



Chicago Metropolitan
Agency for Planning

Accessible Public Engagement Toolkit



*A planner's desk reference for
ADA Title II and WCAG compliance*

Executive Summary

As local governments prepare for Public Right-of-Way Transition plans, hosting public engagements that are accessible to people with disabilities is key to success.

This toolkit was designed with planners in mind, to support effective and impactful public engagement. Heeding the disability rights movement's "Nothing about us without us" slogan, effective and accessible public engagement is paramount.

Conforming to Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), this toolkit breaks down complex regulations into clear and actionable steps. Through checklists and to-do lists, the toolkit supports the planner in creating an accessible engagement from the planning phase through day-of execution. Going beyond just what is required, best practices are offered to foster meaningful participation in events both virtual and in-person.

The toolkit also includes a dedicated guide for digital accessibility following Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 Level AA to ensure online communications are just as accessible as in-person.

Merging regulatory guidance with best practices for effective engagement, this toolkit is much more than a manual; it is an invitation to re-imagine what inclusive and accessible public engagement looks like.

Path to accessible engagement events



In ADA requirements



Not required, but a best practice

1

Level setting *p. 4*

2

Planning a meeting *p. 8*

Start here two to three months before the event

Select the right format 
p. 10

Plan for accommodation requests 
p. 14

Ask for accommodation requests in meeting notice 
p. 16

3

Preparing for a meeting *p.18*

Start here one to two months before the event

Develop meeting materials 
p. 19

Conduct a dry run 
p. 25

Plan for contingencies 
p. 27

4

Hosting a meeting *p.30*

Start here on the week of the event

Be a good host 
p. 31

Day of engagement to do list 
p. 32



WCAG for planners:

A guide to digital regulations p. 34

Additional resources *p. 52*



Level setting

Providing equal access: the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

“Nothing about us without us” is a slogan popularized in the 1990s by the disability rights movement, communicating that those impacted by policies should have direct involvement in their development. Like other marginalized populations, the disabled community has a history of being left out of direct participation in public events and planning processes – whether intentionally or not.

Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act provides regulations to ensure that people with disabilities receive an equal opportunity to access government services, programs, and activities. This includes all public engagement events and online communications. The ADA protects people with a wide range of disabilities – visible, invisible, temporary, or permanent – from discrimination. Public servants are obligated to provide accessible environments that give everyone an equal opportunity to participate, regardless of disability.

People with disabilities face barriers to participation that range from inconvenient transportation options and inaccessible facilities to a lack of assistive communication methods like American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation or braille materials. With an understanding of how to accommodate these and other barriers to participation, communities can design more accessible engagement opportunities.

The ADA defines a person with a disability as someone who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, has a history or record of an impairment (such as cancer that is in remission), or is regarded as having such an impairment by others even if the individual does not actually have a disability (such as a person who has scars from a severe burn that does not limit any major life activity).

This definition is broad because the disability landscape is ever-changing. Language is constantly shifting, types of disabilities are becoming more understood, and global events like the COVID-19 pandemic broaden our understanding of disabilities. In a space that is continually changing, the role of a public servant is to be adaptable. Public servants are not required to keep up with the changing landscape, but must be prepared to support all community members’ rights to equal participation.

Nevertheless, it is helpful to understand the federal language used to define or categorize disability. The following categories are created for data collection purposes, to tailor specific programs, or to allocate benefits and services.

The U.S. Census Bureau categorizes disability into six types to plan and fund programming and policies.

- **Ambulatory difficulty:** Having serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs
- **Cognitive difficulty:** Because of a physical, mental, or emotional problem, having difficulty remembering, concentrating, or making decisions
- **Hearing difficulty:** Deaf or having serious difficulty hearing.
- **Independent living difficulty:** Because of a physical, mental, or emotional problem, having difficulty doing errands alone such as visiting a doctor's office or shopping
- **Self-care difficulty:** Having difficulty bathing or dressing
- **Vision difficulty:** Blind or having serious difficulty seeing, even when wearing glasses

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) uses 13 categories to provide Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for students with disabilities.

- Autism spectrum disorder
- Developmental delay
- Deaf-blindness
- Emotional disturbance
- Hearing impairment, including deafness
- Intellectual disability
- Multiple disabilities
- Other health impairment
- Orthopedic impairment
- Specific learning disability
- Speech or language impairment
- Traumatic brain injury
- Visual impairment, including blindness

Sources: Census.gov; Understood.org

Increasing accessibility matters because the barriers to participation experienced by the disabled community are much higher than those experienced by the non-disabled community.

There are barriers to communication, physical barriers in the built environment, a history of intentional exclusion, and more. When expanding accessibility, it is important to remember that it is not an “us versus them” situation. Increasing accessibility is a collective effort that benefits everyone.

The Curb-Cut Effect is an international concept that calls attention to the ways that accommodations for disabilities tend to offer wide-reaching benefits, a reminder that a success for the disabled community is often a success for all. The phenomenon is a nod to how curb-cut ramps that allow wheelchair users to cross streets also serve a variety of users, like parents with strollers, cyclists walking their bikes, and delivery workers rolling carts stacked with products.

In the same way that curb-cuts have become normalized in the built environment as an asset that serves everyone, prioritizing the needs of people with disabilities in public engagement will benefit everyone.

Equal access to participation is a right. This toolkit is designed to help host public engagement events that comply with the regulations in Title II of the ADA and acknowledge the spirit of the law – “nothing about us without us.” Equipped with these tools, planners will be able to create events and engage with communities with the accessibility, attention, respect, and acknowledgment required.



Planning a meeting

Engagement events can be transformational for a community when done with intention. Often planners spend a lot of time in the details of the content – which is important. And sometimes that means we forget all the other elements that make an engagement impactful to community members. This section will focus on the logistical aspects of engagement to remove barriers to participation for people who have disabilities.

Steps to planning a meeting

Select the right format 
p. 10

Plan for accommodation requests 
p. 14

Ask for accommodation requests in meeting notice 
p. 16

Public Agenda published Common Principles for Engagement in their 2017 *Strengthening and Sustaining Public Engagement* guidebook.

