

## Accessibility Tools Training

[ABS](#) | [Teach](#) | [Handbook](#) | [Accessibility Tools Training](#) | Accessibility Tools Training: How do We Access Meaning in Art?

You may already be familiar with some of the tools in this training and use them in your work. But you will discover how to adapt and modify those tools to reach new audiences. You may even discover that experimenting with these tools enriches the learning experience for **all** your audiences.

### How Do We Access Meaning in Art?



To access completely the meaning of a work of art, **all viewers** need to understand two things:

1. the physical presence of the work—the compositional and material elements that comprise style.
2. the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual power of the work.

A work of art is rarely self-explanatory. To experience and understand a work of art, a viewer needs background information and analysis of the subject matter, artist, materials and techniques, as well as the historical and cultural context.

[Back to top](#)

### Art Requires Dialogue

Equally important is the interaction of the viewer with the object. **Art requires dialogue—verbal, written, or through art-making.** Art enables people to learn about history and culture from multiple perspectives. Art also acts as a catalyst for reflecting on our life experiences.

[Back to top](#)

### A Museum's Mission

One aspect of a museum's mission is to create an open environment for this dialogue between work and viewer for all visitors, including people with disabilities. **The tools that can provide access to meaning in art for people with visual impairments are, in essence, the same tools required by sighted viewers.** For both audiences the tools include: reproductions of works of art (posters, postcards), written texts (labels, brochures, and catalogues), tours, audio guides, lectures, art-making activities, Web materials, sound and dramatic elements, and for school-based experiences, curriculum integration activities.

The diversity of the disabilities community also presents unique challenges and opportunities for the museum's education department and/or accessibility coordinator. A broad range of approaches is necessary when reaching out to this community, such as physical accessibility for people who are blind or wheelchair-users, sign language and captioning for visitors who are deaf or hard-of-hearing, multi-sensory tours for people with developmental disabilities, or telephone and distance-learning classes for people who find it difficult to leave home.

[Back to top](#)

## One Universal Fact

**Individuals in every audience want equal opportunity to choose how in-depth their dialogue and experience with a work of art will be, and they should be able to access art in as many ways as possible. Through the tools discussed in this tutorial, we can make art more meaningful for everyone.**




Tracy Carcioni  
Museum Visitor

**Hear about the art experiences of Tracy, a blind museum visitor.**




[Watch](#) [Read](#)



Tracy Carcioni  
Museum Visitor

**Hear about the art experiences of Tracy, a blind museum visitor.**



[Listen: Audio Described](#)

[Back to top](#)

## What Are Accessibility Tools Used by People with Low Vision?

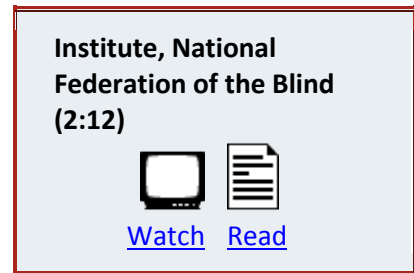
People who are blind or visually impaired can use a variety of tools to access meaning in art. For this tutorial, we have divided the tools into two types: **Learning Tools** and **General Accessibility Tools**. In this tutorial we define each tool and offer examples, practical considerations, and resources.



**Accessibility Advice for Museums from Dr. Betsy A. Zaborowski, Executive Director, Jernigan**

**Learning Tools.** These provide access to exhibition **content** and **meaning**, or to **the art experience**.

1. Touch Tours and other Tactile Experiences
2. Tactile Diagrams with Verbal Guidance of Hands
3. Verbal Description
4. Sound and Drama
5. Art Making
6. Educational Extensions



**General Accessibility Tools.** These provide access to **facilities** and **information media**.

1. Universal Design (Human-Centered Design)
2. Braille and Large Print
3. Tactile Graphics and Maps
4. Audio Described Media
5. Accessible Web Materials

**Learning** and **General Accessibility** tools have multiple uses:

- **Upon entering the museum:** tactile maps, brochures and materials in braille and large print.
- **In the galleries:** audio guides, art-making activities, verbal-description tours, labels and text in braille and large print, tactile experiences and touch tours.
- **In the education center:** brochures and materials in braille and large print, tactile maps, audio-descriptive videos, curriculum integration activities, art-making activities, verbal description, tactile experiences and touch sessions, accessible Web materials.
- **In classrooms and schools:** brochures and materials in braille and large print, tactile maps, audio-descriptive videos, curriculum integration activities, art-making activities, verbal description, tactile experiences and touch sessions, accessible Web materials.

