Editing for Access: Practices and Reflections

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Our Approach to Editing for Access

A central editorial question Pil Hansen and Jessica Watkin asked, prior to distributing their call for proposals, concerned which forms of access would be effective for different access-deserving groups and were realizable within their limited resources.[1]

Accessible publishing can seem out of reach for small, independent publishers for multiple reasons: Such publishers tend to be hosted by a university department and rely on editors' volunteer labour, graduate assistant stipends, and a small grant to cover basic expenses. In other words, independent publishers rarely have the time, resources, and capacity required to fully include access-deserving authors and users (readers/listeners). Our approach to editing for access aims to reduce barriers for (1) users and authors with disability and different ways of experiencing who otherwise might not partake in published discourses and (2) for editors who aim for inclusivity but come up against limitations.

To answer Hansen and Watkin's question, we drew on Watkin's insight (on Blind and universal access) and consulted with Blind, Deaf, and intellectually/learning Disabled users/authors and access providers, including Amorena Bartlett (on d/Deaf access), Kelsie Acton, and Daniel Foulds (on intellectual/learning access). Leaning into their suggestions within our budget, we decided to create (1) video-recorded translations in American Sign Language (ASL) of three articles of three to four thousand words each and (2)

[1] Footnote: In their case, resources for access purposes were Can$4,500 plus a small graduate assistant stipend. Half of this amount was covered by *Performance Matters* at Simon Fraser University; the other half was raised by the guest editor, Hansen, at the University of Calgary.

voice recordings of three comparable articles. Apart from a length that was feasible to translate or vocalize, the criteria for selecting articles for access recording were to (1) include work on Deaf or Blind practices alongside writing on accessibility for other disabilities and (2) prioritize articles with visual images or video for d/Deaf users and articles with audio content or rich practice detail, enabling b/Blind users' imagining. We elected to create plain language adaptations of all abstracts to provide inspiring and clear content introductions for intellectually/learning disabled users that can stand alone or be used as access points to full articles. All articles were also made available in a text-to-voice enabled pdf form with meaningful image descriptions. Authors were given guidelines for how to write image descriptions, prepare plain language abstract drafts, and generally increase the accessibility of their manuscripts. They were asked to do their best within their capacity, as many authors featured in the issue are access deserving. Natalia Esling provided sighted writing support for the co-editor Watkin, who is Blind. Importantly, we also collaborated with the *Performance Matters* editor, Coleman Nye, to develop instructions for peer reviewers for bias screening, access styles, different kinds of knowledge, and how to offer kind feedback, drawing on Nye's expertise in disability studies.

This approach ensures (1) that authors are met with increased access awareness in the editorial and peer-review processes and (2) that disabled users have full access to selected materials, while the access features of the remaining contents reduce some barriers. The approach does not result in full accessibility; yet it provides a degree of inclusivity that disabled scholars, artists, students, and community members rarely encounter.

In the following, each set of author guidelines are introduced with brief explanations of how they enhance access. Then we turn to the process of creating access materials with steps and reflections. Finally, the access-aware and kind peer-review instructions are described, again with brief explanations of the thinking behind choices.

Access Guidelines for Authors

Improving Access for Intellectually/Learning Disabled Users While Supporting Neurodivergent Readers and Sign Language Translation

Increasing access for users with intellectual/learning disability (e.g., Williams syndrome, Down syndrome, traumatic brain injury) and those with working memory challenges (e.g., depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) requires adjusting academic norms for how to structure an argument. It is useful to keep each step of an argument clear and easy to navigate through headings or by repeatedly reminding the user of what has been established and what will be shared next. The same holds true for sentences and specialized concepts. Short sentences that can be held in the mind as a unit and explanations of specialized concepts take precedence over rhetorical craft and fluid discourse. These characteristics also help a sign language translator divide the text into small sections for translation and determine the combined signs that approximate uncommon concepts. Reaching toward such access, we asked that authors try to:

- Organize your text with headers and subheaders. They should make it easy to locate contents named in the abstract and follow the steps of your practice, argument, or study.
- Allow for some instances of repeated context and summary as reminders of what has been established and what comes next in your text, also if it is slightly redundant.
- Be consistent using the same key terms throughout, rather than changing them for variation.
- Try to limit the contents of single sentences (for example to 1-2 ideas and/or a couple of factors) unless the sentence is a list. Use lists with bullet points or numbers where appropriate. Break long or complex sentences into several shorter sentences.
- Avoid very long paragraphs. Try to break them into multiple sections instead.
- As you move from broad concepts to concepts that are more specific to your work, then please ensure that all key concepts are defined in descriptions. This is typically done within your body text when first using the concept. Also consider adding a bracket with a descriptor in common words after the first use

