



CHARTERED INSTITUTE  
OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

# Inclusive Communications

## Skills Guide

## Contents

|    |                          |   |
|----|--------------------------|---|
| 1  | Introduction             | 3 |
| 2  | General Tips             | 3 |
| 3  | Use of Language          | 4 |
| 4  | Diagrams and Images      | 4 |
| 5  | Layout, Format and Fonts | 5 |
| 6  | Colour                   | 6 |
| 7  | Videos                   | 6 |
| 8  | Accessible Websites      | 7 |
| 9  | Social Media             | 7 |
| 10 | Alternative Formats      | 8 |

## Introduction

Your communications should be written, produced and distributed in a way that means they are inclusive to all. There are approximately 13.9 million disabled people in the UK. As a group, disabled people form a large part of your potential audience regardless of which sector you are in. The way in which disabled people access your communications may be different from non-disabled people; and people with different disabilities have different needs or experience different 'barriers' to accessing your information. As a professional communicator you do not need to be an expert on different disabilities, but your communications should not inadvertently exclude anyone and you should know how to reach the widest possible audience.

The *Equality Act 2010* protects disabled people (and other disadvantaged groups) from discrimination in employment and in the provision of goods and services. If the way you communicate with disabled people as employees or customers is found to be discriminatory, your organisation could be liable. The best way to avoid legal action is to take a best practice approach to producing inclusive communications.

## General tips

- Always consider who the audience is for each and every piece of work. Is your internal audience different from your external audience, do you actually know who you are trying to reach and by what communication channels?
- Allow time and budget for producing alternative formats and making 'reasonable adjustments' such as providing live captions on webinars.
- Inclusive design can save you time and money; the more accessible and inclusive your communications are the less time and money will be spent on making adjustments.
- Accessibility or inclusivity does not mean you have to compromise on good design and brand integrity; it just needs to be factored into the creative process.
- Best practice in web accessibility (WCAG guidelines) should be applied to other digital communications, including social media platforms.
- Don't assume that your designers or developers understand what inclusive design is. Make sure you have digital communications tested for accessibility and usability by different user groups, including people with disabilities.
- Include accessibility or inclusive design as an essential requirement for each project.

## Use of language

Shorter and clearer documents can be read more quickly and easily by everyone, especially those who have a learning difficulty such as dyslexia (or for someone whose first language is not English). The use of Plain English is recommended as a standard approach. Plain and simple language might help reduce the need for providing alternative formats such as "Easy Read" (a format recommended for people with learning disabilities).

Some disabled people or people with an intellectual disability may have a lower than average reading age; overly complex language can make your key messages harder to understand. Age-related conditions such as dementia can also make reading difficult. Similarly, people with certain types of visual impairments may find it difficult to read overly complex text.

## Diagrams and images

A clear diagram can convey a lot of information, and helps people to understand the message more quickly. Diagrams are useful for your audiences, and particularly for communicating with people with learning disabilities.

We use images to provide evidence, illustrate a point or to convey a mood. Some people receiving your communications may not be able to view the image in the same way; this could be someone with a visual impairment or a learning disability or difficulty such as dyslexia.

In print communications it is important to label images and diagrams, and for more complex graphics (e.g. a graph or pie-chart), providing a short description of the information the image is communicating makes the image more inclusive for people with a learning disability.

In digital communications such as Word documents, PDFs or web-based communications, it is essential that all images and graphics are 'tagged' with alternative text or 'alt text', so that those using a screen-reader (a device which reads out what is on screen) also get a description of the image being used even if they can't see it.

If you are using photographs of people to illustrate your communications, it is best practice to ensure that your selection is a diverse range of people and where possible, you should try to ensure images of different groups, including people with disabilities are positively portrayed.

Shading or pictures behind the text can reduce the colour contrast between the text and the background. A blurring of the colours or a weakening of the definition between text and shading/images will make the communication more difficult for some and impossible for others to access. Highlight words or key facts by placing them into a text box or using a larger font size instead.