The engagement principles covered in this section are:

- **Interactive:** Everyone has a chance to contribute
- **Inclusive:** Bringing together a wide range of people, including people who may have been excluded or not engaged before
- **Authentic:** Valuing one another's input and knowing the process will have meaningful results
- **Transparent:** Being open, honest and understandable.
- **Informed:** Everyone has access to the knowledge and data they need, and there is balanced information describing the pros and cons of different options
- **Accessible:** Barriers to participation, including location, time, language and other factors that might deter people, are as low as possible

➔ **Tip:** When planning a meeting, try to can incorporate equitable engagement practices like compensating community members (see p. 56) or partnering with local organizations (see p. 55).

Source: Adapted from Public Agenda Strengthening and Sustaining Public Engagement

Select the right format

There are many elements to consider when selecting a format for a public meeting. This list highlights key considerations to help inform these decisions.

Questions to ask yourself when selecting a format:

What are the goals of this engagement?

What dialogue do we want to generate from this meeting?

What information are we sharing and how?

What are the challenges and benefits of hosting in-person, hybrid, or virtually for this engagement?

TYPICAL FORMAT OPTIONS

- In-person
- Virtual
- Hybrid in-person and virtual

IN-PERSON

Pros

- Yields the greatest impact for participation and fostering community connection

Cons

- Can be difficult to attend due to location, time of the event, access to public transit, and other barriers
- Challenging to obtain a high-quality recording

If you select an in-person meeting, ask yourself these questions to ensure accessibility:

Does the location have working accessible entrances?

Does the location have a ramp and/or elevators?

Do the meeting rooms and paths of travel have enough space to accommodate wheelchairs (at least 36")?

Is the location close (within .5 mile) to public transportation?

Is the location accessible by paratransit services?

Does the location have accessible parking spaces?

Does the location have accessible bathrooms?

If there are entrances that are not accessible, can the team post a sign pointing to the accessible entrance?

Is the location scent-free (some fragrances can trigger migraines or difficulty breathing)?

➔ **Tip:** Creating a floor plan to scale can help determine if there is enough room for wheelchair access.

VIRTUAL

Pros

- Offers flexibility for remote participation
- Allows for high-quality recordings
- Participants are not required to travel

Cons

- Minimal opportunities for community connection

If you select a virtual meeting, ask yourself these questions to ensure accessibility:

Does the platform support screen readers?

Does the platform support for Communication Access Realtime Captioning (CART)?

Can the platform be used by ASL interpreters?

Is there a backup plan for digital activities in case someone can't use or access the tools?

Do you have enough staff to have one person dedicated to monitoring the chat?

➔ **Tip:** As of Spring 2025, Zoom offers the most accessibility features compared to other common meeting platforms.

HYBRID

Pros

- Casts the widest net for attendance opportunities
- Offers flexibility for remote participation

Cons

- Challenging to obtain a high-quality recording
- Logistically difficult to engage in-person and virtual attendees equally

If you select a hybrid meeting, ask yourself these questions, in addition to the in-person and virtual questions, to ensure accessibility:

Does the in-person location have microphones?

Are there digital and print copies of all activities?

Does the agenda allow for participation both in-person and virtual?

Is there a designated virtual room facilitator?

If you intend to use virtual breakout rooms, do you have a breakout room management plan?

Plan for accommodation requests

There are several types of accommodations that need to be scheduled in advance of a meeting, sometimes even months before. It is best practice to establish an existing set of contacts to call and develop a plan for securing accommodation services in advance of public meetings. Don't wait until you receive an accommodation request to plan for it!

To create a plan for responding to accommodation requests, ask yourself these questions:

Do you know who to contact if you receive a request for ASL interpretation, CART captioning, or an assisted listening device?

Do you know how far in advance you need to book specialists (e.g., ASL interpreter, CART provider)?

What accommodations can you provide at every public event?

Do you have a plan if an accommodation is requested and it cannot be fulfilled?

➔ **Remember:** Governments are required to provide an accommodation unless it poses an undue administrative or financial burden. If the accommodation is considered an undue burden, the government entity still has an obligation to find an alternative to provide effective communication. In that case, reach out to the requester and try to find a suitable alternative.

Common accessibility requests

- **American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter:** ASL interpreters provide real-time interpretation of words spoken during a meeting in ASL. In Illinois, interpreters must be licensed with intermediate proficiency or higher to interpret government services. The State of Illinois Deaf and Hard of Hearing Commission's [Licensed Interpreter Directory](#) lists local interpreters and their contact information.
- **Realtime captioning (CART):** Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) is human-transcribed captioning produced live during an event and projected on a public screen. CART must be produced by a stenographer using a special keyboard. Artificial Intelligence (AI) generated captions are not considered a replacement for CART, and at the time of printing, AI captions are not reliable.
- **Large-print materials:** Large-print materials are defined as a black and white copy of materials printed in large print, which is considered 18 pt or larger, following accessible text spacing procedures (see p. 38).
- **Advance copy of materials and/or electronic format materials:** If created in an accessible manner (see p. 36), electronic materials allow people using assistive devices to follow along during a meeting. Providing materials ahead of the meeting is also beneficial for people who need additional time with content.
- **Assistive Listening Device (ALD):** ALDs are devices that amplify sound directly to a person's ear. They are often used in collaboration with a hearing aid.
- **Braille:** Documents can be formatted into braille, a writing system that uses raised dots to represent numbers, letters, and punctuation.

Ask for accommodation requests in meeting notice

Proactively sharing what accommodations are being provided in a meeting can increase the likelihood that people with disabilities will feel invited to participate. It is also a sign that your local government values participation from people with disabilities and can build trust.

Two elements that should be shared in a meeting notice:

- 1 Available accommodations
- 2 How to request accommodations

AVAILABLE ACCOMMODATIONS

Share the accessibility of the venue and what accommodations are provided in the meeting notice.

In-person meeting example:

The Village Board Room is on the second floor and is accessible by elevator. An ASL interpreter will be present.

Virtual meeting example:

This meeting will be recorded and posted online one week following the meeting. Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) services will be provided.

HOW TO REQUEST ACCOMMODATIONS

Include a method for participants to request additional accommodations and the time frame you require to reasonably plan for them.

