Guidelines for Accessible Archives for People with Disabilities

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Guidelines Origins and Revision History

The Joint Archives Management/Records Management Roundtables Working Group on Accessibility in Archives and Records Management developed the *Best Practices for Working with Archives Researchers with Physical Disabilities* and *Best Practices for Working with Employees with Physical Disabilities,* which was adopted by SAA in 2010. A SAA Task Force to Revise Best Practices on Accessibility was convened in November 2017, submitting the revised Guidelines for Accessible Archives for People with Disabilities in 2019. The Guidelines have undergone an additional revision and updating process in 2023-2024.

We are grateful for the advocacy and standards developed by the Joint Working Group and 2019 Task Force for the work we are currently building upon.

This 2024 revision is dedicated in memory of Sara White (1977-2024), SAA member and dedicated disability advocate. Sara was involved in the initial Joint Working Group and her advocacy was integral to the formation of the 2017 Task Force, which she co-chaired. Passionate about raising awareness within the archival community, Sara worked tirelessly to improve accessibility in archives and ensure inclusivity for all.

Introduction

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines someone with a disability as "a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities." The World Health Organization estimates that 1.3 billion people, or 16% of the world's population, have a disability[1]. As described in the *World Report on Disability*, "Disability is part of the human condition – almost everyone will be temporarily or permanently impaired at some point in life, and those who survive to old age will experience increasing difficulties in functioning."[2] There are many types of disabilities; they can affect a person's vision, movement, thinking, memory, learning, communicating, hearing, social interactions, and mental health. Disabilities can include structural and functional impairments, and can limit activity and participation.[3] Many disabilities are not immediately apparent; one should never assume another persons' abilities.

Within the archival profession, the term *accessibility* commonly refers to the general discoverability and ease of use of archival collections. In the context of enabling equal or equivalent access to archival facilities, resources, and services for people with disabilities,

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[1] World Health Organization. "Global Report on Health Equity for Persons with Disabilities," December 2, 2022. https://www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect/9789240063600.
[2] "World Report on Disability," World Health Organization, 2011, http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/report/en/.
[3] "Disability and Health Overview," Center for Disease Control, September 16, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/disability.html.

accessibility refers to minimizing or eliminating barriers.[4] Accessibility should be integral to institutional cultures, workflows, and services.

These *Guidelines* present recommendations and resources to help archival workers provide services, resources, and spaces that are accessible and inclusive for everyone, including visitors and staff. They encourage respect for each person's right of control of their own body, assistive devices, and accommodations. They aim to apply overarching standards and guidelines such as the ADA and other external accessibility standards[5] to archival repositories to address opportunities and challenges that are more specific to our field. Institutions are encouraged to conduct periodic comprehensive accessibility reviews touching on all areas of these *Guidelines*. Even if an institution does not have all the tools to achieve "full accessibility" for the vast range of disabilities, continuously working towards accessibility is key.

Core Values for Accessibility

The Society of American Archivists, representing the archival profession, is committed to minimizing barriers and providing access for people with disabilities to archival facilities, resources, workplaces, services, and operations. The following Core Values for Accessibility inform all aspects of these *Guidelines*.

- A prevalent phrase from the Disability Rights Movement is "Nothing About Us Without Us." Center the voices, stories, and experiences of disabled people when establishing policies, workflows, collections, and programming for and about disabled people.
    - Treat every person with dignity and respect.
    - Disability is not a bad word. Being disabled should not invoke pity, stigma, or limiting assumptions about a person's capabilities or worth.
- Disability is a spectrum and each person experiences disabilities in unique and personal ways. Be flexible and allow individuals to have a say in accommodation needs.
    - Avoid making assumptions based on perceived needs.
    - Accommodations for one type of disability may not be optimal for other types of disabilities (example: subtitles may be helpful for someone who is hard of hearing but distracting for someone with ADHD).
    - People who share the same disability may still need different accommodations.
- Respect privacy and personal boundaries.
    - Disabilities are not always visible. Disclosing disability is a choice and no one should feel pressure to disclose.
    - Physical assistive devices are considered part of the body of the person using those devices.

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[4] The related concept of *Universal Design* is an approach to designing facilities and services that can be accessed, understood, and used by anyone regardless of their ability. "What is the difference between accessible, usable, and universal design?" Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology, last modified May 24, 2022, https://www.washington.edu/doit/what-difference-between-accessible-usable-and-universal-design.

[5] Including WCAG 2.2 and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

- Accessibility is about removing barriers so that people can thrive; it should not be perceived as an "inconvenience" with the minimal goal of simply avoiding litigation.
- Design for accessibility, advocate for accommodations, and advance accessibility through ongoing individual and institutional commitment, which includes:
  - The activation and onus of accessibility throughout the organization, from top-level support, financial support, and multiple units throughout an organization in an ongoing way.
  - Accessibility is not a "one-and-done" single effort, it should also not be an afterthought, or the domain of a single person/unit solely, it requires EVERYONE's commitment and ongoing support.
- Improving accessibility is beneficial to everyone, regardless of ability.
  - Universal design (for spaces, for learning, etc) is a way to build accommodations into a system holistically (example: a ramp is helpful for a wheelchair, strollers, and moving carts of heavy boxes). Adopting Universal Design principles for instruction allow students to learn and articulate their learning through multiple senses and mediums.
- Be flexible in interactions with people, physical spaces, policies, operations, and services.

