

Yes, You Too Can Be an Access Advocate!

Hi, my name is Ruth Osorio, and I am going to talk to you about advocating for accessibility at academic conferences. Visually, this video features my face—I am a thirty-two year old white woman—title cards, and captions. Ok, let's do this!

Despite recent progress in making academic conferences more accessible, these spaces continue to be inaccessible to many attendees with disabilities. But we can change that through institutional and cultural progress. Too often, disability advocates bear the burden of advocating for increased accessibility. But our calls for greater inclusion would be stronger and more persuasive if everyone joined in! So yes, you too can be an access advocate, even if you have no background in disability studies or disability activism. Through your day-to-day actions, you can help us build a culture of access.

In this video, I outline simple yet substantial actions you can take before, during, and after a conference.

Before the Conference:

One: if your conference has an accessibility guide, read it! Depending on how the guide is written, it should give you information about the different accessibility features (or lack thereof) of the conference space and surrounding restaurants and hotels. If you know this information, you can be a resource to people at the conference. For example, if someone asks where the nearest elevator is or if there is an accessible gender neutral bathroom, you can give direction and guidance. And if there isn't an accessibility guide for your conference? Well, we'll talk about that in the After the Conference section.

Two: if you are presenting, make sure your presentation is accessible. Do you have scripts or outlines for audience members? Do you describe the images in your presentation? Do you use plain language that could be understood by a diverse audience? Do your videos have captions? Asking these questions can help you design a presentation that can be enjoyed and appreciated by people with various disabilities. For more information, check out Preparing Your Presentation page on Composing Access.

Three: on the day of conference, as you are getting ready, double-check that you are fragrance-free. By doing so, you can help make sure the conference is more accessible and comfortable people with chemical sensitivities and chronic migraines.

During the Conference:

So you're at the conference! You are aware of the accessibility features of the building, your presentation is accessible, and you are fragrance-free! What now? Here are four actions you can take while at the conference to build a culture of access.

One: if a presenter ever asks the audience "hey! Do I need to use this microphone?" Please shout back, "yes!" Most likely the people who would benefit from the amplified sound can't hear the question in the first place. If everyone uses a microphone, more people are likely to hear what the speaker is saying. Similarly, if someone is presenting and speaking too quickly, ask if they can slow down. You can also ask presenters to describe images on presentation slides and read aloud any URL's.

Two: if there is an American Sign Language interpreter or real-time transcription (also known as CART) at your presentation, provide the interpreter or CART transcriber your script or outline beforehand, so they know the correct spelling of any terminology you may be using. If during Questions and Answers or after the panel, you are speaking with a person utilizing either the ASL interpretation or CART, address the person you're speaking with directly—and not the interpreter! Focus your interaction on the person you are conversing with.

Three: when moving throughout the conference building, quickly scan to see if there are any barriers or obstacles for people using wheelchairs, canes, or walking sticks. For example, if when you enter a room, and you notice chairs have been moved around and blocking the walkway, push them back in!

Four: keep note of any accessibility issues you observe during the conference. Were there ramps to the elevated stages? Were directions to important locations and accessible facilities clearly marked? Were microphones height-adjustable, so people of various heights or using wheelchairs could access the microphones? You might make a list throughout the conference in your notebook or your phone. This information will prepare you for the After the Conference task!

After the Conference:

The conference is over, and you're home! Congratulations on advocating for access before and during the conference. But our work is not over! Because there will be a conference next year and the year after that and the year after that, and the only way we can realize a truly accessible conference space is by pushing organizers for next year's conference to center accessibility in their planning.

Most conferences send out a survey to attendees after the conference is completed. This survey is an opportunity to point out any accessibility barriers and issues you observed. If there was no accessibility guide, ask that the organizers prioritize making one for the next meeting. Share the notes you took about accessibility at the conference on the survey, so next year's conference can be more accessible than the last. Disabled attendees and their nondisabled allies complete the survey with the intent to advocate for access every year: our demands could be so much stronger, fiercer, more powerful, if they were echoed by people outside of disability studies as well!

Through these simple yet substantial actions, you can be an Access Advocate, and you can help us imagine and then realize a more inclusive and accessible academia.