



The 2017 Accessibility Conference:
**Becoming a Catalyst
for Inclusion**
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Accessible Writing and Inclusive Language: Beyond the AODA Information and Communications Standards

Transcript from the 2017 Accessibility Conference

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SPEAKER:

Good afternoon everyone. I'd like to thank you for attending this session, Accessible Writing and Inclusive Language - Going Beyond the AODA's standards. The speaker is Mary Neilans. She is a business development manager with AccessAbility Advantage, based in Toronto.

She has 20 years of experience writing and training in a variety of sectors, with a focus on raising awareness of accessibility issues and helping organisations to meet or exceed compliance standards.

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In addition to her role at AccessAbility Advantage as business development manager, Mary provides clients with training support and she is an active member of the International Association of Accessibility Professionals. Please welcome Mary.
(APPLAUSE)

MARY NEILANS:

Thank you. I will let everyone get settled in. Thank you for coming to the last session of the day. Hopefully everyone got enough sugar at the break. I will work to keep you awake until 4 o'clock.

This afternoon we will talk about communication beyond the AODA standards. If anyone is here and expecting something different regarding training on the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, it won't cover a lot of the information on the standards themselves. It will go beyond that, talking about the use of language and how that affects accessibility and inclusion.

The first thing is to take a look at the AODA standards. The AODA standards for information and communication and, to a certain extent, customer service standards, focus on accessibility. My background is in writing and journalism for health and social services, disability awareness, gerontology, et cetera.

My background is focused on disability rights and activism. When I look at the AODA standards, they are not intended to be more than that but to focus on minimum standards for accessibility.

When you want to address the minimum standards for accessibility, you're going to be looking at the guidelines for information and communication.

A lot of the workshops today and tomorrow will be covering how you use technology to create accessible formats. In the description for this session, it talks about going beyond font size and formatting and talking about the content, although we will be using alt-text captions and I will be pointing that out as we move through as well.

We'll be talking about how words and language impact attitudes. The impact of words and language on decisions that are made. Attitudes are the hardest barriers to remove. It's easier to figure out technology than to be aware of language and its impact.

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The AODA's principles exist to provide additional guidelines that you can use to make decisions.

I'm not going to give you a list of dos and don'ts or say here are the words you should and shouldn't use. Those change all the time and they are different for everybody. There is not one concrete list I can give you that would answer all of the questions you would have.

At the end of this session, though, you will know a bit more and have more awareness of how to make appropriate decisions.

One of the things that will help you are the guiding principles behind the AODA – dignity, integration, independence, and equality of opportunity, particularly dignity.

When you are creating documentation and content for the web, whatever types of documents you're producing, it could be marketing, academic, a number of different things, I want you to think about “does this content reflect the principles of the AODA?”

Look at the words, language, and images. Understanding the principles and applying them will help you create inclusive content.

If you want to think about a physical analogy, accessibility and inclusion, what's the difference? Accessibility might be adding ramps to existing stairs, but inclusion results in designing the building from the ground up, so those buildings are accessible to everyone right from the start.

One of the key things is to be clear, objective and respectful.

Being objective is important because attitudes are reflected in subjective content. Describe situations accurately and without stereotypes. I hear people say, “But that's a good stereotype; it's not a negative one. I said someone was inspiring or a hero.” But that is still a stereotype and when it's not objective, it can turn content into more of a cliché.

What can language do? Language can do a lot of things. Words matter. Words have meaning. I have a background in writing. I've written technical manuals and user guides where stating the facts was very important. Journalism, same thing. You have to be careful. Journalism, everyone knows, it has to be questioned a lot and it can be subjective.

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Being objective and factual as much as possible, being aware that everybody reflects their values and some of their background in their writing as well.

Words and language don't have a purely objective meaning. Context and emotion change that. Subtle differences in your writing, in the terms and context and how things are used, can change the impact of what is communicated in a major way.

What else can language do? It can separate into “us” and “them.” That's a big thing that happens when writing about disability. You can see the us and them coming into language.

Breaking it down...

The word disability. What is in a word? Think about the word that is being used a lot at this conference. The word begins with a prefix that means something negative. The prefix means apart, asunder, or having a negative or reversing force. It emphasizes the quality following it – dishonest, disliked, disconnected, disrespected.

The word itself starts off with a negative connotation to a lot of people. When you think about it - and that is one of the things we're going to talk about at the end is - do we need to use the word at all.

Thinking of that, if you're going to describe yourself in a certain way, a lot of us probably don't describe ourselves thinking of things we cannot do. I wouldn't introduce myself to someone saying “I am Mary. I cannot speak Spanish. I don't know how to drive. I cannot do a certain thing.” You don't start with the negatives.

