
CSCCE DEI Tip Sheet: Virtual event accessibility guiding questions

Introduction and background

Virtual and hybrid events are commonplace these days. As the world adjusted to work life during a global pandemic, many event organizers found themselves hosting gatherings, conferences, meetings, and more online. With this came a heightened awareness of the fact that while virtual events are more accessible to some people with disabilities, they create further barriers for others.

Accessibility is a topic all virtual event organizers need to consider as soon as they begin planning. The chances that someone with a disability will attend their event are significant. According to the World Health Organization, 10% of the world's population, or roughly 650 million people, have a disability ([WHO](#)). The US Centers for Disease Control notes that one out of every four adults in the United States has a disability ([CDC](#)), and the World Bank reports that one out of every three households in Latin America and the Caribbean has a person with a disability, representing 14.7% of the regional population (World Bank: [Spanish](#) / [English](#)).

There are five main categories of disability that can impact a person's ability to engage in a virtual event, and it is common for people to have more than one of these disabilities. They are:

- Visual
- Auditory
- Speech
- Mobility (specifically arms, hands, and neck)
- Cognitive/Neurodivergent

(For examples of each category, see the [Digital Engagement Accessibility Toolkit](#).)

Within these categories, disabilities can be permanent (e.g., a person whose arm is amputated), temporary (e.g., a person who broke their arm and is using a sling), or situational (e.g., a person holding a child in one arm).

Accessibility is also fluid: it can suddenly change due to a medical emergency, and most people will experience disability at some point in their lives, especially as they age. When virtual meetings and all associated communication are made more accessible, it benefits all of these groups.

When planning events, it can be helpful to involve people with disabilities. However, remember they can only represent their own lived experiences, not everyone with a disability. Further, be clear in communicating that their perspectives are welcome, but not expected, and offer fair compensation for their time and knowledge.

Talking about Disability

Discussing disability can be intimidating, especially if it is an unfamiliar topic. First of all, don't be afraid of the term "disability." In the past, people used phrases such as "differing abilities" or "special needs" to avoid it. In K-12 school settings, the term "special needs" is frequently used in the names of departments or programs, but when referring to the students themselves, the term "disability" or "disabled" is used. One word you should always avoid is "normal," when describing those without a disability.

When talking about disabilities, be respectful and flexible. Language around the topic is constantly changing. Currently, in English, there are two primary ways to talk about individual disabilities: person-first ("a person who is blind") and identity-first ("a blind person"). When interacting with someone with a disability and the need arises, ask them which language they prefer. Another example of personal preferences is the use of the term "d/Deaf". It denotes two groups: "Deaf" is someone who identifies as culturally Deaf while "deaf" is in reference to the medical diagnosis of having hearing loss. Other languages have their own norms (e.g., in Spanish, the current recommendation is to use identity-first language).

Be aware of ableist language in all communication. Ableist language encompasses many commonly used terms or idioms, where wording that is used to describe disabilities generally refers to a thing or situation that is undesirable. Commonly used examples include: "crazy," "lame," "turning a blind eye," and "as you can see..." These terms and phrases send negative messages to people who are disabled and can counteract the inclusion and belonging efforts of your organization.

Lastly, try to reduce cognitive load. Cognitive load refers to the amount of working memory a person must use to complete a task. For example, if you are filling out a form, text indicating the proper way to respond is sometimes found within the box where you type your answer (this is called placeholder text). As soon as you start typing, placeholder text disappears. This means that you have to memorize the proper formatting before you start to type, or delete your answer part way through to remind yourself what you're supposed to be typing. This unnecessary cognitive load can make completing a form nearly impossible for people with certain cognitive disabilities, and can also be frustrating for any user who is experiencing sleep deprivation, dehydration, or engaging with your form while in a distracting environment.

Every effort made to be more accessible is important. Change is not easy, and changing habits that have been built over a lifetime or that are deeply embedded in an organization's culture can be challenging. However, as accessibility expert [Meryl Evans](#) says, "progress over perfection" - so be sure to document and celebrate your improvements! You will probably make mistakes here and there, but you can acknowledge and learn from them as you move forward on your accessibility journey.