Effective Communication & Etiquette

Respect and courtesy are the foundation of good communication. A respectful and welcoming environment is based upon listening carefully to one another, being sensitive to a person's specific needs, advocating for accessibility, maintaining flexibility, and taking concrete actions to support both employees and patrons with disabilities.

- Respect privacy.[6] A person should not need to unwillingly disclose a disability.
- Listen carefully to a person requesting accommodation, even if their disability is not obvious to you. Find the best way to meet their specific need(s).
- Ask if and how someone may need assistance. Two people with the same disability may choose different accommodations. Respect boundaries and listen if someone declines assistance.
- Use the preferred disability terminology of the person you are speaking with or about. Take care to avoid outdated language.[7] Some people prefer *person-first* language, which emphasizes the person and not the disability,[8] while others prefer *identity-first* language, which acknowledges their disability as a defining characteristic to their identity.[9] There is

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[6] It is not appropriate to ask someone what their disability is, only how they can be assisted. "The ADA: Your Responsibilities as an Employer," U. S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, accessed May 22, 2023, https://www.eeoc.gov/publications/ada-your-responsibilities-employer.

[7] Unfavorable terminology includes "impaired," "the [insert disability label]" (such as "the blind"), or "handicapped." "Disability Language Style Guide," National Center on Disability and Journalism, 2021, http://ncdj.org/style-guide/.

[8] Examples: "A person with a disability" or "a person with hearing loss."

[9] Example: "autistic person."

no unified disability community so take your cue from how the person refers to themselves.
- Give your full attention to each user, and speak directly to them rather than to any accompanying assistants or interpreters.
- Aim to position yourself at an equal height to the person you are conversing with. For example: if they are at a seated height, you should also take a seat.
- When working with a person with a vision disability, identify yourself and use specific and descriptive verbal communication (example: "the desk is to your right").
- When working with a person with a hearing disability, face them fully to allow them to clearly see your lips. Ask if they would prefer other means of communication, especially if you are wearing a mask (such as using a speak-to-text app or another written format).
- Allow and encourage people to use assistive devices and technologies. Only touch a person or their assistive devices with their consent.

Engaging with Disability Communities

Engaging with disabled people to gather their input and feedback about the accessibility of spaces, resources, and services is incredibly important. By reaching out to people with disabilities for paid opportunities for them to identify barriers and pain points they encounter, it demonstrates institutional commitment to making inclusive and respectful spaces and services. If your institution is part of a college or university, there is often a disability support unit on campus. This unit may employ disabled students to help with accessibility testing or, minimally, help distribute calls for participation in accessibility usability studies. If you don't have such a unit within your organization, try reaching out to local branches of disability organizations[10].

The Smithsonian User Access Expert Group is an example of cultivating a user group of people with disabilities to advise and provide input on advancing accessibility within an organization.

Physical Environment

Buildings and Grounds

Accessibility is not only about accessing content and services, but also simply *getting there* and being able to open the door. Post venue accessibility information on your institution's website and in other relevant locations, such as at building entrances and in repository communications. Up-to-date and accurate information regarding entrances, locations, elevators, steps, parking, and public transportation should be posted, with pictures, online, including any temporary outages or construction impacts. Make sure to do the same for staff-only spaces in a convenient and appropriate way. Include information about any

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[10] One example is the American Foundation for the Blind, who specialize in usability testing and offer consulting services. See more at https://www.afb.org/about-afb/what-we-do/afb-consulting.

accommodations that are already available.[11] This helps people prepare and make appropriate arrangements for their visit. Provide a way for visitors to contact your institution to request any needed accommodations.

Buildings and grounds that follow another entity's rules for renovations, such as historical societies, are encouraged to advocate for and pursue full access for patrons and employees. It is reasonable to retrofit buildings and grounds as needed.[12] Follow the <u>Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities</u> (ADAAG) to ensure that access to parking lots, walkways, bathrooms and other utilities, and access points of buildings are accessible to people with disabilities.[13]

- At least one door should have automatic openers and should be wide enough (i.e. 36 inches) to accommodate wheelchairs and scooters.[14]
- Eliminate obstacles that could be tripping hazards for people with sight disabilities or who use scooters/wheelchairs.
- Aisles/stacks should be wide enough (i.e. 36 inches minimum and 42 inches preferred) to accommodate wheelchairs and scooters. If they are not wide enough for wheelchairs to turn around (i.e. 48 inches), they should be open at both ends to prevent the need to back up for long distances.[15]
- If a public elevator is not available, visitors should be permitted to use employee elevators while accompanied by an employee.
- Bathrooms should have wheelchair-accessible toilets and sinks as well as proper disposal containers for medical and personal hygiene.
- Signage should be in large print, with high contrast between letters and backgrounds. Signs should be printed on non-glare surfaces. Whenever possible, Braille should be included in standardized locations.[16]
- Manually operated compact shelving should be avoided unless it is possible to ensure that someone with a disability can turn the crank arms. Electrically operated compact shelving is recommended.

