GRASSROOTS GUIDE:  
MAKING YOUR ACTIVISM ACCESSIBLE

This guide is a compilation of grassroots knowledge intended for grassroots activists. It was developed as a rapid response to a question raised by organizers, and so it applies a more simplified editing and vetting process before publishing. The thoughts included in this guide come from existing organizer databases and pre-developed resources on related topics, and in many instances these guides also contain direct insight from grassroots organizers themselves. Please feel free to share this around with other justice-oriented activists. You can download this (look under File menu top left) in several formats or link to it / embed it on a web page.

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Summary
Defining accessibility

Accessibility in event/action planning
- Choice of location
- Meeting attendees needs
- Creating space for every identity
- Pandemic safety measures

Considerations for virtual events and meetings
- Before the meeting
- Beginning the meeting
- During the meeting
- Closing and after the meeting
- Holding virtual events

Accessibility in communications
- General guidelines for accessible written materials
- Writing image descriptions

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This is a work in progress that is meant to evolve over time with input from campaigners. At the moment, the tips and ideas here reflect the voices of the contributors/reviewers listed below. We are always looking to add more voices of campaigners that have knowledge and experience on this topic. If this is you, please contact us here: blueprintsfc@gmail.com.

Summary

This quick guide was created to support activists in making their spaces more accessible, to ensure everyone is welcome and encouraged to join movements in whatever way they can. The information included comes from existing organizer databases and resources by movement thinkers. We’ve included resources from blogs written by people living with accessibility needs, as we consider them experts on this topic. Each personal experience is distinct, thus we encourage further insight from different positionalities on this topic.

Several of the topics found in this guide are based on questions asked by activists in the Climate Justice Organizing HUB’s learning community (i.e. how to make in-person events more accessible, how to make promotional materials more engaging etc.). This guide includes definitions of accessibility, considerations for accessible event and action planning, communication and content, creating an accessible culture and other suggestions related to creating a space that is inviting to all.

Defining accessibility

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"Universal accessibility is the character of a product, process, service, information or environment which, with a view to fairness and an inclusive approach, allows anyone to carry out activities independently and to obtain equivalent results." - Groupe DÉFI Accessibilité (GDA) & Ex Aequo

Ex Aequo distinguishes accessibility from adaptation:

"Adaptation would consist of changes made in order to accommodate people in relation to “an environment, a communication, a program, or an already existing service. We adapt when we build a subway with only stairs, then add elevators several years later. We make it universally accessible when we provide access ramps to the buses.”

1. Access Culture expands on the definition of accessibility, explaining:

"Spaces accessible to marginalized people – who are abused on many levels – embody openness, deliverance, freedom. An open space is an offered embrace. For people who live on the margins, who have to fight to prove their existence, who are excluded from movements, who are subject to abuse in the form of isolation, having access to spaces means having access to community, to connection, to existence. When we make spaces accessible, when we build movements based on inclusion, we recognize that each person has an intrinsic value, that our existence is beautiful and necessary. Creating accessible spaces is about recognizing that connection is necessary, that community is necessary, that our culture is built on the myth of separation, the lie of disconnection. We must move from independence to interdependence in order to transform society."

**Accessibility in event/action planning**

**Choice of location**

Universal Accessibility Collective suggests that in a universally accessible place, a person in a wheelchair can move around in all the rooms and access a toilet.

- **Doors** must be 800mm minimum and have a button to open them and/or not be too heavy
- The dimensions of a **toilet** cubicle must be 1500 x 1500mm minimum

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● All paths that the person must take must be **obstacle-free** and must have a clear width of at least 920 mm.
● Check that the place is not under **construction** or renovation, which could make the space temporarily inaccessible.
● The **entrance** must be a single level or equipped with an access ramp and must be at least 800 mm wide.

Some of the further suggestions **Sins Invalid** offers based on your choice of location include:

● Being **upfront about barriers**. Have an accessibility coordinator assigned at the event and livestream if possible.
● **Fluorescent lighting** can make spaces inaccessible. Ask for consent for flash photography.
● **Bathrooms**… Are they accessible and safe for everyone to use?
● Note that **snow** will always make accessibility more difficult for folks with limited mobility.

REMINDER: Take the necessary precautions according to the space in order to avoid accidents and prevent unfortunate situations in the event of an emergency.

