

Making Bookstores Accessible

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<https://nicolagriffith.files.wordpress.com/2018/10/making-bookstores-accessible.pdf>

STATISTICS

- [August CDC press release](#):
 - 1 in 4 adults in US have a disability
 - For all ages and sexes, the 3 most common disabilities are:
 - mobility (14)
 - cognition (11)
 - hearing (6)
 - I'm not bookseller, so I can't speak to your customer demographics, but as an author I can tell you that a huge proportion of my readers are women ages 45-64
 - According to CDC, fully 30% of women 45-64 have a disability that makes major impacts on their life
 - If those women can't get into your store—or use your website, or read your social media posts—they won't be buying my books from you; you've lost their business

ACCESSIBILITY

It can be difficult, and expensive, to turn an inaccessible building into a universally accessible one. But it's pretty easy, and inexpensive, to make a few simple, helpful changes.

Here's a list of what, in an ideal world, what every bookstore should offer its customers. In parentheses next to some items are suggestions for ways to begin if your store is small and your budget tight.

For Customers:

- Level entry. No stairs, of course, but also no lip: even 1" can be insurmountable. (In ascending order of expense and difficulty: if you do have a threshold lip, you can buy heavy duty [rubber threshold raps/mats online](#) for just lips 1"- 2.5" for around \$100, depending on brand and size. If you have outside steps, you can buy and install a Garaventa platform lift like the one at Elliott Bay Book Company--this is what I have at my house; I found it secondhand for less than \$7,000.)
- Accessible counter height at point-of-purchase. (If it would cost too much to replace your splendid, chest-high edifice, just add a low table to one end that someone in a wheelchair can see over. And clear space at one end for someone to approach from the side.)
- Reading nook w/space for a wheelchair (because people in wheelchairs, too, like to settle in and take a deeper look at a potential purchase without being banged into or bothered)
- Accessible bathroom on ground floor or accessible via elevator (one small thing you could do immediately: install grab bars in a stall).

- Wider aisles (begin by moving things apart a little, and clearing the floor space; parents with strollers will also thank you)
- Clear signage (buff-coloured card, black ink, large, well-spaced lettering)
- Temperature control. (Depending on your location this could be as simple as fans and opening windows. When your budget is healthier, consider split-duct air conditioning.)
- More accessible websites (e.g. good contrast, mindful of visual difference/colour palette, include image descriptions; plus a link to your disability policies and access info, including contact info)
- More accessible social media (image descriptions; clear spacing; hashtags like #CripLit and #OwnVoices)

For Authors and events:

All of the above, plus:

- In event space, no steps to the dais
- No podium but a sturdy table a wheelchair user can get her knees under
- Good lighting
- Sound amplification
 - small store: small Bluetooth speaker is fine, but put speaker halfway up event space--front two two or three rows will be able to hear the author just fine. (You can buy 60w Bluetooth speaker with both lavalier and handheld mic for \$85 online)
 - Big store, you probably already have professional system, but make sure you buy lavalier mics, too, anywhere from \$15-\$180 (It's very difficult to
- Hands-free microphone:
- Lavalier/lapel is best, not just for disabled authors but for all of us. (Any idea how hard it is to hold mic, hold book, read aloud, and turn pages at same time?)
- But good adjustable mic stand okay—and cost less than \$20
- ASL and/or CART (real-time captioning). (Individual interpreters are usually certified and listed by local government: the state, the county, the city. There are also various agencies. Interpretation costs can be shared between local bookstores and by the publisher--this is what I did recently for the [So Lucky](#) launch. Phinney Books, Elliott Bay Book Company, and the publisher (FSG x MCD), shared the cost.

Both:

- Decent books to read:
 - Disabled people read all kinds of books, not just fiction and nonfiction about disability
 - But what many of us are really hungry for is books that reflect us; books with disabled characters whether or not the book's *about* disability

WHAT IS GOOD #CRIPLIT?

Note: not all disabled people use the same language. I like identify-first language: disabled person. Others prefer person-first language: person with a disability. I tend to refer to literature by and about disabled characters as CripLit; others prefer Disability in Literature.

