

# Society of American Archivists Guidelines for Accessible Archives for People with Disabilities

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

The SAA Task Force to Revise Best Practices on Accessibility was convened in November 2017 to revise the *Best Practices for Working with Archives Researchers with Physical Disabilities* and *Best Practices for Working with Employees with Physical Disabilities* standards developed by the Joint Archives Management/Records Management Roundtables Working Group on Accessibility in Archives and Records Management and adopted by SAA in 2010.

The Task Force wishes to thank the members of the predecessor Working Group for their pioneering efforts in assembling resources and laying the foundation for our approach.

## 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.”<sup>1</sup> The World Health Organization estimates that 15% of the world's population, over 1 billion people, have a disability. As described in the *World Report on Accessibility*, “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.”<sup>2</sup> There are many types of disabilities which can affect a person’s vision, movement, thinking, memory, learning, communicating, hearing, social interactions, and mental health.<sup>3</sup> Archivists should recognize that they interact daily with people living with both visible and hidden<sup>4</sup> disabilities. Each person should have control of their body, accommodations, and experiences in the archives. Treat everyone with dignity and respect.

The term *accessibility* within the archival profession is often used relating to the discoverability and ease of use of archival collections. In the context of archival facilities and services, accessibility is about minimizing barriers to enable equal or equivalent access for people with disabilities. A related concept of “Universal Design” is an approach to designing facilities and

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<sup>1</sup> “What is the definition of disability under the ADA?” <https://adata.org/faq/what-definition-disability-under-ada>  
Please note that the ADA doesn’t comprehensively define a spectrum of invisible disabilities such as neurological conditions and mood disorders.

<sup>2</sup> “World Report on Disability.” World Health Organization,  
[http://www.who.int/disabilities/world\\_report/2011/report/en/](http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/report/en/).

<sup>3</sup> “Disability Overview,” Center for Disease Control,  
<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/disability.html>

<sup>4</sup> Examples of “hidden” or “invisible” disabilities include but are not limited to learning disabilities, psychiatric disabilities, autism, sensory disabilities, chronic pain, and chronic fatigue. For a more detailed list:  
<https://www.disabled-world.com/disability/types/invisible/>

services that can be accessed, understood, and used by anyone regardless of their ability. A universal design approach benefits everyone.<sup>5</sup>

These *Guidelines* provide both basic and extensive recommendations to help archivists provide resources, services, and spaces that are accessible and inclusive. Although some archival institutions may not be legally mandated to comply with the ADA due to the number of staff or age of facilities, these *Guidelines* strongly recommend compliance with the ADA and other external accessibility standards.<sup>6</sup> Institutions should conduct a comprehensive and periodic accessibility review touching on all areas of this document. Accessibility should be integral to institutional cultures, workflows, and services.

## Core Values

The Society of American Archivists, representing the archival profession, is committed to minimizing barriers and providing equal or equivalent access for people with disabilities to archival facilities, workplaces, services, and operations. Respect for all people is at the core of these values.

- Treat every person with dignity and respect.
- Be flexible in interactions with people, physical spaces, policies, operations and services.
- Each person should have control over their body, accommodations, and experiences in archives.
- Respect privacy. Disabilities are not always visible. Disclosing a disability is a choice.
- Ask if and how someone may need assistance.
- Allow and encourage people to use assistive technologies.
- Use the preferred disability terminology of the person you are speaking with or about.
- Design, construct, and retrofit physical spaces to accommodate people with disabilities.
- Use ergonomically appropriate furnishing and supplies.
- Include provisions for people with disabilities in all emergency and evacuations plans.
- Build accessibility accommodations into archival workflows and public services.
- Factor accessibility into every aspect of archival institutional operations and policies.
- Keep exhibitions accessible by removing physical and design barriers and using formats that enhance accessibility.
- Design digital content to meet at least minimal levels of accessibility compliance.
- Select digital platforms which work with assistive technology.
- Consider people first in all accessibility decisions.

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<sup>5</sup> “World Report on Disability.” World Health Organization, [http://www.who.int/disabilities/world\\_report/2011/report/en/](http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/report/en/).

