



Foundation for
Information Technology
Accessibility

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Making Information Accessible

Practical advice on designing, producing
and planning for accessible information.

Primary information sources:

1. Royal National Institute for the Blind
2. Producing accessible information, a practical and strategic guide, Employers' Forum on Disability.

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Why should I make information accessible?

You should produce your information in a way that **ALL** your customers can read because:

- Its fair - Disabled persons including blind and partially sighted people should receive information that is accessible to them. Information enables all of us to make decisions and lead independent lives.
- Its the law - There is now a legal duty to meet the information needs of your disabled customers following the implementation of Act 1 of 2000, the Equal Opportunities (Disabled Persons) Act
- It makes business sense - There are around 40,000 disabled persons in Malta. This is a sizeable customer base which cannot be ignored. Meeting the needs of all your customers makes good business sense.

It is estimated that 10% of the Maltese population have an impairment. This means that a large number of your customers will either have a disability themselves or be close to someone who is disabled. And, since disabilities tend to increase with age, many of your customers will experience disability at some time in their lives.

These customers will need the same information as everybody else. And some will need information to be provided in a different form. This summary will help you get your message across to all of them.

In many cases only small changes are needed to make information accessible for most people. Some people with more complex needs will require you to have a more imaginative approach.

How can I make information accessible to all?

Blind and partially sighted people read information in different ways. For many partially sighted people, well-designed print information using a minimum of 12 point text is enough, although RNIB recommend 14 point, to reach more people with sight problems.

Others will need this information in a different format to standard print. This could be larger print, spoken word audio on cassette tape, braille, electronic documents on floppy disk or over the internet. One

format cannot suit everyone. You should produce information in a range of formats.

How much does it cost?

Making information accessible is often cheaper and easier than many people think. When compared with how much your company or organisation spends on standard print information, the cost is relatively small. For example, adopting Clear Print guidelines¹ can be done immediately and at virtually no cost.

Keep in mind the diversity of your customers

Such things as simple, plain language and well-laid out documents should be the rule because they are appreciated by all. Beyond this, you need to consider how else you might provide information to meet the different needs of the range of your customers. This will mean providing information in other ways. This summary gives details of some of them, but you need to think creatively about what you do, and also be guided by your customers.

The formats you use should, between them, meet the needs of most of your customers. Even so, a small number may need other arrangements. Discuss with them how you can help. For example, some people may prefer to have information given to them on the telephone rather than on paper. Sometimes they may ask to talk to someone face to face – perhaps because they want help in filling out a form. You should aim to meet these individual requests.

Where you make special arrangements, this should be done in a way that does not draw attention to the person who needs information, or causes them embarrassment in any way.

Disability awareness

It is vital that everybody who has contact with your customers fully understands the issues which affect disabled people. For example:

¹ See Reference Section

- Assuming people who cannot speak clearly cannot understand you.
- Not allowing enough time – for example if someone has difficulty putting their thoughts into words or when talking to someone who is using a textphone.
- Unknowingly using words and phrases which can be offensive.
- Sounding patronising.

Staff need to be sensitive and helpful in their approach to any problem your customers may have. It is helpful if they appreciate that these problems are not due to failings on the part of disabled people, but are the fault of products and services which have not been designed to meet their needs.

Good practice: arrange for all who have contact with members of the public to have disability equality training.

Disability Equality Training explores the concept of people being disabled by society's barriers and attitudes, highlighting the role of the organisation in the removal of those barriers and in the changing of attitudes. The training may include an element of 'awareness' - customer care, etiquette and appropriate language for instance - This training is provided by the National Commission Persons with Disability.

An information strategy

One way to make sure your organisation is meeting the needs of all your customers is to develop an accessible information policy and guidelines.

A formal strategy for providing accessible information should help you develop consistent policies and make sure they are followed through. It should be part of an overall information strategy, rather than something tacked on at the end. It will carry more weight if it is part of your corporate mission, with a senior member of staff having responsibility for it. The strategy is more likely to work if it is understood and supported by everyone in the organisation. So internal communication is important.

