

# TIP SHEET

## Creating Accessible Museums (2017)

# Creating Accessible Museums

Museums are making more of an effort to understand who their visitors are and why they come to museums. Understanding the wants and needs of visitors is “critical for exhibitions not only to be effective, educational and successful, but also to be accessible (i).”

Museum visitors come in all ages and backgrounds, bringing diverse needs, interests, and abilities to their visits. Exhibition planners should aim to **plan** and **develop** exhibitions that will be accessible to the widest possible audience (ii). This audience may include:

- Visitors from birth to 100+ years old
- Visitors with mobility, visual, hearing and/or cognitive disabilities
- Non-English speaking visitors
- Visitors with different backgrounds and learning styles.

Museums and other cultural institutions can best serve the public by making their exhibitions and facilities as broadly accessible as possible. This means creating opportunities that go beyond the basic requirements, and thinking expansively about how to be widely-inclusive, welcoming, and collaborative.

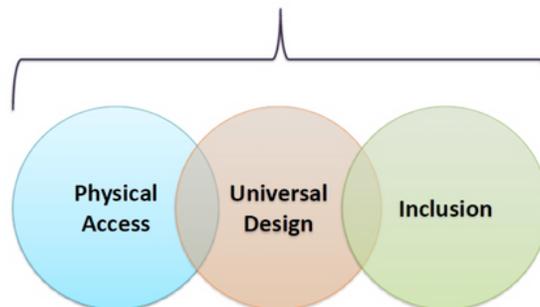
### Why make Exhibitions Accessible?

An important step forward is taken when exhibition planners incorporate accessibility exhibition design, which not only benefit people with disabilities, but also a large number of other visitors. Many of the exhibition accessibility design features call for such improvements as:

- Better traffic routes through an exhibition
- Better viewing of objects and labels for visitors
- Easier motor control functions on interactive exhibitions
- Broadening ways of presenting exhibitions content to accommodate various learning styles.

Museums can create accessible and inclusive exhibits and programs that everyone, without distinctions, can enjoy. Consulting your local Disabilities and Newcomers organizations can also help you to ensure the exhibition is as inclusive as possible.

### ACCESSIBILITY



## Three Zones of Accessibility

### Zone One: Physical Accessibility

The **building's environment** should be designed so that the site, building and facilities can be accessed and used by everyone, regardless of ability. Visitors should be able to get into and around the museums easily without any barriers to prevent movement in and around the exhibition areas. Examples of Physical Accessibility practices include:

- Pathways through the exhibition should be level with no steps. If a few steps are necessary, a ramp or chair lift should be provided as well. If the museum is more than one story, an elevator should be provided.



Figure 1: Wheelchair Path

- Width through the accessible routes should be at least 36 inches wide (91cm) along its entire path. At doorways, the width can be reduced to 32 inches (81 cm) if necessary (Figure 1) (iii).

- In order for people in wheelchairs to get close to an exhibition, there should be a space at least 30 inches by 48 inches (76 x 122cm) of clear floor on all sides (iv).
- Benches with backs and arms provide older adults and people with mobility issues with a nice place to rest, but it will also help all visitors that need to sit and rest during their visit.

By making the exhibition physically accessible, you are also helping to ease the flow of visitor circulation and viewing, especially during crowded periods or when people are pushing strollers.

**Display cases** may come in many shapes and sizes. The exhibition planner's challenge is to make sure that all visitors can access the case and view and interact with its contents.

For example:

- People have different eyes levels. Viewing heights can vary from between

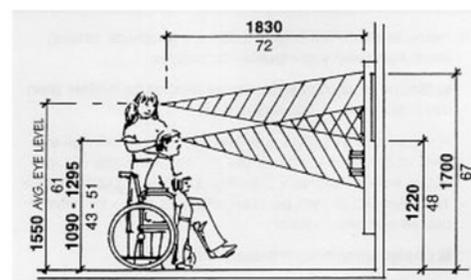


Figure 2: Viewing Height

- 43-67 inches (109 to 170cm) for standing people to 40 to 52 inches (102-132cm) for people in wheelchairs and children between the ages of 8 to 12 (Figure 2) (v). Therefore, exhibition designers need to take into consideration what is being shown in the case and display it in a way that everyone can see it.
- For interactive exhibitions requiring physical response from visitors, the height and depth of the objects or controls should not be too high or deep to be out of reach for visitors in wheelchairs and young children to perform the activity. The controls of an interactive exhibition should be easy to use and require little force to operate.

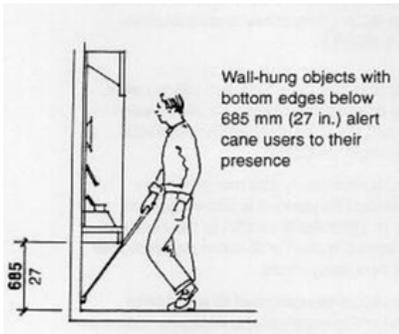


Figure 3: Wall Mounted Display Cases

- If wall mounted exhibition cases are used, the bottom edge of the case should be no more than 27 inches (69cm) above the floor

so that the protruding case does not become a hazard for people with visual disabilities using canes (Figure 3) (vi).

- *Smaller items should be placed in the front portion of a case, with larger items behind, so everything can be seen*

Visitor-friendly **labels and text panels** allow all visitors to enjoy the exhibition. When creating visitor-friendly labels and text panels consider:

- Keep the language active, clear and concise (between primary school ages 9 to 12), avoid jargon, and ensure all technical words are explained as they are used.
- For long text panels, break the information into shorter segments or bullet points. Each panel should be limited to approximately 50-70 words (vii). Consider providing laminated cards, booklets or use QR codes which link to a webpage if there is additional information to share.
- Provide sufficient lighting for reading where text panels and labels are located.