<sup>6</sup> Including WCAG 2.1 and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

## Effective Communication

Respect and courtesy are the backbone 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 diverse abilities. Even if an archives does not have all the tools to accommodate every person's differing abilities, taking incremental steps towards accessibility, stemming from effective communication, is key.

- Respect privacy.<sup>7</sup> A person should not need to unwillingly disclose a disability.
- Do not challenge a person requesting accommodation, even if their disability is not obvious to you.
- 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 language of the person you are speaking to or talking about. The standard is to use *person-first* language, which emphasizes the person and not the disability.<sup>8</sup> However, there is no unified disability community and some people may prefer *identity-first* language which acknowledges their disability as a defining characteristic to their identity.<sup>9</sup> Avoid outdated language.<sup>10</sup>
- Give full attention to each person. Position yourself at a height that is comfortable for the person with whom you are speaking.
- Allow assistive technologies.
- When working with a person with a vision disability, identify yourself and understand that direct verbal communication is critical. Only touch a person with their consent.
- When working with a person with a hearing disability, speak clearly and directly to the person to allow them to see your lips clearly. Ask if they would prefer other means of communication.

## Physical Accessibility

### Accessible Buildings and Grounds

The [Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities](#) (ADAAG) should be used to ensure that access to parking lots, walkways, bathrooms and

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<sup>7</sup> According to the U. S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's "The ADA: Your Responsibilities as an Employer," it is not appropriate to ask someone what their disability is, only how they can be assisted. <https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/publications/ada17.cfm>

<sup>8</sup> Example: "A person with a disability," "a person with a visual impairment," "a person with hearing loss."

<sup>9</sup> Example: "autistic person."

<sup>10</sup> Unfavorable terminology includes "impaired," "the [insert disability label]," or "handicapper."

other utilities, and access points of buildings are accessible to people with disabilities.<sup>11</sup> Venue accessibility and a way for researchers to contact the archives to request any needed accommodations should be easily available on the institution's website and by other contact means.

- At least one door should have automatic openers and should be wide enough (i.e. 36 inches) to accommodate wheelchairs and scooters.<sup>12</sup>
- If a public elevator is not available, researchers should be permitted to use employee elevators while accompanied by a staff member.
- Minimize obstacles that could be tripping hazards for people with sight impairments 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.<sup>13</sup>
- Electrically operated compact shelving is recommended. Manually operated shelving should be avoided unless it is possible to ensure that someone with a disability can turn the crank arms.
- Flooring such as sealed concrete, low-pile carpet or carpet tiles, or sealed wood floors in compliance with archival facility guidelines endorsed by the SAA<sup>14</sup> are recommended.
- Signage should be in large print, with high contrast between letters and backgrounds, and be printed on non-glare surfaces. Whenever possible, Braille should be included in standardized locations.<sup>15</sup>
- Out of consideration for people who are sensitive to smells, venues should be smoke- and fragrance-free.<sup>16</sup>
- Public bathrooms should have wheelchair-accessible toilets and sink as well as proper disposal containers for medical<sup>17</sup> and personal hygiene.
- The venue should have zoned temperature and humidity controls which balance the preservation of the collections and the comfort of staff and users.

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<sup>11</sup> "Accessible Route," Chapter 4, Guide to the ADA Standards, United States Access Board.

<https://www.access-board.gov/guidelines-and-standards/buildings-and-sites/about-the-ada-standards/guide-to-the-ada-standards>

<sup>12</sup> ADAAG, 4.13: "Doors"; 4.14: "Entrances"; 4.3: "Accessible Route," For information on handles, see United States Access Board, Chapter 3 "Operable Parts."

<https://www.access-board.gov/guidelines-and-standards/buildings-and-sites/about-the-ada-standards/guide-to-the-ada-standards/chapter-3-operable-parts>

<sup>13</sup> ADAAG, 8.5: "Libraries: Stacks"; 4.3: "Accessible Route."

<sup>14</sup> 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://saa.archivists.org/store/archival-and-special-collections-facilities-guidelines/1355/>

<sup>15</sup> ADAAG, 4.30: "Signage."