## Layout, format and fonts

Most people in the UK read from left to right so it is best to left align your copy. When your text is left aligned, the eyes and brain know where to go to at the start of every line. When text is centralised the reader has to work harder to find the start of each line.

When laying out your copy you should use unjustified text where possible. Justified or centralised text puts uneven spaces between words. Unjustified text is easier to read as the spaces between words are regular and the reader knows what to expect.

Often we underline words or titles to add emphasis, but this can make the word harder to read for some people. Your eyes have to work harder to separate the word from the line to read it. Emphasis to a word or title can be added by using bold font or a larger or different style of font.

Italics are commonly used to denote a real name or a quote or to add emphasis, but they can make the words more difficult to read. The slant of the letters changes the weighting of the font in the reader's eye, making it appear less solid. Your readers need to work harder to identify the letters and words. Use quotation marks to signal a quote or a name and use a bold font for added emphasis – but use it sparingly!

We learn to read words that use lower case letters, only using capital letters at the start of sentences. Using capital letters for full words, titles or sentences makes it harder for the reader to identify the words. The most accessible style of writing to read is 'sentence case'. Again, if you would like to highlight words, use bold, or increase the size of the font.

Your font choice can have a big impact on the accessibility of your communications. One of the most accessible and most widely available fonts is Arial; others include Calibri, Century Gothic, Trebuchet and Verdana. All these fonts are 'sans serif' fonts. Some people find it difficult to read serif fonts, because they distract the eyes and the brain from the overall shape of the letter. The use of serif fonts in digital publications can also be problematic as the pixilation on screen can distort the serif, causing the word to blur around the edges.

The UK Association for Accessible Formats recommends using a minimum of 12 point fonts, and ideally 14 point fonts for clear print publications. For digital communications, most readers will be able to customise the size of the font on their computer screen via their internet browser, but it is still considered best practice not to publish anything smaller than the equivalent of Arial 12 pt. If you are producing a document in large print as an alternative format, 16 point is the minimum recommended font size, but you should ideally use 18 point or above.

The choice of font and font size may be pre-determined by your organisation's brand guidelines. If the main font is a serif font, it may be good to use a sans serif font for alternative versions of the communication and to get the brand guidelines updated to reflect that.

## Colour

Colour is a vital component of your brand communications, but you may not be aware that around 1 in 12 men and 1 in 200 women have colour vision deficiency (CVD), which is better known as colour blindness. Most people who are colour blind can't fully see red, green or blue light. There are different types of colour blindness and the most common type is red/green colour blindness. This makes it difficult for people to identify some shades of greens from browns, or browns from reds, or blues from purples. More information on how to use colour more inclusively is available from the Colour Blind Awareness organisation.

For people with low vision or visual impairments the contrast between colours used in print and digital communications can present an accessibility barrier. There are a variety of free tools on the internet which allow you to check the colour contrast of text on a certain background. Be mindful that the colour brightness and luminosity are different factors to consider. You will also need to consider the type of communication you are producing; the application of certain colour combinations works well in a digital format with the back-lighting you get on-screen, but you may find on paper that the effect is dulled or that the sheen of the paper makes it harder to distinguish the colours.

## Videos

If you are producing a video, you should factor in getting the text captioned (subtitled) and having an audio description recorded as well. This means you have one version of the video that is as inclusive to different groups as possible. If you are working on a tight budget, it is possible to use the free captioning services available on YouTube or Vimeo.

If you are displaying the video on your website or in a digital newsletter and you don't have captioning and/or audio description, you should provide a Word document (or accessible PDF) transcript of the video, or at least make it known that a transcript is available on request.

If you are planning to show a video to a group of clients or employees as part of a presentation you should ask beforehand whether anyone has any particular access requirements, and try to cater for them in advance or follow up as soon as possible with an alternative format.

