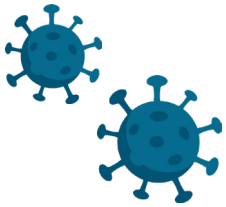
Accessible communication during COVID-19 and other emergencies: A guideline for organizations



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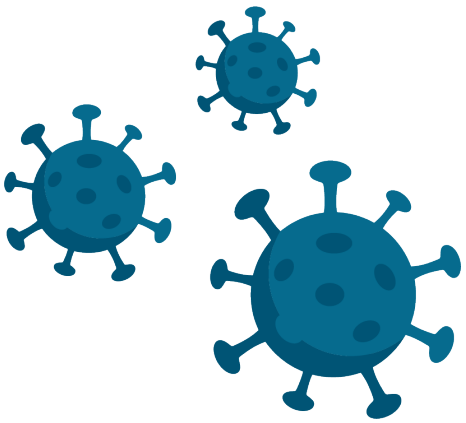


About Accessibility Standards Canada

- Created under the *Accessible Canada Act* to:
  - develop and review accessibility standards for federally regulated organizations*; and
  - support and promote innovative research that identifies, removes and prevents accessibility barriers.
- Accessibility is about creating inclusive communities for all. The Accessible Canada Act promotes the creation of a Canada without barriers.

***Federally regulated organizations:** Government of Canada departments and agencies, and private sector organizations like banks and those that operate in the federal transportation network.

About these guidelines

- These are practical guidelines to help federally regulated organizations communicate with persons with disabilities, including employees, during emergencies.
- The guidelines could be used by any organization that wants to make their communications accessible for use during emergencies.
- These guidelines were created for COVID-19, but they can be used for other emergencies.
- National disability organizations and other stakeholders commented on these guidelines.
- The information is not meant as medical or legal advice. When needed, seek advice from:
  - a public health authority; and/or
  - a legal professional.

Getting started

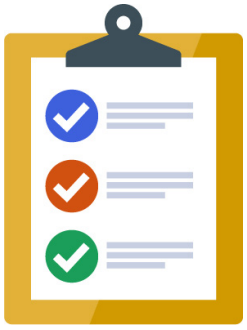
- During emergencies, persons with disabilities must receive the same information as everyone else and at the same time. This information can be important and even save lives.
- Effective communication during emergencies is key to ensuring public health and safety.
- About 22% of Canadians have a disability. To be effective, emergency communication needs to be accessible to them as well.

- Emergencies may have more impact on persons with disabilities. For example, they might find it difficult to get accessible information on safety measures.
- Persons with disabilities may depend on others for:
  - their communication needs; or
  - getting services.
- Measures need to be in place to avoid communication barriers during emergencies, such as COVID-19.
- Accessible communication is a two-way process. It happens when people both give and receive information:
  - face-to-face;
  - over the telephone;
  - when they read and understand written information;
  - on websites and social media;
  - when they complete forms; and
  - when they sign documents.

- Accessible communication benefits and connects everyone. For example, people who do not understand English or French well can also take advantage of:
  - information in plain language; or
  - closed captioning.

- Persons with disabilities should let others know how they communicate. This will help them stay safe during COVID-19 and other emergencies.

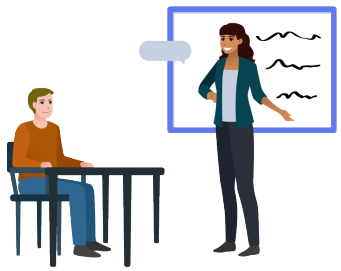
Key takeaways



- Put measures in place to ensure that emergency communication is accessible. This means ensuring that persons with disabilities and the general public:
  - receive the same information; and
  - receive it at the same time.
- Follow the best practices in these guidelines to help avoid communication barriers.
- Persons with disabilities can create a plan to help them stay safe during an emergency. You can find an example of such a plan in the Accessible communication during COVID-19 and other emergencies: A guideline for persons with disabilities.
- Accessible communication benefits everyone.

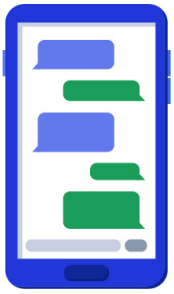
General best practices

- Take into account the nature of the person's disability.
- Be patient.
- Offer your help, but do not insist.
- Do not assume how a person prefers to communicate.
  - Recognize that people have preferences. Preferences can change depending on where the person is and who else is present.
- Respect a person's self-determination. Let them identify their own disability-related needs and the type of help they may need.