<sup>16</sup> Public buildings are already regulated as smoke-free, but these recommendations include privately-owned buildings.

<sup>17</sup> Including but not limited to medical needles, such as for a person who diabetic.

## Emergency Planning

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

- Make responding emergency service personnel immediately aware of any individuals who need assistance, including their specific needs and location.
- Alarms should provide both audio and visual signals.
- Alarms should be available in all stairwells, storage areas, and restrooms.
- Alarms should be visible from anywhere in the research room, staff area, and stacks.
- Floor plans featuring emergency exits should be visible within the reading room, staff areas, and online.
- Workspaces for employees who need extra time to exit the building should be located as near as possible to safe exits.

## Reading Room Accessibility

### Furnishings and Equipment

- The staff reference desk should be designed to flexibly accommodate both visitors and staff. At least a portion of the desk should be at a lower height to enable people using wheelchairs to interact with staff at eye level.<sup>18</sup> If the desk is not accessible, staff should meet the researcher in a more accessible location within the room.
- Chairs should be height- and ergonomically adjustable and mobile. Provide a variety of chair sizes and styles to accommodate all users.
- At least one reading room table should be height adjustable.
- Consider providing an extra wheelchair or other mobility tools for users to borrow on site.

## Public Services

Provide a means for visitors to request accommodations for research visits, tours, exhibits and programs. Offer appointments to review accessibility options for researchers. Train staff to be flexible and sensitive to accessibility requests relating to using assistive devices, allowing extra time on machines, or providing additional staff assistance. Be sensitive to behavior that may be a symptom of an invisible disability. For example, a fidgety researcher may be in pain and

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<sup>18</sup> If the desk is elevated, a portion of the desk should be at a lower height to enable people using wheelchairs to approach the desk and attendant. The height and design of the staff desk should also consider accessibility for the staff member.

trying to find a comfortable position rather than nervously contemplating theft, or a person with limited dexterity may turn pages differently, but still safely.

- Because of the broad range of abilities and assistive technology needed for individuals, researchers should be permitted and encouraged to bring in their own assistive equipment, adaptive software, and assistants.
- At least one computer or tablet should be equipped with adaptive technology. Examples include but are not limited to text-to-speech software<sup>19</sup> and screen magnification applications. Tablets should have a stand and assistive apps preloaded.
- All archives employees should be willing to assist researchers in registering, creating materials requests, and accessing materials. Ideally, employees should be familiar with using any assistive equipment and adaptive software available in the reading room.
- Staff should be trained in appropriate procedures for accommodating service animals.<sup>20</sup>
- Reading room reference materials should be on shelves that are low enough to be reached by persons in wheelchairs and scooters. When materials are not accessible, archives employees should assist researchers whenever necessary.
- Email and chat services support researchers who are deaf, nonverbal, or who may not be able physically to visit the repository.
- Consider designating an alternative venue for researchers with sensory disabilities or other needs to access materials with staff supervision.
- Consider having dual screens at the reference computer so that a researcher can follow what the staff member is doing and enable communicating via chat if needed.
- Consider compiling a list of local sign language interpreters, note-takers, and readers for researchers to contact.
- Consider utilizing transcribing-on-request for researchers.

## Exhibitions

When planning an exhibit, it's important to make it as accessible as possible by engaging multiple senses. Not only does this help people who may have different visual, aural, or physical abilities, but it also creates more interesting and engaging exhibits for everyone.

- Remove architectural barriers to allow wheelchair access. Make sure the 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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<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> Staff 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. Staff 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. For more information on service animals: [https://www.ada.gov/service\\_animals\\_2010.htm](https://www.ada.gov/service_animals_2010.htm)

- Use alternative formats, such as Braille, audio recordings, or an equivalent online format, to describe exhibits for patrons with low or no vision.
- Have sign-language interpreters available for tours or presentations.
- Items on display and their labels should be visible for a seated person. If labels or materials are stored on a flat surface, angle them for better visibility.
- Use a simple font<sup>21</sup> and avoid low contrasting or overly busy backgrounds<sup>22</sup> for text. Fonts should be no less than 18 point. Use short sentences with straightforward language.
- Provide a transcript and closed-captioning for audio or audiovisual components.
- Consider creating a digital component to the exhibit (i.e. a blog post, LibGuide, or online exhibit) for providing a baseline of accessibility for users who may not be able to visit the exhibit or visually access the exhibit. Consider providing a (ideally tactile) QR code at the exhibit for viewers with smartphones to easily link to the digital content.<sup>23</sup>

