Accessible Writers' Lab

A national program creating space for **six disabled writers** to experiment with what an accessible writing process might look like for them.

This report is a case study of the 2022 Edition.

Presented by: Canada Media Fund / Fonds des médias du Canada, Telefilm Canada Partner of Choice, AMI

In partnership with: ReelAbilities Film Festival Toronto, Miles Nadal JCC Downtown Toronto

Table of Contents

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Acknowledgements:

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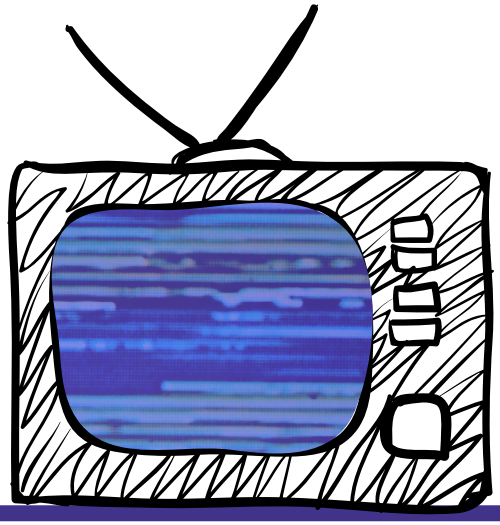
This program included participation from individuals across Turtle Island, living on land and waterways colloquially known as Canada that have been taken care of by, and home to, First Nations, Inuit and Métis for millenia. We are committed to continuously learning, shifting our practices and actively working towards decolonization.

This program and report were made possible through collective community collaboration. The takeaways in this report build on the work of many disabled creatives who have carved pathways in the entertainment industry for as long as it has existed.

This report is a case study of the Accessible Writers' Lab (AWL) 2022 Edition. It includes a description of the program, the questions we explored, and our key takeaways. It is not a comprehensive study of disability[1] inclusion, accessibility best practices, or ableism within the entertainment industry. Any opinions, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this report are those of the authors.

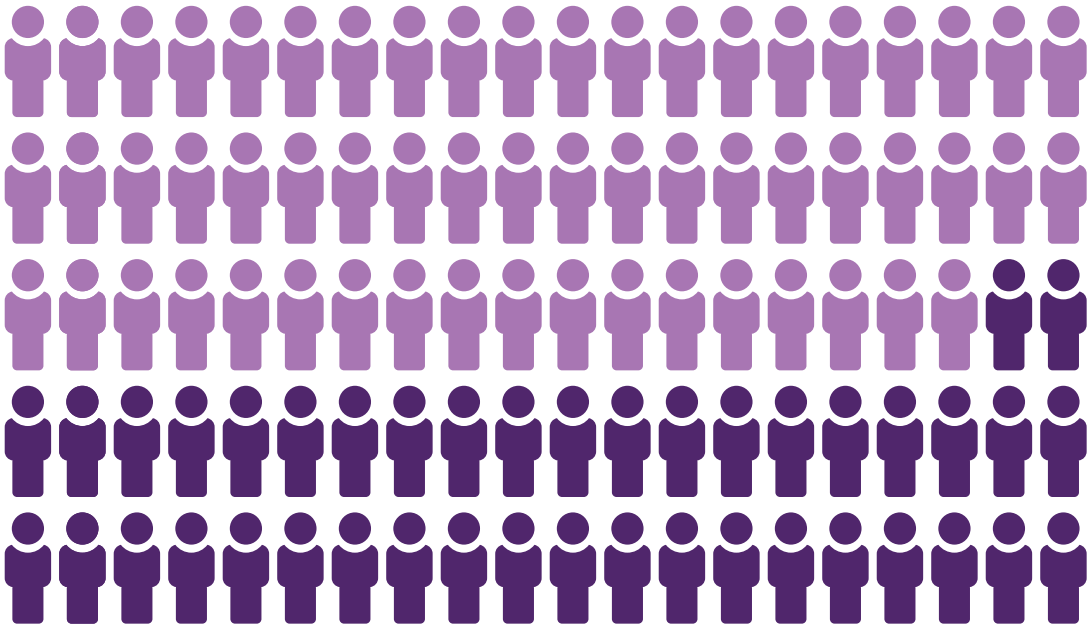
Special Thanks To: Andrew Morris and the Disability Screen Office.