With this tip sheet, and through the guiding questions below, we are offering a starting point for you as you plan your next virtual event. This is NOT an exhaustive list of boxes to check, but instead a series of prompts to support you as you carefully think through your intentions and actions.

Guiding questions

Advertising and registering audience members

Question 1: Are your promotional materials accessible (and inclusive)?

If you are planning a big event, chances are one of your first thoughts will be "who is going to participate and how will I reach them?" A common effort is to create digital advertisements and fliers to distribute via email and social media. When creating these ads, it is crucial to consider which identities are represented in the ad and how that visual representation is read by those using screen readers (this can include people with low vision, blindness, and learning disabilities).

When creating ads using stock imagery, consider using images that depict people with visible disabilities and of different races and ethnicities. Stock image sites such as [Disability:IN](#) and [Disabled and Here](#) are free options for disability-inclusive stock photography. Keeping designs simple and using high-contrast colors ([check the contrast of your ad](#)) makes ads easier to interpret for people with both visual and cognitive disabilities.

It's also important to include in your advertisement (or webpage about the event) information about what accommodations you are providing to support participation (e.g., captioning, translators, or quiet areas/breakouts). This helps participants decide if your event meets their needs, and signposts that your organization cares should they need to reach out and ask for something else.

Once you are ready to share your ad, [adding alternative text](#) (or "alt text" for short) is a mechanism to improve accessibility for those using screen readers. Alt text is a concise, descriptive, and contextual explanation of an image that is read by a screen reader in place of an image. When drafting alt text, consider the goal of the image you have chosen, and try to include that intent in

your alt text. For example, if your goal is to indicate that you welcome diversity at your event, consider including the race, ethnicity, and gender of those depicted, and describe any mobility aids they are using. Otherwise, [those using a screen reader may be left to assume these characteristics](#). Similarly, if your image contains text, make sure all of the words are included as alt text. Including [accessible hyperlinks](#) to register for the event in the ad description can help potential audience members register.

Most platforms have straightforward ways to add alt text when you upload your image, but if in doubt, a quick search for instructions should point you in the right direction.

Lastly, try to limit your use of emojis. While cute, they are often not screen reader-friendly.

Question 2: Is the registration process accessible?

During event registration, it is important to ask about the accessibility needs of participants and plan sufficiently far ahead to meet those accessibility needs. Include a space on the registration form for registrants to request accommodations in their own words.

Make sure that you keep accessibility in mind when you set a registration deadline: you need to make sure you have adequate time to make the requested accommodations. For example, it is reasonable to expect the process of finding and hiring an ASL interpreter to take at least two weeks. It is also important to pass details of accessibility requirements on to your presenters or panelists. For example, if a participant requests access to slides in advance, the presenter needs adequate warning (see [this guide prepared for the 2021 UseR conference](#) for an example of how to communicate these requirements).

Don't forget to check that the registration form itself is accessible. If you are creating your own form using a tool such as Google Forms, you can learn more about [creating accessible forms](#). If your community works with a web developer to create event registration forms, ask them if they will be designing the form with accessibility in mind and share [recommendations for web developers to create accessible forms](#). (Note: your choice of tool may also be influenced by other requirements, such as international or low bandwidth accessibility.)

TESTING TIP: Take a minute to check if your form can be accessed using a keyboard by using the “tab” key to move between fields. If you get stuck anywhere on the form, this suggests it will be difficult or impossible to fill in for someone using a screen reader.

Lastly, providing a way to save information so that your form can be completed in more than one sitting improves accessibility for registrants who have cognitive impairments such as dyslexia and

ADHD, as well as for anyone who might need to double check the information requested. Providing the opportunity to review information before submitting also gives registrants the opportunity to correct any mistakes.

Event logistics

Question 3: Where will you be hosting your virtual event and what accessibility features are built into this software?

Different tools have different accessibility features, and these features are regularly updated. If you are in the position to choose which tool you'll use for your event, take some time to research various options and what features come "out of the box."

If you are already committed to a tool, and it doesn't have the features you need, you may be able to supplement. For example, [Otter](#) is an app that creates transcripts from a video call in real-time (or from a recording) in a separate browser window (note: this is the same AI technology that powers Zoom's built-in captioning), or for those with coding skills, [Whisper](#) is another option.