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[11] For example: "Complimentary wheelchairs are available at the Library entrance."

[12] Thomas C. Jester and Sharon C. Park, "Making Historic Properties Accessible," Preservation Briefs (National Park Service, September 1993), https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/upload/preservation-brief-32-accessibility.pdf.; American Library Association, "Libraries Transforming Communities: Accessible Small and Rural Communities," Text, Tools, Publications & Resources, accessed January 26, 2024, https://www.ala.org/tools/librariestransform/libraries-transforming-communities/access.

[13] Accessible Routes in "Guide to the ADA Standards," United States Access Board, accessed January 26, 2024, https://www.access-board.gov/ada/guides/chapter-4-accessible-routes/.

[14] ADAAG, 4.13: "Doors"; 4.14: "Entrances"; 4.3: "Accessible Routes." For information on handles, see Chapter 3 "Operable Parts" in "Guide to the ADA Standards," United States Access Board, accessed January 26, 2024, https://www.access-board.gov/ada/guides/chapter-3-operable-parts/.

[15] ADAAG, 8.5: "Libraries: Stacks"; 4.3: "Accessible Routes."

[16] ADAAG, 4.30: "Signage."

- Flooring should comply with archival facility guidelines endorsed by the SAA,[17] such as sealed concrete, low-pile carpet or carpet tiles, or sealed wood floors.
- Venues should be smoke-free and fragrance-free out of consideration for people who are sensitive to smells.
- Venues should have zoned temperature and humidity controls which balance the preservation of the collections and the comfort of employees and visitors.
- Include a "how to get here" section to your website, with details on location, public transportation, parking, and other pertinent information for visitors.
- Consider providing a complimentary wheelchair or other mobility tools for visitors to borrow while on site.
- Keep hand sanitizer near hands-on stations and commonly touched surfaces.

Reading Room

- Post pictures of the space online, along with use policies and information about any assistive devices provided, to allow users to plan for their visit.
- The reference desk or table should be designed to flexibly accommodate both researchers and employees. At least a portion of the desk should be at a lower height to enable people using wheelchairs to interact with employees at eye level.[18] If the desk is not accessible, an employee should meet the researcher in a more accessible location within the room.
- Consider having dual screens at the reference computer so that a researcher can follow what the employee is doing. Enable communicating via chat if needed.
- Chairs should be height and ergonomically adjustable and mobile. Provide a variety of chair sizes and styles to accommodate all visitors.[19]
- At least one reading room table should be height adjustable.[20]
- Have adjustable light levels for those with light sensitivity (table lamps or dimmable overhead lighting).
- Some reading rooms can be large and overwhelming. Consider having an alternate space for quiet study, collaborative work, or other uses as needed.

Emergency Planning

All emergency/evacuation plans should include provisions for people with disabilities. All employees should be thoroughly familiar with emergency/evacuation/securing-in-place procedures for themselves and others.

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[17] Pacifico, Michele F. and Thomas P. Wilsted, "Archival and Special Collections Facilities: Guidelines for Archivists, Librarians, Architects, and Engineers," Society of American Archivists, 2009, https://mysaa.archivists.org/productdetails?id=a1B5a00000kG3OUEA0.

[18] The height and design of the desk must also consider accessibility for employees.

[19] For more on Universal Design, see: Spina, Carli, and Margaret Cohen. *Accessibility and Universal Design*. SPEC Kit 358. Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2018. http://publications.arl.org/Accessibility-Universal-Design-SPEC-Kit-358.

[20] Ibid.

- Have emergency plans and procedures available for all staff, both digitally and physically at designated points of each building (service desks, offices, emergency exits, etc.).
- Workspaces for employees who need extra time to exit the building should be located as near as possible to safe exits.
- As appropriate, make emergency service personnel aware of any individuals who will need assistance in an emergency before a situation arises (for example, as part of the onboarding process for new employees).
- Alarms should provide both audio and visual signals.
- Alarms should be visible and audible from anywhere in public areas, employee areas, and stacks and in all stairwells, storage areas, and restrooms.
- Fire alarms should be maintained and strobe lights should be synchronized. Be aware that flashing lights may trigger epileptic seizures.[21]
- Floor plans featuring emergency exits should be visible within the reading room and employee areas, and available online.

Public Services

- Employees should be willing to assist researchers in registering, requesting, and physically accessing reading room and closed stacks materials.
- Registration forms, access policies, and accessibility options should be communicated with researchers prior to their visit, so there is time to review the policies and procedures. Employees should also consider placing reading room policies on tables and have as least one Braille copy available.
- Provide an easy way for visitors to request accommodations.
- Encourage and permit researchers to bring in their own assistive equipment, adaptive software, and assistants that best meet their needs.
- Permit researchers to use non-flash photography to help with their research needs.
- Equip at least one computer or tablet with adaptive technology. Examples include but are not limited to text-to-speech software[22] and screen magnification applications. Tablets should have a stand and assistive apps should be preloaded.
- Train employees to be flexible and sensitive to accessibility requests relating to using assistive devices, allowing extra time on machines, or providing additional employee assistance.
  - Be sensitive to behavior that may be a symptom of an invisible disability. For example, a fidgety researcher may be in pain and trying to find a comfortable position rather than nervously contemplating theft. A person with limited dexterity may turn pages differently, but still safely.

