Guide to Planning Accessible Online Meetings and Events

Nova Scotia Accessibility Directorate
Department of Justice

NOVA SCOTIA

Contents

The Accessibility Directorate used the resources listed below to develop this guide:

Access Resource Design (Canva.com); ASL Access: Every Organizer's Responsibility (Drago Renteria); Guide to Planning Accessible Meetings and Events (Province of Nova Scotia); and Planning Accessible Meetings and Events: A Toolkit (American Bar Association).

NOVA SCOTIA

Introduction

Why Nova Scotia Needs to be Accessible

Over 30 per cent of Nova Scotians (that's over 229,000 people) are living with a disability, and that number will continue to grow as the population of our province gets older.

People living with disabilities often encounter barriers that keep them from fully participating in society. These barriers come in many forms. For example, they can be physical, such as the design of a building; technological, such as the way a computer operates; and even attitudinal, such as the way others think about people with disabilities.

Nova Scotia's Accessibility Act has a goal of making our province accessible by 2030. That means we will remove barriers, and prevent new barriers from forming, in areas related to information and communication; transportation; employment; the built environment; education; and goods and services.

Removing these barriers will improve the health, well-being, and independence of persons with disabilities.

Accessibility and Online Meetings

This guide will show you how to plan a meeting so people with a variety of hearing, sight, mobility, cognitive, and other disabilities will be able to participate in, and navigate your event.

Note that people with disabilities all have different ways of participating. Be sure to communicate with your participants well ahead of time so you can respond to their requests. Remember to be flexible, creative, and open to alternative arrangements.

This guide is for online meetings and events. For tips on how to plan an accessible in-person event, see our *Guide to Planning Accessible In-Person Meetings and Events.*

1. Scheduling

Consider the following when you choose a date and time for your event:

Timing

Are any other significant events happening in the area on the same day? Schedule your event so it does not conflict with something else many people with disabilities and service providers may be attending.

Booking Accessibility Service Providers

Do you need American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, oral translators, or a Communication Access Real Time (CART) captioner? These suppliers are in great demand and short supply. You may need to book them weeks in advance. See section 3 (Communications Materials) for more information.

Preparing Accessible Communication Materials

Give yourself between two to four weeks to prepare accessible documents (including features such as large print, braille, text-only, and plain language), ASL interpreters, and video captioning for the event. See section 3 (Communications Materials) for more information.

Scheduling Checklist

☐ Ensure your event date does not conflict with another that many people with disabilities and accessibility service providers may be attending.

☐ Book accessibility service providers well in advance.

☐ Make arrangements to develop accessible communications materials well in advance.

☐ Ensure the duration of your event (the time from start to finish) includes time at the beginning to identify which accessibility services are available, as well as adequate time for breaks so people with disabilities can access refreshments and washrooms.

2. Promotions and Registration

Develop accessible promotions and registration materials. Find out what your participants' accessibility needs are early in the planning process so you can meet them.

Event Invitation

Include these questions for your participants when you send the event invitation:

- Do you have any accessibility requests – such as ASL interpretation, CART, plain language materials, other (please identify)?

- Will a personal care attendant, sighted guide, or another service provider be joining you at this event? Please let us know if you would like this service provider to receive the meeting information and materials directly.

If your event is small and informal, and does not require participants to register, you can simply ask them to email you their accessibility requests.

Registration Deadline

Give participants a registration deadline that will give you enough time to book any accessibility services that have been requested.

Promotions and Registration Checklist

- ☐ Give participants several ways to register (such as online, telephone, text, email).

- ☐ Ensure your event website is accessible.

- ☐ Use plain language in all communications.

- ☐ Develop accessible pre-meeting and registration materials in alternative formats, such as large print, text-only, braille, etc.

- ☐ State in the promotional and registration materials that the event materials are available in alternative formats and tell participants how to obtain them.

- ☐ If the event is a consultation, give participants options in advance for ways to provide input, such as by phone, videoconference, paper, email, ASL, or video logs (vlog).

- ☐ Use the invitation to ask participants to identify their accessibility needs and give them a clear deadline when they should respond. Designate a person to coordinate these requests.

