ACCESSIBLE VIRTUAL PROGRAMMING TOOLKIT

COOPER HEWITT

Smithsonian Design Museum

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Toolkit

Checklist

Appendix

INTRODUCTION

Why accessibility?

Public cultural heritage institutions have a duty to provide learning to, and be in service of, our larger society. Being a public institution means being in service to the entire public—25 percent of whom are people with disabilities.*

We must work hard to ensure that everything we offer to the public is not just accessible to disabled museumgoers but also provides an equitable experience. If we are accessible, then we are compliant with the law and, at the bare minimum, disabled people can come through our virtual "doors." However, just because someone gets in the door does not mean they have a welcoming and dignified experience once they get there.

Beyond accessibility, we must prioritize equity for our disabled visitors by putting resources behind proactively meeting people's needs and creating spaces that are made with the assumption that disabled people will be there.

Accessibility and equity must not be afterthoughts, tacked on after a program has already been planned. It is possible to provide truly equitable experiences only when disability is considered from a program's inception all the way through to its execution and follow-up, and this toolkit was created to support cultural institutions in integrating disability equity into their programs from step one.

*A note on language: Cooper Hewitt recognizes both person-first language (e.g., "person with a disability") and identity-first language (e.g., "disabled person") as valid ways to talk about disability, and the two will be used interchangeably throughout this document.

Why virtual?

This toolkit will outline the process for designing accessible virtual programs, both live and recorded.

We have chosen to focus on virtual programs because, although this format did explode in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, disabled people have been advocating for years for the option to participate in events online. Virtual programs increase accessibility for many people who cannot always attend programs in person.

Virtual programs provide access to people who are immunocompromised, cannot leave their homes, are caregivers, have temporary illnesses, don't have access to transportation, and so forth.

Although in-person programs are also a valuable part of the museum experience, it is crucial that we do not sever the lifeline that virtual programming extended to so many people during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

What does accessibility mean in virtual space?

Accessibility in virtual space can mean a lot of different things, because everyone's access needs are different. People should be able to access and understand the information you are sharing and be able to participate in the virtual program once they're in attendance. Below are some elements that affect every person's ability to access virtual programs, along with some questions to ask yourself about each.

Senses. Can someone participate in your program if they don't use their hearing? Can they get all the information they need if they can't see color, or can't see at all?

Cognition. Is information about your program presented in a clear, easy-to-find way? Would someone with a different learning style or processing speed than your own be able to participate?

Mobility. Is participation in your program dependent on fine motor skills or the use of specific body parts, such as hands? Do you have equitable alternatives planned for people who cannot or do not use those skills or parts, and/or is clear information provided explaining that those skills are needed to participate?

Language. Can people get the program information and understand the program itself if they don't know the program's primary language? Can people communicate during your program if they do not use speech?

Stamina. Is clear information provided about the level at which attendees are expected to participate? Can someone take a break during your program without missing important information?

As you think about these questions, remember, someone who is blind is going to have some different accessibility needs than someone who is Deaf, and two blind people may also have very different needs—never assume that you know what someone needs just because you know their disability.

What is this document?

Created by and for museum professionals, this toolkit lays out a step-by-step guide for the considerations that need to be made when planning a virtual program in efforts to make it as equitable and accessible as possible.

Steps are organized into Before, During, and After the program, with considerations for how long before a program certain steps should be implemented. Although this toolkit was written primarily with live virtual programs in mind, many of the recommendations here apply to pre-recorded programs as well, and each step is labeled with a "Live" and/or a "Pre-Recorded" icon to help guide you to the steps that are relevant to your program.

There is also an Appendix containing supplementary documents to support you in your planning.

This toolkit was created in partnership with several paid Community Advisors whose lived experiences with disability informed the recommendations outlined in this document.

Cooper Hewitt would like to thank the following people for their contributions:

Aliza Greenberg
Laverne Hamilton
Annie Nishwani Lachhman
Lakshmee Lachhman-Persad
Lily Lipman
Andres Piedrahita
Tucker Salovaara
Saim Sarwar
Mandy Wall
Madison Zalopany

Key Symbols:

 Live content

 Pre-recorded content

BEFORE THE PROGRAM

PROGRAM INCEPTION

BUILD YOUR BUDGET

Include a line item for accessibility services, such as ASL interpretation, captioning, and audio description. For large public programs that anyone can attend, or for recorded videos that will be publicly available online, accessibility services should be provided by default. For smaller programs with a closed group of attendees, it is reasonable to provide only the services that the group requests.

