INCLUSIVE COMMUNICATIONS
BEST PRACTICES + BROAD GUIDELINES

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Indicates links to tools or additional references

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

With the generous support of the Fresh Sound Foundation, we've created our first ever Inclusive Communications guide, with the intent of providing both communications and accessibility guidance to organizations and individuals in the network. In this guide, we cover a wide range of topics from digital accessibility to ethical storytelling to inclusive language. These topics and tips are not exhaustive; instead, we hope they can provide a starting point for those seeking to evaluate and strengthen their communications approaches. We recognize that there are many knowledgeable, experienced leaders and creators speaking more deeply on the topics covered here, and we encourage you to explore the many resources we referenced and drew from while putting this guide together.

River Network strengthens organizations and leaders to improve and protect their waterways, create climate-resilient communities, and ensure equitable access to safe, affordable drinking water. In our 2022 State of the Network Survey, we asked the network to identify areas we can provide more support in order to work towards these collective goals. 90% of respondents shared that they need more communications support, and 84% of respondents told us they need more Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) support. This guide is our first step in delivering this specific support to the network. Visit our website to learn more about River Network and explore additional resources and toolkits.

ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility guidelines are for making our communications platforms and content available, accessible, and clear to everyone.

TEXT LEGIBILITY

Is the text clearly presented?
Can it be read by screen readers and other assistive tools?

FONT

Use sans serif fonts. Choose fonts like **Arial** or **Calibri** to maximize readability.

Use adequate font size. Make sure text is legibly sized, especially for viewing on mobile devices.

Avoid special characters or custom fonts. While it might be tempting to use a website like **Fonts for Instagram** to add flair to captions, screen readers and other assistive tools cannot always read special characters and fonts.

[A screenshot of an Instagram profile with a red arrow pointing to custom fonts used in the bio. This text is clearly different than the standard Instagram profile text and uses serif letters, block letters, and other fonts that have been externally copy-pasted into Instagram.]
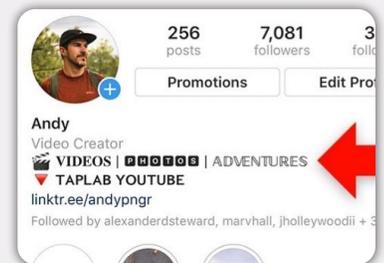
FORMATTING

Put hashtags and mentions at the end. Hashtags and mentions can be disruptive since screen readers will read "#" or "@" aloud. Place them at the end to minimize breaking up the content.

Limit line length. Long lines of text can interfere with comprehension, retention, and readability.

Align text to left. Do not justify text; this makes it more difficult to read. Always align to the left.

Add white space. Use line breaks and white space to break up big chunks of text.

ADDITIONAL TEXT GUIDELINES

Don't overuse capitals. All-caps words cannot always be read by assistive tools.

Use #CamelCase for hashtags. Always capitalize each word in a hashtag to differentiate words to a screen reader. Example: "#blacklivesmatter" might be read as Black Live Smatter.

Limit emoji use. Screen readers read emojis aloud - "😭" becomes "loudly crying face." Use emojis sparingly to avoid confusion.

Describe link text. Instead of links that say "click here" or "learn more," describe exact destination in links. For download links, include the file type and size. Example: (PDF, 92kB)

Inclusive Communication Guide | *Queensland Department of Education*

IMAGE DESCRIPTIONS

Image descriptions help to provide important context and information for people who are using screen readers and/or cannot view images.

ALT TEXT

Alternative, or alt, text is a brief, built-in type of image description that gives people basic information about an image. Alt text is generally not displayed on a page; it is either read aloud by a screen reader or used to replace an image that fails to load. Most platforms enable users to add alt text to their images before uploading.

