

WiCSC+ Trainee Board Accessibility Report

How to Make Conferences More Accessible and Inclusive

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This report seeks to help conference organizers plan accessible and inclusive events. It contains a number of suggestions, examples, and resources relating to various aspects of inclusivity. Topics include, among others, layout and navigability, food options, support persons and service animals, sensory needs, gender inclusivity, and presentation guidelines. In writing this report, the authors combined their expertise and lived experiences in the hopes of providing an accurate and authentic representation of best practices for inclusivity.

Did you use our report?

Let others know by using this blurb: “Our conference is committed to prioritizing accessibility for all our attendees. Drawing insights from the WiCSC+ Trainee Board Accessibility Report ([link to WiCSC+ Accessibility Report](#)), we have implemented important accessibility and inclusivity measures to help ensure all attendees can fully participate.”

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Significance

Ensuring accessibility is crucial for fostering an inclusive environment and academic conferences are no exception. In making efforts to make conferences accessible, all attendees, regardless of their abilities, can engage, contribute, and benefit from the exchange of knowledge. Accessibility is not simply a legal requirement, but a moral imperative that enhances diversity, enriches discussions, and drives innovation by incorporating a broader range of perspectives. In this report, we include the lived experiences from the point of view—hereon, POV—of individuals who have generously shared their experiences, providing concrete examples to illustrate how barriers to accessibility may create everyday challenges.

This document aims to provide a foundational set of guidelines for planning accessible conferences. However, it is not exhaustive; it merely scratches the surface of the numerous considerations necessary for true inclusivity. As we grow in our understanding and knowledge of accessibility, this document will evolve, serving as a living resource that adapts to new insights and best practices.

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*presented in alphabetical order

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1. Introduction

Every individual has unique needs and preferences for how they maximize their conference experiences. It is important to remember that what may seem unusual to one person may, in fact, be an important adaptive strategy for another person. For example, while common courtesy tells us that using our phones during a talk or lecture might be impolite, this common courtesy overlooks the possibility that one may need their phone to use accessibility software to enhance their understanding (e.g., using a screen reader to understand visuals). Similarly, if someone needs to leave the room during the presentation, it need not indicate disengagement and might be necessary for their well-being. Adopting a “compassion first” approach and respecting diverse behaviours (as long as they adhere to conference guidelines and do not harm others) ensures that everyone can participate without undue attention or discomfort. This “compassion first” mindset not only promotes inclusivity but also enriches the conference experience by valuing and accommodating the diverse ways in which people engage and interact.



We welcome your feedback on all accessibility and inclusion recommendations in our report. The suggestions outlined are intended to provide a starting point for considerations to make when planning and attending conferences. Importantly, these are not to serve as hard-and-fast “rules” that must be followed. Instead, they are to serve as a collection of recommendations for consideration and are likely to evolve as we increase our knowledge and understanding. Please share any further recommendations by using this [Google form](#).

2. General Conference Information

Why this matters: Clear and accessible general conference information (such as signage) are vital for helping to ensure that all participants can navigate and engage with the event effectively. Well-designed signs and informative materials help attendees, including those with visual and/or auditory impairments or cognitive exceptionalities, to understand schedules, locate rooms, and access essential services without unnecessary stress or confusion. By prioritizing accessible information and signage, we create an inclusive environment where every participant can move freely, stay informed, and fully participate in the conference experience. This attention to detail reflects a commitment to inclusivity and enhances the overall efficiency and enjoyment of the event for everyone.

2.1 Name Tags

- **Selecting Fonts for Name Tags.** Information should be printed in a large, sans-serif font with a high contrast against the background (see Section 8.2).

Why this matters: Both large-sized and high contrast text make reading the names easier for everyone, especially individuals with vision impairments.

- **Using Colours on Name Tags.** Colour alone should not provide important information. Unless it is for decorative purposes, use colour in conjunction with shapes or symbols.

Why this matters: Colourblind or low vision individuals may not be able to distinguish between some colours. Good design should facilitate the experience, not create barriers.

- **Using Pronouns on Name Tags.** Leave a space for people to write their pronouns if they wish to do so (see Section 6.2).

Why this matters: Attendees should be allowed—but not required—to specify how they want to be referred to by their peers.

2.2 Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

- **Make Your FAQ Easy to Locate.** This information should be especially easy and straightforward to access. For example, if you have a webpage, make the FAQ accessible from the main menu. In a document, the FAQ section is typically placed at the end—this works, as long as it is clearly indicated at the start of the document where the FAQ can be found. **Include information about accommodations in your FAQ.** Ensure that this information is easily accessible.

Why this matters: The goal of a FAQ is to provide information that people often seek out. If this information is difficult to find, it diminishes its usefulness.

2.3 Accessibility / Inclusivity Accommodations

- **Provide Detailed Accessibility Information.** Provide a list of accommodations currently in effect and provide additional relevant information. For example, rather than simply stating that the venue is “wheelchair accessible”, indicate information like elevators and accessible restrooms on a map.

Why this matters: Providing the accommodations currently in effect in a detailed list reduces the burden on individuals who require this information. Constantly having to contact people for basic information is tedious and an unnecessary barrier. Additionally, while there is no one-size-fits-all accommodation, taking the time to clearly indicate accessibility and inclusivity considerations shows that they are a priority, not an afterthought. This makes the request, “Please contact us with accommodation requests,” feel much more genuine and inviting.

- **Offer a Point of Contact for Accessibility.** Despite best efforts, it is impossible to include all information related to all possible accommodations. Therefore, it is important to have a contact for attendees who need to discuss their needs or request further support.

2.4 Venue

- **Consider Venue Mobility.** Ensure the venue is accessible to wheelchair users and individuals with limited mobility. Contact the vendor of the venue to make sure the location is up to code on accessibility (for example, the automatic door button may be out of service).

