

# What can you do to improve the academic workplace for your deaf and hard-of-hearing colleagues?

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**Universally design your workplace:** Our spaces become more inclusive for all when we improve access for any subgroup of our community.

Consequently, by increasing the accessibility of our workplaces for our deaf and hard-of-hearing (HoH) colleagues, we create a better workplace for everyone. This includes hearing folks who have auditory processing disorder, use English as their second language, or are acquiring hearing loss during their careers. *Chances are that someone in your department has hearing loss, whether they've disclosed this or not, and will benefit from your efforts to make your workplace more accessible* (see The Mind Hears [blog post about where are all the deaf and hard of hearing academics](#)). This is why you should universal design your workplace now and not wait until someone who is struggling asks you to make modifications.

**Sharing the work:** With a google search you can find several resources on workplace accessibility for deaf/HoH employees, such as the Hearing Loss Association of America's (HLAA) very useful [employment toolkit](#). One drawback of these resources is that nearly all of the suggestions are framed as actions for the deaf/HoH employee. *While deaf and hard of hearing academics need to be strong self-advocates and take steps to improve their accommodations, our hearing colleagues can help us tremendously by sharing the work and not expecting us to bear all of the burden of creating accessible workplaces.* Speech reading conversations, planning accommodations, and making sure that technology/accommodations function is never-ending and exhausting work that we do above and beyond our teaching, research and service. Your understanding and your help changing our workplaces can make a huge difference to us. For example, if a speaker doesn't repeat a question, ask them to repeat even if you heard the question just fine. The people who didn't hear the question are already stressed and fatigued from working hard to listen, so why expect them to do the added work of ensuring speakers repeat questions? (see The Mind Hears [blog post on listening fatigue](#)). Repeating the question benefits everyone. The changes you make today can also help your workplace align with equal opportunity requirements for best hiring practices (see The Mind Hears blog posts about applying for jobs when deaf/HoH [here](#) and [here](#)). The Mind Hears coordinated the listing below to help you become better allies today.

**One size doesn't fit all:** If a participant requests accommodation for a presentation or meeting, follow up with them and be prepared to iterate to a solution that works. It may be signed interpreters (there are different kinds of signing), oral interpreters, CART ([Communication Access Realtime Translation](#)), or FM systems (assistive listening devices). It could be rearranging the room or modifying the way that the meeting is run. Keep in mind that what

works for one deaf/HoH person may not work for another person with similar deafness. What works for someone in one situation may not work at all for that same person in another situation, even if the situations seem similar to you. The best solution will probably not be the first approach that you try nor may it be the quickest or cheapest approach; it will be the one that allows your deaf and hard-of-hearing colleagues to participate fully and contribute to the discussion. Reaching the goal of achieving an academic workplace accessible to deaf/HoH academics is a journey.

*Suggestions on this list come from a variety of sources (e.g. [HLAA employment toolkit](#)) but primarily our own experiences. This list isn't comprehensive but provides some guidelines for common scenarios with academia. We welcome your comments and suggestions to improve the living document [at this link](#). If you find that you want to explore a topic in more detail, we encourage you to write a blog post for [The Mind Hears](#)—we will link your post to this list.*

*Most of the following recommendations are for deaf/HoH who speech read. Linda Campbell and the Saint Mary's University staff interpreter have assembled a wonderful collection of short guides for [how to work with a staff interpreter](#) in various academic settings.*

## Presentations

- Leave sufficient lights on in the room so that the speaker's face and interpreters (if present) can be seen.
- Have presenters use a microphone when it exists; do not let them assume they don't need amplification ([Ramey, 2019](#)). Ditto for audience questions.
  - Note: check that the microphone system works well before the presentation. A bad microphone system can be worse than none at all.
- Ask presenters to repeat the questions from the audience before answering. We've noticed that presenters are often nervous and forget to repeat, so a reminder can help.
- If the presenter is deaf/HoH, the convener/host should be ready to repeat audience questions.
- Encourage all presenters to use real-time auto-caption with [Google slides](#) or [Microsoft Office 365](#). Our experience is that the AI with these programs far outperforms typical voice recognition software and has less lag than CART. We provide a guide for using real time auto-caption AI programs [here](#) (also, check out [The Mind Hears post on Captions and Craptions for Academics](#)).
- If speakers are using videos, encourage them either to turn on captioning for the videos (CC button, usually on lower right) or eliminate use of videos without captioning.
- If CART services are provided for deaf/HoH participants, consider projecting the captioning onto a screen so that all in the room can benefit.