1 This program's understanding of disability embraced The Accessible Canada Act definition which is inclusive of visible and invisible disabilities, permanent, temporary or episodic in nature. Acknowledging that ableism, audism, and sanism can be experienced regardless of your relationship with the word "Disability," we committed to honouring the language writers use to self-identify.

Why We Created This Program

As of 2017, Canadians with disabilities made up approximately 22% of the country's population. Despite such a large portion of the population being part of the disability community, the TV and film industry at large has not reflected this. There is talk in the industry about needing greater representation for Deaf and disabled people, but who are the people writing these roles? According to the Writers Guild of Canada's (WGC) Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Report for 2021, writers with disabilities accounted for only 1% of Canadian writers working on the television series tracked in 2019.



Canadians with disabilities make up approximately 22% of the country's population.

Writers with disabilities accounted for 1% of working Canadian television writers.

We believe that these statistics do not reflect a lack of interest or talent within the disability community – our call for submissions alone had **182 applicants** respond from across the country within a 5 week submission window. Instead, these statistics reflect the attitudinal, physical, and structural barriers to engagement due to inaccessible standards within the industry. It is not enough to think only of increasing representation in writers' rooms. The barriers that exist need to be understood and broken down to build a TV writing process that is accessible to disabled writers. Otherwise, the industry will continue the cycle of exclusion, preventing talented writers from getting their needs met and ultimately forcing them out.

With that in mind, the goal of AWL was to carve out space to connect and experiment, examine the barriers that we have experienced in our own practices and careers, and start addressing them. Instead of working in isolation, as many disabled creatives have had to do, this was an opportunity to group together and collectively figure out what could be possible, inviting established industry guests into the space to create mutual learning opportunities and interrogate the ableism found within the film and TV industry through multiple perspectives.

This project made it clear that there is incredible talent and so many stories waiting to be told within disability communities. We are very grateful to everyone who has engaged with this Lab and are excited to build off of these learnings together.

Key Points

1 **Disability is not a monolith.** The 182 writers who applied for this program had diverse disability experiences, bringing their own intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, religion and more.

2 **Intentionally accessible, low or no cost, disability-led training opportunities are in great demand.**

3 **Virtual writing rooms** reduce barriers for many writers.

4 **Accessibility involves preparation *and* flexibility.** This means developing and budgeting for an accessibility plan at the start of a process, while recognizing that individual needs can and will change throughout.

5 **Ask first.** Giving writers agency over how their accessibility needs are met ensures a more comfortable and collaborative environment.

6 **Engagement options outside of scheduled meetings** allow writers to be part of a collaborative process, even when they are unable to gather together at the same, specific, moment in time.

7 **Creating space for multiple communication methods** welcomes Deaf and disabled writers to tell their own stories, their way. These methods may include sign language, spoken language, or written text.

8 **Accessibility requires clear communication**. Knowing what to expect in advance allows writers, staff, and accessibility support providers to bring their full selves to the process.

9 The majority of accessibility requests we received through this program were related to **overall program design and attitudes around accessibility**. The most frequently requested accessibility measure was for scheduled breaks.

10 **No writer should be expected to bear the full weight of the representation** of their community alone, whether that's within a process (ex. a training program), or in storytelling.

11 Canadian showrunners and senior writers are looking for **financial, educational and networking support to increase accessibility and disability inclusion** within their own practices.

Submission Process

This program was open to applicants who:

- Were Canadian citizens or permanent residents, 18 years of age or older
- Identified as Disabled, Deaf, chronically ill, neurodivergent, Mad, sick and/or spoonie[2]
- Had an existing professional and/or personal writing practice
- Were interested in collective accessibility, writing for the Canadian TV industry, and experimenting with unique writing methods

The call for submissions was shared through social media, e-newsletters, and with the support of community and industry partners in our network. To better reach multiple levels of the disability community, we used strategies including:

- Commissioning ASL Vlogs for outreach to Deaf communities
- Adding Visual Descriptions[3] into promotional materials
- Including FAQs in social media and e-newsletter copy
- Highlighting the availability of one-on-one application support

Applicants were provided **multiple ways to apply**, acknowledging that barriers experienced during the application process often exclude qualified applicants.
Submission formats included:

- Questionnaire in Google Form, Google Doc and PDF formats
- Video (via self-tape or live using Zoom)
- Audio (via a transcribed phone call or mp4 files submitted)

Funds were budgeted at the start of AWL for access support throughout the submission process. Measures requested during this phase included live captions and sign language interpretation for interviews, as well as support for applicants who chose to have the applications questions read to them and their answers transcribed.