## Public Programming, Outreach, and Instruction

- Provide repository contact information so visitors can easily request any needed accommodations.
- Consider online streaming of public events for people who may not be able to physically attend the event. If doing so, ensure high quality audio is captured and provide closed captioning and a transcription.
- The speaker(s) should always use a microphone. To facilitate lip-reading, speaker(s) should face the group.
- Whenever possible, provide a sign language interpreter.
- Printed materials should be alternatively accessible digitally, in large-print, and/or Braille.

## Digital Content

The digital environment plays a central role in information creation and dissemination. Each archives should establish its ‘minimum’ levels of accessibility compliance for the digital content and technology it creates or uses. Some archives’ accessibility expectations will be informed by federal law, state law, and/or institutional best practices. The most commonly used guidelines are [Section 508 Standards for Accessible Electronic and Information Technology](#), the [World Wide Web Consortium’s Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\)](#), and PDF-UA (ISO 14289-1)<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> Such as Arial, Helvetica, Times New Roman, Garamond, Bookman, or Palatino.

<sup>22</sup> Avoid the red-green combination for people who are colorblind and might be sensitive to low-contrast color combinations such as yellow on white. More characteristic fonts may be used for titles, but should be avoided for the text block. Never place text over a patterned background.

<sup>23</sup> Tang, Lydia, “Exhibit Accessibility,” Accessibility Resources for MSU Library Staff, 2018, <http://libguides.lib.msu.edu/accessibility/exhibits>

<sup>24</sup> PDF/UA in a Nutshell. PDF Association. <https://www.pdfa.org/publication/pdfua-in-a-nutshell/>

The following recommendations apply to a variety of digital content media including electronic documents, websites, apps and other software, and social media platforms.

General recommendations:

- Use meaningful page titles and document file names.
- Indicate the document language in markup.
- Use heading tags.
- Ensure that tables have headings and structure.
- Use proper form markup.
- Use descriptive text for hyperlinks (i.e. not “click here”).
- Ensure your content is structured.
- Ensure your content is navigable when using a screen reader or screen magnification program.
- Ensure your content is navigable when using a keyboard without a mouse.
- Provide alternate text (alt-text) description for all images.
- Provide captioning and transcripts for audio elements and audio description when necessary<sup>25</sup> for video.
- Do not rely solely on color, font and/or other visual cues to convey meaning.
- 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).
- Ensure that font size can be changed without impacting navigability or comprehension.
- Avoid jargon and use simple language.
- Scan text documents as text (not as images) and use OCR to improve accessibility.

Additional recommendations for websites:

- Use proper HTML markup with correct nesting of elements.
- Use [ARIA roles](#) to properly markup sections of content, links, and form elements.

Other recommendations:

- Whenever possible, select, use and/or create technology that works with assistive tools.
- Advocate for accessibility provisions in vendor-hosted contracts/licenses.
- Use a variety of evaluation methods to periodically test the accessibility of digital content, including automated scanning, keyboard-only testing, and user testing (including the use of assistive technology).

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<sup>25</sup> Similarly to alt-text for images, audio description is necessary when the audio itself doesn't describe the essence of what is happening.

# Workplace Accessibility

## Institutional Support

Creating and sustaining an accessible workplace and research environment depends on administrators making accessibility a priority. Accessibility must be factored into every aspect of operations, including but not limited to budgeting, hiring, collection development, digital resources, outreach, and public services. Although some repositories might not legally be mandated to comply with the ADA or other accessibility standards due to the size of staff or age of building, accessibility is a key factor in promoting the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion of the archival profession.