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[21] "Photosensitivity and Seizures," Epilepsy Foundation, November 18, 2013, https://www.epilepsy.com/what-is-epilepsy/seizure-triggers/photosensitivity.
[22] Examples of screen readers include JAWS, NVDA, Kurtzweil, Android TalkBack, or Apple VoiceOver. Other examples of adaptive technology include height-adjustable monitors and oversized keyboards.

- Employees should be trained to use any assistive equipment and adaptive software available in the reading room.
- Employees should be trained in appropriate procedures for accommodating service animals.[23] No one should touch or distract service animals without permission from the handler.
- Offer flexible services to support researchers who are deaf, nonverbal, or who may not be able to physically visit the repository (for example, having a flexible limit on research support and copies/scans, or transcribing documents on request).
- Partner with local knowledgeable organizations or institutional units (example: disability support units) to compile a list of local sign language interpreters, note-takers, and readers for researchers to contact.
- For live events[24], including tours and presentations:
    - Anyone speaking should use microphones.
    - Provide a sign language interpreter and/or captions.
    - Offer Hearing Assistance Technology.[25]
    - Consider online streaming of public events for people who may not be able to physically attend the event.
        - Ensure high quality audio is captured.
        - Provide closed captioning and a transcription (professionally produced captions are always better than automatic transcripts).

Exhibitions

When planning an exhibit, make it as accessible as possible by engaging multiple senses. Creative exhibitions can engage a range of visual, aural, cognitive and physical sensations in their design.[26] For physical exhibits, review the suggestions in the Buildings and Grounds section above; for digital exhibits, review the section on Digital Content below.
- Provide wide, open spaces to make a welcoming and manageable space for people who use mobility aids.
    - Remove architectural barriers to allow wheelchair access.
    - Make sure exhibit cases and surrounding furniture are not hazards for someone who is blind and that nothing hangs too low from the ceiling or sticks out too far into pedestrian traffic.

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[23] Employees are only able to ask (1) whether the animal is required because of a disability and (2) what work or task the animal is trained to perform. Employees cannot ask about the person's disability, require medical documentation, require a special identification card or training documentation for the service animal, or ask that the service animal demonstrate its ability to perform the work or task. "Service Animals," U. S. Department of Justice, February 28, 2020, https://www.ada.gov/resources/service-animals-2010-requirements/.

[24] See the Buildings and Grounds section for general considerations for physical spaces.

[25] American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). *Hearing Assistive Technology*. https://www.asha.org/public/hearing/hearing-assistive-technology/. Accessed 9 Apr. 2024.

[26] For more in depth information on making exhibitions and public programming accessible: Smithsonian Accessibility Program, "Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design," accessed June 16, 2023, https://www.sifacilities.si.edu/sites/default/files/Files/Accessibility/accessible-exhibition-design1.pdf.

- Arrange exhibit items and their labels so they are visible to a seated person.[27] Be aware of any glares from lighting that may reflect off case surfaces due to the angle. Make sure any boundaries or blockades do not block text or material.
- Use concise sentences with plain language.[28, 29] Avoid jargon and ableist language.[30]
- Use a large sans serif font, high color contrast, and single color backgrounds for text.[31] Avoid color combinations that would impact color blind individuals (such as red and green).[32]
- Print materials, such as brochures, handouts, teaching materials, etc. should be available digitally. Files can be available on institutional sites or blogs, linked to via QR codes, and more. Make sure they are able to be read by screen reader technology. This is not only helpful to disabled patrons, but it is also helpful to individuals or education programs who may not be able to visit in person.
- For visitors with vision disabilities, consider including labels in Braille, audio recordings or tours, or digital components (i.e. a blog post, LibGuide, or online exhibit) to facilitate access. Consider providing a simple way for visitors to connect to online content, such as a tactile QR code or short link.[33]
- Provide a transcript and/or closed-captioning for any audio or audiovisual components.
- Consider budgeting for and employing innovative exhibition design such as hands-on tactile elements.[34]
- Provide various types of accessible seating around exhibition spaces for people to rest.
- For larger exhibitions, consider the mental and physical fatigue the exhibit may cause. Have a description of the exhibit navigation posted online and available in person.
  - Consider adding a safe sensory zone away from lights and sound. Provide a "sensory map"[35] that shows the level of activity that may cause overload.
  - Provide a suggested route through the exhibit space considering limited mobility and fatigue.[36] Key factors to improve their visit, including elevators, difficult

[27] Example: If labels or materials are stored on a flat surface, angle them for better visibility.

[28] PlainLanguage.gov, "Federal Plain Language Guidelines," May 1, 2011, https://www.plainlanguage.gov/media/FederalPLGuidelines.pdf.

[29] "The Smithsonian Institution's Guide to Interpretive Writing for Exhibitions," accessed June 19, 2023, https://exhibits.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/SI-Guide-to-Interpretive-Writing-for-Exhibitions.pdf

[30] Marshallsay, Laura. "Don't Make Me Feel Stupid: The Language of Museum Panels." LinkedIn, June 25, 2019. https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/dont-make-me-feel-stupid-language-museum-panels-laura/.