**Remember:** These tools, designed for people who are blind or visually impaired, will benefit **others** too—people with different learning styles, or who may access information better tactilely or aurally, or who have difficulty accessing traditional print materials.

## **How Were These Tools Developed?**

### **Theory and Research**


Art education for people who are blind and visually impaired is a dynamic interdisciplinary field. It is a worldwide collaborative of sighted and blind scholars and researchers, education and museum professionals, artists and art enthusiasts. These researchers investigate issues such as blindness and perception, learning styles of blind and visually impaired students and the role of art in the psychological development of blind and visually impaired children. Learning tools discussed in this chapter evolved from this theoretical foundation.




**Cognitive Psychologist Dr. John M. Kennedy (1:37)**



[Watch](#) [Read](#)



**Cognitive Psychologist Dr. John M. Kennedy (1:49)**



[Listen: Audio Described](#)

## Research Disciplines

Each discipline addresses a different set of questions and makes its unique contribution to the theoretical dynamics of the field and ultimately provides a foundation for lasting change in teaching strategies and educational and museum policies. Authors referred to below have articles in Chapter 3 of [Art Beyond Sight: A Resource Guide to Art, Creativity, and Visual Impairment](#), Eds. Axel & Levent, AEB & AFB, 2003.

- **Cognitive psychology:** Cognitive research has focused on issues of blindness and perception, and tactile perception vs. vision. Much of this work is dedicated to studying specific issues such as understanding and creating outline drawings (Kennedy), processing of special reference information, understanding of such concepts as space and perspective (Heller, Gabias), understanding of surfaces, texture gradients, depth in tactile pictures (Jansson and Holmes), developing tactile exploration skills (Richardson).
- **Educational psychology.** Educators and educational psychologists are exploring blind students' cognition and learning styles and their relevance to formulating a teaching strategy and developing curricula. Researchers in this field often refer to the practical aspects of blind student's education such as integration of blind children into public school system. Up-to-date research in educational psychology helps us to understand the different kinds of mental representations, strategies and processes that blind students bring to the experience of viewing or making art (Pring and Eardley).
- **Neuroscience.** Neuroscientists are interested in multisensory perception, brain plasticity, cross-modal interactions between vision and touch, and recruitment of different parts of the brain in the process of visualization, tactile exploration, and drawing. Among other methods, they use MRIs to study the neural basis for blind people's abilities to perceive and represent images. Another area of ongoing research is comparing brain activity in blind and sighted people when they process visual and tactile tasks.
- **Social psychology.** Social psychology looks into art education as a creative and expressive outlet for blind adults and children and how it can contribute to their personal development, confidence, their performance in other cognitive, creative and social areas.

- **Philosophy.** Philosophy may appear to be a field very distant from the real concerns of education and museum practitioners. However, philosophy deals with much of the conceptual blockage that prevents many people, educators among them, from thinking about a blind person's art education. These authors use new research on blindness and perception to challenge our conventional notions of pictures and visual concepts (Lopes) or to question the assumption that appreciation of a picture through touch is just a variation of the visual appreciation (Hopkins).

### **Who Can Use This Research?**

**Museum Staff:** Museum professionals or art educators will be more interested in topics such as the history of tactile pictures, perception of visual concepts through alternative senses, and art appreciation.

**Educators and Art Therapists:** Educators or art therapists will be more familiar with in-depth psychological research and can immediately connect much of this information to their professional experience. Some of the information may appear to have no immediate relevance to your daily experience as a practitioner. However, it is important know about state-of-the-art research when questioned by your school principal or by a parent. Professionals need to know that tools such as tactile diagrams are not experimental, but based on a body of research.

[Back to top](#)