

Top 20 Look List: Seeing Accessibly: A Review Tool for Taking Small Steps to Improve Accessibility in Your Archives

Daria D'Arienzo (ddarienzo@me.com)

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The *Top 20 Look List* is a continuation of the work of SAA's AMRT/RMRT Joint Working Group on Accessibility in Archives and Records Management to provide current and practical information on accessibility issues in archives. Working from requirements dictated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), our *Best Practices* statements, and current research, this *Top 20 Look List* strives to summarize the most practical low- or no-cost steps that archivists can take to improve accessibility for staff and patrons.

1. Have you read the following recently?

- *SAA Code of Ethics for Archivists*
- *SAA Core Values of Archivists*
- *Best Practices for Working with Archives Employees with Physical Disabilities*
- *Best Practices for Working with Archives Researchers with Physical Disabilities*

Revisit these statements of respect and cooperation that inform our roles as archivists. As we have said before—accessibility and access, and what lies behind true accessibility and access—are at heart human issues.

2. Look at your public entry.

- Is it well marked, with a high contrast, large, simple sign?
- Is it well lit?
- Is it sheltered?
- Where is the parking?
- Is the path to the entrance clear of obstacles?
 - Clear of curbs?
 - Clear of grates?
- Is there an appropriately graded ramp or gently sloping path, with landings for resting at suitable intervals?
 - Are there railings?

- Is there an automatic or power-assist front door?
- Is it wide enough for wheelchairs and scooters?
 - 36 inches minimum; 42 inches preferred.

Designating an accessible parking space with appropriate curb cuts very close to the entrance takes few resources—and the law is on your side! Adding a railing may take more money, but is useful for all patrons.

3. Look at the access for patrons and employees to your public spaces.

- Are the directions clearly marked?
- Is there an elevator?
 - Is it ADA compliant?
- Is the door lock within seated reach?
- Are there Braille markings on the controls and information panel?
- Is there an emergency phone?
- Have all tripping hazards been removed?
- Are all security checkpoints and procedures designed to be accessible?
- Is there an accessible coatroom with lockers?
- Is an accessible restroom available?

4. Check your doors.

- Are they very heavy and difficult to open?
- Is there a glass window in the entrance door?
- Are all-glass doors marked so no one will walk into them?
- Is there an entry phone for those who need it?
- Has the door closure been adjusted to provide an appropriate delay?
 - This can be adjusted for no cost.
- Do the doors open with levers or pull handles with an easy to grasp shape?
 - Turning knobs can be changed for a modest cost; this also aids staff transporting archival materials.

5. Look at your floors.

- Is the surface slippery?
- Are there loose mats or carpets?
- Are all carpets firm and flat?
- Is there contrasting color between the walls and the floors?
- Are there dangling wires or other possible wiring hazards?

Unstable flooring is dangerous for everyone, but especially for anyone with mobility issues. Secure or eliminate anything that moves or that can create a tripping

hazard.

6. Look at the layout and furniture in your research room.

- Are the public spaces negotiable for wheelchairs?
- Are the aisles wide enough?
 - 36 inches minimum; 42 inches preferred.
- Are there clear sight lines for those seated or standing?
- Can you see who comes in? Can they see you?
- Is the room free of obstacles and clutter?
- Does your service desk allow staff to talk with someone in a wheelchair at the same eye level?
- Is there a separate, well-lit area away from the desk for staff and patrons to talk at the same eye level?
- Are there non-tilting chairs with sturdy arms and good support available for patrons with assistive mobility aids, like walkers and crutches, and others who need to sit?
 - Senior citizens and tired patrons will also thank you.
- Is at least one of your public area worktables wheelchair-height?
 - ADA regulation: <http://www.ada.gov/> will provide specific requirements.
 - Add height to tables using coasters or casters for a low-cost solution.
- Are the table chairs adjustable and do they have casters appropriate for the flooring?
- Can everyone reach materials on bookshelves, magazine and brochure displays, and handouts?
 - The preferred height for displays is 48 inches off the floor.
- Are there extra outlets for additional assistive technology equipment?
- Do you have a designated quiet area for those who need to concentrate?