While the current industry standard is based around the use of screenwriting software, **we intentionally accepted writing samples in a variety of formats**, considering them on an equal basis, due to the following:

- Typing on a screen is not a physically accessible option for all writers
- Screenwriting software is often not compatible with screen reading or voice-to-text technologies
- Many creators communicate dialogue, action lines and scene descriptions more authentically and clearly through non-written formats, including, but not limited to, sign language, speaking aloud or storytelling

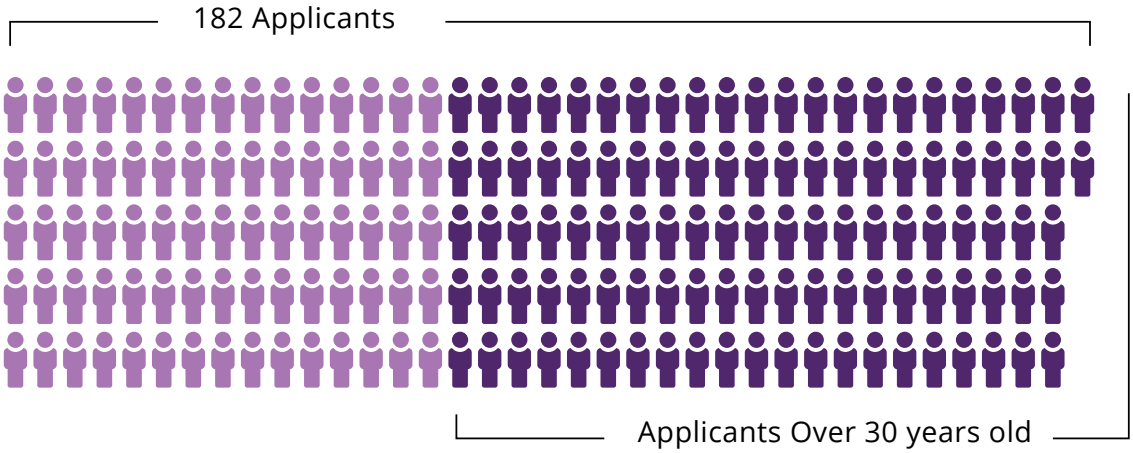
2 A spoonie can refer to any individual with chronic illness, chronic pain, and, or an invisible disability. This term was coined by Christine Miserandino.

3 Visual Descriptions are written text that describe essential information about an image.

"Making this submission form as easy to use as this one is, helps to make this more accessible... Having very clear instructions and using supportive and encouraging language helps too."
– **AWL Applicant**

In total, **182 people applied to the 2022 Accessible Writers' Lab.**

Of note: almost **three quarters of the program's applicants were over 30 years old**, with the majority identifying as emerging writers. Many noted that they had been excluded from emerging artist initiatives due to the standard age cut-off of 30 years old.



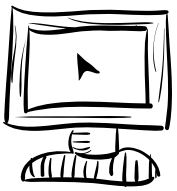
The writers who applied for this program had **diverse disability experiences** and came from a variety of communities, bringing their own intersections of race, class, age, gender, sexuality, religion, and more. This showed us that it is very important to **bring an intersectional lens to conversations about disability**, and to ensure that **accessible standards and policies are the default**, not an afterthought, regardless of whether disability is an explicit focus of an event or narrative.

Many applicants reported that:

- Being able to **attend this program virtually** was an essential accessibility consideration that allowed them to apply
- Financial **cost was a huge barrier** that had prevented them from applying to industry initiatives in the past

The selected AWL writers were paid a $1,350 honourarium in consideration of their time and labour. Flexible payment schedules were noted as an important consideration due to the structure of social assistance.

Program Design and Onboarding Process



Our intention was to co-design the program in collaboration with the writers.

We had one-on-one discussions with each member of the cohort at the start of the program, discussing barriers they had each encountered within the industry and asking what activities they wanted to try with the group.