***Find details about these services, including typical costs, in the Glossary.**

ASSIGN STAFF ROLES

The following roles can increase the accessibility of your live event (one staff member can take on all roles, or the responsibilities can be divided):
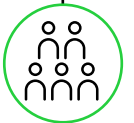
Chat moderator: At logical breaks in the program, this person verbally reads out all messages in the chat so that anyone who cannot access the chat can know what is being said.
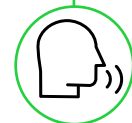
Access services liaison: This person ensures that access service providers, such as interpreters and captioners, have what they need during the event. This person may need to pin and unpin interpreters as they switch out in the course of the event.

Access support person: This person ensures accessibility throughout the event and acts as the point of contact for any attendees who have accessibility concerns.

KNOW YOUR PLATFORM

Popular virtual platforms like Zoom and YouTube are familiar to many people and have strong accessibility standards. Familiarize yourself with the accessibility practices of your chosen platform.

CONSIDER PRICING OPTIONS

If attendees must pay to access your program, consider offering a discounted or free rate for people with disabilities. Additionally, it is best practice to have a free ticket option for caregivers of disabled attendees.
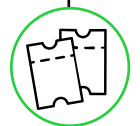
ONE TO TWO MONTHS BEFORE THE PROGRAM

SECURE VENDORS

Access service providers are often in high demand, so the sooner you can hire them, the better. ASL interpreters work in teams, so in almost all cases, you will be hiring a team of two interpreters.

LEARN ABOUT PRESENTER ACCESS NEEDS

If you are bringing in people to present at or facilitate your event, ask them what they need to be able to show up as their best selves at the event.

PREPARE PRESENTERS

Presenters and facilitators have varying levels of experience when it comes to accessibility, and they will likely have to make some edits to their standard presentation practices to make things more accessible. Share with them the Guide for Presenters tip sheet found in the Appendix of this document so that they are prepared to run an accessible event.

BUILD AN ACCESSIBLE REGISTRATION FORM

Make sure that your registration form doesn't time out— give registrants all the time they need. Include clear, simple instructions on how to fill out the form.
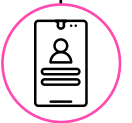
CREATE A PARTICIPANT GUIDE

Though optional, a Participant Guide can be extremely helpful for anyone who needs extra information or clear instruction. This Guide can be created as a simple Word or PDF document (Note: ensure you are following best practices for Word or PDF accessibility when creating this Guide). See the Sample Participant Guide in the Appendix for inspiration.

COMMUNICATE ACCESSIBLY

All communications about an event (website information, social media posts, and e-blasts, among other types of communication) must be accessible. See the Sample Program Description in the Appendix for inspiration. Some things to keep in mind when crafting communications:

Set clear expectations: Be as specific as possible about the run-of-show for the event, who the target audience is, and how participants are expected to engage.

Share content warnings: If your program deals with sensitive or heavy topics, or if there will be bright lights or loud noises at any point during the program, let your audience know.

Include accessibility information: Clearly communicate any accessibility services that will be provided. A point of contact for additional accessibility requests should be clearly identified, and this person should be reachable by both phone and email. Include a time frame for how far in advance you need to receive accommodation requests (anywhere from 48 hours to one week is reasonable).

**Choose typefaces and fonts:** When designing images and e-blasts, keep best practices in mind in terms of typefaces and fonts.
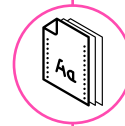
**Create alt text:** Write alt text for all images.

Use approachable language: Write your content at a 9th-grade reading level or below so that most people can understand it without difficulty. You can use a built-in readability checker in Microsoft Word or use an external readability tool.
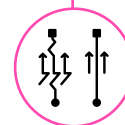
ONE WEEK BEFORE THE PROGRAM

PREPARE ACCESS SERVICE PROVIDERS

Share with your access service providers a detailed run-of-show for the event, in addition to the spellings of all speaker names and any other proper nouns or specialized terminology that will be used during the event. For interactive programs with ASL interpreters, if you know the names of the attendees who will be using the interpreters, you can share that information with the interpreters.
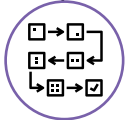
SEND PARTICIPANT REMINDER

Make sure that any reminder emails for participants include all accessibility information, as well as the Participant Guide if applicable.

