Universal Design: Creating Presentations That Speak to All

by Margaret Weigers Vitullo, ASA Academic and Professional Affairs Program

More than 3,000 papers will be presented during the American Sociological Association’s Annual Meeting in Boston, and between 5,500 and 6,000 people will attend the meeting. Given the size of the anticipated turnout and the prevalence of disability in the general population, it’s likely that some members of any audience at the Annual Meeting will have disabilities—whether those disabilities are visible or not.

According to the 2006 American Community Survey, 12.6 percent of the civilian non-institutionalized population between the ages of 16 and 64 reported having a disability, and the rate was 43 percent for those older than 65. If we apply these rates to Annual Meeting attendance, an estimated 700 people with disabilities will be attending.

ASA Strives for Access

To ensure that all attendees get the most out of the meeting, ASA encourages presenters to make their presentations accessible to those with disabilities. At a fundamental level, accessibility is a matter of law. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 applies to conference and meeting activities, and ASA requests that all presenters review the accessibility guidelines on its website at www.asanet.org/cs/root/leftnav/meetings/2008_accessibility.

Effective Communication—For Everyone

Accessible presentations tend to be effective presentations, regardless of the characteristics of the audience. “Universal design” should be applied when developing accessible presentations. Universal design is “an approach to making facilities, information, and activities accessible to and usable by everyone,” according to Sheryl Burgstahler, Director of the DO-IT Project at the University of Washington (2007). The DO-IT Project (“Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology”) aims to increase the participation of individuals with disabilities in challenging academic programs and careers.

A presentation created with universal design principles considers the broad range of audience members, including those with varying native language, gender, racial and ethnic background, age, and disability status. Applying universal design principles can lead to a presentation that creates better comprehension, as well as better feedback and discussion. When comparing presentation recommendations issued by groups interested in disability rights and full access (e.g., DO-IT Project) and suggestions from organizations interested in promoting effective academic communication, the similarities are striking. For example, Columbia University offers suggestions for effective academic presentations, and the tips parallel those on the DO-IT program’s website. The university suggests that authors keep in mind four basic concepts when preparing a conference presentation: big, simple, clear, and consistent.

Big refers to large fonts that are easy to read from any place in a room. Simple includes limiting text to six lines on a slide, with no more than seven words per line. Clear means choosing sans-serif fonts (such as Arial and Tahoma) in colors and sizes that produce high-contrast visuals. Consistent means creating a presentation with a logical sequence, with transitions that explain how the parts of the presentation are related to each other and the big picture.

Similar tips are found on Western Washington University’s “Tips for Accessible Presentations” and the state of Michigan’s "Guidelines for Accessible PowerPoint Presentations."

With the principles of universal design in mind, here are a few guidelines for creating effective presentations for both those with and without disabilities.

PowerPoint

- Use big, simple, clear, and consistent text.
• Use high-contrast templates. Check the contrast by printing in black and white without using the "grayscale" option.

Handout

• Provide handouts of overheads and PowerPoint slides.
• Bring a few copies of handouts in 16- to 18-point font size, as well as a digital copy on a disk.
• If you refer to a handout, allow the audience time to look at the material before you begin talking about it.

Delivery

• Use the microphone and speak clearly at a pace slightly slower than normal conversation.
• Identify yourself clearly at the beginning of your talk.
• Do not turn away from the audience when speaking.
• Describe all non-text elements (e.g., images, tables) on each slide. Identify rows and columns and describe where figures are located in a table when you are discussing them.
• Since the lines of text on your PowerPoint slides will be brief phrases, repeat the phrase within the more extended narrative discussion of each point.
• Repeat all questions and comments from the audience into the microphone.
• If members of the audience are using interpreters or personal assistants, address all comments directly to the person and not their interpreter or assistant.
• If possible, give interpreters copies of presentation materials to review before the presentation.

If you have a physical disability and need special services, equipment, or accommodations at the ASA Annual Meeting, fill out the Accessibility Services portion of the meeting’s registration form, or call ASA Meeting Services (202-383-9005 x305) to arrange for services such as interpreters, CART, and motorized scooters in advance of the meeting.

References and Resources


Columbia University Department of Psychology. (See www.columbia.edu/cu/psychology/200bc/present.html.)

Do-It: Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology. (See www.washington.edu/doit/.)

American Academy of Religion. Making Your Presentations Disability Friendly. (See www.aarweb.org/Meetings/Annual_Meeting/Current_Meeting/Presentation_Tips/disability.asp.)

State of Michigan. Accessible PowerPoint Presentations. (See www.michigan.gov/disabilityresources/0,1607,7-233-40877-145234--,00.html.)

Back to Front Page of Footnotes