Through these one-on-one discussions we developed 6 research questions that are discussed below.

These early meetings also served as a way to ease into the program, giving us the chance to learn what each person needed to feel comfortable in the space.

Based on the 6 research questions, we created a full program schedule involving 90 minute long sessions on Zoom, 2 times per week. These sessions were designed to include collective creation, with each writer developing a different episode of an anthology series in collaboration with the group, and seminars with guest industry showrunners/senior writers.

At the end of the program, each member of the cohort was asked to fill out a post-program survey about their experience with AWL and the research questions.

> "[The pre-program meeting] really clarified things... making it more personal. You feel more comfortable going into the bigger meeting. This really matters to writers who have social anxiety, PTSD, are neurodivergent, etc." **– AWL Writer**

Access Intimacy

Research Question #1: How can we create access intimacy in the space, allowing everyone to bring their full selves to the process?

Access intimacy is a term **coined by Mia Mingus,** who defines this concept as **"a hard to describe feeling when someone else "gets" your access needs. [It's] the kind of [...] comfort that your disabled self feels with someone on a purely access level."** Additionally, she states that "access intimacy is the intimacy [felt] with many other disabled and sick people who have an automatic understanding of access needs out of our shared similar lived experience of the many different ways ableism exists in our lives."

In an effort to create and maintain access intimacy we:

- Created multiple ways to disclose access needs, both in advance of, and during, a collaborative process.
    - Ex. Anonymous forms, emails, conversations, one-to-one disclosure, having access check-ins at the start of and throughout each session.
- Conversed about accessibility before the program start date.
- Established and communicated a baseline of access measures for the group and all guests entering the space.
- Communicated the intentions of the space in advance
    - Ex. Outlines and agendas handed out ahead of time.

"This is the first time I felt I could be fully myself in a room. This is also the first time I felt like I shared the room with people who have similar experiences and so I could focus on the creative part and not spend so much time advocating for myself and my access needs." **- AWL Writer**

One hundred percent of survey respondents agreed it was very important to **establish and communicate** a baseline of access measures for the group and all guests entering the space.

One hundred percent of survey respondents reported that **having multiple disabled** people in the space, and having the space be **disability led**, was important in establishing access intimacy.

Navigating Capacity Needs

Research Question #2: How can we navigate capacity needs in real time?

Sensory overstimulation, pain, fatigue, external life events, and more can all limit a writers' energy. Throughout AWL, we navigated capacity through:

- Accessibility check-ins and scheduled breaks
- Flexible deadlines and email reminders
- Turning cameras on/off during Zoom
- "Come as you are" policy (Ex. Participating while in bed, folding laundry, eating, watching your children, etc.)
- "No explanation needed" exit and break options
- Reducing sensory input (Ex. Minimalizing virtual backgrounds, overlapping voices, etc.)

We included this list of practices in a "Program Summary" document that was distributed to access support staff, invited guests, and the writers before the program sessions began. This was to welcome everyone attending AWL sessions to participate with whatever capacity they had on any given day, without pressure to explain.

> "It's important to have a clear idea going in, [to know] how it's going to happen, when the breaks are. Knowing in advance that we can take a pause if we need it makes people feel comfortable." **- AWL Writer**

When it came to navigating capacity needs, **100% of survey respondents** found that **scheduled breaks**, the ability to turn their **camera on/off** during Zoom and a **"come as you are" policy** were **helpful**.

Additionally, **80% of survey respondents** noted that having the **"no explanation needed exit/break options"** was **helpful** for them.

While 100% of survey respondents felt that a 90 minute session with breaks built in was the right amount of time for our virtual meetings, we frequently ran out of time. This pointed to the need for more sessions over a longer period of time.

Conflicting Access Needs

Research Question #3: How do we navigate potentially conflicting access needs in collaborative processes?

An access need is any measure required for an individual to participate in an activity. These measures could be physical, emotional, environmental, or something else entirely. A conflicting access need occurs when one person's access requirements don't align with another individual's needs. For example, if one person requires a low lighting environment, their access needs may conflict with another person who requires bright light in the same space.