Alt text should be concise and should only be used to describe images that provide necessary context or information. Decorative images, shapes, or patterns do not require alt text.
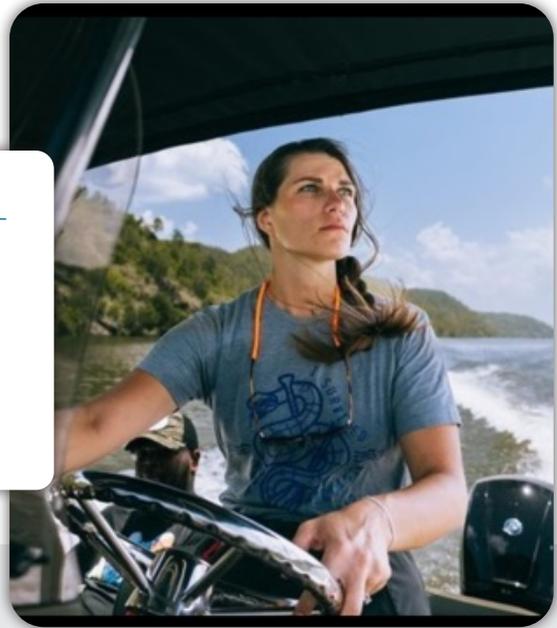
Alt Text | *Moz*

DESCRIPTIVE CAPTIONS

A descriptive caption, a more detailed type of image description, refers to information about an image that is detailed in the caption of an image and displayed to all users. While alt text generally only briefly describes the contents of an image, descriptive captions can be used to provide more nuanced context, such as humor or emotion. Descriptive captioning can be included in the text of any caption, post, or webpage.

Example

Alt text: a woman driving a boat

Descriptive caption: Justinn (she/her), a white woman wearing a blue t-shirt, steers a small motorboat across a lake on a sunny day. She is facing right and looking up into the distance with a determined expression.

SOME MORE HELPFUL TIPS
from Hootsuite's post,
"Inclusive Design for Social Media: Tips for Creating Accessible Channels":

- **Describe the content:** There's a huge gap between "Image of a chart," and something like, "A bar chart illustrates that there has been a year-over-year increase in forest fires, peaking at 100 this year."

- **Skip saying "image of" or "photograph of." The Royal National Institute of Blind People** says most screen readers prefer you don't.

- **Mention color** if it is important to understanding the image.

- **Share humor.** Descriptive text doesn't have to be overly formal and should do its best to express what's funny.

- **Transcribe text.** If the image has copy that is central to its meaning, make sure you include it in the description.

- **Learn from the best: WebAIM** offers tips and several examples, and copywriter **Ashley Bischoff's presentation** is very helpful.

- **Don't forget GIFs.** Twitter recently made **alt-text an option for GIFs**. If the platform does not support alt-text, include a description in the action.

VIDEO + AUDIO DESCRIPTION

Video descriptions and captions are critical for providing information about audio and video to users who are deaf, hard-of-hearing, or speak a different language. Video descriptions and captions also aid all users with information comprehension, absorption, and retention.

There are several different approaches:

SOME MORE HELPFUL TIPS

from Hootsuite's post,
"Inclusive Design for Social Media: Tips for Creating Accessible Channels"

Facebook

Auto-generate captions, write them yourself, or upload a SubRip (.srt) file. Automatic closed captioning is also available for Facebook Live and Workplace Live.

YouTube

Auto-generate captions, transcribe them, or upload a **supported file**. Errors can be corrected with the **caption editor**. Automatic captions are available in English for **YouTube Live**. **Community captions**, which allowed accounts to crowdsource captions and translations, has been discontinued.

Instagram

Automatic closed captioning is **now available** for IGTV Live and IGTV. Otherwise video captions must be burned in or encoded in advance. Add captions to your Instagram Stories, and TikTok and Snapchat videos, with custom text. **Cliptomatic** helps with this.

Twitter

Automatic closed captioning is available for video and audio, or upload an .srt file.

LinkedIn

Automatic closed captions are available for video, or upload an .srt file.

Descriptive audio

Described video is the narrated description of any important non-verbal elements in your video. This track is written and recorded to fit within the gaps between important audio elements. On social media, described video is typically "baked in" and cannot be turned off.

Descriptive transcript

Sometimes referred to as a media alternative transcript, these transcripts provide descriptions alongside dialogue, much like a script.