I'm not suggesting we avoid the use of the word. The alternatives are often a bit more cringeworthy. Some words that you might have heard, for example - differently abled, handicapable, special.

When people say "the disabled" - any description you apply to an entire population is generally a bad idea. It's not a monolithic uniform population. It's not homogenous. If you need to use a term, then the “disability community” is something that is used more commonly. Also the word community is preferred over the word sector by most people. That is normally reflecting business or government use. That is not typically used for most purposes.

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Context, what else? Does describing a “person with a disability”, which is commonly known as “person first” language, is that better than saying a “disabled person”? You will hear that a lot in terms of guidelines.

If you look at the Canadian journalism guidelines, they say person first language is very important.

That's true to an extent. It is intended to be viewed as respectful, to see the person first not the disability. But is this a global standard? Will you see it everywhere? And what does it mean if you don't see it?

What does that mean? Does it show a lack of respect? One writer points out that the person first language is selected by government or medical professionals. They typically see that as reflecting that we are being respectful with the person first. But often in the disability community and other communities, you will see the other terminology, disabled person, that is often used outside of North America.

Within the disabled community, the term disabled people is used much more frequently. Does anyone know why?

The reason is that most people look at the word disabled and assume it means less able. What does the word mean? It means prevented from functioning. You will see that when you have an app or wi-fi. If it is temporarily disabled, all that means is that you still have the app or wi-fi there. But there is a barrier to its use.

It is being prevented from functioning. If you remove the barrier, it can function. The word disabled, often in other locations outside of North America, you will hear that as preferred language because it reflects that the barrier exists for the person.

It is not the medical community pointing to individuals and saying you are the individual and you own this disability and you have that disability. That's a medical term and it comes from a medical background.

A person who is disabled is usually disabled by a barrier that exists. It can frequently be removed.

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That said, I have also heard people say, "So I should correct people when they define themselves as having a disability?" You don't correct people with their language of choice. If someone has a preferred way of describing themselves, however they describe themselves, that's entirely up to them.

A lot of what we will talk about is being aware of the differences and some of the logic and rationale behind it.

Different context, different meaning. The other thing I mentioned was the medical model. Medical model and social model. That is what we were referring to. Some language comes from a medical model background.

Like the war on drugs. When you think about the war on drugs, how did that become a war? How did drug use become a problem? A criminal problem. The reason being the legal community got involved and they got to the door first. The medical community wasn't at the door first, so drug use is more often seen as a criminal problem, not a medical problem. And remember, we're also looking at everything from a North American perspective in most cases.

In other countries, in many cases, the medical community treats disability and treats drug use and a number of things very differently from the way they do in North America.

We are looking at a lot of what happens here. It doesn't necessarily mean it happens everywhere. When the medical community got to the disability door first, that's when a lot of the language and attitudes came in with the problems of disability. Not from a social model.

When you are creating content and documentation, keep that in mind.

What makes information accessible? The AODA guidelines, WCAG 2.0, the web content accessibility guidelines, these are digital standards. If you're familiar with these, then you probably work with digital documents, document conversion, creating web content, content discussed in some of the other seminars. The AODA describes these standards as information needing to be perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust.

Perceivable and operable, information can be accessed by the audience and presented in a way they can navigate it clearly. That can mean different things depending on the disability.

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Understood, this is where plain language comes in. Plain language and clear language, what does that mean?

Robust, that means as technology evolves, be aware of it and content must remain accessible.

Sometimes people develop content for technology that has just come out and maybe that doesn't make it accessible if everyone doesn't have access to the technology. Being aware of that and being able to provide that information in the format that is requested by the user is important.

That's a high-level summary of some of the AODA information and communication standards. We won't go into those much further. Those exist. I have information here I can share after class. I don't know if the Accessibility Directorate is here. Tomorrow? OK. They will provide information tomorrow.

What types of information are covered by the standards? Pretty much everything. Publications, online, signs, posters, websites, presentations.

If you are providing information to the public, it is intended to be accessible and that might mean different things depending on the type of disability or the individual request. The intention is that you may not need to have it prepared and available in all different formats, but upon request, you need to be able to convert it.

The available technology covered by AODA standards includes large print, custom software, accessibility checkers.

Some apps and software can check whether you are using plain and clear language. Technology can help you with a lot of these standards. Screen readers, descriptive video, captioning and windowing, some technology similar to what we're using today.

Now we will talk about content over the format.

Narrative theories.