Why this matters: Unfortunately, it is quite common for accessible venues to not be *truly* accessible for a few reasons. For example, this may be due to poor design (e.g., automatic doors that open into a wheelchair ramp or with buttons that are too high for a wheelchair user to reach), or maintenance issues (e.g., out-of-service elevators). Verifying how the venue would be navigated by someone with limited mobility is important in providing accurate and up-to-date information on accessibility.

- **Consider Transportation To and From the Venue.** Include information about transportation to and from the hotel and venue. Consider multiple forms of transportation such as Uber, taxi, bus, walking distance, etc.

Why this matters: For various reasons, not everyone is comfortable using the same mode of transportation. Including information about the best routes or possible modes of transportation will greatly assist people unfamiliar with the area.

2.5 Maps

- **Include a Map With Relevant Locations Near the Venue.** Consider how unfamiliar your attendees will be with the area and provide a couple suggestions for relevant areas. Include places most likely to be relevant to your attendees, such as nearby hotels, parking lots, restaurants, etc.

Why this matters: For individuals unfamiliar with an area, a few suggestions from trusted sources can be very helpful when planning their trip.

- **Create a Venue Map Highlighting Important Features.** In addition to rooms for presentations, mark important features of the venue such as food/drink stations, a low-stimulation room (see Section 5.1) and restrooms. When marking restrooms, indicate which are accessible, gender-neutral, single-user, etc.

Why this matters: Providing detailed information about the venue will make it easier for attendees to navigate the space, especially for attendees with limited mobility. Clear guidance allows for advance route planning, reduces stress in navigating unfamiliar environments, and enables attendees to focus on the conference rather than logistical concerns.

2.6 Schedule

- **Include Breaks in the Schedule.** When creating the conference schedule, be sure to include breaks throughout the day.

Why this matters: Conferences are typically demanding on time and full of information for attendees to process. Including breaks makes sure everyone can rest without having to miss part of the conference.

- **Consider Formatting and Availability of the Schedule.** Create a downloadable and text-readable document (e.g., PDF, Word doc, ePUB) that is available for viewing before and during the conference. Ensure that the schedule is accessible and that a screen reading software can scan the text (see Section 8).

Why this matters: Allowing attendees to view the schedule in advance allows them to create their own schedule based on interests and accessibility needs. For example, some people may need to plan for more time to travel between presentations or include more breaks in their schedule. The schedule should be accessible to everyone and testing it with a screen reader is highly recommended.

2.7 Code of Conduct

Implement a Code of Conduct. Clarify that harassing, bullying, or demeaning attendees based on who they are is unacceptable. Distinguish those behaviours from simple combativeness or impoliteness. Provide a clear point of contact in case an attendee is made to feel unsafe.

Why This Matters: As sites of academic inquiry, it is natural for conferences to invite disagreement and debate. Such debate is valuable and a code of conduct should not serve to limit it. Rather, a code of conduct should provide a framework for that debate to occur in a constructive fashion. Healthy debate can only occur if all parties feel respected as people and safe to participate.

As is sometimes argued, enforcing a code of conduct is unlikely to be simple. Perceptions of the line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour can vary from person to person and from situation to situation. But however fuzzy that line may be, behaviours that cross it—and make an attendee feel unsafe—are likely to occur. When they do, a code of conduct ensures a process exists to address those issues head-on and in a balanced manner. It does not have to be perfect. It can and should be improved as time goes on. Neglecting to put one in place, however, pins the burden of identifying appropriate recourse on the backs of the marginalized. More often than not, the end result is likely to be silence.

To view an example Code of Conduct, see the [Psychonomic Society's \(2024\) Code of Conduct for its 2024 Annual Meeting](#).

3. Providing Various Food Options

Individuals vary in their dietary needs and restrictions, and this is especially likely at large events such as conferences. Providing detailed information about food services in advance can significantly enhance the conference experience for many attendees.

3.1 If Food Will be Provided

Providing options for common dietary restrictions and contact information for further information on additional dietary restrictions is recommended.

- Information regarding food options should be easy to find.
- A point of contact for questions specific to dietary needs should be provided.
- A feedback system (e.g., suggestions for improvement, dietary needs that were not adequately addressed) can be helpful to improve future events.

Why This Matters: Individuals vary in their dietary needs and restrictions, and this is especially likely at large events such as conferences. Providing detailed information about food services in advance can significantly enhance the conference experience for many attendees. For example, food allergies and intolerances vary widely in their symptoms and severity, and individuals are best equipped to manage their own needs when given accurate information ahead of time. Additionally, food holds important cultural and religious significance for many people. By offering clear information about ingredients, preparation methods, and dietary accommodations, we respect and honour these diverse cultural and religious practices. This approach not only ensures safety and comfort but also fosters an inclusive and respectful environment where all participants can feel valued and respected.

3.1.1 Will Attendees Receive Their Own Meal?

This will require registering in advance and providing food options. Make allergen information easily available and provide contact information for attendees to have an easy point of contact. Consider including a space for attendees to list their dietary restrictions during registration.

Why This Matters: Providing this information will allow attendees to safely make their food decisions and easily obtain further information when needed.

- **Can Attendees Bring Their Own Meal?** Not all food services are able to accommodate all dietary needs. Confirm with food services and/or the venue that it is acceptable in such cases for individuals to bring their own meal. If it is, note if there is a fridge for storage during the conference and/or a microwave to reheat the food.

Why This Matters: Typically, outside food is permitted in the case of dietary needs that cannot be accommodated. However, in some situations, all outside food is prohibited. Providing information about the “outside food” policy can facilitate planning for attendees.