Example: *To request other accommodations, please contact Jane Doe at jdoe@village.gov or (555) 555-5555. Providing at least 72 hours notice will help secure availability for your access request.*

Example 2: *ASL interpretation, large-print materials, captioning, and other accommodations may be available upon request. Please request accommodations at least one week in advance of the meeting by contacting Jane Doe at jdoe@village.gov or (555) 555-5555.*

Example 3: *Please select the following accommodations you will need in order to participate:*

- Advance copy of materials
- ASL interpreter
- Assistive listening device
- Braille materials
- Dietary restrictions (please specify)
- Electronic format materials
- Lactation or family room
- Large-print materials
- Realtime captioning (CART)
- Scent-free room
- Wheelchair access
- Other (please specify)

Note: *This example is typically used if there is a survey or an RSVP for a meeting.*

3



Preparing for a meeting

While the engagement logistics are being formalized, you can focus on the details. This section will cover tips, tricks, and regulations that will make sure your meeting materials and meeting structure are accessible for people with disabilities.

Title II of the ADA points to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 Level AA for guidance on digital accessibility. We've added a few checklists within this section for WCAG conformance specific to materials planners and public servants produce.

Steps to preparing for a meeting

Develop meeting materials p. 19

- *Written documents checklist*
- *Slide deck checklist*
- *Display boards checklist*
- *Online communication checklist*

Conduct a dry run p. 25

Plan for contingencies p. 27

Preparing for a meeting

Develop meeting materials

The online world presents a new realm of exclusion for people with disabilities. Title II of the ADA requires local governments to “communicate effectively with people that have disabilities” to ensure equal access to services, programs, and activities. Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), an international set of requirements for creating accessible digital content, offers guidance to reduce barriers to accessing information.

The checklists in this section reference **WCAG for planners: A guide to digital regulations** located at the end of this toolkit, starting on p. 34.



WCAG for planners:

A guide to digital regulations p. 34



Material guidelines:

IN-PERSON MEETING MATERIALS:

WCAG applies to online materials, but the same guidelines can be used for print materials. Because most government documents can become available to the public, it is recommended to always comply with WCAG.

In-person meetings should include clear directional signage pointing attendees to the meeting room and specifically noting other services they may need. For example, clear signage to restrooms, an elevator, from the elevator to the meeting, etc.

VIRTUAL MEETING MATERIALS:

All online communications should follow WCAG 2.1 Level AA. See p. 47 for instructions on creating documents that meet WCAG 2.1 Level AA.

HYBRID MEETING MATERIALS:

Follow the guidelines above for both virtual and in-person meeting materials. Hosting a hybrid meeting typically will not double your amount of work. If a document has been prepared properly, it should be accessible both in-person and online.

Accessibility checklists for common materials



Required
WCAG regulation



Not required,
but a best practice

WRITTEN DOCUMENTS (AGENDAS, REPORTS, MEMOS)

Titles and subtitles are clearly labeled and tagged
p. 34

All fonts are greater than or equal to 12pt
p. 38

Body paragraph fonts are sans serif
p. 38

Line spacing is 1.5x the size of the font
p. 38

Paragraph spacing is 2x the size of the font
p. 38

All colors pass the color contrast check
p. 40

No information is lost when converted to grayscale
p. 42

All images are high-resolution
p. 43

All images conveying information have alt text
p. 44

Text is jargon free and written in plain language
p. 46

All hyperlinks are descriptive
p. 48

SLIDE DECKS

Titles and subtitles are clearly labeled and tagged

p. 36 

All fonts are greater than or equal to 24pt

p. 38 

Body paragraph fonts are sans serif

p. 38 

Line spacing is 1.5x the size of the font

p. 38 

Paragraph spacing is twice the size of the font

p. 38 

All colors pass the color contrast test

p. 40 

No information is lost when converted to grayscale

p. 42 

All images are high-resolution

p. 43 

All images conveying information have alt text

p. 44 

Text is jargon free and written in plain language

p. 46 

All hyperlinks are descriptive

p. 48 

DISPLAY BOARDS

Board titles describe their content accurately

p. 36 

All fonts greater than or equal to 36pt

p. 38 

Body paragraph fonts are sans serif

p. 38 

Line spacing is 1.5x the size of the font

p. 38 

Paragraph spacing is twice the size of the font

p. 38 

All colors pass the color contrast test

p. 40 

No information is lost when converted to grayscale

p. 42 

All images are high-resolution

p. 43 

All text is jargon-free and written in plain language

p. 44 

If shared online:

Titles and subtitles clearly labeled and tagged

p. 36 

All images conveying information have alt text

p. 44 

ONLINE COMMUNICATIONS (SOCIAL MEDIA, WEBSITE CONTENT)

All images conveying information have alt text

p. 44 

All colors pass the color contrast check

p. 40 

Videos pass flashing and movement requirements

p. 50 

All hyperlinks are descriptive

p. 48 

If posting an image or graphic with text:

The text shown in an image included is word-for-word in the caption

p. 43 

If posting a video with audio:

Captions are used or a transcript is provided

p. 50 

If posting a video without audio:

An audio description is provided

p. 50 

If using audio only:

A transcript is provided

p. 50 

Conduct a dry run

After all of this planning it might seem unnecessary to do a dry run. However, it is crucial to have a space where the full team supporting the event has an overview and a space to ask questions prior to the event. It'll be easier to catch things that need to be fixed a few days before the meeting than the day of.

Invite the right people to the dry run. This may include facilitators, ASL interpreters, CART captioners, venue staff, etc. Interpreters and CART captioners typically include a dry run or prep as part of their fee. The goal is to make sure that people who will support the accessibility of the meeting are fully prepared.

Three elements of a dry run:

- 1** Check your tech
- 2** Meeting location check
- 3** Share facilitation tips

CHECK YOUR TECH

Microphones and other equipment are working correctly

Captions are visible with the correct contrast

All the activities, tools, and aids work as planned

All activities have a backup in case someone can't access them

MEETING LOCATION CHECK

All accessible entrances are labeled

All non-accessible entrances point to the accessible entrance

Signage points to the meeting location (i.e., wayfinding)

The floor plan and activities accommodate a minimum of 36" between chairs or tables for wheelchairs to move comfortably

FACILITATION TIPS

Every speaker should practice stating their name every time the microphone is passed

Speak and present at a pace that allows the ASL interpreter and/or CART captioner to keep up with the content

Identify who is responsible for monitoring the chat and reading the chat out-loud

For virtual meetings: practice reading questions entered in the chat out loud

For in-person and hybrid: practice repeating questions that are asked out loud in the room for the entire audience

Double-check the accessibility of activities and think through different scenarios that may arise. For example: if someone cannot use the chat, can they unmute and share out loud? If someone doesn't want to write on a post-it note, can they dictate their response and have someone else write it?