- ☐ Clearly indicate in the promotions and registration materials if there are any barriers that cannot be eliminated. Suggest alternatives.

- ☐ Send participants the event agenda and materials in advance (when possible).

- ☐ Give participants instructions in advance about how to join the event and an overview of the functions of the online platform you are using.

3. Communications and Materials

As mentioned in section 1 (Scheduling), you should be prepared to provide accessibility service providers (such as ASL interpretation or CART) or accessible documents/communications for your event.

This section will give you more information about these services, along with tips for planning and budgeting.

ASL Interpreter Services

American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters provide interpretation services so those who use ASL can understand the English content and those who use English can understand ASL.

Budgeting

Hourly rates are approximately $55 per hour per interpreter.

The number of interpreters you will require depends on factors such as the length of your event, how it is structured, the number of attendees, etc.

In general:

- Events under two hours require at least two interpreters.
- Events over two hours require at least three interpreters.

Other Tips

Ensure your meeting software allows you to "pin" the interpreter in a large window. A tiny window in the corner of a screen is not big enough for viewers to see the interpretation.

Consider setting up a separate meeting for the ASL interpreter and any participants using the ASL service. Have the ASL interpreter and ASL participants join both the main meeting and the ASL meeting. This ensures the ASL interpreter and the ASL participants will be able to clearly see each other. Participants may choose to join the main meeting with one monitor/screen or device (laptop, tablet or phone), and the ASL meeting with another.

Examples of ASL interpreter services:

Society of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Nova Scotians
sdhhns.org/book-an-interpreter/

Nova Scotia Interpreting Services
interpretingservices.ca/

Sign Language Interpreting Associates Ottawa (SLIAO) –
remote interpreter services
sliao.ca

CART Service Providers

Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) refers to a speech-to-text interpreting service. It provides captioning or subtitles for live events or discussions, displaying the words as they are being spoken. You may have seen CART used on live TV newscasts.

People who are Deaf, hard of hearing, or have different learning abilities may request this service.

You may be able to embed CART captioning into the online platform you are using for your event. If not, you can provide it as a separate URL to users, who can open another Internet browser window and view the CART captioning while they participate in the online meeting or event.

Some online platforms have an automatic captioning feature; however, this will not be as accurate as live CART captioning.

Budgeting

Hourly rates range from $125 to $140 per hour, with additional time required for technical setup and testing ahead of the session. Many CART providers have a minimum charge of two to four hours.

Examples of providers of CART services:

AB Captioning and CART
abcaptioning.com/

Document Accessibility

You will need to ensure the documents for your event (such as Word files, PDFs, etc.) are accessible for people who have disabilities.

The following tips will help you improve the readability and accessibility of your documents:

- **Alternative (alt) Text** – Alt text describes images and other graphics in documents or on websites. Blind or low-vision individuals use alt text to describe these images and to give context as to why the image is there. The alt text is picked up by their screen readers. Alt text descriptions should be short and include essential information that conveys what an image looks like and means.

- **Headings and Structure** – Headings are like "road map" signs—they provide structure for the information and lead readers through the document. Using the headings function allows screen readers and other assistive technology to better navigate a document. Headings should be in a logical order, and subheadings should appear underneath main headings.

- **Colour/Font** – Check the colour contrast and font size in your documents. Avoid using light colours and use a font that is at least 12 to 14 point. Use *contrastchecker.com/* to check for proper contrast and text size.

There are many online resources that provide more information about creating accessible documents. For example, Ryerson University has developed guides and resources on document accessibility: *ryerson.ca/accessibility/guides-resources/accessible-documents/*

Communications and Materials Checklist

- ☐ Ensure all websites and web-based meeting materials are accessible (HTML, Word documents, accessible PDFs, ASL /audio versions, compatibility with screen readers and other assistive technology).

- ☐ Use an accessible font (such as Arial, Helvetica, Verdana, Futura, Univers, or Franklin Gothic) in at least 12 to 14 point, and follow accessibility guidelines (such as the *CNIB's Clear Print Guidelines*) for all communications.