- **Consider Including These Dietary Options:**

- Vegetarian
- Dairy-Free
- Gluten-Free
- Vegan
- Nut-Free
- Halal

Why This Matters: Whether it is due to allergies, food sensitivities, or personal reasons, people do not all eat the same. Including a few options with clear allergen labelling allows attendees to make safe choices. At minimum, vegan options should be considered. Vegan options are dairy-free and vegetarian by definition, and also typically gluten-free (though not always).



Gluten intolerance is a food sensitivity, whereas **celiac disease is an autoimmune disorder**. Someone with a gluten intolerance should be able to eat a meal provided there are no gluten-containing ingredients included (i.e., labelled “Gluten Free”), whereas someone with celiac disease must take even greater precautions (e.g., no cross-contamination of ingredients, food prep area, etc.). Cross-contamination is what separates something labelled “Gluten-Free” (i.e., no gluten ingredients but possibly made in a facility that also processes wheat) from “Certified Gluten-Free” (i.e., made in contamination-safe facilities with regular tests to ensure products have < 20ppm of gluten).

- **Avoid Cross-Contamination.** If food is prepared separately to avoid cross-contamination, be sure to keep the food covered and separate when handling and serving. Setting it up with the rest of the food risks cross-contamination.

3.1.2 Will the Food be Set Out “Buffet Style”?

This only requires knowing the approximate number of guests and eliminates the need to take and distribute individual orders. When serving food buffet style, it is especially important to be wary of cross-contamination. Allergen information should still be easily accessible, and decisions should be made regarding alternative options for people who cannot risk cross-contamination (e.g., opportunity to order a separate meal, confirm that they can bring their own meal).

Why This Matters: Regardless of how food is served, providing accurate allergen information allows people to make safe food decisions.

- **How Will Attendees Access the Food Stations?** Consider the general navigability for all attendees and access for attendees with mobility impairments. For example, consider providing multiple drink stations that are spaced apart and ensuring that tables are at a height accessible for individuals with limited mobility.

Why This Matters: Food and drinks should be easy for all attendees to access. Consider whether high-traffic times will make this area harder to navigate and plan accordingly.

3.2 If Food Will Not Be Provided

- **Communicate Food Policies Early.** It’s important to clearly indicate in advance that food will not be offered, such as including this information in several places including the registration materials, FAQ, event website, or conference schedule. As the event date approaches, send reminder emails about food arrangements and local options to ensure attendees are prepared.

Why This Matters: This allows attendees to plan ahead, which is especially crucial for individuals who experience hypoglycaemia or have specific dietary needs.

- **Suggest Alternative Food Options.** Provide attendees with some suggested food options (e.g., restaurants, cafes, convenience stores) on or near the venue. If possible, include different dietary options and their location.

Why This Matters: Even with advance notification, some attendees might miss this information or forget to bring snacks or meals. Offering a few varied options ensures access to suitable dining choices during the event. This allows attendees to focus on the conference rather than worrying about obtaining food.

- **Plan for Longer Breaks.** Schedule adequate breaks during the conference to give attendees time to find and enjoy meals without feeling rushed.

Why This Matters: Since food is not provided at the conference, attendees will need time to obtain their meals and eat. Longer breaks help ensure that everyone has the opportunity to find food and enjoy it at a comfortable pace,

4. Supporting Parents and Individuals with Assistance Needs

Why This Matters: Disability is often associated with visible aids, especially mobility aids, like wheelchairs or ramps. It is important to note, however, that not all disabilities are visible. Symptoms may vary greatly across individuals, and within an individual too (e.g., day-to-day). There are many aspects that make a place (in)accessible which may not be apparent unless experienced from another point of view. Despite good intentions, many “accessible” designs fail because of this. Additionally, not everyone that requires accommodations has a disability. As the objective of a conference is to share knowledge, we should aim to make this environment as accessible and inclusive as possible to enable a wider audience to participate.



Visible disabilities are typically apparent (e.g., wheelchair, service dog, etc.), whereas invisible disabilities aren't immediately noticeable (e.g., autism or chronic pain may not be “seen”). Accommodations can be beneficial for people with visible or invisible disabilities as well as for people who may not identify as disabled (e.g., breastfeeding parents).

4.1 Families, Support Persons, and Service / Support Animals

There are various reasons why a conference attendee might need to bring their children, support person, or support / service animals. However, information about these types of accommodations are often not included in conference materials.

Why This Matters: Considering the procedures to be implemented in such cases and providing this information up front may allow attendees to plan accordingly and not be deterred from attending the event.

4.1.1 Are Children Allowed?

Although conferences are intended for adults, the reality is that many attendees are also parents. If children are allowed, note whether there are rooms for breastfeeding/pumping and areas where children are allowed/not allowed. Be sure to indicate this on the conference map or conference materials.

Why This Matters: Balancing the needs of parents and of other attendees can be complex. Although conferences are not intended for children, circumstances may force a parent to choose between either attending a conference with their child or not attending at all. Establishing policies in advance can clarify expectations for all attendees, leading to a smoother and more stress-and-judgement-free experience for all.

4.1.2 Are Support Persons Allowed?

People with visible or invisible disabilities may require (or greatly benefit) from having a support person attend with them. Support persons can be trained professionals, volunteers, friends, or family members.

- **Do Support Persons Need to Register?** Conferences are already expensive and especially difficult for people with support needs. Free entry for support persons is recommended. Otherwise, attendees who require this accommodation would essentially be paying double the registration fee to attend. This is not only expensive but also selectively negatively affects individuals who require this accommodation.
- **How Will “Support Person” Status Be Confirmed?** Note that support persons are not typically registered/do not necessarily have certification.
- **How Will Eligibility to Bring a Support Person Be Determined?** Requiring paperwork or disclosure of official diagnosis adds additional barriers.