[31] British Dyslexia Association. "Dyslexia Friendly Style Guide." British Dyslexia Association, 2023. https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/advice/employers/creating-a-dyslexia-friendly-workplace/dyslexia-friendly-style-guide. Use fonts sSuch as Arial, Verdana, Tahoma, Century Gothic, Trebuchet, Calibri, and Open SansArial, Helvetica, Times New Roman, Garamond, Bookman, or Palatino fonts. More characteristic fonts may be used for titles, but should be avoided for the text block. Never place text over a patterned background.

[32] Colblindor, "Coblis — Color Blindness Simulator," Colblindor, 2001, https://www.color-blindness.com/coblis-color-blindness-simulator. Avoid the red-green combination for people who are colorblind or low-contrast color combinations such as yellow on white.

[33] Tang, Lydia, "Exhibit Accessibility," Accessibility Resources for Michigan State University Library Staff, 2018, http://libguides.lib.msu.edu/accessibility/exhibits.

[34] Example: https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/stories/please-touch-objects-tactile-models-and-alternative-approaches-curation

[35] Example: https://rosamondgiffordzoo.org/assets/Syracuse-Zoo-RGZ-2022-SENSORY-GUIDE-MAP.pdf

[36] Example: https://nmaahc.si.edu/visit/accessibility-options

ramps, tight turns, seating areas, and restrooms, should be considered in your mapping.
  ○ Any exhibition material (including digital) must have protection and signage from the public if the material may cause seizures. Adequately block the exhibition space from non-consenting patrons.
  ○ Any material with triggering content should have a content warning posted in an accessible format and location.
● Provide repository contact information and include a statement encouraging visitors to request needed accommodations in advance.[37]

Workplace Accessibility

Accessibility for employees is usually one of the most glaring afterthoughts when considering accessibility. Historically, most accessibility has been focused outwardly on the accessibility of repositories to visitors but an equally important emphasis must be made on the accessibility and inclusiveness of the workspace for staff. Hire and retain people with disabilities and make a commitment to ensure that they can participate, be heard, and be supported in the workplace. There are multiple obstacles that staff with disabilities face, which are often exacerbated by inequities in job rank, classification, and job duties as well as stigma and prejudice.

Institutional Support and Policies

Creating and sustaining an accessible workplace and research environment depends upon administrators making accessibility a priority. Accessibility must be factored into every aspect of operations, including but not limited to budgeting, hiring and retention, collection development, digital resources, technical services, outreach, and public services. Accessibility is a vital element in promoting the archival profession's values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

● Know the current disability-related policies at your institution, including procedures for providing accommodations to employees with disabilities.[38]
● Understanding common injuries and accidents that may occur in your workplace is important. All employees should not only be familiarized with how to safely navigate these instances, but also on how to utilize programs such as disability leave and worker's compensation.
● Familiarize yourself with your institution's resources for people with disabilities. This may include a disability resource office, human resources, or another unit. They can support you in filing paperwork related to workplace accessibility, including

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[37] Example: "To request disability related modifications or to ask questions about the event or its location please contact: [insert contact information]."
[38] "Procedures for Providing Reasonable Accommodation for Individuals With Disabilities," U. S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, accessed May 22, 2023, https://www.eeoc.gov/sites/default/files/migrated_files/eeoc/internal_eeo/EEOC-2018-Procedures-for-Providing-Reasonable-Accommodations-for-Individuals-with-Disabilities.pdf.

accommodations paperwork or complaints. This office can be helpful in connecting disabled employees with other resources like networking groups.

- Develop and disseminate policies and procedures, and support training and continuing education that promotes a welcoming, respectful, and inclusive environment for all employees.
- Undertake regular policy reviews by all employees to encourage understanding of how best to respectfully communicate and assist people with disabilities.
- Create all work-related documents, including digital content, in ways that are accessible for all employees.
- Include accessibility provisions in budget planning, such as for building improvements, furnishings, assistive technologies, and other strategies.
- Establish an employee point person or committee to address and advocate for accessibility on behalf of employees and visitors.
- Build partnerships with the local disability community to responsively and proactively troubleshoot accessibility issues.

Workplace practices

Stigma and preconceptions about disabilities have been long standing barriers for people with disabilities in the archival profession. There are long-held assumptions for job requirements such as requiring the ability to lift a 40-pound box or work primarily on-site, which have perpetuated ableist gatekeeping in the profession. Disabled archivists can struggle with finding, securing, and keeping consistent work. Re-evaluating the archive's physical space, culture of support, and job description "requirements" can allow disabled employees to not only secure employment, but see themselves as valued and welcomed archivists within the workplace.

Disability is fluid and exists on a spectrum. A person can develop a disability or multiple disabilities over a span of time and their abilities may change over time. No two people with the same disability experience their disability in the same way. Because of that, workplace accommodations are unique to the individual employee. Flexibility and compassion are paramount to providing an equitable workplace.