- When available, use “looped” rooms for presentations (indicated by the symbol at right) that allow users of hearing aids and cochlear implants with telecoil functionality to access amplified sound directly
  - In the UK and US ([2010 update to Americans with Disabilities Act](#)), loop systems are mandated by law for any public venues that have amplified sound ([summary of US regulation](#)). However, our experience in the US is that few universities have such rooms for meetings and departmental presentations. In contrast, some of us have noticed that in the UK virtually all public institutions (even grocery stores!), have loop systems, but they are almost never turned on. It may be wise to notify the hosts 2 or more days in advance to make sure the loop system is powered up and turned on.
  - Some hearing aids and cochlear implants may not transmit looped sound and ambient sound at the same time; so don't bother chatting with your deaf/HoH neighbor during the main presentation!!



### In-Person Meetings > 10 people (e.g. faculty meeting)

- Check out The Mind Hears [post about the challenges posed by large in-person meetings such as faculty meetings](#)
- Start the meeting with a communication check. *“Is this communication set up working for everyone?”*.
- As much as is possible with a large group, have all participants sit around a table or set of tables so that they face each other.
- CART services can be helpful for meetings where multiple people are speaking. We have found that having a CART captionist in the room works better than working with a remote captionist; having several microphones in the room does not always provide clear access to the speakers for the remote captionist.
- Having a microphone that is passed from speaker and transmitter to a computer can help CART or one of the better-quality real-time auto-captioning software.
- An FM system (assistive listening device) can help for such meetings. Using the microphone/transmitter as a ‘talking stick’ ensures that all conversations are amplified. You can also place an omni-directional FM microphone (or, even better, two) in the center of the room to catch conversation around the group (check out The Mind Hears [post about FM systems](#))
  - Note: Unlike looped rooms, FM systems work with specific hearing aids or cochlear implants, so if the meeting has more than one deaf/HoH person using FM, the technology issues can become complex.
- If conversation devolves to rapid interjections, the discussion leader should rein in the conversation and recap what was discussed.

- For quick conversations, signaling the next speaker, for example by raising a hand, can help deaf/HoH people know where to look next for speech reading. Hearing aids and cochlear implants are notoriously bad for directionality of sound and some of us only detect sound on one side. While interpreters strive to indicate who is talking throughout conversations, visual signaling can help us track the conversation
- The meeting organizer should check in periodically to ensure that the communication environment is working for everyone.
- A written summary distributed afterwards to meeting participants can ensure that everyone has the same information.

### In-Person Meetings < 10 people (e.g. committee or research group)

A lot of the strategies for larger meetings also work for small meetings. The following include notes specifically for meetings of smaller groups.

- Have participants sit in a circle, so that all faces are visible for speech reading. Conference rooms with long narrow tables can be challenging.
- Use the smallest room possible to accommodate the size of the meeting
- Encourage meetings in rooms with minimized resonance; rooms with carpet and soundproof walls are better listening environments. Also, avoid rooms with a lot of external noise (e.g., busy roads or construction).
- Use rooms with window treatments that can be adjusted to reduce glare so that speakers are not backlit.
- Discourage people from talking over one another in meetings.
- Check in periodically to ensure that the communication environment is working for everyone.
- Deaf/HoH people are notoriously bad at catching jokes, as comments are typically made more quickly than we can track conversation. It can be helpful to repeat jokes for your deaf/HoH neighbor.

### Remote Meetings

- Make sure the platform/software for the meeting is the one preferred by the deaf/HoH participant. Some platforms offer closed captioning and some do not. Some platforms are better set up to allow participants to pin the videos of both the speaker and the sign language interpreter.
- Have your face well lit for speech reading (see The Mind Hears [blog post about accommodating a pandemic](#))
- Keep the camera on when speaking

- Meeting hosts should pay attention to (or assign someone to attend) the written conversations in the chat box, which are more accessible than oral discussion for deaf/HoH participants.
- In meetings with lots of participants the videos become quite small and difficult to speech read (see The Mind Hears blog posts about remote teaching [here](#) and [here](#)). Deaf/HoH participants that manage small remote meetings just fine may need accommodations for large meetings.
- Meeting hosts should ensure that that turn-taking occurs during discussions, so that speakers do not overlap.