> of concepts that are secondary in your work. Avoid assuming that your reader/listener is familiar with academic or artistic concepts and methods that are specific to your field. (Hansen 2024)

Author Requests that Provide Access for b/Blind Users and Enable Both Text-to-Voice Software and Voice Recording

Headlines, clear structure, and shorter sentences are also useful for b/Blind users, who have reduced browsing options to form an overview. More important, however, are descriptions of visual content and information that voice-to-text software or a voice recording person can verbalize. A good image description practice involves representational accuracy, language that is transparent about subjectivity, and decisions about relevance. The following author instructions can be helpful:

- Use footnotes (not endnotes), but use them sparingly.
- Build longer footnotes into the body text if the contents are important or shorten them if they are contextual.
- Write "footnote" at the beginning of each note for text-to-voice recognition.
- Provide a written description of each image or figure, following the guidelines below:
  - ☐ Identify what is important for a viewer to receive from the image (e.g., people/figure, location, action, symbols/text).
  - ☐ Use common words (plain language) to describe the main elements of the image or figure you have identified.
  - ☐ If there are people in the image or figure then try to ask how they would like to be described (e.g., body, gender, race) and describe them simply. We do not necessarily need eye colour or small details. If you cannot find the person or they don't respond, then write in the first person to make yourself audible/visible (e.g., "I see"; "that appears to me as").
  - ☐ Include any colours, shapes, or movement that are relevant to the image or figure.
  - ☐ Include any writing on the image or figure you deem important.
  - ☐ Be concise: sticking to one to two sentences is best, if possible. (Watkin 2024)

Creating Accessible Versions of Selected Materials

ASL Translation

The Steps of the ASL Translation Process and Parameters Chosen for Sustainability

Amorena Bartlett's translation process begins by reading the content to gain a holistic understanding. Then she rereads it with ASL in mind. The third step is to prepare a written sign language translation, adding sign symbols and segmenting the text. At this point, she requests clarification of terms with multiple meanings from the editor. Then the ASL translation is performed and recorded, section by section. In the last step, section recordings are edited into a single video, while integrating images or video content.

Authors, whose contribution was considered for translation, with their consent, were informed that translation depended on keeping their body text around three thousand words. Bartlett was instructed to bookend each ASL recording with the journal, article, and translator information signed at the front and author bios presented at the end. To keep the task realistic, full references were not included and production quality was kept minimal. Higher production quality is resource demanding, requiring specialized equipment and more practice runs and editing phases. By embracing an everyday aesthetic (completing recordings with everyday equipment and without polishing), the ASL translation gained both authenticity and feasibility.

Amorena Bartlett's Reflection on the ASL Translation Experience

Working on this project was a fulfilling experience. I learned much about the process of creating a medium that is accessible for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community. It was a challenge to ensure I was not translating from a literal perspective but rather from a reader's perspective. It is a heady concoction to read something in English and understand it enough to be able to translate authentically to ASL. Preparing to produce quality translation and recording required ample time to read and understand the articles. The most demanding part of the process was to edit recordings; yet this last stage of the work was also the most satisfying. The more I read and the more I signed, the more connected I felt to what I was translating. It is a highly immersive experience, and I wanted that experience to be shared with those watching the recordings. My biggest takeaway is the importance of time management.

Truly understanding and appreciating the material you are interacting with is important to provide the best accessible experience possible. This requires focusing all your energy and brain power on one article at a time. All three articles were equally important, useful, informative, and relevant. To translate is to be in the moment with the words you are translating. The only way to achieve authenticity is to use time well and organize in advance; then the rest is history. I am honoured to have been a part of this project.

Voice Recording

The Steps of the Voice Recording Process and Parameters Chosen for Sustainability

Unlike Bartlett, Graham Percy does not belong to the community he was creating accessible content for. His process also began with reading the material for understanding. In the second step, he inquired about editorial preferences for representation, tone, and voicing symbols—drawing on Watkin's lived experience and expertise. Percy then created two short samples with different tone and speed options for the editors to select from. Finally, he divided the content into sections, recorded them individually, and edited the results to a holistic MP4 sound file.