We explored this concept through two different categories: **Asynchronous engagement**[4] and **multiple communication styles.**

Asynchronous Engagement

We created both synchronous (Ex. live Zoom sessions) and asynchronous engagement options for this program as some members required a structured and predictable space for co-creation in order to schedule access support like sign language interpretation and prepare for lab sessions in advance, while others could not guarantee regular attendance due to changing capacity.

With that in mind, our methods included:

- **Setting scheduled meetings with flexible attendance and a "come as you are" policy**
    - Writers could "attend" sessions outside of meeting times through recordings with captions and sign language interpretation, recap notes, and collaborative documents

- **Creating Google Drive folders for each writer to upload, edit and comment on documents whenever they had the capacity to do so**
    - Script writing and brainstorming was invited to take place in the shared Google Drive directly, or written separately and uploaded into the Google Drive for collaboration. The writers were given editor status on their own folders, allowing them to choose which specific documents were shared with the group

4 Asynchronous refers to something not taking place at the same time. Asynchronous engagement means that writers could learn and work whenever it was ideal for them.

One hundred percent of survey respondents found the **recap notes, recordings,** and **live documents** (documents that had editing and commenting access) **helpful** if they had missed meetings and/or wished to refer back to session talking points.

Multiple Communication Styles

AWL writers used multiple different methods of communication including speaking, signing in ASL[5], and writing in English.

All communication took place **verbally** (Ex. Zoom chat responses were read aloud), through **sign language**, and through **written text** (Ex. closed captions and the chat function on Zoom). We also used Zoom features such as emojis and the raise hand function for non verbal communication, and all participation in live group discussions was optional.

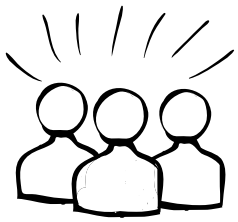
An AWL writer noted:

> "I think it is very important to leave space for silence...I think there needed to be more time to allow some introverted folks a chance to engage." **- AWL Writer**

Recognizing that everyone communicates in different ways was a crucial step to addressing potentially conflicting access needs. Throughout the program, we learned that accessibility is a collaborative process. We needed to hold space, honouring each other's and our own needs, and navigate conflict with open dialogue.

5 ASL (American Sign Language) was used in this version of the program because it was the language used by our writers.

Accessibility Support Staff



Research Question #4: What are some better practices around working with access support staff (Ex. a notetaker, interpreters, etc.) in a creative, collaborative process?

> "Interpreters and access support team members should be included in all communications that include the contracted writer or creative… This helps provide continual context so that these professionals are best prepared to do their jobs." **– AWL Writer**

Based on our conversations about accessibility with each writer, we budgeted for and set up our accessibility team prior to the first session.

- **Two ASL interpreters were hired for each 90-minute Zoom session**
  - We hired interpreters that writers in the program recommended
  - When interpreters switched off, the discussion was paused to make sure no content was missed as we adjusted spotlighting[6] features
  - Everyone was asked to introduce themselves prior to communicating, to help our access team, and Deaf writers who were watching the interpreters, determine who was speaking. Ex. "This is [Name] speaking…"

- **Additional session tasks were divided up between 3 staff members and included:**
  - Session facilitation, leading check-ins, and time keeping for breaks
  - Reading Zoom chat comments aloud to the group
  - Technical support, including recording the session, setting up captions, correcting caption errors in the chat, and spotlighting interpreters and writers
  - Note taking (for everything spoken, signed, and written)

6 Spotlighting a person on Zoom makes them an active user, highlighted on the screen to all participants in the meeting and on the recording.

Before each session, we did the following:

- **Distributed speaking notes to staff members in advance**
  - These notes included the names, pronouns, and roles of everyone who would be present for the session, an outline of the plan for the day and a list of key words and terms that were likely to come up

- **Checked in with staff members 15 minutes prior to the cohort's scheduled start time**
  - This allowed for staff and interpreters to disclose their own access needs for the session and be made co-hosts of the meeting

Through this process, we learned that:

- **Working with an interpreter who understands your communication style is essential.**
  - Deferring to writers on their preferred interpreters and support staff members ensures a much more collaborative environment
  - In pitching to hearing executives or showrunners, it is important for Deaf writers to have the chance to practice with trusted interpreters, ensuring that they are communicating the details of a story effectively
  - It is important for an interpreter to understand the cultural nuance that a Deaf writer is expressing. For example, BASL (Black American Sign Language) is a distinct dialect from ASL (American Sign Language)

- **A consistent team of access support staff allows for a smoother creative process.**
  - When access support staff have the chance to get to know each writer's style, (Ex. their preferred format for notes or specific signs for interpretation), communication can flow smoothly, allowing the writers to focus on developing content

- **To ensure that comments aren't missed, it is important to moderate conversations, with one person communicating at a time**
  - This way of working is highly compatible with video conferencing platforms, and has the additional benefit of keeping the discussion easier to process from a sensory perspective.