*Examples: remember to cover electrical wires, identify or cover slippery surfaces, ensure that outdoor spaces are well lit and that the identified emergency exits are functional.*

### Meeting attendees needs

**Universal Accessibility Collective** suggests:

● Provide **babysitting** services if possible. Consider where people can access with, and leave, strollers for small children.
● Provide **water** if you can! Especially during long events or on hot days.
● Plan meals that respect the **dietary restrictions** of the participants.
● If food is on sale, provide **free or low-cost** options.
● Ensure you have **accessibility helpers** for those in need as requests arise. Identify them with something such as an armband or shirt.
● Choose a place (departure and arrival) that is **accessible by public transport** including adapted transport that is close to toilets and shelter (from
the sun or the rain). Having people waiting at these places allows people with reduced mobility to be accompanied while waiting for transport.

- If the event cannot be universally accessible, offer other ways to participate, such as actions that can be done remotely. Planning an activity with several components promotes the involvement of people with reduced mobility.

Example: I want to organize a demonstration in front of the Sheraton hotel. I look at paratransit services. I walk between the transport stop and the hotel (or the route to the event, if my action intends to be mobile). If there are hills, it will be necessary to provide people to help people in manual wheelchairs.

Sins Invalid offers further suggestions which include...

- Being transparent about the schedule for the event. Let participants know the destination(s) and duration ahead of time.
- Are speakers using language that most people will know?
- Are interpreters available for the event for community members who have a language other than English? What about for those with visual or auditory impairments?
- If food is part of the gathering, share ingredient lists.
- Do not hold your event too early in the day, or too late. There are various disabilities that limit people from being able to attend early morning/late evening commitments.
- Ask participants not to wear scented products.

Creating space for every identity

Neurodivergent: Judy Singer, a sociologist who has autism, coined the term to describe how certain developmental disorders are normal variations in the brain, and people who have these features also have certain strengths. The neurodiverse umbrella includes but is not limited to ADHD, dyslexia, autism, and other learning disabilities. Many include mental illnesses under the umbrella of neurodiversity too, such as but not limited to anxiety, bipolar, PTSD, schizophrenia etc.

Introversion: Susan Cain describes that where people who are extroverted are stimulated by their environment and absorb energy by interacting with others, introverted people recharge when they are alone and feel overwhelmed by prolonged
social interactions as well as certain stimulations from their environment (noise, strong light etc).

**Access culture, Jessica Hughes**, Sharron Emilie Dow and the Catalyst news describe ways to ensure people who are neurodivergent and/or introverted feel comfortable coming to an event and expressing their concerns or needs:

- Outline event plans ahead of time and/or throughout the event if possible. An **awareness of time** can be particularly helpful, for example for those who need to take medication, leave after a certain period of time etc.
- Provide access to a **quiet/low stimulation space**. The space should not include fluorescent light, and should be calm with no pressure to socialize.
- Provide **breaks/slower periods**. This can help avoid overstimulation and help people refocus.
- Provide **handouts of key information**, such as the rights of protestors, legal information, actions they can take at home etc. This is much easier to comprehend than a speaker sharing this information with a crowd.
- When planning activities and get-togethers, keep in mind that we are trying to avoid both overstimulation for the most introverted people and loss of interest for the most extroverted people. Try to **balance the types of activities** included in your event/action! (i.e. an event that exclusively involves networking will probably exclusively include extroverts!) Space out activities that take a lot of social energy.
- Many people require quiet time to think about their response to a question or discussion prompt. Before starting discussions, **give people a minute** on their own to write down their thoughts.

According to **UK Mutual Aid**, there are things groups can do to ensure that people feel comfortable coming to an event and expressing their concerns in the context of racism:

- Publicize the organization’s **anti-racism position** and how the organization will deal with a situation of racism.
- Have **staff available** that are Black, Indigenous and Persons of colour in case of a person’s concerns, insecurity or distress.
- Do not publicize the event with **images** of BIPOC people unless they occupy an important place within the event itself (in terms of resources allocated, people invited, partner groups, staff...).
UK Mutual Aid also describe ways to ensure people feel comfortable coming to an event and expressing their concerns in the context of misogyny, sexism and transphobia:

- Have **staff** with different gender identities available in case of a person's concerns, insecurity or distress.
- Ask people who participate to write or say their **pronouns**.
- Have **gender-neutral toilets** identified by the infrastructure they contain rather than illustrations or gendered vocabulary.

