

Making Presentations Accessible to People with Disabilities

Guidelines for Presidents, Presenters, and Discussants

Increasing numbers of people with disabilities are participating in PAA meetings and related events. In order to provide as inclusive an atmosphere as possible, we are asking that all presenters comply with the following straightforward procedures that will help to allow all PAA members to participate fully in association proceedings:

- Repeat questions posed by people in the audience before responding to the questions.
- Reserve a few seats in the front row for people who are visually- or hearing-impaired.
- When reading directly from text, provide an advance copy and pause slightly when interjecting information not in the text.
- Avoid darkened meeting rooms; full lighting is necessary for many people with visual and/or hearing disabilities.
- When using an overhead projector with transparencies or a PowerPoint presentation, use a large print font of at least 18 points.
- Pace the presentation of material; if referring to a handout, allow time for participants with visual disabilities to find the information.
- Avoid making statements that cannot be understood by people without sight: For example, “This diagram sums up what I am saying about statistics.” (Don't worry about using words and phrases that refer to sight: for example, “See you later!” Such expressions are commonly used, and most people with visual disabilities don't find them offensive.)
- Verbally describe objects and processes whenever possible.
- In making comparisons and analogies, use familiar objects that don't depend on prior visual knowledge. Foods and objects found around the house are good choices. You might say, for example, that the shape of a population pyramid representing a country with a large youthful population and gradually decreasing population as age increases is shaped like a Christmas tree (thanks to Ken Wachter for this analogy!).
- If a sign language interpreter is present, speak directly to the PAA participant, not to the interpreter.
- People with hearing disabilities often use “assistive listening devices” that sometimes work in conjunction with their hearing aids. These devices may include small microphones that a participant will ask a presenter to wear; the amplification will not interfere with other audio-visual equipment.
- People who are deaf often benefit from “real-time captioning,” in which verbal information is transcribed into visual format by a transcriptionist (very similar in function to a court reporter) in real-time. If a captioner is present, speak directly to the PAA participant, not to the captioner.

- People with upper body weakness may not be able to raise their hands to participate in question-and-answer periods. Establish eye contact with participants and call on them when they indicate that they wish to contribute.
- A wheelchair is part of a person's "personal space." No one should lean on a chair, touch it, or push it unless asked. Whenever you are talking one-to-one with a person in a wheelchair, you yourself should be seated so the person does not have to peer upward at you.
- In communicating with people who have speech impairments, resist the temptation to indicate that you have understood when in fact you have not. People with speech impairments are accustomed to being asked to repeat, so don't be afraid that you'll offend them if you ask them to "say it again" or to spell words that you can't decipher.
- Service dogs for people who are blind, hearing impaired, deaf, mobility impaired, or who have other disabilities are not pets and should not be distracted by petting or talking to them. Refrain from asking the person with a disability about the service animal or the person's disability.

Special Guidelines for Presidents:

- Verify that a working microphone is available before calling the session to order. This is necessary to maximize participation by hearing-disabled members of the audience.
- Prompt all speakers to address the microphone. This may mean asking the speakers to wear an FM transmitter on their lapels so that they can be heard even when they step away from the lectern to handle a slide projector.

In addition to the above generalities, members with disabilities may have more specific needs that they will communicate to you. We appreciate your cooperation in complying with federal disability law that makes PAA accessible to more participants, and that consequently allows the diversity of our membership to grow.

Finally, many of these accommodations will also benefit people who have not self-identified as having one or more disabilities. Incorporating the above practices as much as possible will help to make your presentation universally accessible in multiple situations beyond PAA sessions.

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