Plan for contingencies

Even the most diligent meeting planners should be prepared if an attendee arrives and requires an accommodation that is not provided. In these situations, communication is key. Page 28 describes three scenarios that were resolved through continued communication between event staff and attendees.

Questions to ask yourself when you are developing a contingency plan:

Who is the point-person for accommodation requests or questions?

What accommodations are available at the event?

What are the key pieces of information communicated at the event?

CONTINGENCY EXAMPLES

Scenario	Request
You are planning a meeting with a budget of \$0 and no physical materials. Someone requests ASL interpretation only 24 hours ahead of the meeting.	ASL interpretation with insufficient notice
Someone requests large-print materials after they have all been distributed.	Large-print materials
In a virtual meeting, a participant is not able to use Zoom polls.	This is a situation where the request might be unclear but a barrier to participation is raised. It is still within the planners responsibility to provide a reasonable accommodation

Potential Response
Explain that requesting an ASL interpreter typically needs at least five days notice (or whatever your policy is) and offer a few options to ensure participation. That may be a written transcript of the meeting provided afterward, accommodating a companion to join them at the meeting, or assigning a staff member as a note-taker communicating information shared.
It's always important to provide options that the person can choose from. Offer to read the display board and activities aloud to the participant. Offer to be their companion throughout the meeting, and offer to follow up with a large-print copy of materials after the meeting.
Invite the participant to share their response in the chat or out loud. For all virtual meetings, assign a staff member as tech help, identify them in the beginning of the meeting, and include "tech help" in their display name. They can include responses in the chat or out loud in the Zoom polls.

4



Hosting a meeting

Congratulations! You've made it to your engagement. You've done all of the prep work, now let's talk about some ways to host an accessible and inclusive meeting.

Steps to hosting a meeting

Be a good host 🌟
p. 31

Day of engagement to do list 📖
p. 32

Hosting a meeting

Be a good host

Have a greeter at the door to welcome people. This gives a personal touch and connection to the planning team.

Build in time for casual conversation. Before diving into the topic, ask people how they heard about the meeting or how their day is going to help build up a rapport.

Have the point-person for accommodations stationed at a check-in table so that people who need accommodations have a point person.

Communicate directly with the person who is using the accommodation, not an interpreter or companion.

Check in with those using accommodations to make sure they have what they need, for example: is the presentation too fast? Do they want large-print materials?

Begin the meeting with an announcement of the accommodations provided.

***Example:** "Captions for this meeting are provided real-time, displayed on this TV. There is a row of reserved seating for anyone interested in the service."*

Have each person announce their name before speaking. This is a general best practice, but required for ASL and CART services.

Consider that some people may need time to process information before sharing their opinion or question. For meetings, focus groups, or presentations that run longer than an hour, it is recommended to include a break of 10-15 minutes. Open houses or other shorter format meetings do not need to include breaks.

Day of engagement to do list

IN PERSON MEETING:

Signage: Provide clear and visible signage to the location of the event, restrooms, accessible entrances, and other important information.

Accommodation awareness: Make sure staff are aware of the provided accommodations.

Accessible seating section: Create an accessible seating section. That may be a reserved row in front of the interpreter and/or captioner or a row dedicated to wheelchair users and companions.

VIRTUAL MEETING:

Sound quality: Ensure speakers/presenters have limited background noise, or turn on noise suppression. A noise suppression option is offered in most video-based conferencing platforms near the mute button. Mute participants when they are not speaking.

Captions and transcripts: Generated captions and transcripts built into some video-based conferencing platforms like Teams and Zoom are not reliable. If you are using generated transcripts, review and edit them prior to sharing publicly. For accurate realtime captions, look to hire a CART captioner (see p. 15).

Remind people to state their name before speaking: This is especially important when using CART or ASL interpretation services. They need to know who is speaking to share it in the caption or via ASL.

HYBRID MEETING (ALL OF THE ABOVE AND):

Make sure the microphones are charged and working.

Check in with the virtual participants regularly.

Repeat questions asked in person back to the virtual participants.



WCAG for planners: A guide to digital regulations

The online world presents a new realm of exclusion for people with disabilities. Title II of the ADA requires local governments to “communicate effectively with people that have disabilities” to ensure equal access to programs, services, and activities. Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), an international set of requirements for creating accessible digital content, offers guidance to reduce barriers to accessing information. These requirements consider a range of access needs across the broad landscape of disabilities.

- Title II of ADA requires compliance with WCAG 2.1 Level AA. There is an abundance of information within WCAG 2.1, this toolkit condenses federally required guidelines into a digestible format.
- While WCAG applies only to digital content by law, the guidelines are considered best practices for printed materials as well. Because most government documents can become available to the public, it is recommended to always comply with WCAG.

Please note, certain WCAG requirements relating to website design are not covered in this toolkit.

More on levels of conformance

-  **A** Conforming to Level A provides the most basic level of accessibility.
-  **AA** Conforming to Level AA is the required level to consider a document accessible.
-  **AAA** Conforming to Level AAA provides the highest possible accessibility. While not a required level of conformance, this is considered the best practice.

Accessible document elements:

DOCUMENT STRUCTURE	CONTENT
Set up an information hierarchy (p. 36)	Write in plain language (p. 46)
Use accessible fonts and text properties (p. 38)	Use descriptive text in hyperlinks (p. 48)
COLOR SCHEME	Distinguish lists from other text (p. 49)
Check color contrast (p. 40)	Follow video and audio requirements (p. 50)
Don't rely on color to convey meaning (p. 42)	
IMAGES	
Include text alternatives (p. 44)	
Avoid images of text and low quality images (p. 43)	

Document structure

Set up an information hierarchy

**Conformance Level: AA***WCAG Reference Number: (2.4.6, 1.3.1 - 1.3.3)*

Assistive technologies like screen readers require that written documents are set up with clearly tagged titles so the reader can easily navigate to different sections without relying on visual cues like font size or placement on the page. *Information hierarchy* refers to the way content is organized: title, subtitle, etc.

