

Making your Library Accessible for People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

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Each of us has our own strengths and weaknesses. Some people are better at sports than others; some people excel in academics or music or a craft. What are your strengths and weaknesses? Have you ever challenged a weakness of your own and changed it into a strength?

A "weakness" can be likened to a disability. People with disabilities have additional or different challenges because they must overcome a physical or mental disability before they can succeed. All too often there are additional environmental or societal obstacles that inhibit their ability to cope with what others would perceive to be normal or mundane activities, thus making it even more difficult for people with disabilities to succeed in areas outside their own personal lives (i.e., in school, jobs, hobbies).

You might ask, "How does this relate to libraries?" Librarianship is an enabling profession. Stories abound about librarians helping people find the appropriate information they need in order to succeed. Yet, somehow we are thrown when a person who is differently challenged (with a "disability") calls or comes into the library seeking services. How do we cope? We are challenged to work outside of our comfort zone to make accommodations. But, stop and think a minute: we have the easy job - the person with the disability has a much harder time coping because they live with their disability day in and day out, in a world that is not very tolerant of people who are different from the mainstream. We must learn to look beyond our own personal discomfort and provide the same level of service to this population as we do to more physically or mentally capable persons.

Morally, we know that providing appropriate service is the right thing to do. However, for years our society has ignored the needs of this special population. That is the reason there are two federal laws that mandate our serving people with disabilities: [*Americans with Disabilities Act*](#) (ADA) and

the [Rehabilitation Act of 1973](#). These two laws attempt to stop this unwitting discrimination against people who are differently challenged.

So, how do we help our library patrons with disabilities? Two different articles ([Black, et al](#) and [Pemberton & Pemberton](#)) in this issue of TL deal with broad issues of universal accessibility for people with all types of disabilities. This article, however, will deal with more depth on accessibility for individuals with hearing loss. The emphasis, as always, is on the people we are serving, not the disability. Hearing loss is an obstacle that both the patron and the librarian need to address in order for us to succeed at fulfilling the patron's needs.

Hearing loss ranges from mild or moderate (hard of hearing) to profound hearing loss (deaf). According to the National Center for Health Statistics 2003 Health Interview Survey L (Lethbridge-Cejku & Vickerie 2005), 14.3% of the adult population living in the South experienced some hearing difficulty without a hearing aid (defined as "a little trouble, a lot of trouble, or deaf"), and more men than women experience hearing loss.

Hearing loss is a communication disability. This communication gap is functional rather than generational. And while most people have some residual hearing that may or may not be rectified with hearing aid usage, the impact can be minor or devastating depending on: 1) the age of onset of the hearing loss; 2) degree of hearing loss (mild, moderate, severe or profound); and, 3) the individuals' ability to cope with the loss.

Accommodations for People Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Tennessee has the most comprehensive statewide library relating to deafness and hearing loss in the country, Library Services for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing. It is open to all Tennesseans, including Tennesseans with no hearing loss. See related article in this issue: ["Have You Heard about the Library Services for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing?"](#) for more information about collections and services.

Depending upon the variables listed above, accommodations will vary, but usually fall within two categories: people who use amplification and people who use their vision to compensate for the hearing loss. Below is a listing of possible accommodations:

People who are:	Need these accommodations:
Hard of Hearing & Deaf	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear signage to help direct people • Visual alert / warning system • Equal accessibility to <i>all</i> programs and services • Paper and pencil - to provide written communication when verbal communication is not successful
Hard of Hearing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal portable one-on-one Assistive Listening Device (ALD) (amplification system) for use <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ at service desks ◦ on tours • ALD (Amplification) system for use in meeting rooms, auditoriums, children's story rooms, theaters, etc. • Headsets and "Neckloops" for use with amplification systems • Hearing aid compatible public telephones
Deaf	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualified sign language interpreters for public programming such as children's story times, or for staff meetings if there is an employee who is Deaf • A staff person knowledgeable in sign language to handle basic communication needs (e.g. to answer a reference question) • Captioning: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Make sure videos or DVDs that may be used for public programming are Closed Captioned ◦ Provide open Captioning for public programming • Telephones: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Public TTY ◦ Video relay service access • As with all other service animals, Hearing Ear Dogs or Signal Dogs are allowed in all public facilities. See U.S. Dept. of Justice: http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/qasrvc.htm

Two websites that address communication accommodations are:

U.S. Dept. of Justice: Title III ADA Regulations, Section 36.303 Auxiliary Aids and Services: <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/reg3a.html#Anchor-97857>

National Association of the Deaf:
<http://www.nad.org/site/pp.asp?c=foINKQMBF&b=101229>

How to Communicate with a Person Who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Get the person's attention before speaking - Tap the person on the shoulder if you are standing, on the knee if sitting; flick a light switch; or wave within the person's sight line.

Ask which communication strategy the person prefers - Aural/Oral Communication (speechreading and speaking) - ask if the person would like an Assistive Listening Device, Sign Language, Cued Speech, or written communication.

"Key" the person in to the subject matter being discussed (e.g. Overdue Fines or Rules of Conduct or Library Hours) - If the person knows the subject matter, it is easier for them to anticipate what will be said and make it easier for them to speechread.

Speak slowly and clearly, at a normal rate - Over and under exaggeration distorts lip movements.

Do not nod your head while speaking - This makes it harder for the person to speechread.

Look directly at the person when you speak - Look in their eyes. Do not look down, at a computer, or another person when speaking.

Position yourself so the light falls on you instead of behind you - If there are windows with streaming sunlight in the room, this is a problem. Do not put the person in a position where they have to squint to see you.

If the person has a hard time understanding, rephrase the sentence - Certain words are easier to speechread than others.

Keep your sentences as short as possible - Short sentences are easier to speechread than long ones

Don't get frustrated and say, "Forget it!" - Find a way to make your point instead of making the person feel stupid for not understanding or making them feel left-out

Use writing when necessary - Although writing can be useful, keep written messages short and to the point.

Do not cover your face - Do not chew on pencils or gum; make sure that you do not talk with your hands in front of your face; moustaches need to be cropped above the lip.

Do not assume the person understands when he/she smiles and shakes their head in agreement - People do not want to look stupid. Strategies to make sure individuals understand:

- Use open-ended questions that DON'T require a Yes/No answer;
- Ask the person to repeat what you said

Tips for Using a Sign Language Interpreter in a One-to-One Situation:

- The interpreter should stand a half-step behind and to the side of you so the deaf person can look at you and the interpreter at the same time.
- Never say, "Tell him/her" - You are speaking to the person who is Deaf, not his/her interpreter. Address the person as you would anyone else.
- Do not ask the interpreter to do anything other than facilitate communication.

Whatever the circumstance--whether ability or disability--the fruits of our labors as librarians result in people accessing the information they want and/or need in order to live more enjoyable and productive lives. Let us be the model to enable all of our patrons with disabilities to succeed in their encounters with us.

References

Lethbridge-Cejku M, Vickerie J. 2005. Summary health statistics for U.S. adults: National Health Interview Survey, 2003. National Center for Health Statistics. *Vital Health Stat* 10(225).
(http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_10/sr10_225.pdf)