Either way, if you're using a platform that's new to you, or you're enabling new features, make sure to schedule plenty of time for testing and refining your processes ([see CSCCE's guide to selecting and testing online tools](#)). If you have access to IT support at your organization, reach out to them about what is possible.

Question 4: Do you plan on using other online tools during your meeting or event?

Some online meetings or events make use of supplementary tools to collaborate (e.g., [Gather](#)), brainstorm (e.g., [Mural](#) or [Miro](#)), and reflect (e.g., a virtual notes doc). Just like thinking about your event platform, it's important to note that these tools can add an accessibility barrier if not tested beforehand. A collaborative digital "whiteboard" tool can be a helpful way to visualize the content of a meeting, but a participant who uses a screen reader may find it challenging (or impossible) to write in particular spaces and move notes around. In addition, participants with low internet bandwidth or varying software/hardware setups may not have access to certain tools. Performing an internet search for the name of the tool and the term "accessibility" (e.g., "Miro accessibility") can help you to learn about the latest accessibility updates for the online tool you are interested in.

If a tool is not accessible to your participants, and you can't find a replacement that is, consider ways of adjusting your activity so that it can be accomplished without using an additional tool (e.g., by scaffolding a shared Google doc with screen readable headings).

TESTING TIP: Become familiar with the technology you are using and its accessibility features. Some video conferencing software (e.g., Zoom) allows you to assign someone as an interpreter or captionist, and give participants the option to turn this feature on or off. On other platforms you can pin an interpreter's video (e.g., Google Meet) or assign them as a panelist (e.g., Webex) to ensure participants can easily see them. Test these features before you use them so that everything runs smoothly during the event. You can also make how-to guides for participants to support them as they join your event.

Question 5: Will you need interpreters or live captionists?

Having compiled your list of participants and asked what accommodations they need; you are already one step toward assembling the access team you need for your event. Your next question is about who you need to hire and how you do that.

Before you start reaching out to interpretation and captioning agencies, it is crucial to know the roles of these service providers. Interpreters facilitate communication between d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals with hearing participants. Captioning or speech-to-text services are for real-time translating of spoken language and other auditory information into written communication. Some of the options for captioning services are [Communication Access Realtime Translation \(CART\)](#), [C-Print](#), or [TypeWell](#).

TESTING TIP: Testing is also important when it comes to having interpreters and captionists. If an interpreter's screen or captions are overlaid on top of a speaker's screen or slides, then important information in the slides may be covered, or visibility could be low (if the interpreter's screen or captions use a transparent background). Enlist the help of your colleagues or community members to make sure that any extra tools you want to use for your virtual event are compatible with the accessibility needs of your audience.

Every interpreting and captioning agency functions differently. Some may give you the contact information of the individual(s) you will be working with in advance, while others will not give you this information until the day of, due to last-minute assignment changes. Ensure you have contact information for someone from the agency so that you can easily address any issues.

Here are some additional questions that you may ask yourself during this phase of planning:

- Will I need to provide both interpreting and captioning services?
- Are there special considerations for these services in an online environment (see the resources section at the end of this tip sheet for tips on working with vendors)?

- What questions should I ask vendors when arranging services (e.g., "What is the minimum number of hours we can bill you for your services?" or "How are overtime services accounted for and billed?")?
- Will I need regular services? Should I set up a long-term contract?

Question 6: What accessibility considerations should you make as you prepare materials for your event?

Many online presentations include a slide deck, and it's important to ensure that all of your attendees can receive the information in these presentations. If you're using PowerPoint, Microsoft has developed a set of [best practices](#) to ensure that your slides are accessible. At the time of writing this tip sheet, Google Slides does not have a built-in accessibility checker (although you could use a third-party accessibility checker), and PREZI is not considered accessible. You can also ask participants in advance for feedback on your presentation designs to learn which are more accessible for them.

DESIGN TIP: Leave space at the bottom of each slide so that captions are easily readable while you present.