- If you are unsure that you understand, ask the person to repeat or to provide more details.
- Train staff who interact with the public on:
  - communication barriers;
  - the ways in which persons with disabilities communicate;
  - the assistive devices they use; and
  - how to obtain assistive services such as sign language interpretation.

Communication based on technology



- Organizations need to make sure the technology does not create barriers for persons with disabilities.
- Organizations also need to be aware that persons with disabilities might use various adaptive technologies to communicate during emergencies.
- Here are some examples of those technologies.

SMS (Short Message Service) / Texting

- SMS / texting is a popular way for persons with disabilities to communicate.

Tip – SMS / Texting

- Have a smartphone available to communicate with persons using SMS / texting.

Accessible audio formats

- Create accessible audio format versions of long or complex print communications.
- You can use DAISY (Digital Accessible Information Systems) to present print information in an audio format. Its navigation features allow a person to skip forward or backward through a text.

Telephones

- Telephones can be useful communication tools. Yet, they create barriers for many persons with disabilities. You can avoid them by using the assistive devices below.

Teletypewriter (TTY)

- A teletypewriter (TTY) is a keyboard-operated device. It allows someone to send typed messages across phone lines.
- A TTY is inexpensive and easy to operate.
- Publish a TTY number to allow persons to communicate by exchanging typed messages.

TTY relay service

- A TTY relay service uses the help of a relay operator who translates:
  - verbal messages into text for someone using a TTY; and
  - text messages into speech for someone who is not using a TTY.
- You can call someone who uses a TTY by dialling a toll-free number (1-800-855-0511) to reach a TTY relay operator.

Internet Protocol (IP) relay service

- An Internet Protocol (IP) relay service uses the help of a relay operator who translates:
  - messages typed through a web-based chat function into speech; and
  - verbal messages into messages typed in a web-based chat function.
- A person with a disability can use an IP relay service by:
  - using a device with Internet access, such as a computer or a smartphone; and
  - logging into the IP relay service provider's web portal.
- You can use an IP relay service to call a person with a disability by dialling a toll-free number.
  - The toll-free number varies based on the IP relay service provider.
  - You need Internet access to use this service.

Video relay

- Video relay service (VRS) provides real-time sign language interpretation during phone calls.
- A person who uses sign language can call a toll-free number to reach a sign language interpreter.
  - VRS requires an Internet connection and cell phone-based technology.
- People can register to use the service through the SRV Canada VRS website.

Note: Video remote interpreting (VRI) also uses video relay technology. It allows a person who uses sign language to communicate with someone who is in the same location.

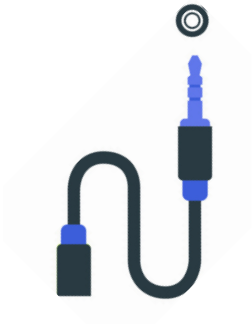
Tip – video relay

- An operator for a video relay call will let a person know that someone who uses sign language is calling.
- Sometimes there is a short delay while the operator makes the connection. The people on the call should stay on the line.

Hearing induction loop

- A hearing induction loop is a sound system that emits a magnetic, wireless signal.
- Devices like hearing aids and cochlear implants can pick up the signal.
- A hearing induction loop helps people who use these devices by:
  - reducing background noise; and
  - making sounds clearer.
- You can place a hearing induction loop around a room. People who use hearing aids and cochlear implants can also wear one around their neck.

Audio jacks



- Audio jacks are common in computers and other devices that support audio output.
- They allow a person with a disability to amplify sound, such as by connecting headphones.

Speech-to-text apps

- Speech-to-text apps convert speech into text. The user can then read the text.
- Most of these apps are free to download.
- To use the app, hold your phone up and turn the screen towards the person who needs to read. The app will convert the speech into large text, which the person can read.
- The app works even if the person who speaks is wearing a mask.
- Using speech-to-text apps may be harder with physical distancing measures related to COVID-19. It may work better in other emergencies.

Tip – speech-to-text apps

- Download speech-to-text apps on your smartphone in advance, and keep them handy.

Television and videos

- Television and videos are key for sharing information about COVID-19 and other emergencies. Video products need to be accessible to ensure persons with disabilities get the same information at the same time.
- Key ways to make the content accessible include:
  - captions;
  - sign language;
  - described video and audio description; and
  - transcripts.

