

# Suggested Practices for Inclusive Online Spaces

Neurodivergent people, broadly speaking, have a mind that functions in ways that diverge from the dominant standards of what society would consider “normal” functions.<sup>1</sup>

This may contribute to differences in how neurodivergent people think and learn, process information and senses, move, communicate, socialize, and live daily lives.

To improve the ways we create online meetings to support neurodiversity (see our Language & Definitions one-pager for more definitions), we began by looking at our meeting structures and developing guidelines to introduce to participants.

These practices may be relevant to running a GSA club or a youth program, including setting up an online community, communicating with each other, or planning live online meetings. While these guidelines were written for facilitating online meeting spaces, they can also be useful to introduce or adapt as community guidelines in support of accessibility.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. COLLECT ACCESSIBILITY NEEDS
2. PROVIDE AGENDAS
3. INCORPORATE ACCESSIBILITY PRACTICES INTO GUIDELINES
4. MORE BREAKS
5. ENABLE SUBTITLES
6. PREPARE CHAT INSTRUCTIONS
7. USE TONE INDICATORS
8. ASK FOR RAISED HANDS
9. GET COMFORTABLE WITH SILENCE
10. DON'T CRITICIZE ACCESS NEEDS

## COLLECT ACCESSIBILITY NEEDS INFORMATION IN REGISTRATION FORMS

Share the accessibility practices you already plan to use.

(E.g. Closed Captions)

### EXAMPLE:

A field that says, "please share any access needs that you have to participate more fully."

### HOW MIGHT THIS HELP?

As Patty Berne says, "When I have my access needs met, I am functionally not disabled."

## PROVIDE AND SHARE AGENDAS WITH DETAILED BREAKDOWNS

### When to share agendas:

- beforehand in an email/chat room
- in the chat as members enter a virtual room
- at the beginning of the meeting
- in post-meeting follow up notes

### A detailed breakdown can include:

- what to expect in the meeting
- how long each section will be
- which activities members will be expected to participate in/how



### EXAMPLE:

Share in chat and email beforehand, and in the review of the day's agenda:

#### ☆☆ TODAY'S AGENDA

4:00-4:05: Buffer-Waiting for attendees to arrive.

4:05-4:15: Check-in (We will go around and introduce ourselves.)

4:15-4:50: Topic and Activities (I.e. GSAs 101 PowerPoint and small group discussions)

4:50-5:00: Break

**Note: Today's meeting will involve discussion in small groups and in go-arounds.**

### HOW MIGHT THIS HELP?

This gives participants an advanced opportunity to expect/prepare for the activities and when they will be asked to communicate or participate. It also allows participants to go back and learn at their own pace, review something they may have missed, and reduce anxiety by being put on the spot.

## INCORPORATE ACCESSIBILITY AND ANTI-ABLEIST PRACTICES INTO COMMUNITY GUIDELINES OR OPENING

- These are shared at the beginning of all our trainings
- Community Guidelines<sup>2</sup> (sometimes known as Community Expectations, Shared Norms, Commitments, etc.) can help to normalize and formalize facilitation practices as well

### HOW MIGHT THIS HELP?

This helps to ensure everyone is on the same page for expectations/clarity around practices we require to make a space as safe and accessible as possible.

As was the case with us, this will take time to implement in practice with your group- make room for mistakes, accountability and growth.

## MORE BREAKS

We include at least one break in all our online meetings. Breaks are noted in the shared agendas & chat. Giving participants a report back time from break can be helpful to ensure everyone comes back in a timely manner.

### EXAMPLE:

"We're taking a break.  
Report back at 5:30!"

### HOW MIGHT THIS HELP?

Breaks are helpful for everyone, especially after sensory activities (videos, audio) or high verbal engagements (group discussions, games), or simply to refresh your needs (bathroom break, rest eyes, get a snack, etc.)

