Tips for Delivering an Accessible Presentation

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When you deliver a presentation at a conference, in an academic class, at a meeting, or online, you want everyone in attendance to understand the points you are making. However, many presenters unintentionally erect barriers for some attendees. Listed below are a few examples.

- The presenter says, "I'm sure you can see the humor in this cartoon" without describing the visual content. If an attendee cannot see the cartoon (perhaps because they are blind or have low vision, sitting in the back row of a large room, or calling into the presentation by phone), they miss the point altogether.
- The presenter says, "Look at how this graph indicates…" without describing the graph, again erecting a barrier for those who cannot see the image.
- The presenter puts a huge amount of text on the screen and talks generally about it, making it impossible for any attendees to both read the content and listen to the speaker.
- The presenter shows a video without captions, making it difficult to understand for viewers who are deaf or hard of hearing or whose first language is not the one the video is presented in or who are unfamiliar with the vocabulary used in the video.

To avoid situations like these, it is important for a presenter to remember that members in the audience may have a wide variety of characteristics with respect to gender, ethnicity, race, marital status, age, communication skills, learning styles and abilities, interests, physical abilities, sensory abilities, socioeconomic status, and religious beliefs. Since the speaker is not likely to know specific characteristics of participants, it makes sense to be proactive and design a presentation that will be accessible to anyone—or, at least almost everyone—without the need for accommodations.

But what does "accessible" mean? The U.S. Office of Civil Rights and Department of Justice define "accessible" to be when "a person with a disability is afforded the opportunity to acquire the same information, engage in the same interactions, and enjoy the same services as a person without a disability in an equally effective and integrated manner, with substantially equivalent ease of use. The person with a disability must be able to obtain the information as fully, equally, and independently as a person without a disability."

Presentations that are accessible to people with disabilities benefit many others as well, including people whose primary language is not the language used in the presentation, people with different learning preferences, people who call into a presentation without access to the visuals, and those sitting in the back row of a large room.

I created eighteen guidelines that I follow as I develop and deliver my own presentations both on-site and online. Although they do not address every potential accessibility issue, they provide a good start for others who wish to make their presentations accessible.

For on-site presentations, follow these specific recommendations:

1. Ensure the facility and presentation area is accessible to all potential speakers and participants, including those with mobility impairments.
2. Arrange the room so that everyone has good visibility to the speaker and visuals, including sign language interpreters and real time captioning.
3. Avoid looking back at projected materials; instead have a computer screen in front of you to glance at so that your voice projects toward your audience and your lips can be read by lip readers.
4. Use a microphone when possible to project your speech; have audience members use a microphone or repeat questions they ask.

For online presentations, follow these specific recommendations:

5. Use IT that is accessibly designed (e.g., can be operated with screen readers and other assistive technology, supports captions).
6. Share relevant accessibility information with participants before the presentation.

For both on-site and online presentations, follow these specific recommendations:

7. Provide multiple ways to learn, such as lectures, group discussions, question and answer sessions, hands-on activities, handouts, and references to resources.
8. Provide attendees materials (ideally, ahead of time) and in an accessible format (e.g., use text-based formats with structured headings and text descriptions of images); also give sign language interpreters and real time captioners materials in advance.
9. Use large, sans serif, bold fonts and simply designed visuals on uncluttered pages with plain backgrounds.
10. Speak the essential content of visual materials, but avoid reading text word-for-word unless it is a quotation.
11. Use clear, consistent layouts and organization schemes.
12. Use color combinations that are high contrast and can be distinguished by those who are colorblind.

13. Make examples relevant to learners with a wide variety of interests and backgrounds.
14. Spell acronyms and avoid or define terms, jargon, and idioms.
15. Speak clearly; avoid speaking too fast, which is particularly helpful to individuals whose primary language is not the one in which you are speaking, sign language interpreters, and real time captioners.
16. Summarize major points, give background and contextual information, display key terms and concepts visually, offer outlines and other scaffolding tools to help participants learn.
17. Give attendees time to process information; pause between topics and after you ask for questions.
18. Use videos that are captioned; if they are not audio described, speak key content such as the title at the beginning and credits at the end; consider sharing a summary of the content of a video before it is presented.

Keep in mind that making your presentation accessible to participants with disabilities will make it more useful for everyone. This is a benefit of "universal design." For information about other applications of universal design, consult the Center for Universal Design in Education at *www.uw.edu/doit/programs/center-universal-design-education/overview*, as well as the book *Universal Design in Higher Education: From Principles to Practice, second edition* published by Harvard Education Press.

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