



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.” 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.”¹ There are many types of disabilities which can affect a person’s vision, movement, thinking, memory, learning, communicating, hearing, social interactions, and mental health.² Archivists interact daily with people living with both visible and hidden³ disabilities.

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 and services for people with disabilities, accessibility refers to minimizing or eliminating barriers.⁴ Accessibility should be integral to institutional cultures, workflows, and services.

These *Guidelines* provide recommendations and suggest resources to help archivists provide services and spaces that are accessible and inclusive. They encourage respect for each person's right of physical control of their own body, assistive devices and related accommodations. They

¹ “World Report on Disability,” World Health Organization, 2011, http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/report/en/.

² “Disability Overview,” Center for Disease Control, August 1, 2017, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/disability.html>.

³ 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: “Invisible Disabilities: List and General Information,” Disabled World, October 3, 2018, <https://www.disabled-world.com/disability/types/invisible/>.

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 September 15, 2017, <https://www.washington.edu/doit/what-difference-between-accessible-usable-and-universal-design>.

advise compliance with the ADA and other external accessibility standards,⁵ including at institutions that are not legally mandated to do so. 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 accommodate every person's differing abilities, 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 equal or equivalent access for people with disabilities to archival facilities, workplaces, services, and operations. The following Core Values for Accessibility inform all aspects of these *Guidelines*.

- Treat every person with dignity and respect.
- Consider people first in all accessibility decisions.
- Respect privacy. Disabilities are not always visible. Disclosing a disability is a choice.
- Respect personal boundaries. Physical assistive devices are considered part of the body of the person using those devices.
- Be flexible in interactions with people, physical spaces, policies, operations, and services.
- Factor accessibility into every aspect of institutional spaces, policies, and services.

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 employees and patrons with diverse abilities.

- 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.
- 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. Only touch a person with their consent.
- Use the preferred disability terminology of the person you are speaking with or about. The standard approach is to use *person-first* language, which emphasizes the person and not the disability.⁷ However, there is no unified disability community and some people

⁵ Including WCAG 2.1 and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

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 October 30, 2018, <https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/publications/ada17.cfm>.

⁷ Example: "A person with a disability," "a person with a visual impairment," "a person with hearing loss."

may prefer *identity-first* language which acknowledges their disability as a defining characteristic to their identity.⁸ Avoid outdated language.⁹

- Give your full attention to each person. Position yourself at a height that is comfortable for the person with whom you are speaking.
- When working with a person with a vision disability, identify yourself and use clear verbal communication.
- When working with a person with a hearing disability, speak directly to the person to allow them to see your lips clearly. Ask if they would prefer other means of communication.
- Allow and encourage people to use assistive devices and technologies.

Physical Environment

Buildings and Grounds

Follow the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities (ADAAG) to ensure that access to parking lots, walkways, bathrooms and other utilities, and access points of buildings are accessible to people with disabilities.¹⁰ Make venue accessibility information easily available on your institution's website and in other relevant locations. Provide a way for visitors to contact your institution to request any needed accommodations.

- At least one door should have automatic openers and should be wide enough (i.e. 36 inches) to accommodate wheelchairs and scooters.¹¹
- 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.¹²
- 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.

⁸ Example: "autistic person."

⁹ Unfavorable terminology includes "impaired," "the [insert disability label]" (such as "the blind"), or "handicapped." "Disability Language Style Guide," National Center on Disability and Journalism, 2018, <http://ncdj.org/style-guide/>.

¹⁰ Accessible Routes in "Guide to the ADA Standards," United States Access Board, accessed October 30, 2018, <https://www.access-board.gov/guidelines-and-standards/buildings-and-sites/about-the-ada-standards/guide-to-the-ada-standards>.

¹¹ 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 October 30, 2018, <https://www.access-board.gov/guidelines-and-standards/buildings-and-sites/about-the-ada-standards/guide-to-the-ada-standards/chapter-3-operable-parts>.

¹² ADAAG, 8.5: "Libraries: Stacks"; 4.3: "Accessible Routes."

- 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.¹³
- 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.
- Flooring should comply with archival facility guidelines endorsed by the SAA,¹⁴ 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.

Reading Room

- The reference desk 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.¹⁵ 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.
- At least one reading room table should be height adjustable.
- Consider providing an extra wheelchair or other mobility tools for visitors to borrow on site.

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.

- Workspaces for employees who need extra time to exit the building should be located as near as possible to safe exits.
- 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 visible and audible from anywhere in public areas, employee areas, and stacks and in all stairwells, storage areas, and restrooms.

¹³ ADAAG, 4.30: “Signage.”

¹⁴ 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/>.

¹⁵ The height and design of the employee desk should also consider accessibility for employees.

- Fire alarms should be maintained and strobe lights should be synchronized. Be aware that flashing lights may trigger epileptic seizures.¹⁶
- Floor plans featuring emergency exits should be visible within the reading room and employee areas, and available online.

Public Services

Provide an easy way for visitors to request accommodations for research visits, tours, exhibits and programs. Offer appointments to review accessibility options for researchers. 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.

- Employees should be willing to assist researchers in registering, requesting, and physically accessing reading room and closed stacks materials.
- Encourage and permit researchers to bring in their own assistive equipment, adaptive software, and assistants that best meet their needs.
- Equip at least one computer or tablet with adaptive technology. Examples include but are not limited to text-to-speech software¹⁷ and screen magnification applications. Tablets should have a stand and assistive apps should be preloaded.
- 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.¹⁸
- Consider offering email and chat services to 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 employee supervision.
- Consider compiling a list of local sign language interpreters, note-takers, and readers for researchers to contact.
- Consider utilizing transcribing-on-request for researchers.