REVIEW PRESENTER MATERIALS

If your presenters have slide decks or any other materials they'll be sharing with participants, you may want to review them to ensure they meet your accessibility standards.

DURING THE PROGRAM

GATHER PRE-PROGRAM

Join the virtual platform 15–30 minutes early with the access service providers and presenters to talk through the run-of-show and ensure that the service providers have what they need. On Zoom, plan to spotlight the ASL interpreters along with the presenters, and ask the interpreters whether they would like you to switch out their spotlights when they take turns or whether they would like you to give them permission to spotlight themselves.
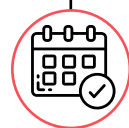
HIT RECORD

An easy way to increase the accessibility of noninteractive programs, such as panels and lectures, is to record them so that audiences can view them on their own time.
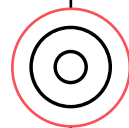
USE AN EXTERNAL CAPTION LINK

In addition to streaming directly to Zoom or whatever platform you're using, CART captioners can usually stream simultaneously to an external platform like StreamText. On that platform, attendees can view captions in a separate window and customize things like font size and color.

USE AN EXTERNAL CAPTION LINK CONT'D

Ask your captioner for an external caption link and drop it in the chat at the start of the program (the captioner can also share the link with you in advance to include in participant reminder emails).

CONDUCT AN ACCESS CHECK

Every virtual program should start with an access check that welcomes everyone to the program and outlines how people can address their access needs. See the Appendix for a Sample Access Check.

HAVE SPEAKERS DESCRIBE THEMSELVES

All program presenters/facilitators should take a moment to describe their physical appearance when they introduce themselves so that anyone who can't see them knows what they look like. People can share (or not share) whatever visual information they want, including skin color, hair color/style, age, gender, clothing, and video background. A sample self-description is included in the Sample Access Check in the Appendix.

HAVE SPEAKERS IDENTIFY THEMSELVES

Every time that someone speaks after their initial introduction, they should start by saying something like "This is [name]"; again, doing this provides access to anyone who cannot see who is speaking.

ALLOW PARTICIPANTS TO COME AS THEY ARE

Let people participate sans camera and/or audio— communicating via the chat or just listening in are both valid forms of participation. Be prepared for people to join from various devices and locations (e.g., if you have people calling in, let them know they can dial *6 to mute/unmute and *9 to raise/lower their hand).

MODERATE THE CHAT

Set clear expectations about what participants should use the chat for. All messages in the public chat should be read out loud so that anyone not actively following the chat knows what's going on.

RESPOND TO CONCERNS

Issues can arise during any live event, so communicate to participants at the start who their point of contact is in case they have a problem. If something comes up, such as the captions stop working, pause until the issue is resolved. Do not sacrifice access in the interest of time.

AFTER THE PROGRAM

COLLECT FEEDBACK

Send a follow-up survey to attendees that includes questions about whether they utilized accessibility services, the quality of those services, and what else could make virtual programs more accessible for them. Ask for feedback from your access service providers as well to find out what did or did not work for them.

CAPTION THE RECORDING

You can pay a vendor to caption a recorded video or you can do it yourself. If you had a CART captioner for the live program, you should receive a caption file from them. You will need to go through the file to clean up any errors in spelling and timing before publishing the captions. Do NOT rely on unedited auto-captions from YouTube or another platform, as they will be inaccurate.
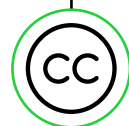
ADD A TRANSCRIPT

Written transcripts provide greater access to DeafBlind individuals and anyone who prefers reading information to hearing it. Export your caption file to a Word document, format it into paragraphs with speaker names clearly labeled, and link it alongside your video.

CONSIDER OTHER LANGUAGES

If you have an audience base whose primary language is not the language used in your program, consider hiring a vendor to subtitle your video in another language.