Job Descriptions and Recruitment

- Remote and hybrid positions allow for a broader pool of candidates for roles. Many people with disabilities or caregivers may be precluded from strictly on-site positions. By being receptive to flexible modes and workplace locations, this can truly open up your repository and the broader profession to be more inclusive.
- Assess whether specific requirements are truly essential for a position when drafting a job description (e.g., lifting 40-pound boxes, pushing carts). Focus on the task that needs to be accomplished rather than the method (e.g., boxes need to be moved rather than boxes need to be lifted, etc.).
- Consider where you cross-post your job opportunities. Does your institution only post them on LinkedIn and Indeed, for example? To recruit a more diverse applicant pool, be

sure to cross post your job opportunities to venues such as We Here (for librarians and other LAM field people of color) and the Society of American Archivists' sections, interest groups, and other communities.
- Include an accessibility statement that describes the level of institutional commitment to accessibility, workflow to request accommodations, and information on the accessibility of workspaces (both physical and virtual).

Interview Recommendations[39]

- Provide detailed, written information on how the interview will go ahead of time. For example:
  - An itinerary that includes how long the interview will last, who is attending the interview, the purpose of each meeting (for example, if the purpose is social and how much time the candidate will have to ask questions), if there are any meals during the process (allow for accommodations for these too[40])
  - Information on how formal the interview is
  - Interview questions[41]
- Follow legal and ethical interview practices. It is illegal to ask if someone has a disability or force them to disclose their disability. For example, don't place much emphasis on reading into employment gaps, which may be related to medical leave or care giving. Check laws in your area.
- For online interviews:
  - Enable captions for all video calls so people don't have to request that they be turned on.
  - Consider pasting the interview questions in the chat or on a slide to allow for interviewees to read and continue to mentally process the questions.
- If you are conducting your interview by telephone or an otherwise audio-only format (not recommended), be sure to check with the candidate that this format is ok from an accessibility perspective. Be sure to have each speaker state their name when they begin speaking: "This is Margaret, my question is…"
- Provide information on accessibility measures currently in place and allow interviewees to request additional accommodations or needs.[42]
- When planning on-site interviews:

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[39] For more on these practices, see: Lydia Tang, Bridget Malley, Chris Tanguay, and Zachary Tumlin. "Toward Inclusion: Best practices for Hiring People with Disabilities," Archival Outlook (2020 July/August): 4, 17, https://mydigitalpublication.com/publication/?m=30305&i=667849&p=6&ver=html5.

[40] Various diseases and allergies can complicate meals. Plan ahead for meal requests or consider alternatives, such as a virtual coffee chat, to allow for social time during the interview process.

[41] Tungate, Courtney. "Why You Should Consider Sharing Interview Questions with Candidates." The Equity Practice, 9 Mar. 2021, https://www.theequitypractice.com/post/why-you-should-consider-sharing-interview-questions-with-candidates.

[42] "Frequently Asked Question About Disability Disclosure Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)," Disability Rights IOWA, 2012, https://web.archive.org/web/20201111203543/https://disabilityrightsiowa.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/FAQ-About-Disability-Disclosure-under-the-ADA.pdf.

- - ○ Provide details about the accessibility of the building(s) and workspaces in advance.
    - ○ Schedule frequent breaks.
    - ○ Gauge a person's comfort with walking distances and navigating spaces. Use elevators and provide the option of transportation to locations that are more than a block away whenever possible.
    - ○ Offer to have a host accompany the candidate from place to place to assist with navigation.
  - Consider the nature of the job when designing the interview process. For example, if the role is for a processing archivist position, consider asking for a sample finding aid and/or having the applicant talk through designing their processing plan instead of requiring a high pressure presentation.

On the Job

- Work cooperatively to meet the needs of an employee requesting a reasonable accommodation. This includes accommodations for disabilities that are not obvious or visible, such as lighting or noise reduction, or workplace relocation requests.[43]
- Don't require a professional diagnosis for accommodation requests, and support requests without a formal or disclosed diagnosis. The choice to seek a professional diagnosis is personal and there are many factors that complicate that journey. Support employees and trust them to do their best work.
- Be open to modifying job tasks to be appropriate for an individual's capabilities.
- Consider job requirements and how to be flexible with arrival and departure times, allow for longer and/or more frequent breaks, and opportunities for remote and hybrid work.
- Allow longer periods for work to be completed.
- Allow employees to take unpaid leave when all paid leave has been exhausted.
- Conduct all meetings and group work in ways that allow full participation of all employees. For example, virtual and hybrid meetings[44] can support staff who are working offsite and allow people who use assistive technologies to participate more fully in the meeting format. Supplying an agenda ahead of each meeting allows people to better-prepare to complete the work of the meeting.
- Continue to have open and clear communication with employees about job expectations and your flexibility to fit their needs. Recognize these may change over time, or even daily. Be prepared to have conversations regarding alternate solutions.

Work Spaces

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[43] For "free, expert, and confidential guidance on job accommodations and disability employment issues": Job Accommodation Network (JAN). "Ask JAN!" Accessed April 10, 2024. https://askjan.org/.
[44] Helpful guidelines for virtual and hybrid meetings: General Services Administration. "Create Accessible Meetings." Section508.Gov, July 2023, https://www.section508.gov/create/accessible-meetings/. and Harvard University. Hosting Accessible Hybrid Meetings.
https://accessibility.harvard.edu/hosting-accessible-hybrid-meetings. Accessed 8 Apr. 2024.

See also the [Buildings and Grounds](#) section above.