Why This Matters: There is often no official paperwork to be given in these situations and paying extra for a support person is not equitable. We recommend using an honour system.

4.1.3 Are Support / Service Animals Allowed?

In Canada, service dogs have the legal right to go wherever their handlers may go. *Support* animals do not have the same rights. Respect the laws (federal and provincial), consider your own policies, and provide information in advance.

We have provided information that applies across Canada and that follows Ontario guidelines (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005; AODA).



Service animals have received specialized training in order to perform specific tasks to help someone with a particular disability. *Support* animals may also help alleviate symptoms or assist someone with a disability. However, they do not have the level of training (if any) to be considered *service* animals. For example, emotional support animals provide comfort and security but do not have training for specific tasks. Therefore, they do not qualify as service animals under the AODA.

• How is Eligibility to Bring a Support or Service Animal Determined?

- **For Service Animals:** “Under the Ontario Human Rights Code and the AODA, service animals do not need to have certificates or identity cards. However, you may be asked to provide acceptable documentation. This includes:
 - Documentation from a regulated health professional
 - An identification card from the Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General for people who are blind and use a guide dog” ([Government of Ontario, 2024](#)).
- **For Support Animals:** The rules for service animals do not apply. Although support animals can be of great benefit to individuals, they do not necessarily have any training and are not “working” animals in the same sense that service animals are. Accommodations can be made within reason on a case-by-case basis.

- **Are There Areas for Service Animals to Relieve Themselves?** This is likely outside the control of the conference organizers. However, it would be helpful for organizers to identify and highlight spaces where it is acceptable for service animals to relieve themselves. This consideration can enhance the experience for attendees with service animals.
- **Is There Appropriate Seating / Space for Service Animals?** Consider navigability in all conference spaces and seating placement.



How Should You Behave Around a Service Animal? Remember that this is a working animal (typically a “guide dog”), so do not distract them while they are “on the job”. DO NOT attempt to pet, feed, film, or otherwise interact with a service animal. If a service animal approaches you without their owner, DO interact with them as they are trained to seek help if their owner is in distress. In all other situations, you should speak to the owner (not the animal).

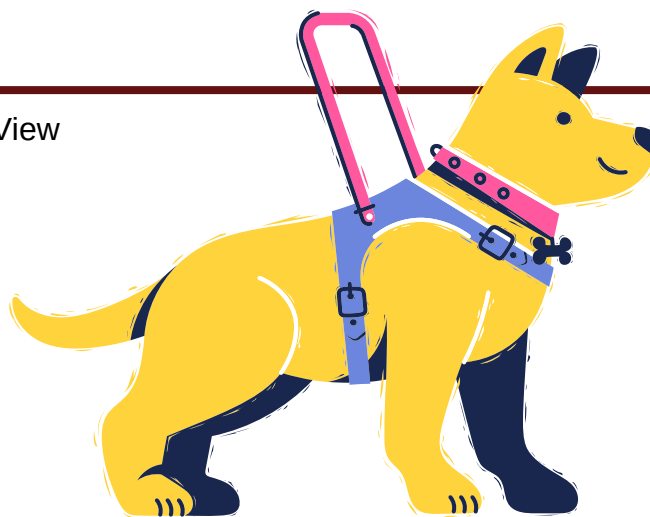
Why This Matters: Service animals are trained professionals and should be treated as such. Accommodations must be made for service animals and may be considered for support animals (within reason). The well-being of all attendees should be considered when planning a conference.

4.2 Example POV: Attending a Conference with a Guide Dog

Attending an academic conference as a blind woman with a guide dog can be both empowering and challenging. The presence of my guide dog provides me with a sense of independence and confidence. Navigating the often busy and unfamiliar environments of conference venues is significantly easier with my dog by my side. My guide dog helps me avoid obstacles, find doors, and locate seating, which allows me to focus more on engaging with the conference content and networking with colleagues.

There are also disadvantages to consider. Some conference venues are not fully accessible, and navigating through crowded spaces can be overwhelming for both me and my guide dog. People are often unaware of the etiquette around guide dogs, sometimes petting or distracting them without permission, which can be disruptive and potentially unsafe. Finding suitable accommodations for my guide dog, such as relief areas, can also be challenging. Further, people often comment on how “lucky” I am to be able to take my dog to work. While I understand that others may miss their animals while travelling, my permissions to “take my dog to work” come at the steep price of being disabled – a price I’d rather not have to pay. Despite these obstacles, the support and independence my guide dog provides outweighs the difficulties, allowing me to participate more fully and more confidently in the academic community.

Note. POV = Point of View



5. Accommodating Sensory Needs

Why This Matters: Conferences can be overwhelming on the senses and some individuals may need to take some quiet time in order to prolong their involvement. People have different ways of dealing with sensory stimuli, such as using noise-cancelling headphones, sunglasses, removing themselves from the space, etc.

5.1 Low-Stimulation Room

A Low-Stimulation Room or “Quiet Room” is Recommended. This can greatly help people with sensory needs take a break. Importantly, it also provides a refuge for any attendee who may need a moment of calm away from the hustle and bustle of the conference. By offering this option, organizers create an inclusive environment that supports the well-being of all attendees.

- **This Room Should Be:**

- **Single-Purpose.** It should not be used as a general break room for people to hang out and chat in or as a storage space.
- **Low-Sound.** Select an appropriate room to ensure that sounds are minimized. For example, choose a room in a less-travelled path of the conference with a door that attendees can open and close as needed. It is important to also limit “noisy” behaviours such as eating, having conversations, using electronics with sound on, etc.
- **Low-Light.** Select an appropriate room to ensure that the light levels are minimized. Avoid excessively bright spaces and consider rooms with curtains to help control light levels. Limiting the use of bright fluorescent lights or the main lights in a room (e.g., by leaving the light off by default) can also help.
- **Low or moderate temperature.** If the temperature cannot be controlled from within the room, make sure to select a room that maintains a comfortable temperature. Avoid both overly hot and overly cold conditions.

