Inclusive Storytelling + Accessibility in Museums: Guidelines from The Lyme Museum

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Curated from experience

The Lyme Museum is the first museum in the world dedicated to exploring the lived experiences of invisible illnesses and disabilities through materiality and storytelling. It is a digital-first museum and resource hub, challenging the ways we think about materiality, illness and representation.

At its core, The Lyme Museum is about visibility. Too often, invisible illness means invisibility in history, in medicine and in culture. This museum changes that. Through pop-up exhibitions in community spaces, digital content, and public engagement, TLM rethinks representation and inclusion.

TLM does this through groundbreaking trauma-informed visual storytelling, ensuring that personal and collective narratives are shared with care, sensitivity and impact. The museum's approach centers lived experience, creating space for voices that have been overlooked and reshaping how illness and disability are represented in cultural spaces. Our work goes beyond exhibitions-The Lyme Museum is committed to becoming a leading resource hub.

'We are really interested in stuff, and we are radically challenging what 'belongs' in a museum, what makes something special, and how we can rewrite narratives and form more expansive and emotional storytelling tools. We have people and their lived experience at the heart of what we do; and we are committed to challenging the norm, and to making invisible illnesses and disabilities visible through the work that we do.'

— Dr. Angela Stienne, founder, The Lyme Museum

The vision of TLM

01 **To shift narratives around materiality and representation in museums**

At the core of The Lyme Museum is a rethinking of what objects and which stories belong in museums. Our focus is on mundane objects and everyday lived experiences.

02 To ensure that museums become truly inclusive of invisible illness experiences

The museum uses its platform to challenge what inclusion in museums looks like, whether in-person or digital, with a focus on invisible illnesses and disabilities and energy-limiting conditions.

03 To develop our own trauma-informed visual storytelling methodology as a tool

The Lyme Museum has developed its own creative visual storytelling methodology around mundane objects and flat lay photography to facilitate sharing lived experience in a trauma-informed way.

'Visitors to The Lyme Museum will most likely have come across many of the objects in my flat lay image and may even have used them. The material is familiar. My experiences may not be. But through the material, tangible, object, my personal experiences and invisible disabilities are given a vehicle through which they are seen, considered, and understood.'

— Robyn Timmins, 2024 volunteer, The Lyme Museum

Guidelines

In addition to being a virtual museum with pop-up exhibitions, The Lyme Museum has developed comprehensive and easy-to-access guidelines that are freely available on TLM website and social media. These guidelines focus on: rethinking materiality in museums, exploring art-based creative methods, creating inclusive physical and virtual spaces, and ensuring that lived experiences are amplified and celebrated.

Accessibility is not a fixed endpoint or a checklist. Instead, it's an ongoing, evolving process that requires adaptability, creativity, and collaboration. It can sometimes be overwhelming! Our goal is not only to model inclusive storytelling but also to provide resources that empower other institutions to follow suit. This document and every resource we share-is a living document.

We expect it to change, expand, and improve with time, feedback, and community dialogue.

Start here!

01 **Forget everything you think you know**

The old "one-size-fits-all" mindset doesn't work.

Accessibility isn't a checklist-it's a mindset. Let go of rigid ideas about what access should look like and be open to creative, flexible solutions.

02 **Start by listening**

The best solutions come from those with lived experience. Talk to people. Ask questions. Build relationships. True inclusion begins by centering the voices of those directly impacted.

03 **Embrace imperfection**

Accessibility is an ongoing process-and that's okay. You won't get everything right the first time. Mistakes will happen, but learning from them is key. Stay open to feedback and commit to continuous growth.

What is accessibility?

[cross; a 'x'] *Accessibility is not a checklist.*

[check mark] *Accessibility is a commitment to ongoing accountability, curiosity, and responsiveness.*

Accessibility must be embedded into every part of our process—from how we design exhibitions, to how we share stories online, to how we communicate with our audiences.

Multiple accessibility standards

There are many accessibility guidelines:

- WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines)

- ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act)
- Section 508 (U.S. Federal Guidelines)
- EN 301 549 (EU accessibility for ICT)

We acknowledge these frameworks. We also know that compliance alone is not the same as inclusion. It's important to recognize that these frameworks and such policies are not always comprehensive-disabled people have been historically underrepresented in the creation of such standards, and in today's climate, many of these policies are subject to change, reinterpretation, or uneven enforcement. As museums, it is our duty to listen to our visitors and take responsibility for one's presence-or absence in some cases. If there's a group that is visibly not present-whether in person or online-it is our responsibility to ask why. Who's missing? Who doesn't feel welcome? Inclusion means not only serving the people who already show up, but also reaching those who have been historically excluded, overlooked, or pushed away.