INVEST IN DISABLED COMMUNITIES

Cultivate long-term relationships with audiences with disabilities by reaching out to community organizations, conducting focus groups, and hosting disability-specific programming on an ongoing basis.

CHECKLIST

BEFORE THE PROGRAM

- ☐ Build your budget
- ☐ Assign staff roles
    - ☐ Chat moderator
    - ☐ Access services liaison
    - ☐ Access support person
- ☐ Know your platform
- ☐ Plan for breaks
- ☐ Consider pricing options

ONE TO TWO MONTHS BEFORE THE PROGRAM

- ☐ Secure vendors
- ☐ Learn about presenter access needs
- ☐ Prepare presenters
- ☐ Build an accessible registration form
- ☐ Create a participant guide
- ☐ Communicate accessibly
    - ☐ Set clear expectations
    - ☐ Share content warnings
    - ☐ Include accessibility information
    - ☐ Use accessible typefaces
    - ☐ Create alt text for images

CHECKLIST CONT'D

ONE WEEK BEFORE THE PROGRAM

- ☐ Prepare access service providers
- ☐ Send participant reminder
- ☐ Review presenter materials

DURING THE PROGRAM

- ☐ Gather pre-program
- ☐ Hit record
- ☐ Use an external caption link
- ☐ Conduct an access check
- ☐ Have speakers describe themselves
- ☐ Have speakers identify themselves
- ☐ Allow participants to come as they are
- ☐ Moderate the chat
- ☐ Respond to conerns

AFTER THE PROGRAM

- ☐ Collect feedback
- ☐ Caption the recording
- ☐ Add a transcript
- ☐ Consider other languages
- ☐ Invest in disabled communities

APPENDIX
GLOSSARY

Access Need
Something that a person needs to understand and/or participate in a program, such as captions for videos, or processing time for activities. Everyone has access needs, regardless of whether they have a disability; however, programs are typically designed with only nondisabled people's access needs in mind. Access needs vary from person to person, and a single person's access needs can change from minute to minute as well as over the course of their life.

Alt Text
Short for alternative text, which is a brief written description of an image. Alt text is not visible on a webpage but is embedded in the page's code, so that someone using screen reader technology or someone whose internet cannot load images can access the description. Click here for more information on how to write effective alt text.

ASL Interpretation
Provided by live certified interpreters, this can include signed interpreting (English to American Sign Language) and voiced interpreting (American Sign Language to English). ASL interpretation benefits Deaf participants who know ASL. Captioning is not a replacement for interpreting, as ASL and English are two different languages. ASL interpreters typically charge **$95–$125/hr** and almost always work in teams of two.

Audio Description

A verbal description of key visual elements in your program. AD benefits many people, including people who are blind or have low vision, people who can't look at their screens because of migraines or vertigo, and people calling in to a program via phone. For a live program, it is best in most instances to integrate AD into your program by having your presenters describe their own visuals, but you can also use a certified audio describer. Post-production audio description can also be done in-house or by a professional. Rates vary based on video length and content, but typically range from **$15-30/video minute.**

Captions

A text equivalent of all audio information presented during a program. Captions benefit many people, including people who are Deaf or hard of hearing, people with audio processing disorder, and people in loud environments. There are various types of captions, including:

Automated Captioning: Automated captions are generated by an AI either directly through a platform like Zoom or YouTube, or through an external vendor. While automated captions are better than no captions at all, they are significantly less accurate than CART captions and should not be relied upon as a long-term accessibility solution.

CART Captioning: Communication Access Realtime Translation. CART captions are generated live during an event by a certified captioner. They are typically delivered through the same virtual platform as your program, such as Zoom, and can sometimes also be viewed in a separate window. CART captioning typically costs **$125–$150/hr.**

Post-Production Captioning: This refers to captions that are added to a video after it has already been recorded, rather than being typed live. Captioning vendors can caption your videos for around **$3/video minute.**

Closed Captions: These captions are called "closed" because they can be toggled on and off by the viewer. This is the kind of captioning you will see on platforms like Zoom and YouTube. Closed captions can be uploaded as an .srt file alongside a pre-recorded video.

Open Captions: These captions are "open" because they are burned into the video file and cannot be toggled on and off by the viewer. Open captions can be added by editing the video in post-production.