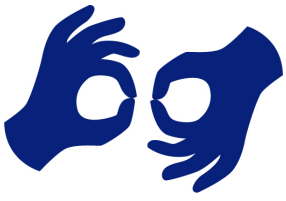
Tip – emergency announcements

- Public messages about emergencies like COVID-19 are very important. They share key information with people. Here are some tips to make them accessible:
  - Use plain language.
  - Speak clearly and slowly.
  - Avoid visual references. For example, do not say: “Follow the red sign to exit.”
  - Repeat information.
  - Include interpretation in American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue des signes du québécoise (LSQ).
  - Make alternative formats available.
  - Use pre-recorded messages as often as possible for more consistency.

Captions

- Captions are especially useful for people who are Deaf or hard of hearing.
- Captions are a text version of the speech and non-speech audio information in a video, such as:
  - conversations;
  - car horns; and
  - music.
- The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission asks most broadcasters to caption their programs between 6:00 AM and midnight.

American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue des signes du québécoise (LSQ)



- Including American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue de signes du québécoise (LSQ) in television broadcasts and videos makes them accessible to:
  - people who are Deaf; and
  - other people who use sign language.

Described video and audio description

- Described video and audio description make television and videos more accessible for:
  - people who are blind; and
  - people who have low vision.
- They help people form a mental picture of the program or video.
- Described video happens during pauses in dialogue. It describes the main visual elements of a program or video like:
  - settings; and
  - body language.
- Audio description reads or describes key elements that appear on the screen, such as:
  - text; and
  - graphics.
- The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission has rules for broadcasters regarding described video and audio description.

Note: Integrated described video is a version of described video. It blends the description of key visual elements into the program or video.

- For example, you can make a dialogue more descriptive.

This method ensures that people of all abilities have a similar viewing experience.

Transcripts

- Basic transcripts are a text version of the speech for a television program or video.
- Descriptive transcripts also include text description of key visual information.

Tips - transcripts

- Put the transcript, or a link to the transcript, directly under the video. This makes it easy for a person to:
  - know a transcript is available; and
  - access the transcript.
- If the video is online, put the link to the transcript on the same web page.

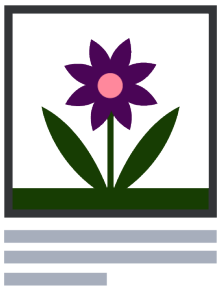
Social media

- Social media is a popular means of sharing information. It can quickly reach a wide audience in an emergency.
- Find below tips to make the content accessible.

Written content

- Write in plain language.
- Do not use emojis. Screen readers can describe them, but it is better to use meaningful text instead.
  - Note: A screen reader is a form of assistive technology that converts texts and images into speech and braille.
- Capitalize each word when using hashtags. For example: #NothingWithoutUs.
  - This makes it easier for people to read. It also helps screen readers recognize and pronounce each word.
- Describe content to which you direct people. Let people know if this content may present any barriers to accessibility.

Photos and images



- Include alternative text (alt text) for all photos and images.
  - Alt text gives a description of a photo or an image.
  - Screen readers announce the image and read the alt text.
- Do not use graphics interchange formats (GIFs).
  - Some of them have fast animation and lights, which can cause seizures.
- Choose graphic elements or photos with good colour contrast (minimum 4:1).
- Avoid putting text on photos.

Videos

- Use closed captions and described video when you post videos on:
  - LinkedIn;
  - Twitter;
  - Facebook;
  - YouTube; and
  - other platforms.
- Use open captions when you post videos on Instagram.
  - Instagram does not support closed captions.
- Where possible, add a link to an accessible Web version of the information you share on social media.
- Include American Sign Language (ASL) or Langue des signes du québécoise (LSQ) interpretation in your videos.

Tip – emergency pages on social media

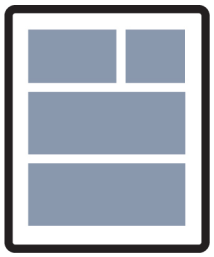
- Create emergency pages that people, including a virtual sign language interpreter, can join to have a conversation in real-time (for example, using Facebook LIVE).

Websites

- The internet helps people stay informed. Yet, websites can create barriers for people with disabilities if they are not accessible. Find below key tips to ensure that information on a website is accessible.

Format

- Use a file format that screen readers can read.
  - Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) is the easiest format to use.
- Do not use Portable Document Format (PDF) without including other options. If you use a PDF, make sure that you tag it properly.
  - PDF is not well supported by iOS or Android mobile phones.