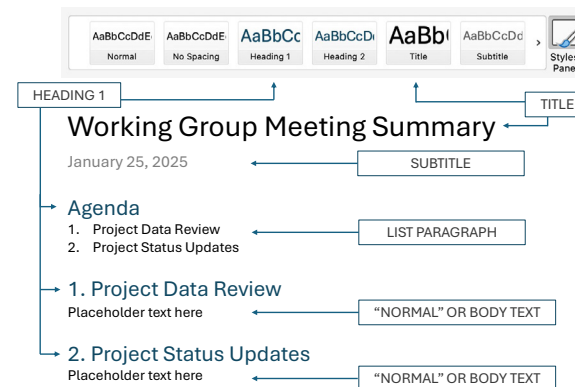
When setting up an information hierarchy, ensure the titles, headings, and subheadings are descriptive of the content.

There are two options for creating information hierarchy in a document:

- 1 Recommended: Create the hierarchy before exporting to a PDF.** Popular word processing programs like Microsoft Word and Google Docs allow for easy tagging. It can be exported to a PDF with the proper tags in place.
- 2** If the document is already in a PDF format, PDF-editing software like Adobe Acrobat allows for the addition of tags. Visit page 62 for a step-by-step guide to tagging.

Example using Microsoft Word:

This image shows the Styles Pane where the format for titles and headings can be selected. The text below the Styles Pane shows how the Title and Headings appear in the document.



Software-specific tips for creating hierarchy can be found in the appendix.

- Adobe Acrobat (p. 62)
- Google Docs (p. 67)
- Microsoft Word (p. 64)
- Microsoft PowerPoint (p. 66)

Document structure

Use accessible fonts and text properties

 **Conformance Level: AA**
 WCAG Reference Number: (1.4.12)

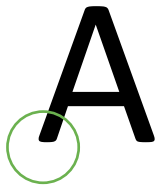
Font properties guidelines:

SELECTING A FONT TYPE:

Sans serif fonts, fonts without decorative “feet,” are the most legible for people with low vision and dyslexia. Using sans serif fonts is required for body paragraphs, but it is a best practice to use a sans serif font for all online communications.

NOT LEGIBLE: SERIF

Serif: decorative “feet”

LEGIBLE: SANS SERIF

Sans serif: no decorative “feet”

Examples of sans serif fonts:

- Verdana
- Calibri
- Arial
- Open Sans
- Helvetica

 TEXT SIZE

While there is no minimum font size defined in WCAG, to optimize for access, the recommended standard size for a document is 12pt font. Text should not be smaller than 9pt font. For slide decks, the text should be equal to or larger than 24pt, and for larger printed materials like display boards, text should be equal to or larger than 36pt.

 LINE SPACING

Line spacing must be set to at least 1.5 times the font size.

 PARAGRAPH SPACING

Paragraph spacing must be set to at least twice the font size.

 PAGE ALIGNMENT

While not a requirement, left-aligned text helps readers distinguish new lines and is considered a best practice.

WCAG includes requirements for word spacing and letter spacing. Common word processing programs like Microsoft Word and Google Docs default to the appropriate spacing. Check WCAG guidelines when using custom fonts in graphic design programs like Adobe InDesign or Adobe Illustrator.

Color scheme

Check color contrast

 **Conformance Level: AA (AAA optional)**
WCAG Reference Number: (1.4.3 & 1.4.6)

Color contrast is a critical requirement for people with low vision to distinguish text and graphics from the background. The following guidelines apply to all elements of digital and print materials, including text, graphic icons, and charts.

While Level AA is required, Level AAA has more stringent contrast requirements and is considered a best practice.

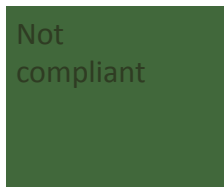
Color Contrast Ratio Requirements:

	WCAG 2.1 Level AA 	WCAG 2.1 Level AAA
	Normal text: 4.5:1	Normal text: 7:1
	Large text*: 3:1	Large text*: 4.5:1

**Text is considered large if it is over 18pt or bold and over 14pt.*

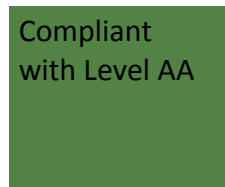
Color contrast examples:

Not contrast
compliant



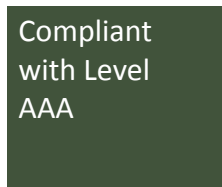
Contrast Ratio: 1.9:1

Compliant with
Level AA



Contrast Ratio: 4.7:1

Compliant with
Level AAA



Contrast ratio: 8.1:1

Resources

There are several online color contrast checkers that can quickly determine sufficient contrast. Below are two options recommended by the U.S. General Services Administration.

DOWNLOAD TO YOUR COMPUTER

[The Pacilleo Group's Colour Contrast Analyzer App](#)

- Easy to use with an eyedropper to select colors
- Provides contrast ratio for Level AA & AAA



Scan or click the QR code to download the [Color Contrast Analyzer App](#).

ACCESS FROM THE WEB

WebAIM's Contrast Checker

- Does not require a download
- Must know the HEX code of colors
- Provides contrast ratio for Level AA & AAA



Scan or click the QR code to visit [WebAIM's Contrast Checker](#).

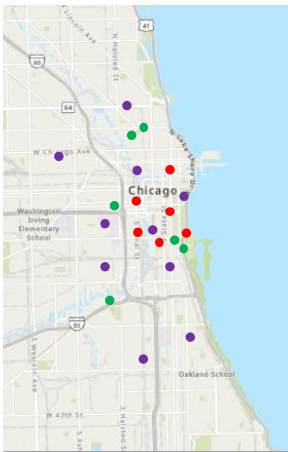
Color scheme

Don't rely on color to convey meaning

**Conformance Level: A***WCAG Reference Number: (1.4.1 and 1.3.3.)*

Refrain from using color to convey information that cannot be understood by a reader who is unable to differentiate the colors. Converting an image to grayscale or printing in black and white is an easy way to check this.

Consider including icons along with color (as illustrated in this toolkit) to organize information or denote topics and themes.