Live described video

Live video hosts should be familiar with descriptive video techniques, taking pauses to describe what's happening on screen. Accessible Media Inc. has a **good best practices guide**.

SUBTITLES

Subtitles are intended for users who hear but are unfamiliar with the language spoken in the video. Subtitles only transcribe spoken content and do not provide information about background sounds or music. Visual accessibility formatting of the subtitles is highly variable from source to source.

Rev *(speech-to-text captioning service)*

CLOSED CAPTIONS (CC)

Closed captions are intended for users who do not hear audio and communicate all important auditory information via text, including spoken content, background sounds, and music. This text is usually formatted to be visually accessible. Many platforms auto-generate video captions that can then be edited for accuracy.

SUBTITLES FOR DEAF AND HARD-OF-HEARING (SDH)

This third option, abbreviated as **SDH**, combines subtitles and closed captioning to make video content accessible to users who do not hear audio and are also unfamiliar with the source language of the video.

SDH Subtitles vs. Closed Captions: What's the Difference? | *3playmedia*

VIDEO DESCRIPTIONS

Video descriptions enable users who use screen readers to understand what is happening in a video. These descriptions provide information about visuals – think image descriptions, but for video.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION

For audio-only content, such as podcasts, spoken and background content should be conveyed in a caption or provided via a transcript.

AVOID FLASHING LIGHTS

These can trigger seizures for photosensitive individuals. GIFs and video should not flash more than three times in one second.

Web accessibility for seizures and physical reactions | *MDN Web Docs*

Photosensitive Epilepsy Analysis Tool (PEAT)

GIFS

Animated GIFs should generally be avoided as they can impose a variety of accessibility issues.

Even with alt text and descriptions, GIF issues include: triggering seizures in users with photosensitive epilepsy, distracting users with reading/attention disabilities, and slowing down webpage load time for users with a metered connection or older browser versions.

⚙ **Image Animated GIF** | *Equalize Digital,* **Accessible animated GIFs are pointless** | *tempertemper*

According to **Equalize Digital**, animated GIFs are only considered accessible if they meet the following criteria:

1 They are set to stop playing after 5 seconds.

2 Users have a way to pause or stop the GIF from playing.

3 There is high-quality alternative text describing the GIF.

4 The GIF's animation does not contain rapid blinking or flashing.

5 Any text contained in the GIF has appropriate color contrast with the background.

COLOR USAGE

Contrast: The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines **recommend** a color contrast ratio of at least 4.5:1. This ratio decreases for larger text and increases for smaller text.

⚙ **Colorzilla color picker chrome extension, MSF&W Contrast Ratio Calculator**

Don't use color to convey meaning. Use symbols instead of color to differentiate variables in graphs, charts, and other figures. Add clarifying labels if colors cannot be replaced by symbols.

Use a solid background when overlaying text on images so text is clearly legible.

Avoid green and red or blue and yellow combinations, as these can be difficult to read for people with red-green color-blindness.

Visualize links. Always underline and use color for links; add a link title when users hover over the link; avoid using color for non-link text.

⚙ **Guidelines for Visualizing Links** | *Nielsen Norman Group*

Accessibility Checkers
Compiled by *Hootsuite*

FACEBOOK:
FB Accessibility Page
FB Accessibility on Twitter
FB's **Navigation Assistant**
FB Accessibility Help Center
Submit FB Accessibility and Assistive Technology feedback

TWITTER:
Twitter Accessibility *account*
Twitter Able *account*
Twitter Together *account*
Twitter Safety *account*
Share feedback *on accessibility and other issues*

YOUTUBE:
YouTube accessibility *settings*
Using YouTube with a screen reader
YouTube *support*

PINTEREST:
Emotional Health Resources
Pinterest Help Center

LINKEDIN:
LinkedIn Disability Answer Desk

WEBPAGE ACCESSIBILITY

Use responsive layouts. Make sure the webpage layout adapts to clearly display content on different screen sizes, including computers, tablet devices, and mobile devices. Avoid overflow, which refers to scroll bars in both directions.