- **Scent-free.** Ask attendees to avoid wearing perfume or scented products. Scents can be problematic for people with allergies, asthma, migraines and/or sensory issues.
- **Post the Low-Stimulation Room Rules.** Include rules to be respected in the “quiet room” on/by the door and in the FAQ (if possible). This makes it clear what purpose the room serves and prevents misuse of the room.

Why This Matters: It is important to ensure that rules are respected in a “quiet room” and that the room serves only one purpose. If this room becomes a multi-use space, then it is likely that people in need of a low stimulation environment will avoid this space, undermining its intended purpose.

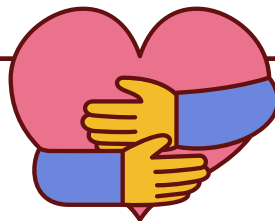
- **Establish a Contact Person.** Ensure their contact information is readily available in case an individual is not respecting the rules. Ensure that reporting can be done anonymously, so attendees do not feel they may face repercussions for speaking up.



If you notice someone in sensory distress (in the quiet room or in another situation), rushing to them to “help” may be counterproductive.

DO NOT turn on the lights, ask rapidfire questions (or expect answers), or touch them.

If applicable, **DO** alert their support person. Otherwise, you can offer to bring them to a safe, quiet place, and leave them be. Sensory overload can make it hard to talk, so do not take offense if you do not get much of a response.

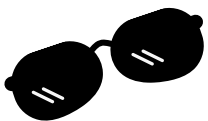


5.2 Other Sensitivity Considerations

People process sensory stimuli differently. The nature of these differences (and of the coping strategies people may use to deal with them) is often not outwardly obvious. Moreover, these coping strategies can lead individuals to act in ways that differ from ‘typical conference behaviour’. It is therefore important to remember that behaviours that may seem ‘atypical’ (e.g., wearing headphones during a presentation) often represent individuals’ unique ways of paying attention to the conference and/or of self-regulating. Do not try to intervene unless the individual is being actively disruptive or appears to be in distress.

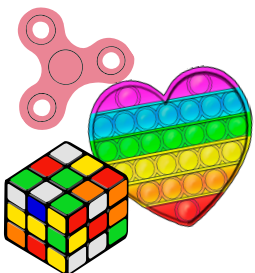
Why This Matters: Adopting a “compassion first” approach and respecting diverse behaviours (e.g., wearing headphones or sunglasses) ensures that everyone can participate without unnecessary scrutiny or discomfort. This mindset fosters inclusivity and enriches the conference experience by acknowledging and embracing the different ways individuals engage and interact with their surroundings.

- **Headphones:** Do not assume that someone with headphones is being impolite or ignoring the presentations. For example, some people may use noise-canceling headphones to block out background noise so they can focus on a talk. Others may be using a screen reader to help interpret slides or posters.



- **Sunglasses:** People with sensory issues or migraines may need sunglasses to help with the bright lighting typically used at conferences.

- **Hoodies:** A hood can provide comfort and act as a barrier for visual and auditory stimuli.



- **Fidgets:** These may come in many forms, but the objective is to assist individuals with concentration and self-regulation. Engaging in the controlled movements offered by the fidgets should benefit the individual’s attention and need for motion. Fidgets should not be actively disruptive to others; it is acceptable to respectfully notify someone if their fidgeting is preventing others from focusing.

5.3 Example POV: Sensory Processing Issues with Autism & ADHD

Note: Everyone is different. Not everyone who is Autistic and/or has ADHD will relate to this experience. Conversely, someone without these diagnoses may relate to it. This does not necessarily mean that they are Autistic / have ADHD.

The lights in the venue are very bright. So are the lights from the computer screens and projectors. Additionally, there are lots of noises, all competing for your attention, and all seemingly at max volume; there are many people shuffling papers, chewing food, and shifting in their seats. You hear the buzz of all the electric devices, and many different conversations all happening at the same time. There are many unfamiliar scents and people moving around. Normally, this isn't too bad, but prolonged exposure makes it worse. Trying to ignore all of these distracting stimuli to focus on the topics being discussed can be quite taxing. You don't want to miss out on the conference, but **if you go too long without a break, you'll overload your senses and it could take a while to recuperate.**

Pushing too hard may lead to an inability to speak or understand speech.

Click [here](#) to read a great article by Zisk (2024) describing the space between being always-able-to-communicate-with-socially-accepted-amounts-of-speech and non-speaking.



Every day, your needs are different, so it can be hard to know how long you can go before needing a break. Headphones, quiet rooms, and support people can help you manage your situation better, so you can put your focus on the actual conference topics instead of that buzzing overhead light.

Note. POV = Point of View

6. Supporting Gender Inclusivity

Why This Matters: The recent societal progress on trans rights has been substantial, but significant barriers to inclusion remain. Unfortunately, conferences are not immune from this situation. The impact on trans researchers' careers can be significant. Trans attendees may, for instance, feel unable to benefit from the networking opportunities afforded to their cis peers. Worse yet, they may decide to forego presenting their research or even attending at all.

6.1 Terms to Know and Use

Gender inclusivity starts with language. Using the right words is a sign of good faith; of a willingness to meet people on their terms. Inclusive vocabulary is usually also more precise. The short glossary below lists some of the most important terms to know. **Note the part of speech listed with each term**—these are important. For instance, “trans” and “nonbinary” are both adjectives. As such, they should be accompanied by nouns (e.g., “a nonbinary person”, not “a nonbinary”).