Example:**Color version****Grayscale version**

In this example, the color contrast between red, green, and purple dots is not distinguishable in grayscale. This is not an accessible graphic.

Images

Avoid images of text and low-quality images

**Conformance Level: AA***WCAG Reference Number: (1.4.5)***AVOID USING IMAGES OF TEXT**

Images of text are not optimized for screen readers. If an image of text cannot be avoided, ensure the text shown in an image is also communicated in the alt text or image description. This may happen when including a flyer for an event or a graphic made for social media.

PRIORITIZE HIGH RESOLUTION IMAGES

Avoid using screenshots or scanned images where possible on digital and printed materials to achieve the best quality. Similar to color contrast standards, sharpness of images is important for accessibility. A way to test image quality is to zoom in at 200%. If the image is not pixelated, it meets WCAG standards.

Images

Include text alternatives on all images

**Conformance Level: A***WCAG Reference Number: (1.1.1 & 1.4.4)*

Text alternatives allow visual content, like an image or graphic, to be accessible for those with low vision or using assistive technologies, like a screen reader. Text alternatives can be in the form of alternative text (alt text) or image descriptions. Alt text is only visible to assistive devices, while image descriptions are located in a caption. The use of at least one alternative is required, but it is best practice to use both.

Text alternatives guidelines:

- 1 Keep descriptions short and focused on the purpose of the image.
- 2 If an image is decorative and does not convey meaningful information, skip the caption and set the alt text as “decorative.”
- 3 Avoid using default or AI-generated descriptions. They do not typically convey enough detail or accurately capture the context of an image.
- 4 For an image that contains text or a logo, the caption and alt text should repeat the text word-for-word.
- 5 Avoid repeating information that is already in the main text.
- 6 For alt text, don’t use unnecessary phrases like “this is a photo of” or descriptions of irrelevant details that are not needed in the context of the photo.
- 7 If a person’s physical appearance is not important, it does not need to be included.

Example 1:**Photo context:**

This photo is in a report on the use of new pedestrian infrastructure.

Text alternative: *Residential street with a concrete curb bump-out narrowing the road as it approaches the crosswalk.*

Don’t need: “This is an image of...”

Not needed – an assistive device will state it is an image

Example 2:**Photo context:**

This photo is in a report on stormwater infrastructure in cities.

Text alternative: *Residential street with a poured concrete curb bump-out separated six inches from the curb, allowing for drainage.*

Don’t need: “On a sunny spring day...”

Not relevant to the context

Content

Write in plain language

**Conformance Level: AAA***WCAG Reference Number: (3.1.5 & 3.1.3)*

Effective and accessible communication includes writing in a way that can be understood by a broad audience.

Replace technical words and concepts that may require specialized knowledge with simple phrases. This process can be called “de-jargoning.”

Guidelines for public-facing materials:

- 1 Use plain language – common words, simple tense, literal language, and active voice.
- 2 If complex terms cannot be avoided, define them on the page in addition to a glossary.
- 3 Use a photo or graphic (with text alternatives) to illustrate a concept.
- 4 The fewer words, the better.

Questions to ask when de-jargoning:

What is the main message the material is attempting to communicate?

If someone doesn’t understand a particular word, will they still understand and retain the meaning of the material?

Which technical words are required to be there and will they need a simplified definition?

Can this content be condensed?

Example:

The “Write in plain language” guideline is called “Reading Level” in WCAG. Reading Level’s definition is:

JARGON:

“When text requires reading ability more advanced than the lower secondary education level after removal of proper names and titles, supplemental content, or a version that does not require reading ability more advanced than the lower secondary education level, is available.”

DE-JARGONED:

“Text should not be above a seventh to ninth grade reading level.”

→ **Tip:** Check materials with the Hemingway Editor. The Hemingway Editor identifies difficult to understand elements of writing. WCAG 2.1 Level AAA states that a general recommended reading level is lower secondary education (grades seven to nine).



Scan or click the QR code to learn more about [Hemingway Editor](#).

Content

Use descriptive text in hyperlinks

**Conformance Level: A***WCAG Reference Number: (2.4.4)*

When screen readers or other assistive devices encounter a hyperlink, they read the hyperlinked text aloud. If the hyperlinked text is not descriptive – like “Learn more here” instead of “read the draft plan” – it does not provide enough context for where the link leads.

Screen readers also have an option to read all of the hyperlinks in a document or on a website for quick and easy navigation. A series of links on the words “click here” or “download here” make it more difficult to navigate the page.

Hyperlink guidelines:

- 1 The hyperlinked text should be descriptive on its own, not relying on the other words in the sentence.
- 2 Refrain from using a full URL as the hyperlinked text.
- 3 When linking to a PDF that auto-downloads rather than a webpage, state that in the hyperlink.
- 4 When using a QR code, make sure corresponding hyperlinked text is on the same page. Hyperlinked text can also live in the alt text of a QR code.

Examples:

- “To discover more of CMAP’s ADA trainings, visit [CMAP’s library of trainings and resources](#).”
- “To learn more, download [CMAP’s annual report](#).”

Content

Distinguish lists from other text

Conformance Level: A*WCAG Reference Number: (1.3.2)*

WCAG requirements for bulleted and numbered lists support assistive device users’ understanding of the sequence and order of importance of information on a document or website.

**REQUIRED:**

Use programmed bullets or numbers, instead of asterisks or dashes, to allow screen readers to recognize lists.

Accessible Bulleted List:

- Apples
- Bananas
- Carrots

Inaccessible Bulleted List:

- Apples
- Bananas
- Carrots

**RECOMMENDED:**

Use the Number Format bullet option when there’s an importance or significance to numerical order. This can be a list of priorities, tasks to do in order, etc.

***Don’t forget:** information hierarchy, font size, and spacing requirements apply to lists as well!*

Content

Follow audio and video requirements

**Conformance Level: A-AA***WCAG Reference Number: (1.2.1-1.2.4, 1.4.2, 2.3.1-2.3.2)***ALL AUDIO & VIDEO:**

- **Limit flashing.** Quick movements or flashes in a video can cause seizures and physical reactions. A common rule of thumb to follow is: in one second, media should not flash or flicker more than three times.
- **Allow pausing.** Audio or video longer than three seconds must have the ability to pause, stop, and have volume control.