- **It is essential for writing rooms to budget for the cost of hiring access support staff and interpreters in advance**
  - Many writers reported being excluded from writing opportunities due to a lack of organizational budgeting for accessibility supports

"[Funding bodies] should create a financing stream that the broadcasters and producers can easily access re: accessibility - almost like an automatic line item that gets underwritten by [the funding body] when productions include a disabled writer." **– AWL Industry Guest**

Deaf Culture and Communication

Research Question #5: What are options to communicate lines that are meant to be performed, or are better understood or communicated through sign language(s)?

Current industry practices in Canada focus on scripts in written language, which does not account for content that is intended to be communicated visually, like sign language. **A common misconception is that sign language is a simple one-to-one translation of languages** such as English; however, **sign languages have their own cultural variances and nuances** such as facial expressions and gestures that cannot be communicated through text alone. Additionally, English, or any spoken language, may not be a primary language for many Deaf storytellers. In practice, this can lead to the following example:

A Deaf writer writes content that is meant to be performed in ASL

In order to follow industry conventions, the writer must translate their ideas and dialogue from ASL into English text

The actor receives the written script, and must then translate the English text back into ASL

This process can lead to a loss of the original creative intention, putting additional labour on Deaf artists. In exploring this research question, the cohort brought up a variety of recommendations.

A push for screenwriting software that would allow video to be embedded within the script document itself.

- This would allow writers to film sign language alongside English text, ensuring the writer's intent is not lost in translation
- All script-related content could be kept on one page, without the need for external links

Hiring sign language coaches and Deaf consultants to join writing sessions.

- Sign language coaches may record videos, communicating a writer's intention
- Deaf consultants help ensure that content is shown appropriately on screen (e.g. making sure signing hands are not cut off). They also reduce the burden on writers having to advocate for their space

"Deaf communities are a complexly interlaced identity spanning across cultures and languages... Being able to commiserate and provide culturally informed support to each other is invaluable."
- AWL Writer

Writing About Lived Experience

Research Question #6: How can marginalized writers be supported to write from lived experience in ways that don't feel tokenistic or exploitative?

"If [industry decision makers] are really dedicated to telling different kinds of stories, they have to accept that they're told by different writers." **– AWL Writer**

Reflections from AWL Writers included:

- Writers with **lived experience of the story being told should lead the process**
- No writer should be expected to bear the full weight of representing their community alone. This can be mitigated by involving **multiple writers who share the lived experience** being written about and providing access to **community consultants** for feedback
    - These positions must be paid and credited, acknowledging the labour of leading others through understanding their lived experience
- Having a **support person** available for the writer's emotional needs, especially if the content is dealing with traumatic issues, is important

"...We need to be training a whole new set of writers, in an accessible manner, so that they, some day, can lead the writing rooms. Until that happens, it will always be the case that we are tokenized, and our stories stolen to make inspirational movies for folks who just want to observe our stories in a casual way." **- AWL Writer**

Industry Perspectives

A key part of this program involved creating opportunities for **mutual learning with industry guests**. We invited showrunners and senior writers to share insights on their experiences within the industry, while also giving them the opportunity to learn from the cohort, gaining real time experience with the accessibility framework that we were developing.