I don't know how many of you are familiar with this. In addition to the comment that "words

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matter,” words and symbols, they have been shown to never be truly objective. How they are interpreted or perceived by people makes a difference. The realities are socially constructed.

What you are talking about in terms of the audience, the culture and society that the information is provided in, how they perform, and the means of its provision, the social constructs, how it is maintained, all of that alters the meaning of content.

As culture, societies, and communities change, so does language.

Historically and contextually - those are the two big ways that change the meaning of language. For example, historically, over time, using the word gay... Using the word gay in the 1920s compared to using the word gay today. It might mean something very different. And contextually, it's a big difference between referring to a gay pride parade as opposed to saying, “that is so gay” as a derogatory comment.

Words can be changed and altered based on history and time and based on the context as well.

I always say “Consider the source” to find what the message is.

As words and symbols are woven into stories, they can alter experiences in a helpful or problematic way to clarify things. All knowledge, all information, all languages are created in community.

Let’s consider something like this. How many of you have seen a meme like this on Facebook?

That is alt-text. If I scroll over the image, and everybody is familiar with alt-text when you are creating content, so we won't talk about it a lot, but that would be the description, a young boy with a leg prosthesis is smiling and running on a track. And the text is “Your excuse is invalid.”

What is the message? Thinking of context...

SPEAKER:
(inaudible)

MARY NEILANS:
That’s right. “Look at this little boy. He has got it all together, he has a smile on his face. Your

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excuse for whatever you're excusing yourself for today is invalid. That boy can overcome his barriers and challenges. So should you." That is the message. Is that a positive message or possibly a positive message?

SPEAKER:
(inaudible)

MARY NEILANS:
I would agree. Messages like this, I don't know if anyone has heard the term, inspiration porn? Or inspiration objectification?

Both of those terms come from Stella Young, who is a renowned disability activist who passed away a couple of years ago. She responded to comments about overcoming anything as coming from the medical model. Her response was "No amount of smiling at a flight of stairs has ever made it turn into a ramp." That is something to keep in mind.

Barriers exist and they need to be removed elsewhere.

Next image. What is the message here? I apologise for the blurred image. Part of the reason is that this image comes from a video that was filmed by a bystander without the subject's consent. Presumably, they were inspired by what they saw.

This image of a fast food worker feeding a customer in a wheelchair. This was done a couple years ago. What is the message behind this?

SPEAKER:
(inaudible)

MARY NEILANS:
The first image we saw was the disabled person as hero. This one is the disabled person as victim. This person, they are lucky enough to have a good-natured fast-food worker feed them.

The story with this was that the person in the wheelchair was waiting outside and couldn't even get into the fast-food chain and the worker went out and helped him in. Not acknowledging that that is a problem, and that there was no way to provide independence.

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Independence is something that - dignity, respect, integration and inclusion, all of that - is not at play in images like this.

Basically the person in the wheelchair did not know they were going to be objectified to demonstrate the goodness of other people. They are not even the subject, they are the object. Objectifying people with disabilities is not good. That is something you want to keep in mind.

The goals of communication come back to the principles again - dignity, integration, independence, equal opportunity. If you use the guiding principles of the AODA, a lot of time people look at the standards – but those are there for the technology side of things. It's about images, alt text, format, documents, all of that is very important.

Hopefully a lot of people have had AODA training from their employer. All employees need to be provided with training on AODA. Hopefully you have had it and you are aware of those requirements.

If not, chat with your employer about that as well because that should be a part of what is happening.

I just wanted to mention dignity again. Hero, victim, two very common symbols. If you are not seeing someone as a complex unique individual, if they are not the subject of the story but the image to be used to represent something, whether it is a hero or a victim, then they are being used as an object. You mentioned the charity model.

If they are using an image to manipulate an emotion, whether it is sympathy, inspiration or to get out the cheque book, all of those are inappropriate as well.

Talking about disability. This is something to be aware of. When you're deciding how to write and what language to use, when you're considering that language and terminology, consider what you are saying and why. Two things are happening with any message you're communicating. The external, which is the objective. How best can you describe the facts? Choose the most accurate and objective words related to what is happening.

Then there's how you bring your own experience to that. That is the subjective and internal interpretation.

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You might think that it's a positive word. If I say someone is awe-inspiring or just heroic, I am being positive, right? But that can be patronising, condescending and reducing an individual to a symbol of something for your own purposes.

Recognise how you bring your own experience and your own understanding and your own choice of words to content.

Here are some words that might affect attitudes, for example: Inspirational, brave, sweet, tragic, suffering, afflicted, feisty, heartwarming and spry.

Are these in your opinion factual and objective words?