⚙ **Use responsive layouts and don't restrict the layout to portrait or landscape** | *Alex Chen's Access Guide*

Make all functionality available through the keyboard. Some users rely on keyboard navigation to view webpages. Make sure the entire site is easily and clearly navigable and functional via keyboard. For instance, if users are navigating using the "Tab" key, configure the page to highlight sections as if with a mouse hover.

⚙ **Make all functionality available through the keyboard** | *Alex Chen's Access Guide*

Make sure there are no keyboard traps. Keyboard users can get "trapped" in elements such as a calendar date picker, where they cannot exit out of the calendar. Make sure users can exit such elements using a keyboard button.

⚙ **Make sure there are no keyboard traps** | *Alex Chen's Access Guide*

Allow users to switch between multiple types of input. Different users might prefer to use voice, touch, keyboard, or mouse input, or they might need to switch input types depending on the context. For instance, someone who prefers voice input might want to type a password for privacy. Make sure a variety of input types are supported and users can easily switch between them.

⚙ **Make multiple types of input available** | *Alex Chen's Access Guide*

EMAIL BEST PRACTICES

Emails are one of the most consistent and frequent ways we reach out to our communities and communicate with one another. These practices are specific to improving email accessibility.

BUTTONS

Color Contrast – Best practice is to use a minimum 3:1 ratio for all buttons, text to button color. Also be sure to double check the button color against the email background color.

⚙️ **Colorzilla color picker chrome extension, MSF&W Contrast Ratio Calculator**

Use empty space around buttons. This ensures folks' fingers have ample space to click the correct links.

PHOTOS

Do not overlay important text within a photo. Screen readers cannot read text that you have put into a photo (I.e. with Photoshop or Canva) AND, not all email clients automatically download photos. If the text is essential to your message, pull it out into a text box instead. If for some reason the text MUST be embedded in the photo, be sure to also include it in the alt text.

Add alt text. Most email marketing tools have built-in functionality to easily add alt text. See the section above for guidance on how to create alt text.

TEXT

Left-align most text. Some text can be centered for emphasis, but try to align as much text as possible to the left, which makes it easier to read.

Underline all hyperlinks and use descriptive anchor text. Screen readers lump hyperlinks at the end of your email; if all your anchor text is "Read more" it will be impossible for folks to determine which links they want to access. Use descriptive anchor text like "Read the [name of publication]."

Use headers correctly. Headers (h1, h2, etc.) enable screen readers to move through your content. Use these headers with intention, so that folks can easily move from section to section. **See Slide 12 in this Firefly Partners presentation** for an example of what this looks like.

Make sure the font is large enough on your unsubscribe link. If the font is too small and folks cannot easily unsubscribe, they may mark it as spam instead, which hurts your deliverability.

MISCELLANEOUS

Double check that the language is clear in the html. If your email marketing tool allows, double check that the language is set correctly so screen readers know what language to read in. Look for the code that says lang="en" (the language is English, in this case).

Set all tables to role="presentation". This ensures screen readers know to read the text that is within your table.

⚙️ **2023 Email Accessibility Slides | *Nonprofit Technology Conference***

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Language frames the ways we relate, react, and communicate. It is vital to use precise, intentional language to make content accessible and appropriate for all.

PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE + IDENTITY-FIRST LANGUAGE

There are two ways to discuss disability:
PERSON-FIRST and **IDENTITY-FIRST**.

PERSON-FIRST: "A PERSON WITH A DISABILITY"

Some people prefer **person-first** language because it emphasizes that a person isn't defined by their disability.

IDENTITY-FIRST: "A DISABLED PERSON"

Some people prefer **identity-first** or "proud" language because it centers their identity.

Many inclusivity guidelines support defaulting to person-first language, but it is always important to ask someone about their language preferences before discussing their identities.

Social Justice Access Toolkit | *Detroit Disability Power*

PRONOUNS

Always **ask for people's pronouns** and include a person's pronouns in parentheses when first mentioning them in a caption, image, or text post. Clearly communicate the intended audience when you ask for pronouns so folks can decide what pronoun usage feels safest for them.