UK Mutual Aid describe ways to ensure people feel comfortable coming to an event and expressing their concerns in the context of poverty or being low-income:

- Have **support staff** available.
- The most accessible option is to offer things for free; **voluntary contributions** are another option, but it's better to avoid putting people in these situations.
- Consider whether **internet access** is necessary for participation.
- Make the event accessible to people with experiences and needs. Provide **adapted vocabulary** or accompanying documents.
- Check the **needs** of the people invited (speakers, facilitators, presenters, etc.).

**Pandemic safety measures**

While the risk of getting COVID from an outdoor gathering is lower than getting COVID from an indoor one, there is still a risk of contracting the virus. This is especially true at crowded protests or gatherings. The risk is even higher for people who are immunocompromised.

If you do not have COVID safety measures in place, higher-risk individuals in particular are unlikely to attend your event. Not having COVID measures in place also sends the message that people at high-risk of becoming very ill with COVID are disposable. We must protect our community members from becoming seriously ill, from reinfection (the risks of which are presently uncertain), and from the development of long COVID-related complications.

Thomas A. Russo, professor of Infectious disease at the University of Buffalo, suggests safety measures to put in place when planning an in-person event include:

- Advertising that attendees will be asked to **wear masks for the duration** of the event, even for events held outdoors. **Have extra masks available** for those who...
come without one, ideally N95 or KN95’s which are one of the best available options to protect against COVID-19.

- Have a few volunteers dedicated to handing out hand sanitizer every so often, and especially before distributing food if this is included in your event.
- Ask those who are feeling ill, who have come in contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 OR come in contact with someone who has tested negative but is showing symptoms of COVID-19 not attend.
- Encourage attendees to keep their distance from one another as often as possible.

Considerations for virtual events and meetings

Before the meeting

- Schedule group meetings at least 2-3 days ahead of time. This helps members to arrange for schedules, care-taking, quiet space, tech, etc.
- Provide context regarding the main agenda items before the meeting. For example, what is the main purpose and importance of the meeting? What are the meeting goals?
- Request input and feedback from all who will be participating to add agenda items and confirm whether the meeting goals address their needs.
- Ask participants to share if they will need translation, interpretation, or any other accommodations. Ask if those who plan to participate need any assistance in setting up and learning the technology platforms used. Provide at least a few days for participants to inform you about their needs.
- Provide items you want participants to review ahead of time so folks can reflect before the meeting.
- Mention if you will be recording ahead of time so folks can raise concerns if they have them.

Beginning the meeting

- Start with introductions and a check-in. Let folks introduce themselves, their pronouns and make time for relationship building by letting people share how they are doing or something about them.
○ For example, check-in questions related to care might be "what colour best describes how you're feeling today?" Or, "If you're comfortable, share one high and one low from your week so far!"
○ You can also hold more fun get-to-know one another check-in's to lighten the mood of the meeting, such as "tell us about a book or tv show you engaged with recently that you'd recommend!" Or, "what is your favourite houseplant?"

- Try to take **notes and video recordings** for those who can't attend. Name it early that you are recording and allow folks to opt out, by getting off video, or managing their participation.
- Provide a person or place where attendees can seek **support** if they feel disrespected or have needs that aren't being met during the meeting.
- It might be relevant to come up with and share **participation guidelines** and/or the group's mission statement to ground the group before beginning. Some examples of participation guidelines, inspired by Aspiration Tech [21], might include...
  ○ Please focus on listening, not only on what you are hearing.
  ○ Wherever possible, please refrain from multitasking on email or social media.
  ○ Please use simple, accessible language. Please avoid jargon and acronyms.
  ○ When you speak, please try to make one point or a few brief points and then let others speak.
  ○ Help us be mindful of the schedule and stay on time. Please support us in moving the dialog forward.
  ○ Please indicate you want to speak by raising your hand on video; if you are not able to use or raise your hand, please feel free to speak up, but please try not to interrupt others.
  ○ Stay muted when you are not speaking.
  ○ Please be mindful of background noise and join the call from a quiet location if you can. Parents and caregivers are certainly exempt, but muting still applies.