While accommodations for interpreters or screen readers might be at the front of your mind, it is important to also consider cognitive load for neurodivergent participants. A clear agenda (including topics, speakers, and timings) can help participants understand what will be happening and when. If there are questions you want the group to discuss, consider sharing them beforehand to give participants time to prepare their responses. You may also find it useful to include a slide that establishes group norms for interactions (e.g., "please use the raise hand button if you have a question or comment you'd like to voice out loud, or type your question in the chat") to help everyone in the room feel able to share their thoughts.

If you have co-presenters, remember to check in with them about their presentation formats. You can share resources about how to make an accessible presentation, or offer to check their presentations yourself (e.g., [this guide prepared for the 2021 UseR conference](#)). You may also want to review how you will switch between presentations or collect slide decks together, as this could be both time-consuming and disorienting for participants. This is another reason it's important to start thinking about accessibility from the initial conception of the virtual event; if you are asking co-presenters to share their material with you, you have to give them enough time to prepare (and yourself enough time to follow up as needed).

Question 7: What materials will you need to share with participants and/or service providers before your event?

Sharing your slide decks and agendas with participants ahead of your event supports individuals who may need preparation time to be able to participate. This might include anyone who takes longer to process information, needs to prepare for transitions, may be using a screen reader, or needs to adjust text size for readability.

Interpreters and captionists rely on knowing presentation and discussion content in order to provide good services. Captionists may add items to a dictionary in their software and make shortcuts for technical vocabulary. Knowing the topic, some terms, speaker names, and the order of events, ensures that when discussing Betelgeuse, for example, the captions will correctly use the name of the star and not the 1988 film ("Beetlejuice").

The same is true for interpreters. Translating from one language to another requires understanding the context of what is being said by the speaker. Without that context, information may be incompletely or inaccurately conveyed. Long events will generally have more than one service provider who will swap off; agendas and event plans give an opportunity for these individuals to plan for provider transition during natural breaks to minimize any interruption of services. Most importantly, sharing materials in advance allows you to open up communication with your accessibility team so that fewer issues arise during the event.

Event participation

Question 8: How will participants contact you should an issue arise during your event?

It is not uncommon that technical difficulties arise during an event, no matter how carefully you plan and test. Providing a phone number as the only contact method can make it difficult for d/Deaf participants to contact you for assistance. Therefore, it is important to provide participants with multiple ways to contact you if they encounter any issues. In addition to a phone number, provide an email address that you check regularly, or a Slack "help desk" channel where people can communicate in text form.

HOSTING TIP: Designating someone other than the presenter to check feedback channels allows for accessibility issues to be quickly addressed with minimal disruption, and without calling attention to the accessibility needs of participants. Make sure that whoever is assisting with this is aware of the accessibility needs and how to respond appropriately to any issues.

Question 9: How will your participants engage in discussion?

During the event, it's likely that you will call on participants to share, or that they might have questions for you or your presenters. For some, unmuting and verbalizing a question might be the easiest way to contribute. Others may prefer to message the whole group in the chat, while some may wish to message only the host.

Given all of these different modalities for participation, it is helpful for the host to set guidelines at the start of a meeting to make clear the expectations around contributing (e.g., should participants raise their hand or not), as well as highlight all the different ways people can contribute - and who will be monitoring different channels if there is more than one facilitator. Beforehand, make sure you're able to field comments and questions in any of the ways you've outlined. For instance, if you want participants to be able to message in the chat, do you have a co-host monitoring messages in chat? Are you paying attention to individuals who have raised their hand?

HOSTING TIP: Leave a little extra time (e.g., watch and wait until the interpreter pauses) after asking for participants to engage so that individuals using interpreters or captioning can contribute. While it may feel a little uncomfortable to hold the silence, there is always a delay between when audio/video is transmitted and when it is received. Turn-taking management is key to making sure that everyone can participate.

You'll also need to keep in mind that if you are using breakout rooms, access services will need to move with specific participants. If you need to, decide which participants will be in which breakout room and communicate with the interpreters and captionists about where they will be moving and when, or assign communication norms to different breakouts (e.g., have one breakout where communication is spoken and another where it is written).

After the event

Question 10: Will materials from your event be made available asynchronously afterward?