What and Why | *pronouns.org*

APPROPRIATE TERMINOLOGY

Always **avoid racialized metaphors** like blacklist / whitelist and other identity-based language – try saying "that's wild" instead of "that's crazy," or "we support" instead of "we stand with."

Continually interrogate the origins and usage of popular phrases. For instance, the phrase "long time no see," though commonly used today, originated as a way to mock the speech of Asian immigrants and Indigenous people.

Replace culturally appropriative language like "spirit animal" and "powwow."

Be intentional and precise with language use.

The terms "BIPOC" and "diversity," for instance, are very broad and should only be used when broad language is appropriate. If an organization serves a predominantly Black community, do not use BIPOC in place of Black – say Black. Or, if describing a group of people with varied racial identities, describe this group as racially diverse. A group of people can be diverse in many different ways – do not use "diversity" as a euphemism for marginalization.

This diagram from **Basic Diversity** represents many different layers and facets of what we broadly refer to as "diversity."
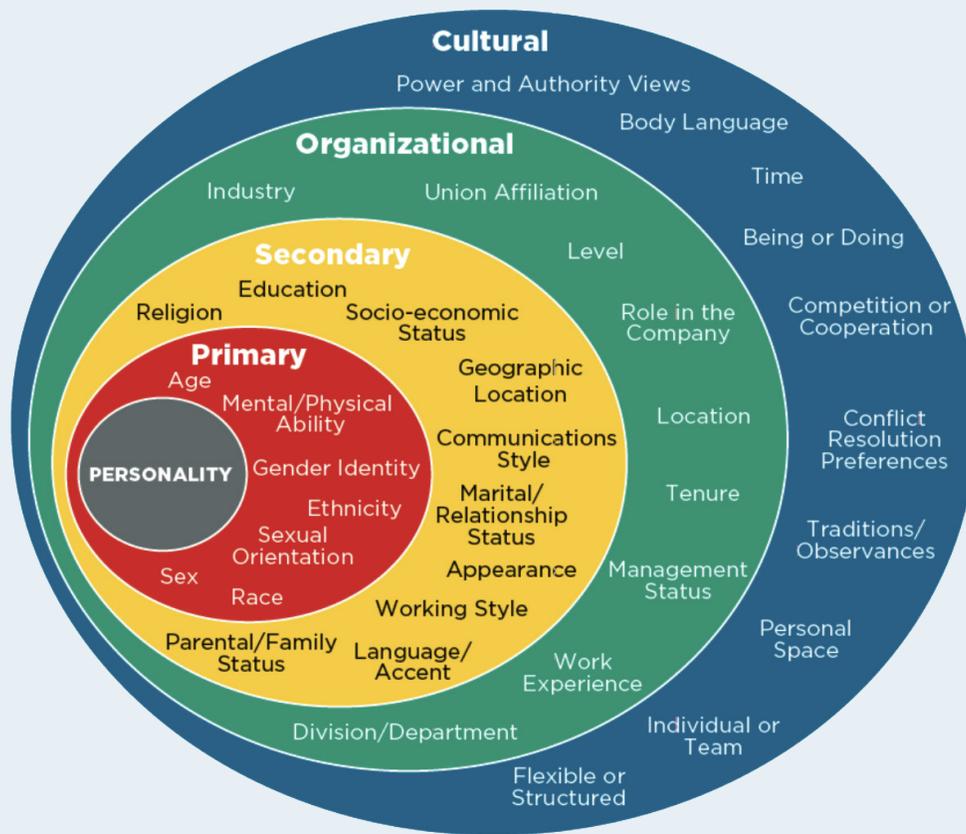
[A diagram of five concentric ovals representing different layers of diversity. The center oval only contains the word "identity." The other four, from inner to outer, are labeled: primary, secondary, organization, and cultural. Each of these ovals contains words that represent examples of this layer.