- ☐ Use alt text for all images in PowerPoint presentations and other materials.

- ☐ Check the colour contrast and font size for all PowerPoint presentations.
- ☐ Do not use too many slide transitions and animation in PowerPoint presentations. These can be distracting, and animation may not be picked up by a screen reader.
- ☐ Use plain language in all materials and communications (see figure 1 below).
- ☐ Caption all videos used during the event.
- ☐ Confirm that any additional features, such as breakout rooms or a built-in poll, are accessible for all participants.
- ☐ Book ASL interpreters well in advance and send them the agenda, speakers' notes, and other relevant materials at least three business days before the event.
- ☐ Create a second meeting for the ASL interpreters, if required, and ensure participants are aware of both meetings and how to join.
- ☐ Arrange for CART captioning and send service providers meeting materials ahead of the event.
- ☐ Test materials for accessibility prior to finalizing. Accessibility is best tested by people with disabilities, who should be compensated for their expertise.

Figure 1. Use plain language

Ensure your materials are written in plain language. The goal of plain language is to communicate clearly so that the intended audience can:
1. easily find what they need
2. understand what they find, and
3. use the information
(*plainlanguagenetwork.org/*)

You may choose to engage a professional plain language editor to help prepare your materials.

Below is an example of text before it was reviewed for plain language and after:

Before

Partial funding for retrofitting of residential properties is available to qualified residents, with priority given to improving entrance and egress, bathroom accessibility, and mobility in the kitchen/food preparation area for older adults. Applications may be submitted in writing to this office.

After

If you are 70 years or older, you can apply for a grant to help pay for home improvements that make these areas of your home safer and more accessible:

- the entrance
- the bathroom
- the space where you prepare food

Application forms are available online or at our office. If you need help to complete the form, please call. We're here to help.

4. Meeting Practices

Be sure to conduct your meeting in a respectful and organized manner that allows everyone to participate fully and values their contribution. Follow these practices for all online meetings.

Accessible/Inclusive Meeting Practices Checklist

☐ Ensure your online platform is accessible. Currently, Zoom and Microsoft Teams have the most accessible features, such as keyboard controls and functions that work with screen readers.

☐ If possible, designate a person to assist with any technical issues that may arise for the organizers or participants. This person may need to connect with individual participants in the case that a technical issue is on the participant's end

☐ Confirm that interpreters and captioners are ready before the event begins. If there is a technical issue with interpreters or captioners, pause the meeting and do not resume until the issue is resolved.

☐ At the beginning of the event, identify to participants which accessibility services are available as well as any accessibility functions within the online platform.

☐ Ask meeting participants to turn their cameras on when they are speaking, if possible, and to state their name each time they speak so captioners and attendees know who is speaking.

☐ Ask speakers to, when possible:
  ○ look directly into the camera when speaking
  ○ ensure they are in a well-lit space
  ○ have a plain background behind them on camera

☐ Ask all participants to mute their microphone when not speaking to reduce background noise.

☐ Ensure all graphics and images that are referenced during the meeting, such as in PowerPoint presentations, are described. Don't assume everyone can see what is on the screen.

☐ Use plain language when speaking.

☐ Ensure the captioning on the screen does not cover the content of presentations.

☐ Whenever possible, encourage participants to use the chat feature, which provides an additional way for participants to communicate. Don't assume everyone can see the messages, and be sure to read them aloud when referencing them.

☐ Pause frequently to ensure participants using CART, ASL interpreters, screen readers, etc. have time to access and process the information. Allow adequate time for everyone to ask questions and make comments.

☐ Gather feedback from the audience on the accessibility of the event, and incorporate the feedback into the next event.

☐ Communicate the Access and Inclusion requirements for this event with all presenters at least one week in advance. Not sure what to say? You can use our sample text, available on page (14) of this guide.