Check the information you produce and prioritise it. Some information should be available from the outset in different formats to standard print, for example information for mass distribution, aimed at older

people, or on issues such as health. Other information should be available in different formats when a customer requests it.

When you produce information in a range of alternative formats it should be:

- equivalent quality as standard print
- same price as standard print
- available at same time as standard print.

It is essential to plan the production of the alternative formats at the same time as planning your standard print version. Accessible information guidelines will help you do this by making the production of alternative formats part of the planning process. It will also raise staff awareness of the needs of blind and partially sighted customers.

Planning

- Plan ahead so that all formats are available at the same time.
- Anticipate the possible demand for information in each format rather than waiting for the demand to show up. Keep this under review. Take up is likely to increase as people become more familiar with what is possible or available.
- Tell people what you have done. Include details of alternative formats in general publicity and in your mainstream publications.

Budget

- Build in budgets for the production and distribution of accessible information.

Internal communication

- Keep staff informed. New staff may not be fully aware of the needs of disabled people or of their obligations under the EOA. Many people still think disability is all about wheelchairs, but it is not.

Easier for all – basic good practice

These rules make information easier for everybody, but are particularly important for disabled people.

Plain language

People who do not consider themselves as disabled may have some difficulty with reading, writing or basic arithmetic. Although abilities vary widely it makes sense to write as simply and clearly as possible. The design of the publication should also help get the message across.

- Use simple words and short sentences. Write in a language your readers will understand - avoid jargon, technical or bureaucratic language. If you have to use a technical term, explain it.
- Only give one message at a time in each sentence.
- Use active rather than passive voice. For example 'We consider' rather than 'It is considered'.
- Address people directly - 'you' rather than 'the recipient'.

Design and layout (print based media)

- Avoid cramped layouts.
- Keep lines short. Narrow columns are easier to read than long lines.
- Leave enough space between columns.
- Use a ragged right hand margin.
- Divide text into short chunks.
- Avoid over elaborate or unusual type faces.
- Avoid design features which may lead to confusion, such as printing text on top of images.
- Do not run text around illustrations as this usually results in lines of unequal length, which can be difficult to read.
- Where possible, use pictures or drawings to back up text.
- Use clear headings and navigation aids such as a content list, bullet points and rules to separate unrelated sections.
- Make sure there is enough contrast between text and its background.

Forms

Forms which have to be filled in need to have enough space. People with visual impairments often have larger handwriting, and many people find it difficult to write in small boxes.

These rules are all common sense. But they make commercial sense too. No one will thank you for publications which are confusing or hard to understand or read. Shorter concise publications should reduce the cost of design, printing, storage and translation into other formats.

Accessible formats

Making your information more accessible through auxiliary aids or services could include providing the information using some of the following methods:

- in clear standard print;
- in large print;
- on audio tape (with descriptions of any diagrams);
- in braille (including tactile diagrams or descriptions);
- on video (with audio description and/or subtitles and Maltese Sign Language);
- in a format accessible to people with learning disabilities-(use of simple language and pictures);
- by phone (including textphone);
- face to face;
- on disk;
- on CD-ROM;
- on DVD;
- by e-mail;
- on a website (ensuring that websites are accessible to disabled persons).
- Clear print
- Large print
- Tape
- Braille
- Websites
- Electronic text
- Signs
- Videos
- Recognising your audiences
- Deafblindness
- Useful contacts

How can I let people know that accessible information is available?

Once you have produced your alternative formats, you need to let your customers know they are available. Unfortunately, many blind and partially sighted people have low expectations of getting information in a way they can read, so they don't ask for it. This is often misinterpreted by organisations as lack of demand.

Every standard print publication should have a clear, large print statement (16 point) in a prominent place about the availability of alternative formats. Local radio, public libraries, Talking Newspapers and local societies for blind and partially sighted people are also useful ways to reach people with sight loss.