**During the meeting**

- Be mindful of participants who **may not be able to see or hear or otherwise fully participate** in virtual meetings.

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○ If an attendee is blind, you should use more descriptive language that paints a picture of what others are seeing and provides richer context.
○ Some people use screen readers to access information. Make sure your presentation has image descriptions and refrain from using images/GIFs with flashing lights as they can cause seizures, headaches, and migraines.
○ If an attendee is deaf or hard of hearing, make sure you’re using a platform that supports real-time closed captioning.

- Use a shared document for notetaking. Offline versions of meeting documents allows those joining by phone to participate better.
  ○ Those who join a meeting over the phone do not have the same functions available as those using the desktop. A big concern is that people joining by phone cannot use the chat or get links posted on the chat, etc.
  ○ Consider sending important links ahead of the meeting, or in your workspace during, so people on the phone can access them.

- Not everyone knows how to type quickly, navigate a computer, or use the controls in a virtual meeting. It can be helpful to provide a tutorial before meetings or during meetings so folks can more easily follow along.
  ○ If the meeting is large, and too many participants want to speak, engage with a 'talking stack' such as leaving a star in the chat to indicate the desire for a speaking turn, or for those phoning in, provide a pause before returning to the talking stack to see if they have any points to add.

- Consider that people who have good internet bandwidth have better connectivity quality for video and voice. Working with this may be as simple as suggesting the person turn their camera off for the fastest possible internet, but also simply remaining patient if their internet kicks out when speaking.
  ○ If it comes to suggesting they leave their suggestions in the chat, read the chat out loud as soon as you are able.

- Recognize some folks may have background activity that can't be avoided while attending a meeting. Try to be flexible when it comes to folks needing to attend to their living and meeting situation, especially when meetings are held during people's 'off' time.

- Avoid the use of jargon and acronyms. Always explain them for newer members who might not be familiar with 'insider language.'

- Newer members may feel less inclined to speak up due to being unfamiliar with meeting conduct and the presence of existing relationships in the group.
Encourage new members to contribute ideas using strategies that avoid calling them out if they aren't comfortable speaking yet, such as using an interactive powerpoint or allowing them to leave ideas in the chat that can be read out by the facilitator.

- Remind folks of meeting expectations such as when to turn off the mic and video, using the chat channel, etc.
- Many platforms are not made with disability and neurodivergent needs in mind. Those who are blind, deaf, hard of hearing, or disabled are left out when accessibility needs are not anticipated before the meeting.
  - For a more detailed explanation of meeting these needs, see Rooted in Rights resource. For information on how to deal with participants who are not engaging respectfully during the meeting, see the HUB’s wiki page on space watchers.

Closing and after the meeting

- Hold a check out question, but try to keep it simple. For example, "what's one word you would use to describe how you're feeling after today's meeting?" Or, "share a compliment about 1 attendee present at today's meeting!"
- Send the notes and a meeting summary afterwards. Share the main items that were achieved, any major decisions or action items and a meeting recording if relevant.
- Provide a channel for follow up questions, suggestions or comments.

Holding virtual events

- Provide information on how to access the event for people with limited or no access to the internet at home. Be willing to share information offline too.
- If you’re hosting an event over video conferencing software (i.e. Zoom, Google Hangouts, or GoToMeeting) offer the option to dial-in by phone and participate without a computer or internet.
- If the event is being live streamed (i.e., Facebook Live, Instagram Live/Stories, YouTube), consider whether people can attend without an account on that platform. For more, see this resource on video conferencing software for accessibility.
- Invite and include disabled people as speakers, and assume that they will also be attending your virtual events.
• Create a **tip sheet for online platforms** with directions. The tip sheet can include information, step-by-step, about how to use the platform(s).

• Share what you are planning to do to increase access for your event. Share the **format of the event and how long** it plans to run for attendees.

• Budget to provide **closed captioning, sign language interpretation and other language interpretation**.
  
  ○ **Live descriptions, captions and good audio** are key for live streamed events.

• Make sure the service you’re using to host the virtual event is compatible with **assistive technology**, for example screen readers, and that it allows for computer-based listening/speaking and phone-based listening/speaking.