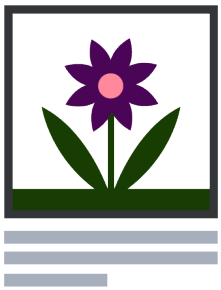


Layout

- Use large fonts with a high colour contrast (minimum 4:1).
- Use dark colours against a light background.
- Limit colour and graphics.
- Enable resizable text.
  - This function allows a person to change the size of the text to make their interaction with the site easier.
- Give your content more structure by using titles and section headings.
  - Use the style gallery included in most word processing programs.
  - With this structure, documents are easier to convert to accessible formats, such as:
    - braille; and
    - DAISY.
  - They also help screen readers navigate the information.
- Use descriptive hyperlinks.
  - They should identify the content to which they link.
- Limit the use of tables. If you use them:
  - Identify column and row headers.
  - Break complex tables down into smaller tables.
  - Avoid merged or empty cells.

Videos and multimedia files

- Have text versions of audio and visual information. (See Transcripts)
- Use described video and audio description for videos. (See Described video and audio description)
  - Where possible, use integrated described video.
- Have videos in American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue des signes du québécoise (LSQ). (See American Sign Language (ASL) and Langue des signes du québécoise (LSQ))
- Do not use media files that play automatically. People who use screen readers can have trouble turning them off.



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- Do not use graphics interchange formats (GIFs).
  - Some of them have fast animation and lights, which can cause seizures.
- Choose graphic elements or photos with good colour contrast (minimum 4:1).
- Avoid putting text on photos.

Forms

- Clearly label each field in a form.
- Use an HTML format. (See Format)
  - Avoid PDF or use it only as an alternate format (the HTML would be the main format) and make sure it is tagged properly.

Tips - websites

- Use online tools known as “accessibility checkers”. They can help you:
  - identify barriers in a website; and
  - offer solutions to remove them.
- Hire an expert in accessible web design and content if you want to:
  - design a new website; or
  - remove accessibility barriers from an existing website.

Face-to-face communication

There are barriers to face-to-face communication. The best practices below can help you remove some of these barriers.

Sign language interpretation

- People who are Deaf, deafened, deafblind or hard of hearing may use languages such as:
  - American Sign Language (ASL);
  - Langue des signes du québécoise (LSQ);
  - Indigenous Sign Language; and
  - another sign language.
- Other persons with disabilities may also use sign language.

Tips – Sign language interpretation

- If a person with a disability has a sign language interpreter, speak directly to the person. Do not speak to the interpreter.
- Do not assume that someone who knows sign language can fulfill the job of an interpreter.
- Book interpreters well in advance to avoid delays.
- You can also consider other options, such as:
  - using a TTY, IP or video relay service (see Telephones);
  - using a speech-to-text app (see Speech-to-text apps); and
  - communicating in writing.

Communicating with people who are deafblind

- A person who is deafblind may have an intervener on whom they depend to communicate.
- An intervener communicates auditory and visual information to the person they help. They can communicate what you say to the person and tell you what the person says in return.
- Do not separate a person with a disability from their intervener.

Tips – communicating with people who are deafblind

- People who are deafblind may not respond to your presence.
  - Blindness may prevent them from seeing you. Deafness may prevent them from hearing you.
- Get the person's attention by tapping them gently on the shoulder or arm. Consider other options to keep a safe physical distance.
- If the person can read print, use a notepad for brief communications. Write short notes in large letters. Use a thick black marker on a white surface.
- You may also be able to communicate with a person who is deafblind with the print-on-palm method.
  - Print large capital letters into the palm of the person's hand with the tip of your index finger. Pause between words.
  - Consider other options to keep a safe physical distance.

Important – Universal sign for an emergency

- The universal sign for an emergency, like an evacuation, is an X on the back.
  - Draw a large X with your finger, covering the person's back. This should alert them to follow you.
  - Provide a more detailed explanation as soon as possible.

Lip and speech reading

- Some persons with disabilities lip or speech read. For speech reading, the person watches:
  - the movements of the lips, jaw and tongue;
  - facial expressions;
  - body language; and
  - any sounds they may hear.