¹⁶ “Photosensitivity and Seizures,” Epilepsy Foundation, November 18, 2013, <https://www.epilepsy.com/learn/triggers-seizures/photosensitivity-and-seizures>.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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, July 2011, https://www.ada.gov/service_animals_2010.htm.

Exhibitions and Public Programming

When planning an exhibit or public program, make it as accessible as possible by engaging multiple senses. Creative exhibitions can utilize a range of visual, aural, cognitive and physical abilities in their design.

- 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.
- Exhibit items and their labels should be visible to a seated person. For example, if labels or materials are stored on a flat surface, angle them for better visibility.
- Use a simple font¹⁹ and avoid low contrast or overly busy backgrounds²⁰ for text. Fonts should be no less than 18 point. Use short sentences with straightforward language.
- Use alternative tools, such as Braille, audio recordings, or an equivalent online format, to describe exhibits for patrons with low or no vision.
- Consider creating a digital component (i.e. a blog post, LibGuide, or online exhibit) to facilitate access for individuals who may not be able to visit or visually access an exhibit. Consider providing a (ideally tactile) QR code at the exhibit for visitors with smartphones to easily link to the digital content.²¹
- Provide a transcript and/or closed-captioning for audio or audiovisual components.
- Provide repository contact information and include a statement encouraging visitors to request needed accommodations in advance. For example: To request disability related modifications or to ask questions about the event or its location please contact: (insert contact information).
- 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.
- Ensure that all speakers use a microphone. To facilitate lip-reading, speakers should face the audience.
- Consider having sign-language interpreters available for tours or presentations.

¹⁹ Such as Arial, Helvetica, Times New Roman, Garamond, Bookman, or Palatino fonts.

²⁰ Avoid the red-green combination for people who are colorblind or 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.

²¹ Tang, Lydia, "Exhibit Accessibility," Accessibility Resources for MSU Library Staff, 2018, <http://libguides.lib.msu.edu/accessibility/exhibits>

Workplace Accessibility

Workplace Policies and Procedures

Flexibility is the watchword for workplace policies and procedures. Necessary and helpful workplace accommodations are unique to the individual employee.

- Know the current disability-related policies at your institution, including procedures for providing accommodations to employees with disabilities.²²
- 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.
- Assess whether specific requirements are truly essential for a position when drafting a job description (i.e. lifting boxes, pushing carts and typing at certain minimum speeds). Be creative about finding alternatives, including utilizing assistive technology.
- Follow ethical interview practices. It may be illegal to ask if someone has a disability or force them to disclose their disability. Provide an opportunity for an interviewee to request any needed accommodations without forcing disclosure of any disabilities or conditions.²³
- 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.
- 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 on appropriate tasks when needed.
- Allow employees to take unpaid leave when all paid leave has been exhausted.
- Create all work-related documents, including digital content, in ways that are accessible for all employees.
- Conduct all meetings and group work in ways that allow full participation of all employees.

Work Spaces

- Ensure that work spaces, including aisles and storage areas, are ADA compliant.
- Locate work spaces for employees with disabilities as near as possible to the materials they need to complete their work.

²² "Procedures for Providing Reasonable Accommodation for Individuals With Disabilities," U. S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, accessed October 30, 2018, https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/internal/reasonable_accommodation.cfm.

²³ "Frequently Asked Question About Disability Disclosure Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)," Disability Rights IOWA, 2012, <https://disabilityrightsowa.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/FAQ-About-Disability-Disclosure-under-the-ADA.pdf>.

- Ensure that employee offices and break rooms are accessible.
- Modify workstations to include helpful or necessary adaptive equipment or adjustable furniture.²⁴
- Provide helpful and necessary assistive technology and support training the employee to use it.

Institutional Support

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, collection development, digital resources, outreach, and public services. Accessibility is a vital element in promoting the archival profession's values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

- 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 an employee point person or committee to address and advocate for accessibility on behalf of employees and visitors.
- Include accessibility provisions in budget planning such as for building improvements, furnishings, assistive technologies, and other strategies.
- Build partnerships with the local disability community to responsively and proactively troubleshoot accessibility issues.

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, the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), and PDF-UA (ISO 14289-1)²⁵ 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 recommendations:

- Use meaningful page titles and document file names.
- Indicate the document language in markup.
- Use heading tags.

²⁴ 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 disabilities when requested.

²⁵ "PDF/UA in a Nutshell," PDF Association, August 1, 2013, <https://www.pdfa.org/publication/pdfua-in-a-nutshell/>.

- 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, and 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 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.
- Use Plain Language Guidelines when generating content for your site.²⁶
- 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.
- Establish ‘minimum’ levels of accessibility compliance for the digital content and technology your institution creates or uses.
- Advocate for accessibility provisions in contracts and licenses for vendor-hosted solutions. Request vendors demonstrate that their technology product conforms with your institutions’ minimum level of accessibility compliance.²⁷
- 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).

²⁶ “Federal Plain Language Guidelines,” PlainLanguage.gov, May 1, 2011, <https://plainlanguage.gov/media/FederalPLGuidelines.pdf>.

²⁷ 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 2.0 template is available through the Information Technology Industry Council. “VPAT,” ITI, last modified August 14, 2018, <https://www.itic.org/policy/accessibility/vpat>.

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

General Resources

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