- **Trans (adj.):** Having a gender identity distinct from one's gender assigned at birth.
- **Cis (adj.):** Having a gender identity matching one's gender assigned at birth.
- **Nonbinary (adj.):** Having, or relating to, a gender identity that is not exclusively male or female.
- **Gender identity (n.):** How an individual identifies in the context of gender.
- **Gender expression (n.):** How an individual presents their gender identity.
- **Deadname (n./v.):** As a noun, the name a trans person used before their transition. As a verb, the act of referring to a trans person by their deadname.
- **Pronouns (n.):** The set of third-person pronouns someone should be referred by. Often presented as a pair of the subjective and objective cases (e.g., she/her), but further forms are sometimes also included (e.g., they/them/their/theirs/themself).



Gender expression may not always map to societal expectations of gender identity. Women may wear more masculine clothing, just as men may wear more feminine clothing. Additionally, non-binary people may present in a way that is traditionally associated with masculinity or femininity.

6.2 Names and Pronouns

Use a trans person’s preferred name and pronouns when referring to them.

Do not unnecessarily highlight them as being trans, especially in professional environments. Doing so can “out” trans people. Think of how you would refer to a friend who changed their last name after marriage or divorce. Simply accommodate the new name without highlighting the life changes that led to it.

Why This Matters: There is power in a name. For trans people, being referred to by the correct name can be a wonderful, affirming experience. Conversely, being deadnamed can be distressing and humiliating. Unfortunately, legally changing one’s name can be costly, complex, and time-consuming. It can also pose a risk with family or when travelling. As such, many trans people have a legal name that differs from their chosen name. Dealing with that mismatch on a daily basis is often crushing.

6.2.1 Pronouns

Provide a Space for Attendees to Specify Their Pronouns. Do not require attendees to specify their pronouns (see [Section 2.1](#)).

Why This Matters: We often use someone’s name and appearance when deciding which third-person pronouns we should use to refer to them. Such guesses can easily lead us astray, especially with trans and gender non-conforming people. It is simpler and less awkward to allow attendees to specify how they wish to be addressed. However, specifying one’s pronouns should not be mandatory; people may have a number of reasons for feeling uncomfortable providing them.

6.2.2 Dos and Don'ts



- Centre chosen names over legal names.
- Allow attendees to easily specify a name that may differ from the name on their legal documents.
- Exclusively use chosen names on all public materials (e.g., name badges, schedules, etc.).
- Treat legal names as confidential information in cases where they differ from chosen names.
- Allow attendees to change their chosen name after registering.
- Provide alternatives to requiring government-issued ID when attendees pick up their name badge (e.g., confirmation emails, being vouched for by another attendee, or simply using the honour system).



- Ask for legal names unless you are absolutely certain they are required.
- Require attendees to manually reach out to specify a chosen name.
- Deny attendees their name badges if they cannot provide ID with a name that matches their registration.



Consider allowing participants to **“opt in” to including their pronouns** on their name tag. When talking about someone whose pronouns you don't know, use gender neutral pronouns (they/them) or the person's name.

6.3 Trans Safety and Host Selection

Consider Trans Safety When Choosing Conference Locations. Consider both legal risks and general safety. Look into legal protections and risks at the national and regional levels. If at all possible, directly involve trans people in the process so that they may express their concerns. If a potentially risky location is chosen, mention it so prospective attendees can make an informed decision about whether to attend.

Why This Matters: Trans people are disproportionately likely to experience harassment and even violence, especially in areas where anti-trans attitudes are prevalent. In those areas, authority figures may harbour these same attitudes, amplifying the consequences. Going through airport security—as is frequently required when travelling for conferences—is often a stressful experience for trans people. Having to do so in a less trans-friendly area can dissuade attendance.

- [Link to Trianon's \(2023\) trans legislative risk map for Canada](#)
- [Link to Reed's \(2024\) trans legislative risk map for the United States](#)

Moreover, some jurisdictions have enacted legislation that criminalizes aspects of trans existence. Under the most restrictive laws, trans people can be prosecuted for using the restroom associated with their gender identity. Notably, this legislative push affects some jurisdictions in Canada as well as in the United States. Additionally, even areas without anti-trans laws on the books vary in the level of legal protection afforded to trans individuals.

Trans travellers may face additional risks beyond those faced by residents. Countries vary in their recognition of “X” gender markers on travel documents. Trans individuals travelling with testosterone may face additional scrutiny, as testosterone is a controlled substance in many countries.

The **Government of Canada** (2024) publishes [general information on the risks faced by queer travellers](#). Per-country information is also available on [each destination's travel advice page](#) (Government of Canada, n.d.).

6.4 Restroom Usage Policies

Allow attendees to use the restroom associated with their **gender identity rather than the sex they were assigned at birth.** If the host jurisdiction prohibits trans attendees from doing so, state so prior to registration and provide alternatives. Ensure gender-neutral restrooms are available and clearly inform attendees of their location.

Why This Matters: Being forced into a restroom that does not match one's gender identity can be degrading. It can also forcibly out trans people. Due to such concerns, some trans attendees may forego going to the restroom until they return to their accommodations.

The simple and inclusive approach outlined above allows organizers to focus on the conference rather than on policing restroom usage. Ensuring gender-neutral restrooms are available is important for nonbinary attendees and for attendees who may not feel comfortable using a gendered restroom.



“We already provide gender-neutral restrooms. Wouldn't it be simpler for everyone if trans people only used those restrooms?”