Tips – communicating with people who lip or speech reads

- When speaking to a people who lip or speech reads:
  - Face the person in a quiet well-lit area (with no glare).
  - Speak clearly. Use a normal tone of voice and volume.
  - Use short and simple sentences. Pause after each phrase.
  - Maintain eye contact when you speak.
  - Do not cover your mouth or face.
  - Use facial expressions to help convey meaning.
  - Minimize body movements:
    - use simple gestures;
    - point to the objects or places to which you are referring;
    - show size and shape with your hands; and
    - mime to help explain what you are saying.
  - Check if the person understands what you said. Rephrase if necessary.

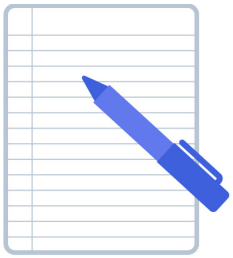
Tips – Face masks and lip or speech reading

- Face masks are a barrier to communication for a person who lip or speech reads.
- Keep a supply of masks with a clear plastic window that shows the mouth. These masks allow lip and speech reading.
  - These types of masks may also be useful for others, such as people who need to see facial expressions to communicate better.
  - Make sure to follow COVID-19 public health measures.

Paper, white boards, communication boards and pre-printed cards

- Writing on paper or on a dry erase board can be useful when:
  - face-to-face verbal communication is difficult; and
  - the conversation is brief, such as giving directions or simple instructions.

Tip – Have paper and pen handy



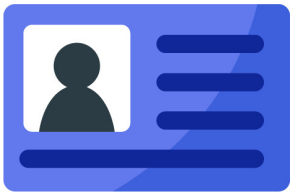
- Have pen and paper available to exchange messages without sharing materials.
  - Use clear statements and simple words.
  - Make sure to follow COVID-19 public health measures.
- Communication boards or pre-printed cards can help with face-to-face communication. They use:
  - words;
  - pictures; and
  - symbols of typical items, activities or emotions.

- In this type of augmentative communication, a person might touch a picture of a glass to ask for a drink.
- Use calendars or a diary to help a person remember a date or appointment.
- These can be very useful in a medical setting or group care facility.

Communicating with a person who is blind or has low vision

- Introduce yourself. Say your name and position.
- Immediately greet the person when they enter a room.
- Speak clearly. Use precise and descriptive language.
- Provide specific directions.
  - Avoid saying “over there.”
  - Describe positions, such as: “to your right / left / straight ahead / behind you.”
  - Use clock positions. For example: “The exit is at 12 o’clock.”
- Let the person know when you are leaving a group conversation.

Personal information



- Some persons with disabilities may have consent disclosure forms or similar legal documents.
- The goal of these documents is to allow health authorities and others to share personal information with another person, such as:
  - an intervener;
  - a spouse;
  - a family member; or
  - a friend.

Printed, written and visual information

- Persons with disabilities can face barriers with information that is:
  - in standard print;
  - in writing; or
  - visual information.
- You can remove these barriers with alternate formats, such as:
  - plain language;
  - large print; and
  - braille.
- You can find information on other ways to remove barriers in the sections on:
  - Communication based on technology; and
  - Face-to-face communication.

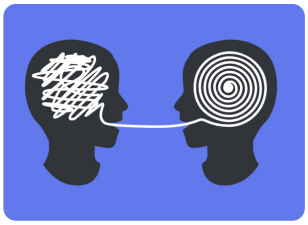
General best practices

- Be respectful when you refer to persons with disabilities.
- Use images that show persons with disabilities in a respectful way.
- Do audience testing with persons with disabilities to ensure that:
  - the communication is accessible; and
  - the message is clear.
- Use tools such as Microsoft Word's Accessibility Checker.
  - This tool identifies and helps remove accessibility issues in Word documents.
- Provide a point of contact and options for people to seek help or other information. For example:
  - a telephone number;
  - a TTY number; and
  - an email address.

- When a person with a disability asks for documentation in alternate formats, give it to them as soon as you can.
- When you prepare print materials in advance, make sure to prepare alternate formats as well.

Plain language

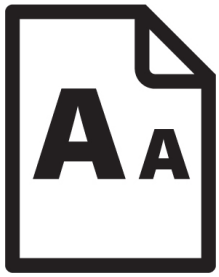
- Plain language applies to all written information, including webpages and emails.
- Plain language benefits everyone; not just persons with disabilities.
  - In emergencies, people will more quickly understand and remember what to do.