## In-person Conversations

- Face people while conversing.
- If the deaf/HoH person is using a signing or oral interpreter, direct all conversation to the deaf/HoH person, not the interpreter.
- When you're in a noisy room, you won't be heard by speaking with cupped hands directly into the deaf/HoH person's ears, because in this situation we can't speech read your face. Similarly, we cannot understand whispering behind a cupped hand or into our ears. Come to think of it, whispering hardly ever works because the sound and speech reading information are so distorted—best avoided altogether.
- Avoid covering your mouth. If you are chewing, please wait to speak until you are done chewing. Also avoid blocking visibility of your mouth with your cup at gatherings with coffee/tea. During the pandemic, speech reading has become impossible for many of us with the use of masks (see The Mind Hears [post on Navigating a Masked World when you are deaf/HoH](#)). Take this into account when necessary and have an alternate means of communication available, such as writing on a paper or phone.
- If a deaf/HoH person asks for repetition, please repeat as closely as possible what you just said. Sometimes we hear part but not all. If you change up the words to reframe what you said, we are back to square one.
- If a deaf/HoH person asks for repetition/clarification, never say “*Oh, it's not important.*” This conveys that you don't value their participation in the conversation. So even if you think your comment is not worth repeating, please repeat yourself to avoid excluding your colleague.
- When a deaf/HoH person joins the conversation, it's helpful to give them a little recap of the current topic of discussion.
- Hearing aid and cochlear implant batteries go dead at the most inopportune times. Most of us go through one or more batteries per hearing aid each week; the chances of this happening while we are in a presentation, meeting, or conversation are quite high. As

we search for and replace the fiddly batteries, please keep in mind that we are missing out on the conversation.

## Incidental conversations (e.g. passing in the hallway)

- When greeting your deaf/HoH colleagues in passing, give a wave. We may not hear a quiet greeting.
- To get the attention of deaf/HoH colleagues, waving your hand where we can see it is more pleasant than being shouted at.
- Not all deaf/HoH people wear hearing aids throughout their workday. Some of us enjoy periodically being able to take out our hearing aids or turn off our cochlear implants and focus in the quiet.
- Our communication skills can vary with fatigue level. The cognitive fatigue of speech reading is taxing so that after a few hours of teaching and meetings with spoken conversation, we may avoid all conversations or switch from speaking to signing (see The Mind Hears [post about How Much Listening is too Much](#)). We also might need to take a break from our technology (e.g., hearing aids) due to fatigue, badly functioning technology, batteries running out etc. Some of us have hearing loss that fluctuates over time. Please don't be surprised if our preferred communication mode and ability to navigate hearing spaces changes (see The Mind Hears [post about The Mental Gymnastics of Hearing Device Use](#)).
- Not all deaf/HoH people speech read. Some of us rely on writing notes or using voice recognition apps on our mobile devices; you may be asked to communicate using modes unfamiliar to you. A motto of the deaf community: *use whatever form of communication works*.
- Not all people are easy to speech read (see The Mind Hears [post about understanding unfamiliar accents](#)). People with facial hair and people who either don't move their lips/face or over-enunciate can be very difficult to understand. Some of us hear high pitched voices better than low and some of us hear low voices better. For better or for worse, many of us avoid conversations with people we don't understand even though they may be wonderful people. It is not rude to ask if you are easy to understand and how you could be better understood.
- The spectrum of what it means to be Deaf and Hard of Hearing is extremely vast, diverse & situational. Some of us speak very well but have lousy hearing. Some of us prefer to express ourselves using signed language. Some of us use technology (e.g. hearing aids or cochlear implants) all the time to help us hear while others of us do not. You can be the best ally to your deaf/hoh colleagues by not making assumptions of how deaf/hoh should navigate the world.

You may have noticed that all of these considerations not only increase access for deaf and hard of hearing but make these situations more inclusive for all participants, such as non-native English speakers. Some of these strategies ensure that the loudest in the group doesn't monopolize conversation and allows space for less confident participants. If you make your workplace more accessible for your deaf and hard of hearing colleagues, you will make a more accessible workplace for everyone.

[Other resources for deaf/HoH including papers about d/Deaf in academia](#)

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