### SAMPLE RELEVANT COMMUNITY GUIDELINES:

- Use the Raise Hand feature
- Use Tone Indicators
- Commitment to Anti-Oppressive Language

See Quick Reference Guide for an example of our "Commitment to Accessibility"

(2) Community guidelines are practices shared in the beginning of a gathering; these can encourage an inclusive space, give participants shared rules/tools to engage, or can be referred to by the facilitator to encourage engagement in some way. They are strongest when created collaboratively.

## ENABLE SUBTITLES / AUTO-TRANSCRIPTION

- Zoom now has an auto-transcription feature ([see Zoom support for more info](#)) to allow for closed captions in meetings.
- The words will show up on your screen to allow folks to read what you are saying during the presentation.

### EXAMPLE:

See Quick Reference Guide for full sample of captioning announcement.

Here is a piece of that announcement:

- “Live captioning is provided by Zoom and may not be 100% correct. So if you see something not coming up correctly, please be patient with this new tool. We would like to ask that when folks are speaking, please speak clearly and as close to your mic as you can.”

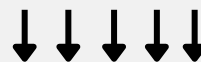
## PREPARE THOROUGH CHAT INSTRUCTIONS AND QUESTIONS

- Share verbal instructions or questions in chat before starting or breaking out
- Include how you would like questions answered or participation to look like (chat, raise hand to speak, etc)
- Use symbols, emojis, or divider lines to emphasize facilitator instructions or questions, or to indicate when you are moving on to a new topic in the chat



### HOW MIGHT THIS HELP?

Captions gives the options for participants to read what you are saying, which is important for folks who have a hard time processing auditory information, are hard of hearing, might not be able to have sound for safety concerns, or who simply learn better through reading.



Similar to captions, it can be helpful to include the instructions via chat so participants are able to refer back visually if they missed verbal instructions.

### EXAMPLE:

Divider lines:

++++  
=====

### ☆ Breakout Room Instructions

1. Select a facilitator and notetaker
2. Take turns to answer the questions verbally
3. Decide who will report back

### EXAMPLE:

**/j = joking**  
**/hj = half-joking**  
**/ij = inside joke**  
**/s = sarcasm**  
**/srs = serious**  
**/nsrs = not serious**  
**/p = platonic**  
**/r = romantic**  
**/lh = lighthearted**  
**/neg - /nc = negative connotation**  
**/pos - /pc = positive connotation**  
**/rh = rhetorical question**  
**/gen = genuine question**  
**/hyp = hyperbole**  
**/c = cospasta**  
**/q = quote**  
**/lyric(s) or /ly = lyrics of a song**  
**/li = literally**  
**/nm = not mad or upset**  
**/t = teasing**  
**/ex or /fex = example, for example**

## INTRODUCE AND USE TONE INDICATORS

[Tone indicators](#) are shorthand signifiers written at the end of a sentence to demonstrate the writer's intent and emotion, which often can be difficult to interpret/convey over text.

These can be used in all virtual chat spaces, both group or individually, whether in online spaces like Zoom and Discord, or over text and direct messages.

## HOW MIGHT THIS HELP?

Neurodivergent participants may be unable or less able to instinctively understand tone over text, which can make it difficult to feel included in conversations and lead to feeling left out, unwelcome in spaces or rejected.

See Quick Reference Guide for more information and examples on tone indicator use.

## ASK FOR RAISED HANDS

- Some online meeting platforms like Zoom and Google Meet have a “raise hand” feature that notifies the facilitator that a participant wants to engage.
- In Zoom, a small palm image will show up on the participants list and in gallery view.



## HOW MIGHT THIS HELP?

Neurodivergent participants may have difficulty with turn-taking and interrupting. This is a great option to get the presenter’s attention without having to interrupt the speaker, and can help create an order or flow.

### EXAMPLE:

Introduce the feature early on (check-in with participants about whether they have this feature and review where and how to access it) and let participants know that group discussion will happen via raised hands, to support clarity.