- Follow the plain language writing rules below.
  - Write in short sentences and remove unnecessary words.
  - Write at the Grade 8 level to reach most people.
  - Use pictograms, which help communicate key pieces of information quickly.
  - Use the active voice.
  - Use short, everyday words and avoid technical jargon.
  - Don’t use acronyms.
  - Maximize the use of bulleted or numbered lists.
  - Explain new or complicated ideas.
  - Make sure each page has white space and is not filled with text.

Tip – readability checkers

- Use an editing tool, such as the one in Microsoft Word, that checks a document for:
  - language comprehension level;
  - punctuation;
  - grammar; and
  - overuse of the passive voice.
- You can use other free online apps to improve the readability of documents. The Hemingway app is a good example.



Large print

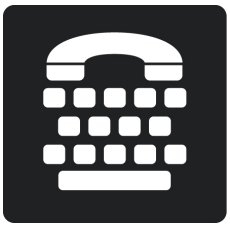
- Standard-sized print can be a barrier, even when using a magnification device or software. It could be the case because:
  - the print may still not be large enough;
  - there may not be enough colour contrast; or
  - only a few letters at a time might be displayed.
- Use 14-point font with good colour contrast as a default unless required to provide a larger print version.
  - Requests for larger print are typically for 18-point font.

Braille

- Some people who are blind read documents that are printed in braille.
- Documents can be printed in braille using a braille printer or embosser. There are companies that specialize in doing this.

Signs

- Inaccessible signage can result in many persons with disabilities missing key information.
- It is especially important that signs (exterior and interior) conveying emergency information are accessible. These may include directional signage for COVID-19 assessment centres and healthcare settings. These signs may indicate where to:
  - obtain a test;
  - receive necessary medical attention;
  - emergency doors and exits;
  - identify areas designated for persons with disabilities; and
  - where communication assistive devices are located.



Dos and don’ts for signage

What to include on signs

- Use accessibility symbols to identify communication assistive devices. For example:
  - the ear symbol to identify a hearing induction loop; and
  - a telephone symbol to identify a teletypewriter (TTY). See Communication based on technology.
- Use high colour contrast with the background (minimum of 4:1). For example, black text on a white background or vice versa.
- Use braille, raised print and raised pictograms on the same sign.
- Ensure the braille conveys the same information as the print.
- Use sans-serif typeface (for example, Arial and Helvetica) and numbers in Arabic (for example, 1, 2, 3).
- The signs should be large.
- Use text supplemented by pictograms.

What to avoid on signs

- Avoid red on a black background.
- Do not use:
  - italics;
  - stylized print;
  - underlining; and
  - block of capitals.
- Don’t use signs that are sandwich boards or that protrude from the wall. These create hazards for persons with disabilities, especially people:
  - who are blind;
  - who have low vision; and
  - who use a mobility aid.

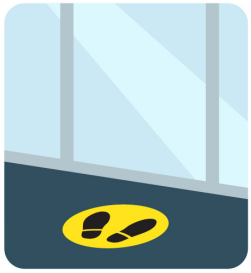
About positioning of signs

- Identify a quiet area in noisy environments.
- Identify areas designated for persons with disabilities.
- Identify areas where communication assistive devices are located.
- Position at key decision points (for example, washrooms).
- Place on walls and do not suspend from ceilings.
- Position to avoid shadow areas and glare.
- Use glare-free surfaces.

Electronic signs

- If a sign is electronic, ensure the content has a good colour contrast (minimum of 4:1).

Alternatives to signage



- People who are blind or who have low vision may not be able to see indicators on the floor. These are often used to tell people where to stand to ensure appropriate physical distancing during COVID-19.
  - Where necessary, offer to guide the person. Make sure to do it while respecting public health guidelines.
  - Reassure the person that you have taken the necessary precautions.
- Variable message signs can be a good source of information during emergencies. These signs can provide information on COVID-19.
  - Example: Those found along highways. They can remind people about physical distancing.

Other resources

- Accessibility Glossary – Translation Bureau, Public Works and Government Services Canada
- Writing Tips Plus: Clear communication: overview of the writing process and techniques – Translation Bureau, Public Works and Government Services Canada
- A Way with Words and Images: Suggestions for the portrayal of persons with disabilities – Employment and Social Development of Canada
- TV Access for People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing: Closed Captioning – Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission
- TV Access for People who are Blind or Partially-Sighted: Described Video and Audio Description – Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission
- Learn about Accessibility and TV – Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission
- Message Relay Services – Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission
- Video Relay Services (VRS) – Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission
- Web Accessibility Initiative – World Wide Web Consortium (W3C)

Contact us!

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