Accessibility in digital spaces

Taking meaningful action also means ensuring that our digital spaces reflect the same level of care and intentionality as our physical ones. As museums increasingly expand into virtual environments, accessibility must be built into the foundation - not added las an afterthought. The way we design our websites, PDFs, and digital exhibits plays a direct role in who is able to engage with our content, participate in conversations, and feel represented. Digital inclusion is not just technical - it is relational, tied to storytelling.

Fonts, colors & visual identity

1. Use fonts designed for legibility: bold, sans serif, no stylized thin strokes.
2. Minimum 12-16pt font size for digital and print body text.
3. Strong color contrast between text and background.
4. Avoid using color as the only way to convey information.
5. Avoid red/green pairings and low-contrast pastels.
6. Use tools like WebAIM's Color Contrast Checker and the W3C accessibility standards to test visual decision

Accessible digital design

1. PDFs, websites and virtual exhibits must be screen reader-compatible.
2. Use clear structure: headers, alt text, reading order and semantic tagging.
3. Ensure all interactive elements are usable via keyboard and screen reader.
4. Avoid purely visual communication: always provide descriptive text alternatives.

Multimedia access

1. All videos include open captions and transcripts.
2. Audio stories include written text alternatives.
3. Photos and images include alt text that describes both appearance and context.
4. Jargon is avoided in descriptions. Use plain, direct language.

Language that includes

1. Use direct words: "disabled people," not euphemisms like "differently abled."
2. Name harm without sanitizing it.
3. Avoid passive voice and institutional distancing. Own your words.
4. Be transparent about what's still in progress.

Interactivity that works for everyone

Ideal interactive documents and websites should be designed for maximized usability.

1. Keyboard and screen reader compatibility
2. Clear, consistent navigation
3. Descriptive link and button text
4. Adjustable font sizes and color modes if possible
5. No auto-play audio or movement without user control
6. Feedback forms for ongoing input

Storytelling in physical and virtual spaces

Use multimedia tools to create immersive, engaging storytelling that reflects nuanced experiences. Examples include:

1. Virtual storytelling platforms that allow individuals to share their lived experiences in real time.
2. Interactive installations where visitors can explore multiple perspectives on a single topic.
3. Dynamic exhibits that evolve over time, allowing new narratives to emerge as our understanding grows.

Centering lived experiences

Inclusive storytelling goes beyond diverse representation-it demands a fundamental shift in how stories are sourced, shared and experienced. Museums must make intentional choices in how they build narratives.

Avoid flattening disability stories into narratives of victimhood, pity, or triumph over adversity. Portray individuals in their full humanity, showcasing complexities such as joy, struggle, innovation, and their contributions to society.

Place these narratives within a broader societal context to show how historical and contemporary structures have shaped disabled lives, and vice versa.

Participation and co-curation

1. Feature first-person quotes and media wherever possible.
2. Use storytelling workshops to let communities co-curate their own narratives.
3. Use oral histories, letters, diaries, flat lays and contemporary interviews to connect visitors directly to personal stories.
4. Translate when needed, but never flatten tone, dialect or emotional weight.
5. Make space for trauma-informed methodologies adapted to your museum and your audience.
6. Ensure the voices being shared have consented to their stories being told, are involved in how they are presented, and that their narratives are not exploited.

Best practice

01 Decenter dominant perspectives

Let the story begin where it actually begins-which is often far from colonial timelines or institutional frameworks.

02 Avoid erasure through simplification

Stories are often simplified for general audiences, but this risks removing cultural nuance, pain, or resistance.

03 Involve the storytellers in curation

Consult, compensate and collaborate with those whose stories you share.

04 Embrace cultural protocols

Seek permissions and honor community guidelines, especially in Indigenous and diasporic contexts.

05 Let people see themselves reflected

That means language and linguistic access, disability culture, racial equity, and space for gender and sexuality beyond binaries.

Meaningful engagement

01 Create

Create discussion prompts that invite visitors to explore how the stories relate to current social and accessibility challenges.