They are connoting something, evoking emotions or responses. A lot of the time, some of them are positive but they can be seen as patronising.

Consider whether you would use that same language if you were describing the same factual situation about a person who did not have a disability. Stop and think about it. If you wouldn't, then perhaps you shouldn't be using those words now.

Is it inspirational or brave when someone without a disability that you know lives their daily life? You make cereal in the morning, you get dressed, you drive a car - is that inspirational and brave? If you wouldn't describe it as that... When Terry Fox ran across Canada, that wasn't inspirational just because he had a disability. It was inspirational... I couldn't do it.

If it is something that is legitimately inspirational, that's great. If that gentleman got into a fast food place and is now being served by somebody, what is inspirational about that? Especially if you're talking about the person with the disability.

Is it feisty when a 40-year-old male expresses an opinion on a talk show? If it's not feisty in that context, or if you change the gender, the age, the disability, then think about the terminology. If you would be using in one context but not another, ask why?

If you want to make language dignified and objective, you might want to change your terminology.

Would you describe someone with a different physical quality, for example, a different hair

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colour or height, would you say there were suffering from it? My mother used to say I suffered from my hair colour, but you would not typically use that.

Instead of saying someone is wheelchair-bound or someone is suffering from Parkinson's, which I hear a lot. I don't know how many times I've heard that used, "they are suffering from Parkinson's."

What is another way I could say that? They have Parkinson's. They use a wheelchair. There are factual and objective ways to say something that take away the emotion and the manipulation behind it.

Here are some media examples. When reviewing the following examples, always consider it... Now hopefully everyone is aware of fake news and people are examining things closely. Also examine it closely from this perspective.

Is the language and message accurate, respectful, clear? Is there a stereotype? Can you identify if there are possible issues and can you recommend any changes or improvements?

"Never ignore someone with a disability. You don't realise how much they can inspire you. Share if you agree." Here's an image of a woman sitting on a beach facing the ocean with her arms outspread. Apparently you should not ignore her because she might inspire you.

Is that an example of something that has a lot of dignity and respect? No.

It gets easy once you see a few of these.

The next one. Is the accomplishment itself inspiring like the Terry Fox example or is it inspiring because the action was accomplished by a person with a disability? Do daily activities reflect overcoming obstacles?

You sometimes hear comments like, it is so inspirational that a black president was elected. That a woman is chief executive officer of a major oil company. That is so inspirational. What does that tend to mean? In those contexts... Why is it so inspirational that a woman is CEO or that a black man can become president?

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Why?

SPEAKER:
(inaudible)

MARY NEILANS:

Exactly. It is usually not the biggest compliment to society when you look at a situation like that. What is happening is that those people have overcome obstacles and barriers, but instead identifying the barriers and removing them, we give the people praise and say good for them. The other perspective is to ask why are those barriers in place? Maybe we as a society need to do something a little more to remove those barriers.

I have put the links there for these articles. They exist. And I think we can agree that this is not unbiased journalism at its best. Two headlines, the tragic family with not one but two wheelchair-bound parents. Another one - brave Parkinson's sufferer to take on a skydiving challenge. These are media headlines. A lot of the time, I will hear people say, "but I see that all the time in the newspaper." Parkinson Canada will put out a flyer that uses terminology like this.

Why would the media or a charity use terminology like that if it's not respectful to people with disabilities that presumably they want to represent?

SPEAKER:
They don't know any better.

MARY NEILANS:

That might be one reason. Maybe they do. If they do, then what would another reason be?

It gets results. It will sell. Like blood and guts might sell. Portraying something as tragic or brave will sell a little more than from something with a different perspective. If it comes from a charity, then somebody who is suffering from MS is going to get your cheque book out faster than someone who is just living with it. You're going to help this poor person and the motivation behind that language is very clear. Unfortunately, they do know better. That's part of the problem.

It becomes a reminder of ablest attitudes. This is a quote from Erica Cook who is a disability rights author and educator. "I don't suffer from dyslexia, I live with it and I work with it. I suffer

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from ignorance of people who think they know what I can and cannot do.”

The language of suffering.

Here are images from sources that are less problematic. This image with the woman smiling and sitting in a wheelchair and the text overlay, “I am not your inspiration, I am your co-worker.” This comes from the Indiana Council for People with Disabilities. The slogan of the whole campaign was “I’m not your inspiration.”

This was one of many posters they had up generating a lot more awareness. I saw some others, “I’m not your inspiration, I’m your classmate.”

There was a video out recently about special needs. There are several people in the video but they were all talking about their needs and saying “I need to get to work. I need to make my lunch. I need to buy clothes that are easy to put on. Are those special needs?” They are the same needs most of us have.