• Make sure your events are accessible to augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) users. This requires offering **multiple ways to participate**, answer questions, submit questions, and interact.

• Have an **accessibility point person** who can assist with access issues and technology concerns. Mention how to reach them at the beginning of your event.

• Provide any **written or visual materials ahead of time** so people know what to expect. Use an accessible file format.

• Allow attendees to **send questions and comments in advance**. You can also make it clear to attendees that they will have an opportunity to ask questions during the event if relevant.

• Consider providing a **glossary of terms** that will be used during the event.

• Check out the following resource on **inclusive design principles** for the content of your event.

• Wear a **headset when presenting** to improve audio quality, and try to have speakers limit background noise. It’s helpful for speakers to state their name each time they speak for those with hearing impairments and the accuracy of the technology they rely on.

• **Describe** live scenarios and any images, read any text that appears on screen, and describe gestures for those with visual impairments.

• Make it possible for people anonymously, or with their name and RSVP attached, to make **access need requests**.

• Build time for **reflection/breaks** into your event, as well as time for questions.

• See the below points on **accessible communication**, which apply to information provided during the event whether provided orally, via a slideshow or other channel.

• **Offer channels to provide feedback** about the event, including accessibility, to help you prepare to plan the next one.

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Accessibility in communications

There are many things to consider when it comes to accessible communication, from formatting to the language used. It is important to ensure our written material is easy to read, easy to understand, easy to find the information you need and the information is easy to use the first time you read it.

General guidelines for accessible written materials

According to plainlanguage.gov:

1. **Write for your audience.** Use language your audience understands. If you are targeting the general public, a rule of thumb is to aim for an 8th grade reading level or lower. Check out the following resource which can be used to reduce the reading level of your writing.

2. Put the most important information at the beginning, **bolded**, and include background information (when necessary) toward the end.

3. Limit paragraphs/written sections to **3-8 lines**, 5 being a happy medium.

4. Use **as few words as possible** to get your point across! (e.g. a number of vs 'some', in order to vs 'to'). Remove 'filler' words such as descriptive words that do not add to your main idea.

5. Format information in **lists, tables** etc. to break up written text and add variety that is more visually appealing. Add headings if they'll help break information up.

6. Add **blank space**! This draws the eyes better to key written ideas. Especially around important ideas and to separate sections.

7. Avoid **jargon**, abbreviations and technical terms. Keep your language as simple as possible (e.g. disseminate vs 'send', in accordance with vs 'by'). See more examples of simplifying your language here.

8. Illustrate text with **images** when possible.
9. Ensure your language is gender-neutral.

Writing image descriptions

Most important elements to describe according to Antimonarchy:

- The **people and animals** in an image
- The background or **setting** of an image
- Elements that relate to the **context** specifically, so if it was an image of a congested highway on a news website, the description would mention the packed cars
- The **colours** of an image (don’t overdo it however, a simple ‘light blue’ will do)

Basic process for writing a description:

- I first say what the content is, such as a photo, educational graphic etc. I then use what is called Object-Action-Context for the most part, For example, [Image ID: A photo of a person standing in a crowd waving to someone out of view / End ID] While obviously I would usually provide more information than that, Person = object, standing + waving to someone out of view = action, and ‘in a crowd’ = context.
- I describe the clothing that might be worn and the position that people in an image might be in, such as leaning against one another on a couch, or standing with their fingers intertwined
- If the background is a simple colour, I usually include it in the first sentence of the description. However if it is more complicated, such as a river winding through a dense forest, I include that at the end of the description after describing the important elements.

Meeting disability and accessibility guidelines

As described by the British Dyslexia Association and W3C:

- Use **sans serif fonts**, such as Arial and Comic Sans, as letters can appear less crowded. Alternatives include Verdana, Tahoma, Century Gothic, Trebuchet, Calibri, Open Sans.
- Font size should be at least **12-14 point**.
- Line **spacing of 1.5** is preferable.