You have reached the end of your event. While that is something to celebrate, there are further questions to ask yourself if you plan to make resources from the event available for individuals to access asynchronously.

Consider the audience for these materials; if they will be shared only with a limited audience (e.g., participants who signed up), then you will need to account for the individual accommodation needs

of those participants. Considering these accommodations does not stop after the event has concluded; you want to ensure your event is accessible from start to finish, including any post-event or follow-up emails or links to resources.

You might also want to make resources from your event available to a broader audience - sharing knowledge from the event with a larger group of people. Before you create public resources, however, you will need to consider a wider net of accessibility issues so that the entire public can use this information in the same capacity that their non-disabled and neurotypical peers can. Things like creating or cleaning caption files, ensuring the interpreters are visible, and making sure shared slide decks are accessible are important to check before you make your event resources public.

Here are some questions to ask yourself as you go through this process:

- Was a caption file created during the live event, or will you need to start from scratch to add captions?
- Are there errors that need to be fixed in order to make this caption file readable?
- How would someone who uses a screen reader access the text in the slide deck or the chat?
- Was the interpreter visible for the duration of the recording?

Question 11: How will you assess your efforts to make the event accessible?

Along with the rush of relief that comes after a well-run event is the desire to assess your efforts and the benefit your audience derived from them. Begin by asking yourself how you thought things went: did you encounter any problems or were some things more successful than others? If you worked with a team, check in with them to see if they have any specific feedback for you. As much as we wish every event went as smoothly as our well-laid plans, there is a lot to be learned by reflecting alone and with your technical support team to reveal improvements for future events.

REFLECTION and ITERATION: Making events accessible is an iterative learning process of responding to the needs of event participants and adjusting as new accessibility features are added to online tools. One way to encourage feedback is to summarize what you have changed in response to past feedback at the beginning of an event, or at the beginning of the next day for a multi-day event where participants give feedback at the end of each day.

Regardless of how thoughtful you were in your accommodating process, it is crucial to consider the experience of your participants. Surveys are an excellent way to elicit feedback from your audience. Find a survey platform that offers screen reader-accessible surveys and compile a list of questions to ask your participants about their experience (for guidance on survey design, see [“Ten simple rules](#)

[for measuring the impact of workshops](#)"). If you are looking for more individualized feedback, include an option for participants to share their email addresses so that you can engage with them in-depth at a later time.

Question 12: Do you anticipate participants in your event continuing the conversation on another platform?

Some events assume that participants will remain in contact, especially if the event is designed to build community. Make sure that any other platforms you are using afford the same accessibility options as your event platform. If they do, take a moment to revisit your event documentation to make sure it contains instructions for turning on accessibility features. And if they don't, consider how you might better facilitate ongoing connections between participants.

Final thoughts

Accessibility needs are myriad and highly individualized. It is common to feel overwhelmed by the process of making your events more accessible, and worry about the problems you might encounter or the mistakes you might make. Much like any aspect of being a community manager, there is a learning curve to accommodating diverse needs within your community and to a broader audience. You will make mistakes along the way, and that is okay. Learn from those mistakes, accept feedback gracefully, and move forward knowing better. The most important part of the process is listening to your community members and having an open dialogue with them about their needs. Refrain from falling into the trap of preparing a mental checklist of accommodations without engaging with the individuals you are accommodating; people are more than a checklist, and communities are stronger when opportunities to participate are thoughtfully made possible for everyone.

Learn more

These resources are intended as a starting point as you work to enhance the accessibility of your events and community resources. We have tried to include links to organizations that regularly update their information as technology advances and norms shift. However, these links may lose functionality over time.