Making Your Virtual Presentation Inclusive and Accessible – A tool for communicating with presenters

When presenting, in person and virtually, it is important to ensure that your presentation is created with diversity, inclusion, and accessibility in mind. Please consider the following suggestions:

Creating Your Communication Materials:
- ☐ Use an accessible font (Arial, Calibri, Helvetica, etc.) in at least 12 to 14 point, and follow accessibility guidelines (such as the CNIB's Clear Print Guidelines) for all communication materials.
- ☐ Use alt text for all images, graphs and charts in your presentations and other materials.
- ☐ Check the colour contrast. Use at least 24 font size for all text in your presentation slide deck.
- ☐ Do not use too many slide transitions and animations.
- ☐ Ensure videos are captioned and have the captions turned ON.
- ☐ Provide your slides in advance to those who are using assistive technology or who require an alternative format.

Use Plain and Inclusive Language:
- ☐ Write in clear or plain language. The goal of plain language is to communicate clearly so that the intended audience can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use the information (plainlanguagenetwork.org)
- ☐ Use terminology that is inclusive and culturally appropriate. Avoid gendered language, jargon and acronyms.

Acknowledgements:
- ☐ Start the presentation by recognizing the contributions and importance of Indigenous and African Nova Scotian communities before you begin.

Speaker Introductions:
- ☐ State your gender pronouns and provide a visual description of yourself and your surroundings. For example, "my pronouns are she/her. I am a white woman with brown hair and glasses sitting in my home office".

During your presentation:
- ☐ Ask all participants to mute their microphone when not speaking.

☐ For comments and questions, ask all participants to identify themselves (say their name) and have their cameras on before speaking. This is important for Sign Language Interpreters and Captioners.

☐ Describe all graphics, graphs, data visualizations, and images that are referenced during the presentation.

☐ When responding to comments and/or questions written in the chat, always read the original comment out loud.

☐ Offer different methods for participant to ask questions. This can include the "raise hand" feature, the option for participants to turn on their cameras and indicate they have a question by waving, a question on the registration form where participants can write a question in advance, or having participants ask questions through the chat.

☐ Pause and give participants enough time to think and respond.

Appendix: Glossary

Alternative (alt) Text
Alt text describes images and other graphics in documents or on websites. Blind or low-vision individuals use alt text to describe these images and to give context as to why the image is there. The alt text is picked up by their screen readers. Alt text descriptions should be short and include essential information that conveys what an image looks like and means.

American Sign Language (ASL)
American Sign Language (ASL) is a complete, complex, visual language. It uses hand movements as well as facial expressions and body movement to convey information. ASL is a language of access; it evolved out of a need for people with different hearing levels to access spoken communication and connect with fellow community members. ASL is not a universal language; each country has its own sign language, and regions have dialects, the same way many languages spoken all over the world do. ASL is used predominantly in the United States and Canada, and, like any language, has its own unique rules of grammar and syntax.

Assistive Technology
Assistive technology is any device, software, service, or product system, including service animals, that reduces individual barriers to accessing and engaging in all aspects of a learning community including social, emotional, academic, and daily living activities and experiences.

Braille
Braille is a tactile system of raised dots used by many people who are blind or partially sighted. Each raised dot arrangement represents a letter or word combination that is read by touch.

CART (Communication Access Realtime Translation)
Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) is a type of captioning that provides simultaneous (real-time) speech-to-text translation. It is often used by people who are Deaf or hard of hearing. To produce CART captioning, a certified CART stenographer listens to speech

at an event, and types a shorthand of what is being said into a stenotype machine. This machine converts the shorthand back into full words, and displays the text on a screen. If an event is in-person, the text can be displayed on a large screen. If the event is online, it can be embedded into the online meeting software, or a link can be provided to a website where participants can view the text. The CART stenographer can either be onsite, or at a remote location connected to the meeting audio via online meeting software or a room's telephone/audio system.

Disability
The Nova Scotia Accessibility Act defines disability as, "a physical, mental, intellectual, learning or sensory impairment, including an episodic disability, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders an individual's full and effective participation in society."

Large Print
Printed material in a font size of 14 points or greater is considered large print. Using an 18-point, sans serif font, such as Arial, Helvetica, Verdana, Futura, Univers, or Franklin Gothic, is considered best practice.

Vlog (video blog)
A vlog is a blog in video form. A person who communicates using sign language may choose to send a vlog electronically instead of an email.