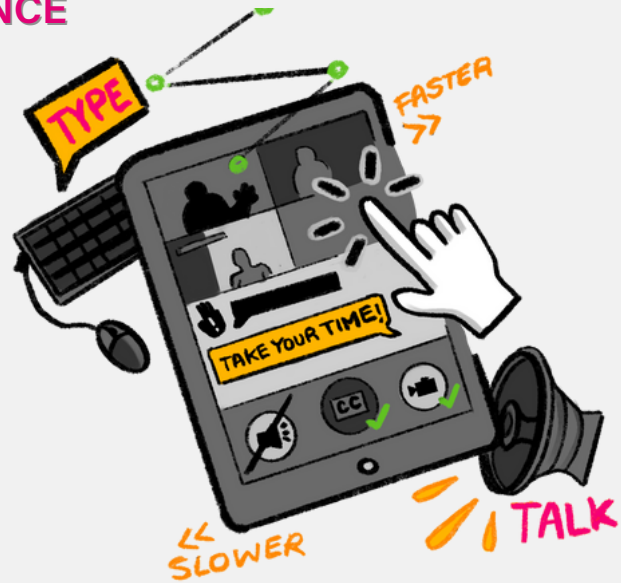
***"It can be really difficult for us to just unmute ourselves and begin talking- both because of the structural ambiguity, and the social stress. Neurodivergent folks, especially autistic people, tend to struggle a lot more with turn-taking, and this may make us feel like we never know when to speak or stop speaking.***

***This results in us either accidentally interrupting people and sometimes becoming so embarrassed that we don't speak for the rest of the meeting, or deciding not to contribute verbally at all."***

- GSA Network Youth Leader

## GET COMFORTABLE WITH SILENCE AND PROVIDING MULTIPLE ENGAGEMENT OPTIONS

- Neurodivergent participants may communicate differently than neurotypical people. Online meetings provide options for different kinds of engagement, like asking for reactions, filling out polls, or using a meeting-based chat window.
- There may be times when participants are nonverbal or seem distracted. Encourage everyone to let the facilitator know their needs, if they feel comfortable. Incorporate moments where you give people time to think about their response.



### EXAMPLE:

"Silence  $\neq$  disengagement. There may be parts of the training that require participants to pause for thought."

"We're going to give folks a minute to think and respond"

### HOW MIGHT THIS HELP?

For participants who are nonverbal at the time, creating time for people to type out chats and capture all they are trying to say can be very helpful.

While some may view silence as negative, there are others who are not bothered or more comfortable with silence.

This does not always mean that people are not engaged or focused; they just may not have anything to add.

### ENGAGEMENT IDEAS

- Visual (Video, Emojis)
- Auditory (Audio, Talk)
- Text (via chat window)
- Activities (polls, quizzes, prompts, etc.)
- Time to think, Breathe, Process and Respond

## **DON'T DRAW ATTENTION / CRITICIZE STIMMING, SERVICE ANIMALS, OR OTHER KNOWN ACCESS DEVICES**

- Stimming (sometimes known as “stims” or self-stimulating behavior) refers to behaviors that help to regulate the senses.<sup>3</sup> They are often repetitive. Some common examples of stims are rocking back and forth, pacing, cracking knuckles/joints, playing with hands, humming.
- Calling attention to stims and access needs may look like:
  - Reacting in shock to stims that look “bad” or “ugly”
  - Fawning over stims or access needs by calling them “cute” or “adorable”

**We suggest introducing this as a guideline for supporting neurodiversity.**

### **EXAMPLE:**

If you are not sure what might be happening or are concerned about a participant’s ability to engage at that moment, you might consider reaching out via a direct message to ask, “do you need any help focusing?” or “is there anything I can help you with?”. Pair with a tone indicator.

### **HOW MIGHT THIS HELP?**

Autistic or neurodivergent people are conditioned to mask emotions to appeal to neurotypical people. Participants may not want attention drawn to stimming. Even if a reaction seems positive, it contributes to the otherization and infantilization of neurodivergent and disabled participants.

***"As autistic or neurodivergent people, we're quite literally conditioned to mask our emotions to appeal to neurotypicals. Even if someone appears to be okay with the attention, it still may be unwanted and ostracizing."***

*- GSA Network Youth Leader*