Simply making sure furniture in staff and public spaces does not create physical barriers for anyone costs nothing but forethought.

7. Look at your exhibit areas.

- Are your exhibits negotiable for those who use wheelchairs?
- Can everyone view the exhibits?
 - It is simple to check to see if the displays are too high.
- Do you have a Braille or audio option for visitors?
- Have you used accessible fonts, color, and good contrast for your labels?
- Are your item labels at a height and large enough that anyone can read them easily?

8. Look at your work and storage areas.

- Are the aisles wide enough for a wheelchair to navigate?
 - 36 inches minimum; 42 inches preferred.
- Are the aisles clear of all obstacles?
- Are things hanging off shelves?
- Are there power cords stretched across aisles or any dangling wires?
- Is it an obstacle course to navigate staff spaces?

All items should fit on the shelves. Organize and re-box as needed. Nothing should overhang, impeding access or blocking emergency routes for anyone with limited mobility. Wide aisles are also useful for loaded archives carts and book trucks.

9. Look at your conference/meeting rooms and presentation options.

- Is the room large enough to navigate in a wheelchair?
- Can the conference table accommodate a wheelchair?
- Is the meeting room well-lit and quiet?
- Is a microphone available if needed?
- Are on-screen presentations clear and simple?
- Do the on-screen presentations use large print and high-contrast colors?
- Are on-screen presentations available in alternative ways—large print, audio, and Braille?
 - Do these include a copy of the oral presentation that accompanies slide shows?
- Are you set up for meetings by telephone?

Many of the same questions posed for research rooms can be asked about your conference and meeting rooms, too.

10. Consider ergonomic issues for all staff and patrons.

- Have workstations been modified to meet employees' needs?
- Can workstations be modified to include adaptive equipment and furniture if needed?
- What about desks, chairs, lighting, and appropriate computer assists?
- Can electrical outlets and light switches be reached while both sitting and standing?
 - 15 inches off the floor for outlets.

Sometimes a simple change in placement of a keyboard can help. Specialized software, larger monitors, and or oversized keyboards are other options.

11. Have you tested your sound, fire, security and alarm systems with the needs of differently-abled staff and researchers in mind?

- Do you have visible and audible fire alarms?
- Could someone in a wheelchair reach to activate an alarm if necessary?
- Does your emergency and evacuation plan include provisions for staff and patrons who are differently-abled?
- Is there a designated meeting place for people to gather outside during an emergency?
- Have you trained employees to assist patrons and colleagues in case of emergency?
- Have you invited the fire department, police department or institutional safety department to visit and advise?

Consulting with public safety experts costs nothing and gains much.

12. Look at your informational signs.

- Are they simple and clear?
- Do you include universally recognized icons?
- Do you have clear, appropriately coded floor plans?
- Have you used accessible fonts, color, and good contrast for your signs?
- Are they at a height and size so that everyone can read them?
- Are there audio options?
- Are there Braille options?

If you can't read the signs easily, neither can others. In an aging population—think of life without reading glasses. It costs virtually nothing to create signs and labels using a larger font or to create an accessible handout. Audio options may be possible.

13. Use your public access computer with only one hand and with one eye covered.

- Can you maneuver the controls?
- Can you really see what is on the screen?
- Do you have the easy option of an enlarged text feature?
- Have you installed free open source screen readers for those who need them?
- Do you have screen adapters, adaptive keyboards, keyboard overlays, or voice input available?
- Is a trackball, touch pad, or touch screen available?

- Can you easily sit at the computer if you use a wheelchair?
- Is there a person always nearby and available to help?

14. Look at your website.

- Is it simple, easy to navigate, clear, and direct?
- Can you search it?
- Is the font large enough, or can an individual easily change it if necessary?
- Have you used adequate contrasts for the text and background colors?
- Are alternative formats available?
- Is it free of distracting and problematic "bells and whistles" that make it difficult for people of all abilities to at least make first contact with your archives?
- Do you have information about resources and services for special users clearly articulated and linked online?
 - This can be as simple as offering the option of talking to or directly emailing a staff member, should a researcher wish to do that—and providing a name, phone number and personal email address.