In primary, the words are: age, gender identity, ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation, and physical/mental ability. In secondary: religion, geographic location, marital/relationship status, communication style, parental/family status, socioeconomic status, language/accent, working style, appearance, education. In organization: industry, union affiliation, management status, role in the company, department/division, work experience, location, tenure, network, level. And finally, in cultural: power & authority views, time, body language, flexible or structured, competition or cooperation, conflict resolution preferences, transitions/observances, individual or team, personal space, being or doing.]

Inclusive language guidelines | *American Psychological Association,*
Should I Use the Adjective Diverse? | *Alex Kapitan*

CLEAR LANGUAGE

Avoid using jargon, slang, or technical terminology unless this language is clearly introduced and necessary to convey information.

Clearly introduce acronyms before referencing them.

Hemingway App

Use simpler vocabulary and shorter sentences for clarity. Stay away from idioms or figurative phrases that might be confusing.

Use sections and subsections to break down large chunks of text and logically present information.

Use active voice instead of passive voice.

AVOID GENDERED LANGUAGE

Avoid language that defaults to a gender binary. Try "chairperson" instead of "chairman," "esteemed guests" instead of "ladies and gentlemen."

Gender-Inclusive Language | *University of North Carolina's Writing Center*

AUTHENTIC, ACTIONABLE LANGUAGE

Always back statements of support and solidarity, such as land acknowledgements, with action. Broad messaging should still strive for precision and specificity, explicitly naming racism, classism, power dynamics, perpetrators of harm, and other relevant pieces of the big picture.

A guide to Indigenous land acknowledgement | *Native Governance Center,* **Honor Native Land Guide** | *US Department of Arts & Culture,* **Narrative Message Checklist** | *Race Class Narrative Action*

REJECT LINGUISTIC SUPREMACY

Support and preserve the linguistic choices of BIPOC partners, collaborators, organizations, authors, etc. Standard American English (SAE) is only one of many forms of English spoken in the US (others include African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Chicano English, etc.), but SAE is often expected and enforced in professional settings, privileging whiteness and perpetuating white supremacy. When necessary, language should be edited for clarity, not for strict adherence to SAE.

Linguistic White Supremacy | *Metropolitan State University of Denver,* **This Ain't Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!** | *Conference on College Composition and Communication*

ETHICAL + INCLUSIVE STORYTELLING

What does it mean to responsibly and respectfully share stories from our communities? How can we best approach the storytelling process, from choosing who to be in conversation with to asking thoughtful questions and sharing responses authentically and reciprocally?

CO-CREATION PRINCIPLES

Move at the speed of trust – don't just drop in on folks when a story is needed. Build a relationship before asking for someone's story, and stay in touch with storytellers after and continue to maintain a relationship. This ensures the storyteller's continued agency over sharing their story.

Prioritize the storyteller's needs. Ask why they're interested in sharing their story or what they hope to get out of the experience and prioritize these desires above organizational motivations.

Acknowledge and actively disrupt power dynamics. Consider how the interviewer's positionality will impact the storyteller's sense of comfort, openness, and formality. Explicitly name the dynamics at play and emphasize that there are no expectations beyond what the storyteller feels excited about sharing.

Compensate storytellers for their time. Storytelling is mental and emotional labor and should always be generously compensated.

Position storytellers as the experts. Approach the conversation with humility and an expectation of learning.

PREPARING FOR A CONVERSATION

Provide a clear outline of the expectations for the conversation. Beyond logistics, this means stating intentions for the storytelling process and outcome; explaining how, where, and why stories will be shared; and creating space for the storyteller to ask for specific support (list of talking points in advance, phone call instead of video, etc.). Emphasize that the storyteller will have full agency to alter, edit, or omit information after the interview.

Emphasize that stories will not be evaluated, judged, altered, or cherry-picked. Share that the goal is authenticity, not for the storyteller to "say the right thing" or be eloquent/polished. Encourage folks to lean into complexity and nuance over linearity or perfection.

DURING THE CONVERSATION

Create a safe space. Emphasize that the storyteller can share however much/little they would like in whatever way feels most authentic to their thoughts and feelings. At any point during the interview, they can also re-answer questions, in part or in full, if they would like to change or add on to their answers.