VIDEO WITH SOUND:

- **Provide captions.** Captions are more than the script. They include speech as well as sound effects or music. A plain text document with the captions must be provided with the video.

VIDEO WITHOUT SOUND:

- **Provide audio descriptions.** Audio descriptions are used in videos without audio tracks to describe the visuals. In a video where alt text is not sufficient, audio descriptions can provide the same experience to someone listening to the video rather than watching.

AUDIO ONLY (I.E. PODCAST):

- **Provide transcript.** A transcript is more than just a word for word document. They should include who is speaking, emotions evoked, and other descriptions that will give someone reading the document the same experience as listening.

Content

Applying guidelines to an online survey

Survey design should follow the same guidelines as preparing a document. Color contrast, fonts, and text size impact the ability for full participation in surveys. Inaccessible surveys can lead to skewed or inaccurate results.

Guidelines:

- 1 Follow Level AA color contrast compliance
(p. 40)
- 2 Use sans serif fonts
(p. 38)
- 3 Include alt text for images or imported graphics
(p. 44)
- 4 Provide clear instructions, free of jargon
(p. 46)

➔ **Tip:** Survey programs like SurveyMonkey and Qualtrics have built-in accessibility features and programs that can review surveys for accessibility and offer feedback on how/what needs to be altered to meet compliance.



Additional resources

You are not doing this work alone – there are peers in your community striving for the same goal, organizations like CMAP with resources, and ways you can involve consultants and organizations outside your staff to share the work with you.

FIND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Browse CMAP Resources

p. 51

Contract it out

p. 52

Partner with organizations

p. 53

Compensate community partners

p. 54

Additional resources

Browse CMAP Resources

CMAP's Accessible Communities Program equips local governments with the resources they need to improve accessibility and comply with the ADA.



*Scan or click the QR code to visit
[CMAP's ADA Resources.](#)*

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| ADA TRAININGS | CMAP hosted an in-depth training on accessible public engagement. Visit CMAP's resource library to find the recorded training and others on topics including ADA accessible design standards, ADA Transition Plan training, ADA coordinator training, Public Right-of-Way Accessibility Guidelines (PROWAG), and more. |
| ADA TEMPLATES | CMAP has templates available to help northeastern Illinois communities meet their legal obligations of providing an ADA notice, grievance procedure, and designating an ADA coordinator. Find the templates on CMAP's resource library. |
| CONNECT WITH PEERS | CMAP's Regional ADA Coordinators Group is a peer professional development group to provide resources and support to ADA coordinators or their designee in northeastern Illinois. Participants will gain practical, actionable knowledge to help improve accessibility and ADA compliance in northeastern Illinois and connect with other coordinators in the region. |

Contract it out

When issuing procurement of any kind— a Request for Proposals (RFP), Request for Inquiries (RFI), or Request for Qualifications (RFQ), include a requirement to follow ADA Title II and WCAG regulations for all communications. Project budgets should take the cost of providing accommodations into account.

Sample text to include in a contract or request:

All digital and printed public-facing materials and engagement events produced for this project must meet the requirements of Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Web Content Accessibility Guide (WCAG) 2.1, Level AA. This includes providing appropriate auxiliary aids and services to ensure people with disabilities have an equal opportunity to participate in a service or activity conducted by a public entity.

Additional scope requirements to consider:

- Stipends are offered to participants (*see p. 54*)
- Translation of materials into an additional language

Partner with organizations

Build relationships with local organizations that work with and advocate for people with disabilities. These organizations can support outreach to the disability community and help with providing accommodations.

Organizations serving all of Illinois:

- Illinois Network of Center for Independent Living, The Arc of Illinois, DayOne PACT, Service Inc. of Illinois

Organizations by county:

- **DuPage County:** Ray Graham Association, DuPage County Community Services
- **Cook County:** Access Living, Community Alternatives Unlimited, Aspire Chicago
- **Lake County:** Community Alternatives Unlimited, Special Recreation Association, Riverside Foundation
- **Kane County:** Kane County Health Department, Association for Individual Development, Fox Valley United Way, DayOne PACT
- **Kendall County:** Association for Individual Development
- **Will County:** Disability Resource Center of Joliet, Will County Disability Resource Center, United Way of Will County, Cornerstone Services
- **McHenry County:** Pioneer Center for Human Services, First Light Home Care, Options & Advocacy for McHenry County

Compensate community partners

Providing stipends to participants of public engagement activities, like working groups or listening sessions, is becoming a standard practice in our region. Because people with disabilities have historically been excluded from meaningful engagement, providing compensation for their time and experience can help to build trust in the planning process. It allows participants to feel confident that their voice is valued during the engagement process.

→ **Tip:** When possible, it is best practice to consult community members on the types of stipends that would benefit them most. For instance, some communities may not want a gift card to an online retailer like Amazon due to lack of internet access. If your project has a steering committee, advisory committee, or community partners, consult them as you are creating a plan for stipends.

Examples of stipends:

DIRECT PAYMENT

- A gift card or cash payment, e.g., a pre-loaded cash gift card, deposit via PayPal or Cash App, a gift card to a local store, or a donation to attendee's organization(s).

Example: Members of a steering committee supporting the development of a transition plan were paid a flat rate via a pre-loaded cash gift card at the end of the planning process.

Example: Community members that attended one-on-one interviews with the project team to share their lived experience received a pre-loaded cash gift card following the interview.

IN-KIND

- Offering catered meals or snacks at events, grocery gift cards, or travel vouchers for participants.

Example: A public meeting is held on a Saturday morning. Donuts, coffee, and fruit are available for attendees to consume as they are providing feedback.

Example: A public meeting is held on a Saturday morning. For parents and caretakers, it can be hard to attend a public meeting without childcare, and for this topic specifically it was important parents and caretakers could attend. The municipality provided a kids' corner during the meeting with activities for children to stay occupied.

GIVEAWAY

- Giveaways are ideal for a large group. For example, running a prize drawing or giveaway for survey respondents.

Example: A community organization is hosting a public open house with a limited budget. They support a local business by purchasing a gift card to give away following the event.

Example: A municipality is about to send out a survey and wants to learn the best way to make it stick out from the sea of emails. They consult the project steering committee and ultimately decide to give each survey respondent a chance to win a 65" TV.