Before your event

PRESENTATIONS

- [How Can You Make Your Presentation Accessible?](#) - UW DOIT Center, written with a focus on in-person presentations but most are applicable to virtual presentations
- [Make your PowerPoint presentations accessible to people with disabilities - Microsoft Support](#) - Best practices and specific tips for how to make your PowerPoint presentation accessible
- [Preparing for an accessible online conference](#) - This guide, prepared for the 2021 UserR conference, includes detailed instructions about creating accessible presentations and figures

COMMUNICATIONS

- [The Digital Engagement Accessibility Toolkit \(ASTC\)](#) - This web-based guide walks through why the language we use matters, some of the tools available to make digital engagement more accessible, and a host of additional resources. It was created with museum educators in mind, but contains lots of broadly applicable guidance.
- [Disability Language Style Guide \(National Center on Disability and Journalism\)](#) - A guide to best practices when talking to, or about, people living with disabilities
- [National Deaf Center](#) - A hub for learning, research, and community related to the d/Deaf experience in postsecondary education
- [Tips for Communicating with people who are d/Deaf or Hard of Hearing](#) - NTID Coop & Career Center resource on communicating with the d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- [The Carpentries Toolkit of IDEAS](#) - A guide created for Carpentries instructors on how to make their trainings inclusive and accessible
- [The Accessibility Guy](#) - A YouTube Channel featuring Shawn Jordison, an expert in making digital documents and resources accessible
- [Hemingway](#) - A tool to help you edit your written content so that it is more easily understandable

TECH TIPS

- [CSCCE's guide to selecting and testing online tools](#) - This resource walks you through five steps to assess accessibility of your online tools ahead of an event
- [8 guidelines to make social media posts more accessible](#) - A technical guide (including step-by-step instructions) for making your social media communications more accessible
- [Don't Use "Click Here" and other common Hyperlink mistakes](#) - An introduction to the importance of accessible hyperlinking practices

IMAGES

- [The case for describing race in alternative text attributes](#) - Describes the importance of providing context and noting race in writing alternative text
- [Alternative Text by Social Media Scheduling Platform](#) - How to add alt text to your images on a range of platforms
- [Disability:IN](#) - A source for free disability inclusive stock photography
- [Disabled and Here](#) - "Disability-led stock image and interview series celebrating disabled Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC)"
- [Sara's Curated List of DEAIAB \(Diversity, Equity, Access, Inclusion, Accessibility, Belonging\) Resources](#) - Including Diverse Image Sources
- [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) 2.1](#) is the standard for making web content more accessible

WORKING WITH VENDORS

- [Developing Contracts for Service Providers](#) - Information and tips on how to develop contracts and hire accessibility services
- [Remote Access: Questions for Vendors](#) - Online events may have different considerations for hiring service providers. This guide helps you go through some different questions in order to select the best vendor for you.
- [Best Practices in Access](#) - Information on Video Remote Interpreting (VRI)
- [Providing Dual Accommodations](#) - When and why you might need to hire both an interpreter and a captionist for one participant
- [Guide to Organizing Inclusive Scientific Meetings \(500 Women Scientists\)](#) - This guide includes information on accessibility at in-person, hybrid, and online meetings
- [Meryl Evans Website/Blog](#) - Meryl worked with Sara on the Digital Engagement Accessibility Toolkit, and is a speaker, trainer, and author on accessibility and disability. She has a post

specifically focused on [making online video meetings more accessible](#) and [creating Accessible Social Media and Website Content](#).

COMMON VIRTUAL EVENT TOOLS

- [Zoom’s accessibility offerings](#)
- [Zoom’s sign language translation feature](#)
- [Zoom’s foreign language translation feature](#)
- [Google Meet’s accessibility offerings](#)
- [Microsoft Teams’ accessibility offerings](#)
- [Powerpoint’s accessibility offerings](#)
- [Accessibility of Google Forms](#)
- [Accessibility of Online Survey Tools](#)
- [Accessibility Insights](#) - Originally created with developers in mind, this extension for Chrome and Microsoft Edge can be used in a variety of ways to check the accessibility of your web content

EMBEDDING ACCESSIBILITY IN YOUR COMMUNITY

- [Demystifying Disability](#) (Book) by Emily Ladau - This book provides an introduction to numerous topics related to disability and how to be an informed ally
- [How to be an Ally](#) resource from Rutgers Office of Disability Services with general ideas related to allyship
- [Accessibility Organizations](#) from The Digital Engagement Accessibility Toolkit (ASTC) - This is a list of organizations that have a social media presence you can follow to learn about ongoing conversations around accessibility
- On social media, hashtags to follow include:
 - #A11y
 - #Accessibility

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Citing and reusing this guide

CITATION AND REUSE

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