Let the storyteller take the lead. Follow threads that the storyteller brings forth rather than sticking to a predetermined set of questions. Emphasize that the storyteller can always tailor or skip questions in their responses.

AFTER THE CONVERSATION

Give the storyteller full agency over the final product. The storyteller should hold decision-making leadership over the story, including when/where/whether the piece is published. Emphasize that the storyteller can choose to remove the piece from public platforms at any point. Final decisions should be met with explicit and enthusiastic consent from the storyteller.

- **Questions to consider:** Who is the protagonist of the story? Who is dis/empowered? Whose needs and desires are centered?

Further considerations: Does someone's consent expire after a given amount of time? How frequently are we checking in with storytellers to ensure they are still comfortable with keeping content available to the public?

MISCELLANEOUS BEST PRACTICES

Here are some final considerations that weren't covered in previous categories!

Consider role representation. Avoid stereotyping and present people in diverse, intersectional ways. (Stereotype examples: woman in the kitchen, Black person playing basketball, etc)

Provide channels to receive feedback. Create clear, visible, and permanent opportunities for community members and audience members to submit feedback.

Incorporate visual diversity when authentic and appropriate. Make sure that people and stories being shared visibly and accurately reflect the diversity of the groups represented.

Pass the mic & hold community takeovers. When authentic and appropriate, give community members the opportunity for social media "takeovers" to share their stories.

How to Run a Smart Social Media Takeover in 7 Steps | *Hootsuite*

Content warnings. Always lead with content warnings for sensitive information, particularly around content involving violence, abuse, assault, hate speech, slurs, death, or self harm. If an image requires a content warning, flag it as sensitive and/or depending on the platform, precede it with an image that flags the following content.

A guide to content and trigger warnings | *The Mix,* **How to write a trigger warning** | *lookslikefilm*

Provide communications materials in appropriate/relevant languages. Consider the target audience and what additional language communications would help support engagement.

REFERENCES + RESOURCES

PRIMARY REFERENCES

- **Inclusive Design for Social Media: Tips for Creating Accessible Channels** | Hootsuite
- **16 Ways to Make Your Social Media Accessible & Inclusive** | LocaliQ
- **Access Guide** | Alex Chen
- **Disability-Inclusive Communications Guidelines** | United Nations
- **Guidelines to Make Your Social Media Platform Accessible** | Web Accessibility Initiative
- **Social Justice Access Toolkit** | Detroit Disability Power
- **Inclusive communication guide** | Queensland Department of Education

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Accessibility guidelines

- **7 tips to write content that is more accessible** | Community Centric Fundraising
- **The Ultimate Guide to Closed Captioning** | 3PlayMedia
- **SDH Subtitles vs. Closed Captions: What's the Difference?** | 3playmedia
- **Alt Text** | Moz
- **Web accessibility for seizures and physical reactions** | MDN Web Docs
- **Guidelines for Visualizing Links** | Nielsen Norman Group

Inclusive language

Broader resources and websites

- **Inclusive language guidelines** | American Psychological Association
- **The Conscious Style Guide**
- **Radical Copy Editor** | Alex Kapitan
- **The Diversity Style Guide**
- **Conscious and Inclusive Language Resources** | Rabbit with a Red Pen
- **Health Equity Considerations for Developing Public Health Communications** | Center for Disease Control and Prevention
- **Disability Language Style Guide** | National Center on Disability and Journalism
- **DEIJ Terminology Communications Guide** | Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay

Specific guides and articles

- **How did 'white' become a metaphor for all things good?** | Aradhna Krishna
- **Water Words Alternatives** | Climate Nexus WaterHub
- **What and Why** | pronouns.org
- **Gender-Inclusive Language** | University of North Carolina's Writing Center
- **A guide to Indigenous land acknowledgement** | Native Governance Center
- **Honor Native Land Guide** | US Department of Arts & Culture
- **How to Run a Smart Social Media Takeover in 7 Steps** | Hootsuite
- **A guide to content and trigger warnings** | The Mix
- **How to write a trigger warning** | lookslikefilm