- Ensure that work spaces, including employee offices, break rooms, bathrooms, doors, aisles, and storage areas, are ADA compliant. For example, make sure that there is a wide enough pathway for someone with a wheelchair or mobility disability to navigate through, without obstructions or hazards (such as carts or boxes). Blockages like these can create tripping hazards, make maneuvering more fatiguing or painful, and be a fire hazard.
- Choice of box dimension can be a barrier for some workers because of the possible weight. Utilize smaller boxes with the intent of minimizing physical strain.
- Organize box storage so that the most frequently used boxes are at a convenient height. Avoid having large, heavy boxes on the highest or lowest shelves to avoid lifting strain. Consider getting a height-adjustable cart to facilitate the transfer of boxes back and forth from shelving.[45]
- Locate work spaces for employees with disabilities as near as possible to the materials they need to complete their work. Remain flexible as needs change.
- Have stable and safe ladders for retrieving materials from high levels; this is key for minimizing workplace injuries. Precarious ladders, old or unstable kick stools, and other precarious tools for retrieval are a risk for workplace injury.
- Ergonomics need to be factored into workspace setups. Having a desk and chair that are not compatible with an employee's body can cause injury over time. Having a height adjustable/adjusted table, chair, and monitor are minimum essential components of a personal office set up. Additional considerations can include a sit-stand desk, floor padding, adjustable or alternative lighting, and the ability to limit sound and/or social exposure.
  - If your company does not provide an ergonomic service, consider hiring a third-party ergonomic specialist to help evaluate what the space needs.
- Many employees will have developed sophisticated assistive and/or adaptive technology set-ups including hardware, software, and tools that meet their needs. Working with the employee, determine and then provide the necessary assistive or adaptive technology, equipment, and furniture they need for their work. Provide ongoing technical updates, where relevant, and support and training for the employee to use their devices to best aid their work.[46] Be aware that software updates and changes to website, database, and physical facility layouts can disproportionately and negatively impact disabled users and employees.

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[45] Example of a height-adjustable cart:
https://www.globalindustrial.com/p/long-deck-mobile-scissor-li-with-oversized-63-x-32-platform-1100-lb-cap
[46] Examples include, but are not limited to, text-to-speech screen reading software such as Kurtzweil, JAWS, and Apple's VoiceOver; voice recognition software such as Dragon; magnification capabilities; a touch screen keyboard; alternative keyboard functions for mouse actions; a large, adjustable monitor; an oversized keyboard; and standing/height-adjustable tables and chairs. Provide TTY or hearing aid compatible telephone equipment for employees with hearing disabilities when requested.

Digital Content

The digital environment is critical to information creation and dissemination. Most institutions' accessibility expectations will be informed by federal law, state law, and/or institutional best practices. Section 508 Standards for Accessible Electronic and Information Technology[47], the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)[48], and PDF-UA (ISO 14289-1)[49] are the most common tools used to build digital accessibility policies. The following recommendations apply to a variety of digital content media including electronic documents, websites, apps and other software, and social media platforms.

General Guidelines

- Use a variety of evaluation methods to periodically test the accessibility of digital content, including with tools like the WAVE Accessibility Evaluation Tool[50], keyboard-only testing, screen readers, and user testing on usability, readability, and understandability (including with people who use assistive technology).
- Ensure that font size can be changed without impacting navigability or comprehension.
- Use sufficient foreground and background contrast and avoid color combinations that are problematic for people who are color-blind (i.e. red juxtaposed with green).[51]
- Ensure your content is navigable when using a screen reader or screen magnification program, and when using a keyboard without a mouse.[52]
- Do not rely solely on color, font and/or other visual cues to convey meaning.
- Ensure your website utilizes responsive design[53]. For example, having content that isn't responsive to screen size could force users to scroll laterally on their phone which can be an increased barrier for people using screen magnifiers.
- Use concise sentences with plain language.[54] Avoid jargon and ableist language.

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[47] "U.S. Access Board - Revised 508 Standards and 255 Guidelines." Accessed December 8, 2023. https://www.access-board.gov/ict/#508-chapter-1-application-and-administration.

[48] Initiative (WAI), W3C Web Accessibility. "WCAG 2 Overview." Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI). Accessed December 8, 2023. https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/.

[49] "PDF/UA in a Nutshell," PDF Association, June 16, 2013, https://pdfa.org/pdfua-in-a-nutshell/.

[50] "WAVE Web Accessibility Evaluation Tools." Accessed December 8, 2023. https://wave.webaim.org/.

[51] "Accessible Colors | WCAG 2.0 AA and AAA Color Contrast Checker." Accessed January 26, 2024. https://accessible-colors.com/; "Colorable." Accessed January 26, 2024. https://colorable.jxnblk.com/; Colblindor, "Coblis — Color Blindness Simulator," Colblindor, 2001, https://www.color-blindness.com/coblis-color-blindness-simulator.

[52] Examples of screen readers include JAWS, NVDA, Kurtzweil, Android TalkBack, or Apple VoiceOver. Other examples of adaptive technology include height-adjustable monitors and oversized keyboards.

[53] "Responsive Design: Best Practices." Interaction Design Foundation, 2 Nov. 2022, https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/responsive-design-let-the-device-do-the-work.