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• Suggest **bolding** over underlining or italics.
• Choose **contrasting colours**. You can review your chosen colours to check if they meet colour blind requirements using this resource. Try not to use colours that are too bright as these can also be hard on the eyes and make reading difficult.
• Use **single colour backgrounds**. Pale or pastel backgrounds rather than stark white can be easier to read.
• Use **left alignment** for text.
• Offer **subtitles** and a text transcript for video communication.
• When a document is published online, make an **HTML version** available (the only universal format currently)
• It is possible to test accessibility for people with visual impairments with **screen readers** such as NVDA, JAWS, Window-Eye and Voice over.
• Use the WAVE tool to test the **accessibility of a website**. Ensure that the options displayed with the mouse can also be displayed (elsewhere if necessary) using only a keyboard.

Tips for maximizing accessibility according to the specific type of online document are available using this resource.

**Creating accessible group cultures**

The following section drew from the writing of:

-Liz Kessler, a person who describes themselves as disabled and who is involved in struggles for justice

-Lee at **Access culture**, a disabled, queer, trans and autistic activist.

Practices that Foster Accessible Cultures Include…

• Different abilities, different limits... work with them! **Do not set standards** for how hard, or how much, work should be completed.
• Incorporate regular discussions about personal and group boundaries. This allows each person to give their consent actively and enthusiastically when they have the capacity to do so. This also promotes respect for these limits. Short term limits support long term sustainability.
* Accept people who are less reliable and do not depend on one person to hold an activity. Last-minute disengagement related to personal conditions or situations is common! Accept these contingencies and be interested in what the disengaged person needs to be able to pause or move forward.
* **Do not overload** the schedule. No need to follow the capitalist (and counter-intuitive) 9 to 5.
* Plan **break times**. Do not have meetings or tasks to complete during breaks. Commit to the entire team taking a break so no one feels excluded or singled out.
* Some people will express ideas while crying or angrily rather than using statements such as "I feel..." and "I think...". No matter how emotional the person is when sharing their ideas, what they have to say is of **equal importance**.
* Create **communities that last** beyond activism. When a person takes a break from activism, access to the support and social contact of the activist community encourages resilience.
* **Listen to people** who tell you what they need. Social norms are tailored to some identities more than others. If you feel comfortable in a space and other people tell you that you don’t, it may be time to take action so that they too feel comfortable.
* **Understand intellectual privilege** and recognize that there are many forms of intelligence. Emphasizing intellectualism reinforces that people should conform to one form of intelligence – that is, so-called intelligence as defined in white, bodily, elitist, and academic contexts. Recognize that there are many forms of intelligence, and that people are valuable regardless of their perceived intelligence.
* Accept that **accessibility is a process**. There is no set finish line, we have to stay tuned and pay attention to the people around us.
* **Not interpreting eye contact or body language**. Ask to touch a person (even for a hug) and avoid imposing eye contact.
* **Taking into account classism and internalized ableism**. Asking about someone's occupation can create a feeling of exclusion for people with certain identities. Not everyone has the privilege that comes with having a 'good' job; social connection, higher income and sometimes health insurance.
* Deconstructing the **Politics of Desire**. The people who are most often 'front and center' in our communities enjoy white privilege, attractiveness (or body) privilege, able-bodied privilege, and class.
* **Pay particular attention to intersectional perspectives**. Intersectional perspectives are those of people who experience more than one social identity limiting their accessibility to spaces.
• Create **habits** related to accessibility. For example, the use of a planning list adapted to the current project or process helps team members to develop reflexes as to the accessibility aspects to consider when organizing an activity. **UK Mutual Aid** has developed a list specific to holding face-to-face, hybrid or online events which you can use to adopt specific practices in your teams.

**Attribution and further resources**

**Input and resources for this guide were provided by:**

1. Groupe DEFI Accessibilite (GDA) - Research report for associations in Montreal - Universal Accessibility and contributing designs (version 5.3), Langevin, Rocque, Chalghoumi & Ghorayeb, University of Montreal
2. https://collectifau.ca/
3. https://www.sinsininvalid.org/blog/access-suggestions-for-a-public-event
5. https://www.instagram.com/p/CYBl-miPcCL/
11. The Invisible Students in the Classroom: How to Include the Introverts Without Excluding the Extroverts. MA thesis by Sharron Emilie Dow.
12. https://thecatalystnews.com/2021/03/04/how-to-care-for-your-introvert/
13. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Bt6SVDG3DhgfCs0TDihFYdWK5Fc3TmsAVG4dqiZTueA/edit

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17. https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG21/

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