



# Design For All

## Accessibility in design today

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Design isn't just for designers, it's for our clients. And our clients include the 650 million people (roughly ten per cent of the world's population) living with some form of disability, many of which are not apparent. Of these citizens, 4.4 million are Canadians whom we have an obligation to include.

The United Nations tells us that inclusive design is a human rights issue, that we are obligated to serve the recipients of our design work. The text in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006)<sup>1</sup> stipulates that each person in society should have the right to participate fully. This includes access to information in various media. As communication designers, we play a vital role in making communication accessible to all, across all types of media

The GDC National Sustainability Committee finds accessibility relevant to our work because it addresses the cultural and social pillars of sustainability. The **GDC Code of Ethics**, states clearly that as designers, we are obligated to consider the impact of our work on others, our communities, and the environment.

Also known as “universal design” and “design for all”, accessibility is strategic. It aims to meet user needs and address all disabilities, limitations and restrictions, not just blindness or hearing loss. Better still, when we make design accessible, everyone is better served. Consider, for instance, the diverse groups that benefit from seamless curbs from sidewalk to street level—the small child whose long legs are still a few years away, a skier temporary on crutches, the busy mom with a stroller and a child on each arm, and today, even the skateboarder and the sidewalk texter.

Accessibility is also affected by our assumptions. This is where research is imperative to truly understand our audience’s needs and how they perceive messages. Testing assures that messages are respectful and inclusive and that our intentions as communicators have been understood.

We also can’t treat all audiences the same because they aren’t. Our unique traditions, beliefs, histories, education and trends play a role in who we are as people and as communities. Recognizing these important differences can help us avoid cross-cultural miscommunication.

Design organizations around the world are regularly featuring cross-cultural case studies and resources to help us better understand each other. A recent frog design case study about their **action toolkit** helps us understand cross-cultural challenges and how design can solve the universal challenge of communication. The project aimed to connect resources

and skills to impoverished young women living in the developing world. They wanted to leave the women with a tactile design piece that was relevant.

They discovered that the language appropriate for this audience differed from their own. With that acknowledgement they were able to meet the audience needs and let the audience tell them what was appropriate language, symbols and relevant in their lives. They remind us that giving people equal rights doesn't mean treating people the same.

This article is too short to give you much depth and guidance to your practice, but here are a few tips to get you started.

- Never make assumptions. Work with your audience.
- Create consistent grids, hierarchy and positioning for those who use your design decisions to navigate.
- Use clear language.
- Understand what constitutes respectful written language and design by having frank discussions with your audience.
- Clearly explain technical terms that are essential inclusions and avoid metaphors. Don't assume that people know a term or word.
- Select colours that are culturally appropriate. Purple may vie well in Asia to represent wealth, but in North America will be considered "cheap". Research colour.
- Review colours to avoid conflicts for those who are colour blind (affecting approximately seven per cent of the population, most who are male).
- Test your final colours with your audiences.
- Text and backgrounds should have a 70 per cent contrast ratio to be easily read by those with low vision. Use light colours such as white or yellow on dark backgrounds for best readability for visual impairments.

- Choose fonts with a balanced X height to width ratio for high legibility. Twelve point is a minimum but consideration of large point sizes are recommended.
- Align text left to keep letters kerned appropriately and add kerning to fonts whose auto kerning is poor.
- Avoid materials that are heavy. Ensure printed pieces can be held with one hand.
- Avoid glossy paper as reflections can compromise readability.
- Avoid loud and abrasive sound on websites, displays and video and always keep background noise to a minimum.
- Consider the physical environment the user will likely be in, including any surrounding circumstances and/or distractions.
- Avoid flashing, strobing visual effects and optical illusions that flicker at a frequency greater than 2 Hz and lower than 55 Hz.
- Accommodate different audio and video needs by giving control to the user where possible, and avoid being dependent on both video and audio for understanding.

Universal design still has a long way to go in North America. Designers have the power to influence that change. We can help engage a person whose first language isn't English, or help an elderly person not comfortable with social media feel included. We can lift creativity to new heights when we design for all.

To learn more about the GDC National Sustainability Committee, check out our [inspiring vision](#) and [GDC Sustainability Values and Principles](#).

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Centre for Excellence in Universal Design](#)  
[AIGA's Cross Cultural Design](#)

[Accessibility Colour Wheel](#)

[Smithsonian Guide](#)

[RGD's Access Ability Guide](#)

[Council of Europe's Guide to Universal Design](#)

[Web and video strobing](#)

[1] Source: <http://www.un.org/disabilities/index.asp>