

Writing Spaces

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Documenting Campus Spaces: The Collaborative Accessibility Guide Assignment

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Overview

The Collaborative Accessibility Guide (CAG) assignment was originally designed for an upper-level writing course, Technical and Scientific Writing, taught at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) and large public research university. However, this assignment can easily be adapted for any technical or professional writing course. Over the course of a 3-4-week unit, which culminates with the CAG assignment, students work together in groups of 3 to 4 to analyze accessibility in both physical spaces and documentation projects, explore a new genre, document a physical space on campus, and create a multimodal accessibility guide for a real-world audience.

This assignment was inspired by my own experience as a graduate student working on part of the accessibility guide for the 2024 Watson Conference. While I enjoyed going out and exploring a new genre and physical space on my campus, I was surprised by the amount of time and energy it took to document just one building. So, when I had the opportunity to create this assignment, I decided to make it a group project so that students could distribute the workload and rely on the strengths of each individual in the group.

This assignment works particularly well as a group project. The trick is to make sure that the expectations for each person in the group are clearly defined—and preferably written down—to make sure one or two people don't end up doing all the work. I recommend asking students to assign roles like “project manager,” “photographer,”

“content writer,” and “document designer/editor,” depending on the number of students in each group.

The CAG assignment opens the door for conversations about genre, audience, collaboration, technical documentation and editing, and document design. Plus, it gets students out of the classroom and encourages them to think critically about the spaces in which they exist and the power dynamics that are inherently built into those spaces.

Time Commitment

This assignment will take approximately 3-4 weeks to complete, including one class period for “documentation day,” when students will visit their selected campus space to take photos and notes for their accessibility guide.

Materials

To complete the CAG assignment, students will need a camera to take photos and a computer with some type of word processing software.

Students in each group will also need to be able to access a selected space on campus (see “Learning Accommodations” section for alternatives).

Assignment Process

- **Form Groups and Designate Roles.** Before the students start work on the project, I start by putting them in groups (I find 3-4 students per group works best, but you can adjust this based on need or preference). Students will not only collaboratively create the CAG assignment, but they will also sit in those groups during in-class sessions to better acclimate to working together. After reading [“Stronger Together: Collaborative Work in the Technical Writing Classroom”](#) by

[Laurence José](#), each group will draft a group contract (144) that outlines expectations for the group, the roles of each member, and the space they will document.

- **Define Accessibility and Accessible Documentation.** Together, we discuss what the term “accessibility” means in the context of physical spaces, products, and documentation. Then, we read [“Basic Approaches to Creating Accessible Documentation Projects: What Is Accessibility, and What Does It Have to do with Documentation Projects?”](#) by [Cathryn Molloy](#) and discuss how we can make our writing more accessible and why accessibility in writing is important.
- **Explore the Genre.** After discussing what “genres” are and how they form, we look at several different examples of accessibility guides from airports, sports stadiums, museums, convention centers, and other physical spaces. In groups, students will compare the examples, analyzing their strengths and weaknesses, and discuss how each example might be improved.
- **Work Together to Document a Space on Campus.** During a designated class period, students go in their groups to document their chosen space on campus. Together, they will take notes on and photograph entrances, including push-to-open buttons, exterior stairs, and ramps, plus interior stairwells and elevators. You can also ask students to document other accessible architectural/design elements, such as wayfinding and orientation signage, ergonomics and user comfort (adjustable furniture, adaptable workstations, or lighting levels) or sensory considerations (visual cues, tactile indicators, or auditory signals that address the needs of individuals with sensory disabilities).
- **Collaboratively Draft a Technical Document for a Real-World Audience.** Students will work together to plan,

draft, and edit an accessibility guide for their chosen space. During this part of the assignment, students will read and discuss [“Beyond Black on White: Document Design and Formatting in the Writing Classroom” by Michael J. Klein and Kristi L. Shackelford](#). Each group should also have a particular audience in mind for the guide and design the guide for that audience (e.g., students and faculty, administrators, visitors).

- **Reflect on Potential Improvements to the Space.** Finally, students should reflect on the accessibility of the space they documented. This can take the form of an informal in-class writing session or a formal graded assignment that they turn in with the final draft of the CAG. Because accessibility guides are technical documents that represent a physical space as it is, this reflective assignment gives students the opportunity to analyze how well the space has been designed for accessibility and speculate how it might be improved.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this assignment will:

- Practice collaborative learning and writing strategies to work towards a common goal
- Gain an understanding of the accessibility guide genre and the ways in which genre can impact rhetorical choices
- Develop a deeper understanding of what it means to design accessible spaces and documents
- Think critically about how spaces on their campus are designed, who they are designed for, and how they might be improved
- Use a combination of images and texts to document a

physical space

- Plan, draft, and edit a document that is both thoughtfully designed and accessible

Learning Accommodations

- For online courses where students are in different locations, instructors can adjust the requirements of the assignment to allow students to document any space in their local community, provided they receive permission. In this case, instructors will also have to modify the assignment so that it is no longer collaborative, as online students will likely not have access to the same physical spaces.

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