skip over them as desired. Ideally, figures could be described in a note by the author, but this is not standard practice.

In conclusion, there are some positive steps that you can take to make sure that your presentations are accessible. By making some of these small adaptations, you can ensure that everyone who attends your session can find out about your work. And ultimately, these changes also benefit you because they will make you a more effective presenter for everyone in your audience, not just people with disabilities.