## Accessible websites

The way websites are designed can sometimes create barriers for people accessing the internet with the use of assistive technology or for those with visual, cognitive or mobility impairments. Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1) have been produced by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C, the web's governing body).

WCAG is a set of checkpoints that help ensure that web sites are designed and written properly. Although the guidelines do not explicitly cover other forms of digital communications such as newsletters or marketing campaigns, it is advisable to apply the same principles.

You should carry out an accessibility and usability check on your existing website(s) to see if there are any barriers you need to remove. Web content changes rapidly and can be added by many different people in an in-house team or agency. Even if your content management system has certain required fields such as labels for images it does not necessarily mean they are being filled in correctly.

When commissioning a new website, accessibility and usability should be a key component of the project and design brief. Ask your web developer whether they are familiar with the WCAG guidelines. You should also factor in time and budget for disabled user testing at different stages in the website design and development before the website goes live.

## Social media

Social media platforms have recently added accessibility settings so that you can make your content more widely accessible to users with disabilities. In most cases you have to actively enable or seek out the accessibility options when adding in photo or video content. Twitter and Facebook were among the first of the major platforms to include accessibility features (Instagram, LinkedIn and others have followed suit):

### Twitter

You can add 'alt text' to images shared on Twitter by enabling the accessibility features on any user account. To do this go to Settings and privacy > Accessibility > turn on Compose image descriptions. You will then be able to add a short image description to the photo, meme or infographic you are including in the post.

If you are including a video in a Tweet, this should be captioned and audio described before you upload it.

### Facebook

Facebook automatically adds 'Alt text to images included in posts. However, the machine-generated text does not offer as much detail as tags written by a human. To add your own 'alt text' to an image select a new post, select Photo/Video, select the photo you want to add, and click Edit Photo. Then click Alt Text. The automatically generated 'Alt text' will be shown on the left side of your photo. Click Override and add your own description of the image.

As with Twitter (or any other social media platform) you should add captions and audio description to videos shared on Facebook. You can do this by adding a caption file, or you can upload your videos to YouTube first and add captions in the process, then share the videos on Facebook.

In addition to making the content you are sharing on social media more inclusive, it is also important to consider your messaging and use of language. Avoid over-using hashtags and abbreviations as this will make the posts harder for some users to understand. And, if you are linking to content hosted elsewhere, such as a report or a webform, this content needs to be in an accessible format as well.

Details on how to make other social media platforms more inclusive are available in [this blog](#).

## Alternative formats

Always offer an alternative format. Ensure you include some clearly positioned (and readable) text that offers the reader the chance to contact you for an alternative format such as an accessible PDF, large print, Easy Read, digital, audio or Braille versions of the communication. Only offer what you are sure you have readily available and plan the production and publication of alternative formats at the same time as the main communication.

If you publish a guide on your website that is not in an accessible format, it is best practice to offer alternative formats alongside the 'original' so the person requiring it does not have to ask for it. Everyone in the communications team should be made aware of the availability of alternative formats.

## THANKS

By Catherine Grinyer MCIPR

Catherine is founder and Director of Big Voice Communications, a specialist inclusive communications consultancy. Working with a range of clients in diversity and inclusion, Catherine leads award-winning projects, and was Highly Commended for the Best Diversity Resource in the Excellence in Diversity Awards. As an Associate of the Employers Network for Equality & Inclusion (enei), Catherine develops and delivers best practice guidance and training on inclusive communications. She recently co-authored an essay, "Why digital inclusion matters to your communications now" which was published in Platinum, the CIPR's 70th anniversary book showcasing excellence in public relations. From 2015-2017 Catherine was on the council of the British Assistive Technology Association (BATA) and from 2013-2017 she was Chair of the CIPR's Diversity & Inclusion Forum. Catherine was previously Director of Communications at Business Disability Forum for 7 years; leading an award-winning rebrand in 2012.

Last updated: November 2019