Not everyone with a disability is suffering or a patient. I’m not a medical professional. I work with people with Parkinson’s, but they’re not Parkinson’s patients when I’m working with them. If they are a patient, they are being seen by a doctor. You’re not a patient all the time just because you have a disability, a condition or disease.

Avoid diminutive cute terms that remove dignity. You will find that a lot with older adults as well. I have experienced that, where I been called sweetie, honey and ma’am. Words matter. They affect your tip. Avoid cute terms that remove dignity.

Avoid using slang words and descriptions if you are outside of a group. There is also a term, sorry, I know some people in the Parkinson’s community work with who refer to themselves as Parkies.

I would never use that term. I’m not comfortable with it. I find it envelops the whole person and the disease becomes who they are. I know people who are uncomfortable with it, but some people choose to use it. I’m not in a position to ask people not to describe themselves in that way.

If you hear people using terms like cripp or gimp, if they want to describe themselves that way, that is taking back language and terminology.

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Question language and understand why it's being used. This is why we're talking about charities and the media. Understand the motivation behind the language used. The source and the intended audience make a difference. Charities and fundraisers and people who want to sell products - always consider the source. That comes with interpreting any information you see and hear.

Does a disability even need to be mentioned? We are talking about whether to say a person with a disability, disabled person, how to use the language, how to describe the disability, but in a lot of cases, the disability does not need to be mentioned. Consider the context and if you don't need to mention it, whether it is a physical, cognitive or any kind of disability, if you don't mention gender, race, religion, people get used to that. I don't need to talk about people in that way.

If that is the case, think about, "do I need to describe someone's disability?" If you don't need to mention it, don't.

Lastly, the language around disability, what is being said does change over time. The appropriateness of language changes over time as well.

Think about the R word, for example, which is now replaced by intellectual disability in many cases. But the R word was the preferred word at a certain point in time to the words that were used prior to that. Over time, as things developed, different connotations happened, positive and negative, that can change.

Likewise with the H word. That is also still used, but less often. How many people here have seen a recent Sarah Silverman video? The comedian came out recently and, very proud of it, she was promoting a new Netflix comedy special. She said "I'm not going to use the words, "that is so gay" anymore because all of my gay friends said it's offensive to a lot of them, so I'm not going to say it. Really, what I'm talking about is something that is just lame."

But lame is also a term from the disability community and that is inaccurate. If you're describing something that you consider boring or not cool, why don't you just say that? Not gay or not lame, because those words reflect prejudice.

Lastly, plain language is clear language. I have some handouts and I can also send you

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information.

Plain language is clear, concise and inclusive. Clear and concise information is a step towards universal design. When you design information, effective communication with the audience to understand the message.

You have information to share, I would like to understand it. When you want to communicate between two individuals or groups, keeping the information clear concise and simple is the best way to communicate that. There are some basic rules and I will wrap these up quickly.

Use specific, accurate terms.

Use simple, familiar words. People talk about legalese and different words in the legal community, the medical community. These communities are still coming around to plain language and clear language. They are getting there.

Most people know if you want to communicate something, avoid jargon, explain complicated ideas. If a piece of terminology has to be used that sounds complicated, then explain it.

Avoid unnecessary words. It's a lot harder to say something in less words than it is to use more. Everybody who has had to write a 500-word essay knows that.

Eliminate redundancies. In most cases, it is repetitive and not used for emphasis.

To summarize, keep these reminders in mind.

Know and meet the AODA standards. We didn't talk about the standards in depth but they are out there. They are straightforward and you can go through that information to know what they are and meet those standards. That is for basic minimum compliance. Then beyond that understand the impact of language and perceptions, attitudes. Understand and know your own attitudes.

Use clear language, be accurate objective and inclusive.

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Do not use a person with a disability to make them a symbol or object for anything positive or negative. You will avoid a lot of problems with communication.

Remember the principles of the AODA. Particularly dignity.

There's a ton of resources here if anyone wants to look at them. And that's it. Hopefully we have time for questions.

(APPLAUSE)

SPEAKER:

We do have a little bit of time for two or three questions.

MARY NEILANS:

You can run accessibility tests. There's a lot of software out there that is straightforward. Free software. You can run tests. For a lot of content, the reading level is down to grade 6 or sometimes four.

You can usually apply tests to most types of documents. That is definitely easy to find. I can give you some resources after.

Any other questions?

SPEAKER:

Thank you so much.

MARY NEILANS:

I think that's it.

(APPLAUSE)

MARY NEILANS:

Thank you. Enjoy your evening.

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