Reference Section

Given the vast range of media types and means of communications available, it is impossible to cover all areas, and this list is not meant to be an exhaustive one. The points outlined hereunder are meant to facilitate the work of media producers, in ensuring that the overarching anti-discrimination principles defined within the Equal Opportunities (Disabled Persons) Act are observed.

The Foundation for Information Technology Accessibility (FITA) accessible information consultancy service provides information, training and support to help businesses make their services and products accessible to people with sight problems. To find out more visit www.knpd.org/mittsfita

Clear print

Clear print is a design approach which better takes into account blind and partially sighted readers.

Simply, a Clear Print document will find a wider audience. The solutions we propose are straightforward and inexpensive, focusing on some basic design elements, for example font, type size, contrast and page navigation.

Clear Print differs from large print in the size of the type used (known as point size). Clear Print documents set text in a minimum type size of 12 point (although we recommend 14 point to reach more customers with sight problems). Large print documents are produced in a larger type size, ranging from 16 to 22 point.

Clear Print guidelines are based on our experience of the issues over many years together with advice from experts in the field. Currently more research is underway into areas such as contrast, type size and page layout. RNIB hosts a scientific advisory panel to ensure that our guidelines are based on sound research and take expert opinions into account.

Type size

The size of the type (known as point size) is a fundamental factor in legibility. We recommend a typeface between 12 to 14 point. To make sure you reach more people with sight problems it's better to go for 14 point.

Contrast

The better the contrast between the background and the text, the more legible the text will be. Note that the contrast will be affected by the size and weight of the type. Black text on white background provides best contrast.

Typeface

As a general rule, be guided by typefaces such as Arial, Univers and New Century Schoolbook. These are all good examples of clear and legible typefaces.

Avoid simulated handwriting and ornate typefaces as these can be difficult to read.

Type styles

Capital letters and italicised text are both generally harder to read. A word or two in capitals is fine but avoid the use of capitals for continuous text. We advise that italic text is not used where an alternative emphasis is available.

Leading

The space between one line of type and the next (known as leading) is important. As a general rule, the space should be 1.5 to 2 times the space between words on a line.

Type weight

People with sight problems often prefer bold or semi-bold weights to normal ones. Avoid light type weights.

Numbers

If you print documents with numbers in them, choose a typeface in which the numbers are clear. Readers with sight problems can easily misread 3, 5, 8 and 0.

Line length

Ideally, line length should be between 60-70 letters per line. Lines that are too long or too short tire the eyes. The same applies to sentence and paragraph lengths, which should also be neither too long nor too short.

Word spacing and alignment

Keep to the same amount of space between each word. Do not condense or stretch lines of type. We recommend aligning text to the left margin as it is easy to find the start and finish of each line and keeps the spaces even between words. We advise that you avoid justified text as the uneven word spacing can make reading more difficult for people with sight problems.

Columns

Make sure the margin between columns clearly separates them. If space is limited, use a vertical rule.

Reversing type

If using white type, make sure the background colour is dark enough to provide sufficient contrast.

Setting text

Avoid fitting text around images if this means that lines of text start in a different place, and are therefore difficult to find. Set text horizontally as text set vertically is extremely difficult for a partially sighted reader to follow. Avoid setting text over images, for example photographs. This will affect the contrast and, if a partially sighted person is avoiding images, they will miss the text.

Forms

Partially sighted people tend to have handwriting that is larger than average, so allow extra space on forms. This will also benefit people with conditions that affect the use of their hands, such as arthritis.

Navigational aids

It is helpful if recurring features, such as headings and page numbers, are always in the same place. A contents list and rules to separate different sections are also useful. Leave a space between paragraphs as dividing the text up gives the eye a break and makes reading easier.

Printing

Avoid glossy paper because glare makes it difficult to read. Choose uncoated paper that weighs over 90 GSM. As a general rule, if the text is showing through from the reverse side, then the paper is too thin.