15. Look at your informational documents and other printed materials.

- Is the font of the written documents clear and large enough for everyone to read easily?
- Is there enough white space?
- Have you used adequate contrasts for the text and background colors?
- Are the sentences short and clear?
- Are there visuals that will help?
- Are there aural or Braille options?

16. Listen to your archives voice message.

- Is the message spoken slowly and clearly?
- Are there options or specific instructions for those who may need additional support in physically or virtually accessing your archives?
- Do you provide a name together with a phone number and email address to make it easy to reach an actual person?

17. Are basic accessibility tools at hand for staff and researchers?

- Can you create an "accessibility" toolbox?

At my little public library we call it "Sadie's Bag." Consider magnifiers of various sorts, including an illuminated magnifier, a selection of reading glasses, book props, page turners, pencils with large grips, a small hand-held recorder and

player, flash drives, and extra task lights. These things are modest in cost and are useful tools.

18. Have you discovered the principles of Universal Design?

- Have you looked at the website of the Center for Universal Design?
(<http://www.ncsu.edu/project/design-projects/udi/>)

These guidelines are a collaborative effort of architects, product designers, engineers and environmental designers. The 7 Universal Design principles are a framework for the design of “products and environments usable by all people to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.”

Applying these principles--Equitable Use, Flexibility in Use, Simple and Intuitive Use, Perceptible Information, Tolerance for Error, Low Physical Effort, and Adequate Size and Space for Approach and Use—can inform new spaces and help redesign and improve old ones.

The Center for Universal Design “designs” for as many people as possible, regardless of age, ability or circumstance. Think small changes that can benefit everyone.

19. Have you invited colleagues and researchers who are differently-abled to participate in space, program or web site assessment and design?

- Have you asked those with diverse abilities to evaluate what you have or do not already have in place?
 - A collaborative and multi-dimensional approach brings many perspectives and benefits all users.
 - Ongoing assessment makes sense.
- Remember: as one self-identified, differently-abled library researcher who is also a library professional said, even our glorified new technologies “may either enhance or impede one’s abilities to access information.” (Copeland, p. 233)

There is no substitute for seeing barriers through the eyes of those who face different forms of challenges—not only those in wheelchairs. Just do it. Real people with real experiences mean real solutions. Visit: the DO-IT Center at the University of Washington: <http://www.washington.edu/doit/> for more inspiration. (DO-IT: Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology)

20. Are respect, inclusion, cooperation and compassion hallmarks of your archives?

- Is everyone who works or volunteers in your archives knowledgeable about and sensitive to accessibility issues?
- Is accessibility a hidden issue or is it right out there, acknowledged and part of all training and professional development?
- Have workplace policies been modified to accommodate employees who are differently-abled?
- Are you aware of ADA regulations governing “reasonable accommodations” in the workplace?
 - Examples include: flexible hours, working from home, longer and more frequent breaks, and work-sharing.
- Do you provide training opportunities to develop the skill set needed to serve researchers with different abilities?
- Are colleagues readily available when needed by other staff or patrons?
- Do you have a sign and/or page on your website offering assistance to patrons who are differently-abled?
- Do all colleagues know what assistive technology is available and how to use it if you have those tools?
- Do colleagues look all researchers in the eye and offer assistance from the point of view of the researcher?
- Are you aware of the legislative and/or legal requirements that govern accessibility in public places?
- Have you incorporated accessibility sustainability into your policies, budget planning, and review process?

Basic human kindness trumps expensive technologies or even state-of-the-art facilities. Creating a welcoming environment is the goal, with someone ready to offer and assist, if it is the wish of a colleague or patron, with reading, taking notes, computer or web tips, physical handling of an item or any other reasonable request. Access, security, safety, assistance, and respect should be equally available to all colleagues and patrons.

Finally, in the context of your own institution, what has been left out?

If any of the things on the list can't be fixed perfectly because of money, architecture, etc., what workarounds can you consider and implement?

Visit the SAA AMRT/RMRT Joint Working Group on Accessibility
in Archives and Records Management
(<http://www2.archivists.org/groups/amrtmrt-working-group-on-accessibility>)
for useful resources.