Transcript

A **basic** transcript is a text equivalent of all audio information presented during a program in a document format. A **descriptive** transcript also includes descriptions of visual information. You can easily create a transcript by taking your caption file and formatting it into paragraphs with speaker names labeled.

SAMPLE PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Intersecting Histories: A Look into the Drawing Collections of Cooper Hewitt and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs

About the Program:
Program Length: 90 minutes
Interactivity Level: Low
Intended Audience: People with an interest in 19th and 20th century museum history. No previous art history knowledge is required. Material will be presented at roughly a 12th grade reading level.

For more information, download our Participant Guide.

Program Description:
Join us as Dr. Bénédicte Gady explores the intersecting histories of the drawing collections of Cooper Hewitt and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. Cooper Hewitt was founded as the Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration in 1897. It was deliberately modeled after the Parisian museum, which had been founded 33 years earlier. Both were "teaching museums"; the drawings in their collections were used as study materials. Visitors were invited to manipulate, copy, and trace drawings, regardless of risk to the physical works.

SAMPLE PROGRAM DESCRIPTION CONT'D

While the two museums' initial goals were the same, their methods and guidelines for collecting were very different. They also differed in the importance they placed on contemporary art. Studying the two collections as they have grown highlights their similarities and allows us to better understand the drawings they each hold. Finally, changes in mission and audience at both museums over the 20th and 21st centuries invite us to more broadly consider the role of drawings in museums today.

Accessibility:

This program can be joined on Zoom via any device, or attendees can dial in via phone. This program includes live CART captioning. It will be recorded and available on Cooper Hewitt's YouTube channel. For general questions or if we can provide additional accessibility services or accommodations to support your participation in this program, please email us at CHEducation@si.edu or let us know when registering. Please make your accommodation request as far in advance as possible—preferably at least one week before the program date.

SAMPLE PARTICIPANT GUIDE

[Event Name] Participation Guide

When: [event date and time]

Where: [platform]

What is [Event Name]?
[Short description of event.]

Who can attend [Event Name]?
[Identify the target audience for the event, e.g., "This event is geared toward high school students who are interested in learning about design for the first time" or "This event is open to anyone who is curious about 19th-century interior design."]

How can I attend [Event Name]?
First, you must register for the event. Registration is free, but you have to reserve your spot. After you register, you will receive the link to join the event. You can join the event using any internet-connected device. [OR] This program is best when joined from a laptop or desktop computer rather than a smartphone or tablet. Microphone and camera access is [not] required to participate in this event.

How do I register?
[Optional — Include screenshots of each step in the registration process.]

1. On our website event page [LINK], click Register Now.

SAMPLE PARTICIPANT GUIDE CONT'D

2. Fill in the following information: Name, Email address, How you heard about us.
3. Select the number of tickets you would like to reserve.
4. Click Submit.
5. Check your email inbox for a confirmation email containing the Zoom link.

What will happen during the program?
[Describe the run-of-show for the event, including information about how attendees will be expected to participate, if at all. Example:

The program will start promptly at 1 pm ET. A museum staff member will give a brief introduction and then introduce the panelists. The panel discussion will last about 45 minutes, and during the discussion, the panelists will show slides and videos. Then there will be a 5-minute break, following by 20 minutes of audience Q&A. At this time, you can ask questions out loud or in the chat, or you can simply sit back and listen.]

Program Etiquette
- Your camera can be on or off throughout the program, as you prefer.
- Please keep your microphone muted when you're not talking.
- Don't use the public chat for side conversations unrelated to the program topic.
- If you have any trouble during the program, you can let us know in the chat or by unmuting yourself.

SAMPLE ACCESS CHECK

Hi, my name is [name].

Welcome to [program name]. To give a brief visual description of myself, [sample description—"I am a white woman in my thirties with curly, shoulder-length brown hair. I wear large glasses with blue frames, and I'm sitting in my motorized wheelchair with a large painting behind me"].

We have live captions available for today's program, and you can access them by clicking the CC button on your Zoom menu and clicking Show Subtitle. You can also view and customize the captions in a separate window by clicking the StreamText link that was just dropped in the chat. [Send the link in the chat.]

Our ASL interpreters will also be spotlighted throughout the event.

