

Helping **Everyone** Join the Conversation

IOWA DD Council
Preparation, Participation, Power

Why is this important?

People with disabilities, people whose first language is not English, and people with limited education are often excluded from public discussions. This includes discussions and decisions about their own lives.

Everyone should have a chance to take part, share their ideas, and be heard. Making sure all people can participate, regardless of their abilities or background, leads to stronger communities and decisions.

It is important to understand that everybody has unique needs and abilities. People may need additional accommodations.

- An accommodation is a tool, change, or support that helps a person do a task or learn

The Iowa Developmental Disabilities Council can provide additional resources and training.

Keep reading to learn a few tips to help make meetings and public discussions welcoming and accessible for all.

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1. Use people-first language

Why? People-first language puts the person before the disability. A disability is only one part of who someone is. Only mention a disability when it is important to the conversation.

Examples of people-first language:

❌ **DON'T use: Disabled people**

✅ **DO use: People with disabilities**

❌ **DON'T use: Wheelchair-bound person**

✅ **DO use: Person who uses a wheelchair**

❌ **DON'T use: Non-disabled person**

✅ **DO use: Person without a disability**

There are exceptions to this rule. Not everyone prefers people-first language. This means they see their disability as an important part of who they are.

For example, some people prefer to be called autistic rather than a person with autism. Some people who are deaf prefer to be called deaf.

It is the person's choice, so ask them what their choice is.

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2. Use clear language

Why? We want people to understand what we say and write. Sometimes the way we communicate makes it harder for people to understand us. Clear language uses simple words, short sentences, and information that is easy to follow.

Clear language helps remove barriers and makes information easier for everyone to use.

Tips:

- Keep sentences short.
- Give each fact or idea its own sentence.
- Define any difficult words that must be used.
- Use bullet points or lists.
- Explain acronyms and/or provide a glossary for long documents.
- Avoid sarcasm and subtle humor.
- Stay clear of slang.
- Use an **active** tone, not a passive tone.
 - Passive tone: Your email will be answered.
 - **Active tone:** I will answer your email.
 - Passive tone: The bill was advocated by John.
 - **Active tone:** John advocated for the bill.

2. Use clear language - continued

Examples of simple words:

 Instead of: Stakeholders

 **Use: Groups**

 Instead of: Access

 **Use: Get**

 Instead of: Manage

 **Use: Do**

 Instead of: Finance

 **Use: Pay**

 Instead of: Facilitate

 **Use: Lead**

 Instead of: Utilize

 **Use: Use**

3. Use a reading level for all

Why? According to recent data from the U.S. Department of Education, more than half of Americans between the ages of 16 and 74 read below a sixth-grade level.

Written information should be easy for most people to understand.

Many document editing programs include readability tools. Check the help section of your program to see if this feature is available. Many artificial intelligence (AI) tools and free websites, such as [Readable.com](https://readable.com), can also help you check the reading level of your writing.

When you're writing, focus on:

- ☐ Using short sentences
- ☐ Using common words
- ☐ Only including one idea per sentence
- ☐ Explaining any acronyms you use
- ☐ Making it easy to understand

**If you think people might not understand what you've written,
make it simpler!**

4. Use respectful communication

- Do not assume a person who has limited, or no speech, cannot understand what is being said.
- Always speak to the person, not a companion, interpreter, or support person.
- Speak slowly and clearly.
- Do not pretend you understand what a person with limited speech is saying when you do not.
- Ask the person to tell you again what was said. Repeat what you understand.
- Allow people to finish their sentences. It may take time for them to communicate their thought.
- When asking questions of a group:
 - Ask one question at a time.
 - Avoid yes or no questions.
 - Ask why, how, and what questions.
 - Take time and wait for a response.
 - Respond to any attempt the person makes to communicate.

5. Prepare for your meetings

- Meetings should always be held in an accessible location. Avoid meeting rooms with background noise.
- Summarize difficult documents.
- Have someone welcome people, help them find where to go, and show them where the exits and restrooms are.
- Provide materials in different formats, such as large print, Braille, and audio. Use at least a 14-point font for all handouts. An 18-point font is recommended.
- Provide agendas and materials electronically ahead of the meeting.
- A screen reader can only read text. For people who use a screen reader, pictures and graphs need to be described.
- Offer support before and after meetings. Before the meeting, help people understand what will be discussed. After the meeting, answer questions and review important information.
- Speakers should describe themselves to the audience. During the discussion, people should state who they are before talking.
- At the beginning of the meeting, let everyone know that they can take a break whenever they may need one.
- Make sure everyone has a chance to share their ideas and take part in the meeting. Encourage all participants to have a role in the discussion.

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Want more resources?

Digital Access for Everyone Provided by Easterseals Iowa

About the Program:

- Easterseals Iowa's Digital Access for Everyone is a **1½-hour introductory course**.
- It provides an overview of the top five items that can help you make your content more accessible.
- The course is divided into navigation instructions, six modules, and an optional quiz.
- You may take the modules in any order.
- The course is FREE.

Learn more:
[Training.iowaAT.org](https://training.iowaAT.org)

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