> "Honestly, I'm becoming very aware of how many barriers there are to traditional writing rooms. I want to be thinking about different ways of doing things in future." **– AWL Industry Guest**

We took the following steps to prepare the industry guests before their session:

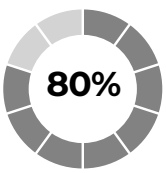
- Shared an accessibility guide that outlined the overall intentions of the program, the access measures that we incorporated into the space, a program description, and cohort bios
- Set up a one-on-one meeting with each guest to go over the accessibility guide together, discuss the topic for their session, and answer questions
- Began sessions with a short Q&A moderated by AWL team, and then transitioned over to each guest having the space to lead the room, bringing forward a writing activity or discussion topic

There was a clear consensus from AWL industry guests that **writing rooms must adapt in order to remove barriers for disabled creatives.**

One hundred percent of AWL industry guests felt that the following would help them **increase accessibility and disability inclusion** within their own writing or producing practices:

- Clear funding mechanisms for access support workers (such as sign language interpreters, notetakers, emotional support workers, etc.)
- Networking opportunities with disabled creatives
- A database of disabled creatives
- Educational resources around accessibility, disability storytelling and culture
- Support navigating accessible technology
- Disability-focused mentorship programs

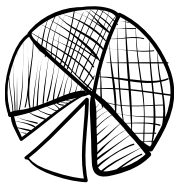
> "I would really like to have a place where I could easily, quickly get funding towards accessibility." **– AWL Industry Guest**



Eighty percent of AWL industry guests felt that **pre-production or production accessibility coordinators**[7] and **access to physically accessible workplaces** would help them increase accessibility and disability inclusion within their own writing or producing practices.

7 A production accessibility coordinator (PAC) is a role developed by IndieVisible whose role on set is to support the access needs of cast and crew members.

Accessibility Requests: An Overview



The following breakdown includes accessibility requests we received throughout the application and program phases, demonstrating what accessibility can mean to different people.

Twenty-eight percent of access requests were connected to timing and capacity needs. These included:

- Scheduled breaks (the most frequently requested access need)
- Limiting the length of meeting times
- Asynchronous co-working options and non-mandatory attendance

Twenty-two percent of access requests were related to communication and information sharing formats, such as:

- CART[8], closed captioning, and transcriptions for meetings
    - Note that live captioners are much more accurate than auto-captions
- Sign Language Interpretation
- Avoiding walls of text and providing alternate formats for idea sharing

Twenty percent of access requests were for support resources, including:

- Note taking
- Virtual meetings
- Project support workers
- Tech support and accessibility software made available
- Financial support

Fifteen percent of access requests related to the structure of the space including:

- Flexibility to gauge access needs during the program through an "open conversation format"
- Supportive, respectful, and encouraging attitudes/language
- "Come as you are" policies
- Reducing sensory overstimulation (Ex. avoiding overlapping discussions)
- Protocols for anonymous or confidential feedback/access requests

Fifteen percent of access requests were about setting clear expectations, allowing writers to prepare in advance. These included:

- Email reminders and calendar invites for scheduled sessions
- Pre-session agendas and outlines
- Written breakdown of next steps to be able to review afterwards

Overall, 78% of the access requests we received throughout the program were related to overall program design and attitudes around accessibility.

8 CART stands for Communication Access Realtime Translation and refers to live captions, generated by professionals in real time.

78% **of the access requests** we received throughout the program were related **to overall program design and attitudes around accessibility.**

28% **of access requests** were **connected to timing and capacity needs.**

22% **of access requests** were related **to communication and information sharing formats.**

20% **of access requests** were for **support resources.**

15% **of access requests** were related to **the structure of the space.**

15% **of access requests** were about **setting clear expectations, allowing writers to prepare in advance.**

Final Thoughts

Through this program, it became evident that **accessibility does not detract from a creative process**. Instead, it invites innovative solutions, supporting writers to bring their full selves to the creative process. There are so many talented writers with unique perspectives and stories to share. The onus cannot be placed on them to work around the barriers that actively exclude them. We hope that this report will serve as a resource to promote accessibility and disability inclusion throughout the Canadian film and television industry.

> "I feel, like all the other changes we've made over the years to writing rooms, it just takes a little extra effort to be more inclusive. It's... something we absolutely should be striving for."
> **– AWL Industry Guest**

> "I strongly believe that if there were more programs like AWL, and more funding to support writers from marginalized groups, we would start to see the change. I believe that our stories will help lead the way to change the pre-existing systems that keep us from thriving." **- AWL Writer**

Questions for consideration:

1. What mechanisms can be built to provide accessibility resources and financial support for disabled creatives?
2. How can multiple communication methods and languages be incorporated into screenwriting formats?
3. How can embracing accessibility creatively add to the stories we tell on screen?