Our point of contact for accessibility today is [name]; if you have any issues today, you can send them a private message or simply unmute yourself to let us know. We will pause the event to solve any problems that arise. Before we begin, does anyone have any accessibility needs that are not currently met? [Pause for responses—count to 15 before continuing.]

Today's program will be [duration] long, and we will take a break halfway through. [Explain run-of-show, e.g., "There will be 45 minutes of panel discussion, followed by a 10-minute break and then 20 minutes of audience Q&A."]

SAMPLE ACCESS CHECK
CONT'D

You are welcome to leave your cameras on or off, but please keep yourself muted when you're not talking; if that isn't possible for you, please keep background noise to a minimum. You can drop comments and questions in the chat throughout the session, and anything put in the chat will be read out loud by **[name]**. We will answer all questions during the Q&A portion of the event.

If you'd prefer to ask your question out loud, please click Raise Hand on your Zoom menu bar, and we will call on you to unmute yourself. If you're calling in via phone, you can dial *9 to raise and lower your hand.

ACCESSIBILITY HOW-TO GUIDE FOR PRESENTERS

We are excited to have you present/facilitate our upcoming virtual program! We maintain a high standard of accessibility for our programs, so here are some tips to ensure you can provide our participants with as accessible an experience as possible:

ACCESSIBLE FACILITATION TIPS
▪ **Describe all visuals (including yourself). To provide access to participants who are blind or low vision, or who are calling in via phone and can't see the screen, please describe any visuals as you show them.** A short sentence or two should suffice. Additionally, when you first introduce yourself, share a brief visual description of yourself e.g., "I am a nonbinary person with olive skin and shoulder-length dark brown hair. I am wearing red glasses and a bright yellow sweater." You can choose to include or not include any information related to your race, gender, age, disability, and other visual identifiers. Find more information about self-description here.

▪ **Identify yourself.** Each time you start speaking after another person has spoken, identify yourself (e.g., "This is [name]") so that anyone who can't see you knows who is speaking. If applicable, encourage your participants to do the same.

▪ **Slow down.** Everyone processes information at different speeds. When asking your participants a question, give them ample time to respond before moving on. A good rule of thumb is to sing "Happy Birthday" in your head twice before moving on. Additionally, we often have live captioners and ASL interpreters supporting our programs, and if you speak too fast, they might miss important information.

CREATING ACCESSIBLE SLIDES

▪ **Leave space for captions**. Our virtual programs feature live captions. To ensure that the captions don't block anything on your slides, leave about two lines of text's worth of blank space at the bottom of each slide.

▪ **Use high color contrast.** Keeping a strong contrast between your text and background colors ensures that your slides are legible to people who have low vision or are color-blind. Avoid overlaying text on busy images, as this can also make the text hard to read. You can use this tool to check your color contrast.

▪ **Use large, clear text.** Using large text (at least 18pt font) will make it easier for people with low vision to read your slides. Additionally, sans serif fonts are more legible for people with low vision and those with learning disabilities such as dyslexia.

▪ **Don't overcrowd.** Extremely text-heavy slides can be overwhelming and hard to process for many people. Keep things simple, and use plenty of white space.

▪ **Avoid slide transitions and flashing media.** Animated transitions between slides can cause dizziness and nausea in people with vestibular conditions such as vertigo. Additionally, flashing lights in videos or gifs can cause problems for people with a number of disabilities.

▪ If you plan to share your slides with participants after the program, use one of these guides to ensure your file is accessible for all users: Microsoft PowerPoint, Google Slides.

FEDERALLY APPROVED ACCESS VENDORS

ASL Interpreting
- ASL Services: https://aslservices.com/
- Associates in Sign Language: https://aslmo.com/
- MT & Associates: https://www.mtapractice.com/
- The Language Doctors: https://thelanguagedoctors.org/

Audio Description
- 3Play Media: https://www.3playmedia.com/
- Audio Description Solutions: https://audiodescriptionsolutions.com/
- VITAC: https://vitac.com/audio-description/

Captioning
- 3Play Media: https://www.3playmedia.com/
- Caption First: https://www.captionfirst.com/
- National Captioning Institute: https://www.ncicap.org/
- Quick Caption: http://www.quickcaption.com/

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