- Use familiar and common typeface such as Arial or Times New Roman. Use the other typefaces and/or embellishments for titles or non-essential information. Choose text type that can be read from approximately 72 inches (1.8m) away (viii). Avoid printing text on patterned, imaged and embellished backgrounds, as they can be difficult to read (ix).
- If possible, provide alternative formats (Braille, Audio) for people who cannot read print.
- By incorporating large print and, easy to read labels, a museum is not only accommodating people with visual impairments, but also helping visitors at the back of the group or people who have forgotten their reading glasses to read the label/text from far away

If making the parts of the museum physically accessible to visitors is not an option (because the museum is in a historical home or building) an alternative program been created to make the contents of the inaccessible areas available to the public. Alternative programming could include but is not limited to, videos and/or photographs of the inaccessible rooms or tactile reproductions of the most significant artefacts made available.

## *Zone Two: Universal Design*

Universal Design is the concept of designing all products and the built environment to be aesthetically pleasing and usable by everyone, regardless of their age, ability, or status. Exhibition designers should incorporate multiple ways to communicate information to visitors who have different abilities and limitations as well as different learning styles beyond viewing objects and reading labels. This will provide visitors with the opportunity to choose how they want to learn and interact with the exhibition.

- Tactile Experiences, such as replicas of an artifact, a small-scale three-dimensional model of a building or landscape, or a fur sample to support a natural history display should be used as much as possible. Tactile experiences benefit people with visual impairments, but can also help to engage and educate younger visitors as well as visitors that cannot read the associated texts.
- Audio projections, such as explanations, environment sounds, or historical dialogue or speech with text scripts and open captioning should be incorporated. Open captioning of videos benefit deaf and hard of hearing visitors, but also help people who have difficulty hearing the audio because of noise. It can also be beneficial for people who are learning English to read and listen to what is being said at the same time.
- Providing audio self-guided tours that can be used by anyone.

- Interactive components, such as active how-it-works demonstrations, using technology to view artefacts or building reproductions of artefacts using historical techniques help to engage audiences with different learning styles

## *Zone Three: Inclusion*

Inclusion in exhibitions addresses the issue of integration. Inclusion helps to providing equal access to services and participation in programs, as well as equal representation in the exhibition. Simple ways to be inclusive in exhibition design include:

- Include people with disabilities and people from diverse backgrounds and cultures in your text panels.
- Attempt to make your exhibition as unprejudiced as possible, by telling the stories from a variety of perspectives.
- Present the information in an orderly fashion with an obvious storyline, theme or repeated elements. If the exhibition is free flowing provide in-gallery printed handout or audio visual kiosks; this will help to ground the story for people with disabilities and v English as a Additional Language visitors.
- Present information to all the senses using multi-sensory techniques. You should also attempt to balance noisy and quiet areas within the exhibition to help people who have difficulty with overlapping sounds.

## Legislation

Accessibility is not simply a choice; it is the law. Under the **Canadian Human Rights Act (1985)**, no person can be discriminated based on “race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, disability and conviction for an offence (xi).”

While, under the **UN Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities (2006)**, Article 9: Accessibility, people with disabilities have the right to access all “facilities and services open or provided to the public (xii).”

It is therefore the legal obligation of all museums to not only meet the minimum requirements set forth in these laws, but to make every effort to go beyond the laws to make their exhibitions as inclusive as possible; giving equal opportunities and satisfying experiences to everyone who comes through the museum doors.

“Accessibility isn’t about being nice – it’s the law (x).”

Elizabeth Sweeney

Visual Artist, Art Educator and Disability  
Arts Consultant Manager of Public  
Programs and ARTeach at the Robert  
McLaughlin Gallery

## Conclusion

All visitors, with their diverse needs, interests, and abilities should be able to move about, enjoy and interact with the exhibition without barriers. Incorporating accessible exhibition designs will create an environment of inclusion for the broadest possible audience, without calling attention to the limitations that some visitors may have.

## **References:**

- (i) Johnson, Kristin. "Exhibition Accessibility," in "The Manual of Museum Exhibition." Ed. Barry and Gail Dexter Lord. Rowman & Little Publishers, Inc. Toronto, Ontario. 2002. Pg. 134
- (ii) Professional Networks Council of the American Alliance of Museums. "Standards for Museum Exhibition and Indicators of Excellence." August 2012. Website: <http://name-aam.org/about/who-we-are/standards>
- (iii-viii) Smithsonian Accessibility Program. "Smithsonian Guideline for Accessible Exhibition Design." Washington, D.C. Website: <https://www.si.edu/Accessibility/SGAED>
- (ix) Johnson, Pg. 141
- (x) "E." Elizabeth Sweeney, Website: <http://www.elizabethsweeney.ca>
- (xi) "Part 1: Proscribed Discrimination: General: Prohibition grounds for discrimination: 3(1)." Canadian Human Rights Act. 1985. Website: <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/h-6/page-1.html>
- (xii) "Article 9: Accessibility" UN Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities. 2006. Website: <http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>

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Written by: Kathleen Watkin,  
MAS Advisor

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For more information, contact:

Museums Association of Saskatchewan  
424 McDonald Street  
Regina, SK  
S4N6E1

Phone: 306-780-9279  
Toll Free SK: 1-866-568-7386  
Fax: 306-780-9463  
[mas@saskmuseums.org](mailto:mas@saskmuseums.org)  
[www.saskmuseums.org](http://www.saskmuseums.org)