Gender-neutral restrooms are part of the solution, and many trans people will use them by choice. They can be especially crucial for nonbinary attendees. However, the vast majority of restrooms remain gendered. Being funnelled away from them essentially requires transgender researchers to identify themselves as transgender. Moreover, gender-neutral restrooms are often rare and far apart. They also often double as accessible restrooms, amplifying this problem. Trans people may worry that using an accessible gender-neutral restroom could deny access to attendees with other accessibility needs. Trans attendees should be allowed to focus on the conference rather than on hunting down a gender-neutral restroom.

7. Planning for Accessible Layout, Seating, and Format

Why This Matters: Theoretical layouts do not always work out practically. It can be useful to actually explore the space and consider how anyone (especially someone with limited mobility) would access the space. Remember that people will be navigating spaces in groups and certain areas may be more crowded during certain times.

7.1 Consider the Layout of the Space

- **Are There Multiple Rooms?**

- Are they all on the same floor?
- Where are the stairs/elevator?
- Include a map (see [Section 2.5](#)) showing all relevant locations (e.g., restrooms, water fountains, etc.)

Why This Matters: Some attendees may take more time than others to move from one location to another. There are additional considerations when these locations are on a different floor or in different buildings. For example, elevator use should be prioritized for those that require it. Providing this information in advance allows attendees to plan ahead.

- **How is Seating Arranged in the Room?**

- Is it easy to navigate between rows of chairs?
- What kind of chair is used?
- Is there room for wheelchair users?
- Is there standing room available?

Why This Matters: Sitting for long periods of time can be difficult for a variety of reasons (e.g., pain, restlessness). Consider including space at the back or sides of presentation rooms for people to stand or move without distracting other attendees.

- **How Are Posters Set Up?** Make sure that there is enough room to navigate all posters and that all posters have approximately equal spacing. Don't forget to consider noise levels. Smaller, more crowded spaces will make it more difficult to hear and interact with presenters.

Why This Matters: Poster sessions are often very busy and people tend to move about in only somewhat predictable patterns. Additionally, not all conference venues are alike. The layout of poster rooms greatly affects the flow of traffic. To ensure proper flow, provide adequate spacing around each poster to allow attendees to interact with the presenter. Additionally, place posters in a predictable and organized layout. Doing so will help reduce bottlenecks and unfair poster attendance caused solely by poster placement.

- **Where is the Food Set Up?** (See Section 3)

7.2 Consider Hybrid Options

- **Are Hybrid Options Possible?** It is worth considering due to:
 - **Reduced Strain on Many Attendees.** For example, people with visible or invisible disabilities, parents, etc.
 - **Lower Costs.** Conferences are expensive, especially for students. Even if students are reimbursed, there are often significant delays in receiving refunds and not everyone can pay entrance fees, travel fees, etc.
 - **No Visa Issues.** This can be especially difficult for some countries.

Why This Matters: In-person events are typically more demanding and require more energy and accommodations for attendees. Providing hybrid options can alleviate strain due to many issues (e.g., mobility, sensory, financial, etc.).

8. Designing Accessible Audiovisual (AV) Presentations

Why This Matters: The goal of presenting at a conference is to disseminate information to a wider audience. By implementing accessibility guidelines for presentations, you can ensure accessibility for all conference attendees. In doing so, you foster inclusivity and maximize the reach and impact of your research. Although the recommendations provided in this section serve as an important first-step in ensuring accessibility, they are not exhaustive. **There is no one size-fits-all solution when it comes to accessibility.**

8.1 General Considerations

8.1.1 Alternative Formats

Offering alternative formats (i.e., providing links with downloadable slides or PDFs) allows individuals to access the content in a way that best suits their accessibility requirements. For example, individuals with visual exceptionalities may adjust font colours or use screen readers to enhance readability.

- **Consider Including QR Codes.** Provide a QR code and a link for easy access to downloadable versions of your poster or presentation.
- **Ensure Compatibility with Assistive Technologies.** Ensure that downloadable materials are compatible with assistive technologies. Text-based formats like PDF and PowerPoint are preferable to image formats like JPG and PNG. Presenting text as an image complicates the use of screen readers and limits individuals' ability to change the text's appearance.
- **Provide Access Instructions.** Include clear instructions on how to access and use alternative formats. For example, clearly label QR codes or download links with phrases like 'Download Poster PDF here'.

8.2 Visual Components

8.2.1 Colour Combination

Colour combination plays a significant role in conveying information. Selecting high-contrast colour combinations can enhance readability for all individuals, regardless of their visual abilities. High contrast between the text and background is especially crucial for readability. Opting for a light-on-dark colour scheme, where light text is represented on a dark background, can reduce eye strain and improve readability. Doing so may be especially beneficial for individuals with visual sensitivities (e.g., low vision, visual dyslexia). However, it is important to note individuals with other visual sensitivities, like presbyopia, may benefit more from a dark-on-light colour scheme. Again, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Providing alternative formats for your presentations allows you to accommodate needs in all their diversity.

- **There are Various Visual Impairments.** Consider other visual impairments such as colour blindness. Some individuals may have difficulty distinguishing between certain colours, such as red and green.
- **Use More Than Colour to Convey Information.** Avoid relying on colour alone for conveying information. Instead, supplement colour with additional visual cues such as numbering and symbols. For example, when highlighting different categories in a chart or graph, use distinct symbols or shapes in addition to colour coding.
- **Test it out.** Use online contrast checkers that are Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG; World Wide Web Consortium, 2023) compliant to check the content's colour contrast. Websites like [WebAIM's \(n.d.\) Colour Contrast Checker](#) allow you to input specific colours and assess their contrast ratio.