[54] PlainLanguage.gov, "Federal Plain Language Guidelines," May 1, 2011, https://www.plainlanguage.gov/media/FederalPLGuidelines.pdf.

Website

The website should include an accessibility section that includes contact information for a point-person who can address and plan for increased accessibility support, information on the accessibility (or lack-thereof) of the public transportation to the repository, physical space, services, and collections.

- Use proper HTML markup with correct nesting of headings. Investigate the proper use of ARIA tags as necessary.[55]
- Use meaningful page titles and document file names.
- Do not rely *solely* on color to deliver emphasis on text content. People who are color blind or use screen readers and other types of assistive technology may not be able to distinguish the emphasis. Use coded emphasis such as **bold** and *italics* in addition to color emphasis.
- Use unique and descriptive text for hyperlinks (i.e. not "click here").
- Use Plain Language Guidelines when generating content for your site.[56]

Digital Repository

- Advocate for accessibility provisions in contracts and licenses for vendor-hosted solutions. Request Voluntary Product Accessibility Templates (VPATs) from vendors which document their platforms' accessibility compliance. Request vendors demonstrate that their technology product conforms with your institutions' minimum level of accessibility compliance.[57]
- Historical Document Remediation
  - Scan text documents as text (not as images) or convert scanned documents from image files to text, and use OCR to improve accessibility.
  - Include transcripts for those materials that cannot be OCRed, such as handwritten manuscripts.[58]

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[55] "Accessible Rich Internet Applications (WAI-ARIA) 1.2." Accessed January 26, 2024. https://www.w3.org/TR/wai-aria/.

[56] "Federal Plain Language Guidelines," PlainLanguage.gov, May 1, 2011, https://plainlanguage.gov/media/FederalPLGuidelines.pdf.

[57] Options for requesting product accessibility information from vendors include but are not limited to requesting an independent third party evaluation from an accessibility consultancy or requesting a VPAT (Voluntary Product Accessibility Template). The VPAT 2.4 template is available through the Information Technology Industry Council. "VPAT," ITI, last modified March 16, 2022, https://www.itic.org/policy/accessibility/vpat.

[58] OCR for handwritten documents is a growing area of research and innovation. One case study: The National Archives. "Machines Reading the Archive: Handwritten Text Recognition Software." The National Archives blog, March 19, 2018. https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/machines-reading-the-archive-handwritten-text-recognition-software/.

Visual Content

- Provide alternate text (alt-text) description for all images. Clearly describe exactly what is in the image. Note that this does not limit creative description that appropriately conveys artistry.[59]
    - Many platforms allow you to add alt-text to various image file formats.
    - Text within the image or graphic needs to be included in the alt-text.
- When creating graphics, use high contrast colors and ensure any text is legible in font and size.

Audiovisual

- Provide captions and transcripts for both audio and video content.[60]
    - AI-generated captions/transcripts often mis-transcribe specific jargon, names, punctuation, and can lack overall fluency. Consider it a starting point that will require further editing, proof-reading, and formatting.
- Use audio description[61] when applicable for video content. Audio description makes nonverbal visual action and content more accessible to individuals who are blind or visually impaired.
- Avoid content that has flashing, flickering, or strobing effects. Some platforms allow you to mark a video as photosensitive. If that option is not available, provide a textual content warning before the offending content.

Social Media

- Stay up to date on each of your chosen platform's changes to accessibility features. Feature updates can cause incompatibility with tools like Hootsuite.
- Where alternative text boxes are not provided, add the descriptive text to the bottom of the text portion of the post as a caption.
- Do not use special characters to change the visual appearance of the font in your post or username. It will be read literally by a screen reader in a way that would not make sense for the user. (e.g., 𝕭𝖆𝖉 𝕱𝖔𝖓𝖙)
- Ensure the text of your posts do not overwhelm the reader or cause cognitive overload. Be brief in your writing and do not use many numbers.
- Do not use many emojis in succession and leave them for the end of the sentence. Reserve how many are used and do not replace emojis with "ASCII art." (ex. ¯_(ツ)_/¯)
- Capitalize the first letter of every new word in a hashtag to clarify the string of letters (ex. #LikeThis). Place hashtags at the end of all text.

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[59] For more information on how to structure your alternative text, visit https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/describe-content-images or https://guides.cuny.edu/accessibility/alt-text.
[60] For more on captions, transcripts, and audio description, visit https://webaim.org/techniques/captions/.
[61] Audio description is audio-narrated descriptions of a program's key visual elements that are inserted into natural pauses in the program's dialogue. https://www.fcc.gov/audio-description

- Research the culture of the platform before posting to get an understanding of the accessibility expectations your audience has. For example, it is common to see the total run time of a TikTok posted on the video so people can understand how long the video is from the start.
- If your institution chooses to use platforms that list business information, be sure to update it often and be just as clear in your descriptions on your social media platforms as you are on your website.
  - Include or link to basic information such as phone number, reference email, and hours of operation.
  - When using a messaging service through these platforms, update your automatic response with a clear initial message explaining when the patron can expect a response back.

Resources to Support the SAA Guidelines for Accessible Archives for People with Disabilities

For additional resources, visit the [Zotero library](#).

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