02 Include

Include actionable takeaways, such as ways to support disability advocacy, challenge exclusionary practices, or promote inclusivity in their own communities.

03 Partner

Partner with organizations and individuals working on similar issues to host events, talks, or workshops that directly address ongoing discussions and issues.

Key accessibility takeaways

1. We cannot "solve" accessibility in a single exhibit, feature, or file.
2. Listen to disabled and marginalized voices. Making space for conversations is just as important as adding a ramp or a transcript.
3. Understand that accessibility and accountability go hand-in-hand.
4. Access is not a barrier to artistic freedom-but neither is "freedom" an excuse for exclusion. The two must exist in dialogue.

TOOLBOX: CREATING ACCESSIBLE CONTENT FOR EXHIBITION DISPLAYS ONLINE AND IN GALLERIES

Creating accessible content for exhibition displays is not only considerate but also broadens your audience and makes your art and message available to a wider audience, including disabled visitors. This applies to your physical galleries, but also to your online content. Remember, your content is only accessible if it does not include ableist tropes, and if representation, inclusion and accessibility are at the core of your practice, from the onset.

Accommodate individuals with low vision by providing alternative formats for visual content. This can include audio descriptions for artworks or tactile representations for physical displays. Online exhibitions should provide high-resolution images and detailed alt-text for all visual content, to be used by screen readers. See our handy guide on UX and accessibility.

Make it easy for visitors to navigate through your exhibition, whether it's online or in a physical gallery. Use clear signage, both in galleries and on websites, and provide accessible maps or site guides. For online exhibitions, ensure that navigation is simple and intuitive, with clear links and headings. After all, journeys are also about storytelling and the ways that you help your audience understand and explore the content you are sharing!

If your exhibition includes interactive elements or multimedia presentations, ensure that they are accessible to all. Provide transcripts and captions for videos, and use interactive elements, such as touchscreens. Online exhibitions should also have accessible interactive features. Keep in mind that flashing lights and really loud noises are an accessibility issue; they are rarely worth it!

What participation with an exhibition looks like is different for all visitors, and this requires creativity and flexibility. Consider offering accessible guided tours, both in-person and virtually, with sign language interpreters or live captioning for online tours. Create opportunities for tactile exploration or interactive experiences that are accessible to diverse audiences. Keep in mind that engagement looks different for everyone: see our guides on accessible events especially for people with energy-limiting conditions.

TOOLBOX: ACTIONS TO GET STARTED ON ACCESS IN A MUSEUM/GALLERY

Assess the current provisions and barriers in your museum to ensure that spaces are accessible and actually used by Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people. Ensure that the scope of the review encompasses ways of engaging with museum collections beyond the idea of a museum within four walls: digital engagement, digital interfaces and their accessibility, online content open access, reputation, social media engagement, as well as spaces that fall outside of the scope of the specific gallery: shops, cafés …

Advisory and community groups are crucial in ensuring that access is embedded in all aspects of an organisation and reflects the genuine and varied needs of communities. Inclusion is complex and the hard part is knowing that we cannot accommodate every need at once, and that those needs are ever-changing; but what we can always do is hold space for communication, and we can always try to be more creative, to be more compassionate and to increase levels of access and involvement.

Think about the situatedness of your collections: museums were created to classify objects, people and ideas into worthiness. Some collections can be more harmful than others. It is crucial to be trauma-informed and aware of the potential triggers that collections can have on visitors, advisors, experts, and staff. It is paramount that the involvement of communities does not trigger, re-traumatise, or feel tokenistic to audiences we wish to include and represent. Be committed to equity and social justice, ensuring that services and products linked to your museum / gallery are inclusive and accessible. Involving Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people in museum programming is an essential step towards creating inclusive and accessible experiences: ensuring that the museum is not just committed to inclusion, but that inclusion and access are embedded and reflected in all its aspects, and that emanates from deep involvement from the outset.

So much of inclusion and accessibility work is rooted in removing physical and intellectual barriers, preventing trauma, doing politics. All of that is tremendously important but it is also heavy. And often we forget about disabled joy. We need to ensure that disabled, Deaf and neurodivergent people are involved in the joyful parts too! We need more celebrations, events and launch nights that don't have normative ways of celebrating, but that are led by and work for Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent audiences.

Think, create, make change!

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