8.2.2 Font Size and Format

- **Use White Space.** Provide ample white space and avoid clutter. Ensuring sufficient white space—that is, having an appropriate amount of empty space between elements—makes content easier to read and navigate. For example, increasing line spacing within paragraphs allows for better separation between lines of text, making it easier for readers to follow along.
- **Keep it Simple.** Avoid using complicated or serif fonts (e.g., Garamond, Times New Roman) and opt for sans-serif fonts (e.g., Arial, Calibri, Aptos). Complex fonts can be difficult to read. On the other hand, simple sans-serif fonts are generally easier to read, especially when viewed from a distance. Additionally, avoid using underlines or italics excessively, as they can hinder readability.
- **Size Matters.** Use large and readable text. Text should be readable from a distance to ensure everyone can read your content. This is particularly important for individuals with visual impairments or those viewing content from far away in a large venue. For online or web content, use a minimum 16pt font size for body text to ensure that the text is large enough on various devices and screen resolutions. Larger text sizes also accommodate individuals who may need to zoom in on content for better readability.
- **Be Careful When Using Background Images.** Avoid placing images behind text. Placing images behind text can make it difficult for readers to distinguish the text from the background, as the text may blend into the image and become less legible. Keeping text elements separate from images ensures clarity and prevents visual clutter. Alternatively, consider using an overlay between the text and the image. An overlay is a semi-transparent layer that is positioned above the image, allowing text to be displayed on top of the image without obscuring it entirely. When done effectively, this technique maintains readability while incorporating visual elements.
- **Avoid Using Justified Text.** Justified text can pose challenges for individuals with dyslexia and those who may need to zoom in when reading. In justified

text, readers may encounter large, uneven spaces between or within words. These spaces can disrupt the text's flow, making it harder to read. Instead, use left or right aligned text. These formatting options maintain more consistent spacing between words and enhance readability for all users.

8.2.3 Graphs and Images

Providing descriptions of graphs and images favours accessibility. It ensures that individuals with visual impairments and those who use screen readers can access and understand all the information in your presentation. These descriptions can be included as alternative (alt) text or as captions. Although both are read aloud by screen readers, alt text is hidden on the screen (typically accessible by right-clicking on an image), whereas captions are displayed on the screen.

- **Use Alternative (alt) Text.** For simple and non-decorative images, provide short and informative alt text. Alt text should succinctly describe the content of the image, allowing users who cannot see the image to understand its significance. Any description is better than IMG_123_C_001. Note that the best way to write alt text for an image may vary depending on that image's significance in context.

Alt text: Parliament Hill, Ottawa, Canada



- **Include Descriptive Captions.** For more complex or visual elements like graphs or tables, provide a descriptive caption (verbally or within the text). Such captions ensure that everyone can understand the information presented. When creating captions for graphs, include details about the graph's purpose (i.e., what it illustrates or analyzes), key variables and their levels, and notable trends or findings.

8.3 Audio Components

8.3.1 Closed Captioning

Using closed captioning or providing transcripts for videos ensures that individuals with hearing impairment can access and understand all the information in the presentation. If possible, use live closed captioning during presentations. Here are tutorials for [Live Closed Captioning using Zoom \(Zoom Support, 2024\)](#) and [Live Closed Captioning using PowerPoint \(Microsoft Support, n.d.\)](#).

8.3.2 Audio Clarity and Volume

Using the microphones in the room ensures that the presenter's voice is clear and audible. Clear audio helps individuals with hearing difficulties and enhances the overall presentation experience for everyone. A better presentation experience fosters better understanding and engagement.

As a presenter, be aware that an audience member may ask you to wear a remote microphone to broadcast directly to their hearing aids. If you are unsure how to use the device, be sure to ask the person who is sharing it with you. Also, test the functionality before you begin your presentation.

8.3.3 Question Handling

Ensure that all audience members have the opportunity to hear and participate in the discussion by either repeating questions from the audience or providing microphones to audience members asking questions.

8.3.4 Communication Aids

Not everyone has the same degree of hearing loss or uses the same communication aids. For some individuals, sign language (e.g., ASL - American Sign Language; LSQ - *Langue des signes québécoise* / Quebec Sign Language) may be helpful in some cases. But others may use cochlear implants or find that watching someone's lips as they talk can facilitate their understanding.

8.3.5 Broadcasting Systems

- **Loop systems:** It is possible that the facility has a loop system installed. This will broadcast directly to a hearing aid telecoil. If you know that the facility has a loop system, you can remind the audience to switch to telecoil mode in their hearing aids (this often happens automatically, but some users have manual control). You can also post signs or add this information to the conference program.
- **Auracast:** While not yet in the mainstream, this is the new wave of standardized public broadcasting that will be available to any Bluetooth user (including earbuds and newer hearing aids). As with loop systems, be sure to let the attendees and audience know if this option is available.



Recommendations for Communicating with Someone with Hearing Loss:

- **When Asked to Repeat Something:** Do not repeat it verbatim, use different words and tonality.
- **Monitor Volume and Speed:** Talk loudly (but without screaming) and at a relatively slow pace. Properly enunciate your words. Letting the audience see your mouth while you talk can be helpful.
- **Consider the Environment:** Communicating in loud and busy environments with competing sounds can be challenging. Moving to a quiet environment or using alternative methods of communication (e.g., in text form) may help.
- **When Turning to Look / Point at Your Slides:** Remember to continue to position your mouth in front of the microphone or to bring the microphone with you.

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Did you use our recommendations?

Let others know by using the example blurb below!

Our conference is committed to prioritizing accessibility for all our attendees. Drawing insights from the WiCSC+ Trainee Board Accessibility Report ([link to WiCSC+ Accessibility Report](#)), we have implemented important accessibility and inclusivity measures to help ensure all attendees can fully participate.

Your feedback matters! Please help us continue to improve our guide. Feel free to share your thoughts, suggestions, and insights with us using this [Google form](#) and check out wicsc.ca for more resources!

