

Event Accessibility Checklist

For in-person, virtual, and hybrid events — covering both speakers and attendees with disabilities.

Most accessibility failures at events aren't malicious. They're just late. A venue chosen before anyone asked about step-free access. A caption tool enabled five minutes before the session starts. A speaker with a disability fielding logistics questions the morning of. This checklist exists to move those decisions earlier, when they're still easy to get right. Work through it at the start of your planning process, then again two weeks out as a final check.

SECTION 1 — IN-PERSON EVENTS

Venue & physical access

- Confirm step-free access at all entrances, not just the main one
- Verify elevator access to every event floor, including breakout rooms
- Ensure accessible restrooms are near the event space, clearly signed
- Confirm accessible parking is close to the entrance, with a drop-off zone if possible
- Check that all interior pathways are at least 36 inches wide and free of obstacles
- Walk the full attendee route yourself before event day and flag anything that needs fixing

Why it matters: Many venues technically meet minimum requirements but still create real barriers in practice. The walk-through catches what the venue diagram misses.

Speaker access

- Ask about access needs in your initial speaker outreach, not as a follow-up
- Confirm the stage or speaking area is wheelchair accessible with a level entry or ramp
- Ensure the podium, mic, and presentation setup can be adjusted for a seated speaker
- Share full logistics at least two weeks out: agenda, venue map, parking, load-in details
- Assign a dedicated staff member as the speaker's day-of point of contact

- Brief the emcee on correct name pronunciation and respectful, non-patronizing language
- Confirm what AV support is available at the stage (clicker, HDMI, monitor placement)

Why it matters: Speakers with disabilities often end up advocating for basics that should already be handled. Do the work before they have to ask.

Interpretation & captioning

- Provide live CART captioning displayed on a visible screen near the stage
- Position sign language interpreters where attendees can see both the interpreter and the speaker simultaneously
- Confirm the captioning or interpretation service has the speaker's slide deck in advance
- Offer hearing loop or assistive listening devices if the venue supports them

Why it matters: Real-time captions serve deaf and hard-of-hearing attendees, people whose first language isn't English, and anyone in a noisy room. The benefit extends well beyond one community.

Sensory & cognitive access

- Cap ambient music or background noise during sessions at a conversational volume level
- Designate a quiet, low-stimulation room attendees can use at any point during the event
- Use high-contrast, minimum 18pt fonts on all signage
- Avoid strobe lighting or rapidly flashing visual effects in presentations or venue lighting
- Provide printed agendas so attendees can follow along without relying on a screen or app
- Include clear navigation signage throughout the venue, including accessible route markers

Why it matters: Sensory and cognitive needs are often invisible. A quiet room costs almost nothing to set up and matters significantly to attendees with autism, anxiety, chronic pain, or migraines.

Materials & communication

- Offer event materials in accessible formats: digital, large print, and screen-reader-friendly PDF
- Include accessibility information on your event registration page and marketing materials
- Provide multiple ways to ask questions: live mic, written submissions, and a chat or app option
- Send the event schedule in advance so attendees can plan their day

Why it matters: Accessibility information buried in fine print doesn't help anyone. When planners publish it upfront and offer materials in multiple formats, they signal that the event was designed with everyone in mind, not retrofitted after the fact.

Platform setup

- Choose a platform with native closed caption support (Zoom, Teams, Google Meet)
- Enable auto-captions before the event starts and assign a human captioner for high-stakes sessions
- Confirm the platform is compatible with common screen readers (NVDA, JAWS, VoiceOver)
- Test all tech, including captions, at least 24 hours before the event
- Send a tech guide in advance with step-by-step instructions for joining, enabling captions, and using chat and Q&A tools

Why it matters: “We’ll send the recording” is not an accommodation. Real-time access to the session matters, and troubleshooting a caption tool during a live session is too late.

Speaker support (virtual)

- Ask about access needs during initial outreach, same as you would for in-person
- Share slide decks in advance so speakers can review them on their own assistive setup
- Confirm bandwidth requirements and offer a tech check call in the days before the event
- Have a co-host or dedicated tech support person on standby during the session
- Allow flexibility on camera-on requirements and don’t make it a condition of participation
- Confirm how Q&A will be managed so the speaker isn’t caught off guard during the session

Why it matters: Virtual speakers with disabilities often troubleshoot alone, on the day, in front of an audience. A tech check call and a clear point of contact costs almost nothing. Being caught off guard costs trust.

Attendee experience (virtual)

- Send clear joining instructions at least 48 hours before the event
- Offer multiple ways to engage: live chat, Q&A tool, reactions, and a post-event email option for those who can’t participate in real time
- Make recordings available with captions within 48 hours after the event

- Ensure all shared documents are accessible: tagged PDFs, alt text on all images
- Confirm the event doesn't require a specific device, operating system, or app download to attend

Why it matters: Not everyone can attend live. Health conditions, time zones, caregiving responsibilities, and accessibility needs all factor in. A post-event recording with captions and accessible materials isn't a bonus. It's how you make the event real for everyone who registered.

Visual presentation standards

- Use high-contrast slide design: dark text on a light background, or light on dark — avoid low-contrast combinations like gray on white
- Use a minimum font size of 24pt on slides
- Add alt text to every image in the presentation
- Never rely on color alone to convey information: use labels, patterns, or text alongside color coding
- Describe visual content verbally as you present (“This chart shows quarterly revenue from 2022 to 2024...”)

Why it matters: Slide accessibility affects low-vision attendees, people using screen readers to review materials afterward, and anyone attending on a small screen.

Hybrid events introduce a specific failure mode: the virtual audience becomes second-class. They hear a room they can't see, miss conversations that happen off-mic, and can't participate in Q&A at the same pace as in-person attendees. Complete both Section 1 and Section 2 first, then use this section to address the points where the two audiences intersect.

Bridging in-person and virtual

- Use room microphones (not a laptop mic) so virtual attendees can clearly hear in-room conversation
- Assign a dedicated moderator for the virtual audience whose only job is managing that feed and chat
- Integrate virtual Q&A into the main session in real time, not as a separate segment at the end
- Caption both the room audio and the virtual audio streams separately
- Display the virtual attendee feed on a screen visible to in-room participants so the room knows the virtual audience is present
- Test the full hybrid setup from both a virtual and in-room perspective before the event
- Give virtual and in-person attendees equal opportunities to ask questions and receive responses
- Share all materials, slides, and resources with virtual attendees at the same time as in-room attendees

Why it matters: Virtual attendees often include people who chose that format because in-person attendance wasn't accessible to them. A poor virtual experience isn't just a tech inconvenience. For some attendees, it's exclusion.

“Accessibility isn't a compliance checklist. It's a decision about who you're actually building your event for.”

If you want to go deeper on disability inclusion, accessible event design, or bringing this conversation to your team or conference, reach out.

winstonclements.com • bookings@winstonclements.com