Format

When folding paper, avoid creases which obscure the text. People who use screen magnifiers need to place the document flat under the magnifier, so try not to use a binding method that may make it difficult to flatten the document.

Large print

For many blind and partially sighted people, larger print is essential. No single size is suitable for everyone, but most people prefer their large print in the range of 16 to 22 point.

If possible, for example with personal communication, always ask your customer which size suits best.

You can produce simple large print documents yourself in-house with your word processor, but more complex jobs may need to be sent to a commercial printer.

Tape

Spoken word audio on tape or CD has the benefit that everyone is able to use it except those with very poor hearing. It is also ideal for people with learning difficulties, low literacy levels, or those who may have problems with their hands.

Once you have chosen to produce spoken word audio on tape or CD, you will need to decide whether to do it yourself, or to use a transcription agency.

Doing it yourself may be appropriate if responding to an individual request, whilst an agency can produce audio material to professional quality, often including music and other effects.

Braille

Braille is a writing system of raised dots which enables people to read by touch. Many blind and partially sighted people prefer particular types of information in braille, for example information to be used in meetings or to be read silently.

Braille may be produced in-house if you have braille translation software, some basic training and an embosser (braille printer). It is more common for braille to be professionally produced by a transcription agency.

Websites

It's important to design your website so it's flexible. Customers should be able to adjust text and colour settings in their browser to suit their individual needs.

Other customers will browse your website using "text to speech" software. Careful design is paramount for people accessing the web using speech access because inappropriate use of HTML can make a website unreadable.

For a full explanation of accessible web design visit the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) published by the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI), which is part of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C).

The Foundation for IT Accessibility (FITA) offers a commercial consultancy service on website accessibility, including website audits, presentations and seminars. For more information visit FITA's website at www.knpd.org/mittsfita.

Electronic text

Making your information available in an electronic format can be a cheap and easy way to reach a growing number of blind and partially sighted people who use a computer with text-to-speech or screen magnification software, or other 'access technology' device.

Electronic information includes email and Microsoft Word documents which can be sent on floppy disk, CD-ROM, attached to an email or downloaded from a website.

Signs

A well-designed, legible sign system can benefit everyone by increasing people's awareness of their surroundings and helping them to get around.

There are four types of function for signs: information, direction, identification and safety.

Ensure that your signs are well designed, are enhanced by tactile symbols, and placed in appropriate location for their function.

The sign design guide, written by the JMU Access Partnership, is highly recommended, and is available from RNIB Customer Services, telephone 0845 702 3153, email cservices@rnib.org.uk

Videos

Videos are a very effective way of communicating.

To ensure that the video material is effective, and accessible to everyone, certain steps should be taken when planning the content and producing the video.

Key areas to consider are:

- effective use of narration
- effective use of on-screen text and graphics
- ensuring music and sound effects enhance rather than confuse
- ensuring good overall sound quality
- considering audio description to enhance accessibility.

We encourage use of these guidelines right from the start of the process. It can be very difficult to make a pre-produced video accessible.

Recognising your audiences

If you are communicating with a blind or partially sighted person who has a learning or literacy difficulty, or if English is not their first language, then plain and simple text (known as plain English) can really help. By using short sentences, simple punctuation and no jargon, your message will come across more effectively.

It is also important to develop materials in a range of languages for people whose first language is not Maltese.

Deafblindness

Deafblindness is a disability individual to each person. It is very important to check with each customer on the best way of providing them with his or her information.

Some deafblind people have enough hearing to use the telephone. Others may have access to a text telephone or Typetalk. Sometimes deafblind people will need or prefer to access information and communicate with people through a personal communicator or interpreter.

Useful contacts

If you have any questions about the information contained here, please contact stanley.debono@gov.mt

To produce information in alternative formats (eg braille or audio) contact the Foundation for Information Technology Accessibility (FITA) on telephone number 2599-2659 for independent impartial advice about the options available - whether it involves doing the work or working out the ideal Braille related layout and design.