Five things planners can do everyday

This toolkit shares a lot of information that may change how you create materials and host meetings. The best way to learn new ways of working is to practice them when you can. Below are actions that planners can do every day to build a practice around accessibility.

1

On all calls practice speaking your name “This is Kennedy speaking...” when taking the mic. If people ask why you’re doing that, it’s a great moment to say this is an accessibility practice to ensure people know that the speaker is switching and who is speaking.

2

Always set up your documents with an information hierarchy that can be tagged.

Heading 1

Heading 2

body

3

Create links in emails and communications to be descriptive.



4

Change organization brand guidelines colors to allow for

high contrast

Bonus: include contrast ratios in brand guidelines.

5



Change organization brand guidelines font to be sans serif.



Appendix

Key definitions

p. 51

Creating information hierarchy in Adobe Acrobat

p. 52

Creating information hierarchy in Microsoft Word

p. 53

Creating information hierarchy in Microsoft Powerpoint

p. 54

Creating information hierarchy in Google Docs

p. 54

Key definitions

Accommodation: A modification or adjustment to an activity, service, or program that allows people to fully participate, regardless of disability. Examples of accommodations are providing ASL interpretation at meetings; ensuring online documents can be read by a screen reader, etc.

Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):

The ADA was passed in 1991. Title II, one of five titles in the act, “requires state/local governments to give people with disabilities an equal opportunity to benefit from all of their programs, services, and activities.” This includes public engagement events and online public communications and activities.

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG):

International guidelines developed to increase the accessibility of online content. Title II of the ADA (amended August 2024) refers to WCAG 2.1 level AA to satisfy section 35.200 – Requirements for Web and Mobile Accessibility (28CFR§ 35.200).

Accessibility:

An analysis of the extent to which people with disabilities can fully participate or partake in a space, service, program, or event. The practice of increasing accessibility aims to offer the same opportunity or experience to people with disabilities as it does to people without, often through the use of accommodations.

Creating information hierarchy

Adobe Acrobat

Find the importance of document hierarchy on page ##.

Adobe Acrobat calls the document hierarchy “tags.” Tags identify which text is a section title, heading, paragraph text, or list. At a minimum, your document needs to have section title and heading tabs and all images and links should be identified.

1 Open the accessibility tags panel. Click View in the menu bar. When the menu opens, hover over Show/hide. Another menu will open, hover over Side Panels. Another menu will open, select Accessibility tags. Once you open it, it will remain in your side bar, identified by an icon of a tag.

2 Access tags. If the accessibility tags panel says “no tags available,” it is time to add tags.

3 Auto tag. Click the ellipsis in the accessibility tags panel and select “auto-tag document.” This will produce a list of tags that will not be perfect, but it is a good place to start.

4 Your document should contain the following tags:

1. Headings: <H1>, <H2>, etc.
2. Paragraph text: <P>
3. List title: <L>
4. List body: <LBody>
5. Link: <link> *make sure to use descriptive hyperlinks, p. ##*
6. Figure or image: <figure> *with alt text description as the title*

5 Review auto tags. Analyze tags. The Accessibility tags pane should look like an outline of the document. Edit that tags that do not fit.

6 Edit tags. If a tag is in the wrong place, for example, maybe a paragraph is tagged correctly as paragraph text, but it should live under a subheading, right click on the tag and select cut. Select where you would like to move the tag and paste it. To edit how text is tagged, right click the text and select properties.

7 Review for reading order. Once you have your tags placed, open the reading order pane. Click View in the menu bar. When the menu opens, hover over Show/hide. Another menu will open, select Reading order. This will show you a numbered reading order. Click and drag an item to rearrange the reading order.

Creating information hierarchy

Microsoft Word

Find the importance of document hierarchy on page ##.

Microsoft Word holds its hierarchy formatting in the Styles Pane. At the bare minimum, your document needs to have a section title and heading tabs.

1. Open the Styles Pane. The Styles Pane lives in the Home panel. It can also be found by going to Format in the menu bar and selecting style or searching “styles pane.”

2. Select your formats. Word has many title and heading styles pre-established. Select the formats that will work best for your document. If you are adding formats to a document before adding in text, you can create document hierarchy with example text to reference while you are creating the document. For example, it may be beneficial to have the below list on a separate page to be deleted later:

Title

Heading 1

Subheading

Body text

3. (Optional) Modify styles. To change how a style looks, in the Style Pane you can right click on the name and hit modify style or click “new style.”

Tip: When modifying or creating a style in either the “Modify Style” or “Create New Style for Formatting” dialogue box, click the “format” drop down and change it to paragraph. Make sure your style is saved at the proper Outline Level. A title is Level 1, heading is Level 2, and so on.

4. Check your work. Opening the navigation pane, located in the Home panel. Select list view. If done properly, an outline of your document will appear.

Note: Microsoft Word has a built-in accessibility checker that has been found to be unreliable and should not be used to assess accessibility.

Creating information hierarchy

Microsoft Powerpoint

Find the importance of document hierarchy on page ##.

In Microsoft Powerpoint, document hierarchy (title, headings, body text) are typically pre-identified, making manually creating hierarchy much simpler.

→ **Tips:**

It is easiest to create accessible powerpoint presentations as you work, rather than going back later.

When you open a Microsoft Powerpoint presentation, navigate to the tools drop down and select accessibility checker.

A side pane will open on both sides of your screen. On the right side, make sure the box “keep accessibility checker running while I work.” this pane will populate any errors the accessibility checker finds along with steps to fix it and why you should fix it.

The left pane will populate the hierarchy, how a screen reader would read the document. You can use that list to check your work and make sure it is in the proper order.

Creating information hierarchy

Google Docs

Find the importance of document hierarchy on page ##.

Google Docs keeps the heading hierarchy in the main toolbar. Next to font you will see a drop down with the word "Title." This is the formatting drop down.

→ **Tips:**

In the formatting drop down, set styles are created for you. If you do not like the style, simply mock up the style you want in the body of the document. Once you create a word with the font, size, and color you would like, select the next, navigate to the toolbar, find the formatting drop down and hover over the style you would like to update. A box will come up where you can select "update 'Style Type' to match.

Check your work by going to view → expand tabs & outline bar. There you will see all of your headings in order.