As editors, we asked Percy to represent himself and his own reading experience rather than adopt a neutral "normative voice" or use his acting expertise to develop distinct voices for each author in an attempt to represent them. In dialogical pieces, he therefore named author shifts explicitly followed by a subtle change in tone. Disabled people often experience invisibility and erasure—that is, not being listened to or acknowledged. Representation therefore should be approached with care and by "readers" with related experience of disability, if attempted. Percy received the same instructions as Bartlett regarding information to include at the bookends, naming his own role, and using everyday aesthetic/equipment for meaningful but unpolished production.

Graham Percy's Reflection on the Voice Recording Experience

I recently purchased my first iPhone and a microphone, which I used to make recordings. I relied on the Voice Recorder App for software and was initially delighted with its easy functionality. However, when combining my short recordings into a larger, seamless whole, an unpleasant echo appeared, along with a thinness to the sound that gave the impression of being underwater.

Converting the files from MP3 to MP4 corrected most of this distortion. My recommendation is to record the initial files on the highest quality setting for MP4 at the outset.

As a longtime stage actor, it is hard to explain the degree to which I find it disorienting and disheartening to hear the sound of my voice. I don't think I am alone in this experience. I have no advice for how to overcome that sensation, other than to note that after a few days of recording, my voice became the clay I was working with. I mostly recorded while sitting in front of my computer. This made my breath shallower, but it also usefully disrupted my habit as a stage performer of projecting my voice or, frankly, shouting. In my daily life, I am a soft-spoken mumbler, introverted and quiet. My problem was how to decouple clarity and articulation from the professional habit of projecting my voice. As I got quieter, I got messier, reverting to my everyday habit of mumbling. Gradually, a third mode of speaking emerged.

Using that mode, the most significant interpretive intervention I made as a reader was the imposition of a midline pause, or cesura, that gave me a chance to reload my breath. This choice allowed me to relay complex ideas without rushing or straining toward the end of the line. Yet receiving and articulating a large idea simultaneously made for a dizzying experience. As an actor, I usually deliver text long committed to memory and written into my body. In contrast, this mode of instantly speaking what I read gave me the distinct feeling of a high-wire act, where I kept falling off the wire. Going sentence by sentence became my most sustainable recording rhythm.

Plain Language Adaptation

The Steps of the Plain Language Adaptation Process and Parameters Chosen for Sustainability

Adapting artistic and academic writing to plain language is a specialized skill. With instructions, however, most can reduce the complexity of their abstract and select the most important parts to communicate with common words. The first step of Acton's work was therefore to provide instructions for authors for how to prepare such a plain language draft:

- Use the 3000 most common words in the English language. You can check how common words are at

https://splasho.com/upgoer6/. Use your discretion when it comes to terms that have become common more recently.
- Define words that aren't common.
- Write in short paragraphs.
- Use lists like this one when possible.
- Write in short sentences.
- Write a short summary at the start of a piece.
- Sometimes write a short summary halfway through the piece if it is really long.
- Sometimes take out metaphors if they might be confusing. Often metaphors are confusing.
- Try to move through the information in a logical, linear way. This often means telling events in the order they happened.
- Sometimes give more information about references in the writing so you don't have to look anything up to understand what is happening. (Acton 2024)

The second step of Acton's process was to rework the authors' drafts. This involved further reducing topics covered, writing full-sentence explanations of key terms and ideas, and adding illustrative examples drawn from the manuscript (Acton 2023). The result was reviewed by Foulds, who gave feedback from his perspective as an artist and research collaborator with a learning disability. This feedback then informed Acton's final revision.

Kelsie Acton's Reflection on the Plain Language Adaptation Experience
I've been working on plain language in disability culture for several years. As my understanding of the work has developed, I've come to understand that good plain language will be different each time because the audience is different each time.

Like theatre, writing makes meaning in many different ways. Often, the most complicated part of plain language work is finding a way to share the original feeling of the piece. Even in academic work (like the articles in this issue), we often want our readers to feel. Disabled people write in hope for a different world. Plain language needs to hold that hope.

One of the ways I hold hope is in collaboration. I work with people who use plain language, for a variety of reasons. I share my writing with them. Often, I share the original text. And we move back and forth to imagine writing that makes them feel the way the piece wants them to feel. Together we imagine writing that is not scary, not confusing, not exhausting, and does not bring up memories of past failures. Daniel Foulds and I worked on the abstracts in this issue. Together, with the editors of this issue and everyone who worked on access, we are imagining a more accessible version of academic publishing, one that can imagine people with learning disabilities reading (and writing) in academic journals.