- Hire and retain people with disabilities and make a commitment to ensure that they can participate, be heard, and be supported in the workplace.
- Establish a staff point person or committee to address and advocate for accessibility on behalf of staff and users.
- Budget planning should include accessibility provisions such as for building improvements, furnishing, assistive technology, and other strategies.
- Building partnerships with the local disability community will mutually benefit both groups by identifying and troubleshooting accessibility issues and better supporting user needs.

## Workplace Policies

Flexibility is the watchword here. Necessary workplace accommodations are unique to the individual employee and may include but are not limited to:

- Policies and training should be available and, ideally, required and regularly reviewed by all employees to understand how to respectfully communicate and assist people with disabilities and to promote a welcoming, respectful, and inclusive environment.
- When drafting job descriptions, assess whether specific requirements are truly critical for the position (i.e. tests of box lifting and typing speed). Be creative about finding alternative solutions and utilizing assistive technology.
- During the interview process, it is illegal to ask if someone has a disability, or force them to disclose their disability. Instead, provide an opportunity for the interviewee to request any needed accommodations without forcing unwanted disclosure of any disabilities or conditions.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> “Frequently Asked Question About Disability Disclosure Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).” Disability Right IOWA. <https://disabilityrightsiowa.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/FAQ-About-Disability-Disclosure-under-the-ADA.pdf>

- Do not doubt or challenge an employee requesting accommodations if their disability isn't obvious or visible. This includes accommodations for sensory disabilities, such as lighting or noise reduction or workplace relocation requests.
- Be open to modifying job tasks to be appropriate for an individual's capabilities.
- Be flexible with arrival and departure times and allow for longer and/or more frequent breaks.
- Allow longer periods for work to be completed.
- Allow employees to work from home with appropriate tasks when needed.
- Allow employees to take unpaid leave when all paid leave has been exhausted.

## Work Spaces and Practices

- Ensure that work spaces, including aisles and storage areas, are ADA compliant. For more detailed specifications, please view the "Accessible Buildings and Grounds" section of these Guidelines.
- Modify workstations to include necessary adaptive equipment and adjustable furniture.<sup>27</sup>
- Provide assistive technology and support the employee's training of utilizing it.
- Locate work spaces for employees with disabilities as near as possible to the materials they need to complete their work.
- Ensure that staff offices and break rooms are accessible.
- All work-related documents should be created in ways that are accessible for all employees. See the "Digital Content" section of these Guidelines for more specifics.
- All meetings and group work should be conducted in a way that allows full participation of employees with disabilities. See the "Public Programming, Outreach, and Instruction" section of these guidelines for more detail.

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<sup>27</sup> 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 oversize keyboard; and standing/height-adjustable tables and chairs. Provide TTY or hearing-aid-compatible telephone equipment for employees with hearing impairments.

## Task Force members

### **Co-chairs:**

Kathy Marquis, Wyoming State Archives

Sara White, Madison, Wisconsin

### **Members:**

Krystal Appiah, University of Virginia Library

Samantha Cook, Intern, University of Wyoming Libraries

Daria D'Arienzo, Meekins Archivist, Williamsburg Public Library

Alan Lefever, Texas Baptist Historical Collection

Donna McCrea, University of Montana

Lydia Tang, Michigan State University

### **Ex-officio**

Meredith Evans, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum

Brenda Gunn, University of Virginia Library

Felicia Owens, Society of American Archivists

Tanya Zanish-Belcher, Wake Forest University

# Resources

## General Resources

American Library Association (ALA). "Accessibility Defined."

<http://www.ala.org/support/accessibility-defined>.

Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA). "Accessibility Toolkits: Understanding Accessibility Challenges for Patrons." Last modified February 5, 2018.

<http://www.ala.org/news/member-news/2018/02/understanding-accessibility-challenges-patrons>.

The Association of Specialized Government and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASGCLA).

"Tools and Resources." Last modified October, 2017. [www.ascladirect.org/resources](http://www.ascladirect.org/resources)

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World Intellectual Property Organization. “Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired or Otherwise Print Disabled.” <http://www.wipo.int/treaties/en/ip/marrakesh/>.

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Mid-Atlantic ADA Center. “Archived Webinars.” Accessed September 15, 2018. <http://www.adainfo.org/training/webinars>.

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