- If I rolled into your shop and asked for a good book, what would you point me to?
- Disabled people want good books, just like everyone else (graphic novels, romance, military history, memoir, science fiction, historical fiction, crime fiction, etc.)
- But we also want to see ourselves; we need a mirror; we need to know we're not alone: we want fiction with disabled characters and nonfiction with or about disabled people.
- There are plenty of okay #CripLit memoirs—though many are either what I think of as misery memoirs or triumph-over-the-odds memoirs (sigh)—but very little decent #CripLit fiction, especially for adult readers.
- Much disability fiction is not #OwnVoices--not written by disabled authors but by nondisabled authors--which unless properly researched and beta-read by disabled people can be not only full of misinformation but *actively harmful*
- I'm guessing many of you have sold a lot of those books—you may even have thought something like ME BEFORE YOU, by JoJo Moyes, or STILL LIFE WITH MONKEY, by Katharine Weber, heartwarming or inspirational or poignant—but they send an extremely dangerous message that, in my opinion, should not be propagated, should not be read by disabled readers *or* nondisabled readers. These two books, in my opinion, should never have been published:
 - Both present a nondisabled woman in love with a disabled man
 - In both the man is rich, good looking, and talented; has the love of a good woman—he has everything, really, except use of his legs.
 - But because he can't walk, his life is deemed not worth living; he kills himself so his wife can be happy and rich, unburdened by a cripple hanging about, and free to live a 'normal' life
- Most people will be familiar with the [Bechdel Test](#) for women in film/tv.
- Late last year disability activist Kenny Fries (pronounced Freese) proposed the Fries Test for disability in fiction
 - Fries Test = "Does a work have more than one disabled character? Do the disabled characters have their own narrative purpose other than the education and profit of a nondisabled character? Is the character's disability not eradicated either by curing or killing?"
 - Fries Test is a low bar:
 - disabled characters don't have to have names
 - they don't have to talk to each other
 - and they certainly don't have to talk about something other than disability
- Fries Test is very low bar. Nonetheless late last year I put out a call on social media for suggestions for book-length fiction for adults that would pass the test.
- I had hundreds of responses.
- But so far [only 55 books pass the test.](#)
- Think about that:
 - Stanford lit lab estimates there are about 5m novels extant in English

- given that 1 in 4 people now have some kind of disability, there should be 1.25m books for, by, and about us that, at minimum, should pass the Fries Test
- But there are 55
- Think of all those voices that are missing
- think of how much your customers yearn, need to see themselves reflected in stories: you can help
- 25% of your customers have a disability; how many books do you have for them?
 - Take a look at the list of books that pass the Fries Test for disability in fiction.
 - Read through the [archived #CripLit Twitter chats](#) for book suggestions
 - Read Annie and Kate's suggestions
 - Go to the [Disability in Kidlit](#) website for recommended disability literature for children and young adults.

SUGGESTIONS

My biggest, boldest suggestion?

- Have an association-wide independent accessible shopping day (like the UK's [Purple Tuesday](#) scheduled for 13 November this year—they're doing general retail rather than just books)
- Perhaps link this to [Independent Bookstore Day](#) in April, or maybe [LitCrawl](#), or just have a special day in November in time for holiday shopping
- Every store should make a commitment to do 3 small things, e.g.:
 - put access info on website so customers know what to expect
 - improve entry accessibility (e.g. buy a threshold mat)
 - add grab bars to bathroom stall
- If you've already sorted that, then pick three other things
- Next year, add something else, etc.
- Eventual goal: association-wide accessibility standard minimums

Radical hospitality

Imagine you are recovering from flu and feel really tired and fragile. You walk into your bookstore. What would you need?

- A chair near the door to rest?
- A friendly smile from a staff member, and "What can I do to help you?"
- Perhaps escort customer to high shelves in case they need help reaching down the book you've recommended?
- Make information available so that everyone knows you can, for example, buy and download audio books right there from the store. Walk them through the process on the store's iPad
- Anything else you think might help: but always ask first, don't assume they need help (and never, ever touch a customer's mobility device without permission!)

Disability in Literature Shelf

- Special Disability in Literature section (start with a shelf)
 - fiction and nonfiction
 - poetry and plays
 - memoir and graphic novels
 - adult and kidlit
- But eventually you should be able to recommend at least one book from every single one of your sections, and recommend them to all customers, disabled and nondisabled

Build and share Resources list

- On PNBA website, list
 - ideal accessibility standards
 - minimum accessibility standards (and aim to improve this year over year)
- Suggestions for how to reach those standards—what's worked for people, what a good price is—or maybe even share equipment (use unofficial Twitter hashtag, or build an unofficial Facebook group to avoid legal implications)
- Maintain and increase list of good #CripLit

Outside Resources

- Many organisations have accessibility checklists. See, for example, [SFWA's](#)
- Read through the [#CripLit chat archive](#) for a deeper understanding of
 - the tropes and clichés of bad disability literature to avoid
 - potential authors to consider stocking or inviting
 - recommended reading
- Lurk on a #CripLit chat or two (next one scheduled for Sun Oct 28, 4pm Pacific)
- Check out the list of fiction that passes the Fries Test
- Check out Disabilityinkidlit.com
- Research and implement digital accessibility:
 - <http://wave.webaim.org/>
 - <https://www.washington.edu/accessibility/web/>
 - <https://aerolab.co/blog/web-accessibility/>
 - <https://answers.syr.edu/display/itservapp011/Accessible+Technology+Toolkit>
 - <https://a11yproject.com/> (with the warning that the auto testing is a bit hit and miss, so live testing best)
 - <https://www.dropbox.com/s/kzfb7z86r9j37yz/deibel-keyboard-accessibility.pptx?dl=0> (good, clear, self-explanatory and self-contained document)
- Take a look at [Easy Chirp](#) for Twitter

And remember, this is just a beginning! You don't have to do everything at once. Pick one thing and improve that. Readers are waiting!