Kind Peer Review

Instructions to Peer Reviewers

The issue editors, Hansen and Watkin, initiated an exchange with the journal editor, Nye, about how peer review could be adapted for access. Reviewers are often overworked academics who rely on their specialized area of expertise to provide critique and feedback within the few hours they can volunteer. This leads many to focus on assessment and apply parameters that derive from their own work rather than taking time to grasp and adopt the ways of knowing and communicating authors present. Articles that range from artistic reflection to empirical scholarship and apply various access styles would, therefore, face a high risk of receiving well-intentioned feedback that unproductively suggests conforming. To change this culture, Nye included in guidelines to peer reviewers Hansen's descriptions of the knowledge and access styles in our issue. This was placed within a "kind peer review" framework devised by Nye. Reviewers were invited to offer affirmative feedback, stretching the work as members of a peer community rather than critiquing it as anonymous sensors (Yoon et al. 2021). In the following, we offer examples from the guidelines.

Diverse Forms

Contributions to this issue present four kinds of knowledge: (1) artistic reflection, (2) practice-based discovery/exploration, (3) critical/analytical discussion, and (4) empirical insight. Some articles combine several kinds of knowledge. The standards for presenting and qualifying knowledge are different for each type (Hansen 2023). Whereas the guidelines described all four forms, the example below reflects the first form only.

> Artistic reflection should be situated in the practice and the people or environments involved. The work should go deeper than claiming that something worked by engaging with the question of how it worked, why it worked (or didn't work), and the challenges involved. Some reference to related practices or discussions are also expected, but sources are often not academic. The writing/imagining/sounding of reflection can take creative forms and tends to be subjective, reflecting the experiences and identities of the authors. (Hansen 2025)

Access Styles

In this section of the guidelines, the difference that access deserving authors bring to their writing and how that translates into style and ways of knowing was briefly named, asking reviewers to "consider what their perspective reflects and whether different perspectives are valid before suggesting to correct or nuance the work" (Nye 2025). Then we explained the empowering language some disabled authors elect to use (capitalized identifiers or repurposed slurs). The difference between language that centres one disability and formulations that aim for cross-disability inclusivity was also introduced (Hansen and Watkin 2025). Finally, the access principles mentioned earlier were summarized, including reduced sentence complexity; repeated (redundant) introductions and summaries; and access choices that enable text-to-voice software, translation, and voice recording.

Kindness

With the common ground established in the guidelines, kindness required less explanation.

> We encourage a kind review process, wherein the reviewer responds from a perspective of care and respect for the author, engages with an ethos of community building, and acts with a collegial spirit that is generous and rigorous at the same time. As this journal issue centres the voices of disabled artists and scholars, the expectation is that our journal reviewers will centre an ethics of access and acknowledge differences in knowledges. (Nye 2025)

Distributed Efforts and Selective Approach as Recipe for Sustainability

The parts of our approach to editing for access yield additional insights when considered as a whole. Although facilitated by Hansen, our access process was a distributed effort where every contributor had agency to affect our work with their knowledge and experience. The deep engagement with content and personal authenticity creators of access material brought to the task are strengths of their work. These strengths were enabled by representing themselves as "readers" and completing the work with agency. Using this agency, access providers suggested involving authors in drafting plain language abstracts and image descriptions and provided instructions for how to do so. In turn, access work became embedded in the full community of contributors to our issue. Having the journal editor lean into our choices and offering suggestions was, of course, instrumental for our ability to carry this work through the peer-review process and to the final, published issue.

Editing for access is not easy. Everything from technical problems, through choices that improve inclusion for some at the expense of others, to finding reviewers who are open to kind reviewing presents challenges. Access editing is to work with and care for the trouble that disability inserts in normative publishing systems. This work is carried by community motivation and collective problem solving. When mobilized by such collaboration, access editing is also not difficult.

In summary, selective production of access materials; distribution of access tasks across specialists, authors, and editors; and flexibility for authors' application of access guidelines enable everyone to scale their access efforts to their resources and capacity. This renders the approach adaptive and sustainable. We hope our writing proves a useful resource for editors and authors who also wish to increase the inclusivity of their work through access.

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