

# Best Practice Guide for Icebreaker Design and Facilitation

COMPILED BY JESS GATES FROM *NICEBREAKERS*

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### ACCESSIBILITY SYMBOLS

These symbols are used throughout *Nicebreakers* to **indicate what different icebreakers require participants to do**. They aim to include requirements commonly related to accessibility concerns for different people. This operates similarly to Meeple Like Us (2018, emphasis added) and their Board Game Accessibility Guidelines, who state that

“...we’re perfectly qualified to talk about what a game asks people to do but **not at all qualified** to say what conditions would prevent people from doing it. We put that judgement squarely on the reader who will know much better than we do on the basis of their knowledge of themselves and their friends and family.”

The symbols are all labelled as verbs. Swap in whatever the verb is for that symbol (talking, differentiating colour, hearing) where it says “whatever this symbol represents” below.

- If an icebreaker activity displays a symbol in full, this activity requires **whatever the symbol represents** as a **core part of its intended experience**.
- If an icebreaker activity displays a symbol with the lines on either side, this activity requires **whatever the symbol represents**, but it is **not part of the core intended experience** or is **able to be modified or removed entirely** from the activity.
- If an icebreaker activity displays a symbol with three faces below it, this activity requires **whatever the symbol represents**, but requires it in **teams** or may only require one person from a team to do whatever the symbol represents.
- If an icebreaker activity does not display a symbol, the activity **does not require whatever the symbol represents**.

## Accessibility Symbols

These symbols are designed to **enable facilitators of icebreaker activities to clearly understand what each icebreaker game will ask of those who participate in it**. In combination with the accessibility guidelines, they are intended to give facilitators an understanding of what aspects of their icebreaker may present accessibility concerns for some participants.

They are not intended to tell people which icebreakers to use or not use, or to say certain icebreakers are better or worse than others. The judgment of whether the icebreaker in question should be used rests on the facilitator.

They are also not intended to ensure an accessible, inclusive icebreaker experience will be facilitated if a particular game is used. The responsibility of creating an accessible, inclusive and welcoming space rests on the facilitator as well. On the next page, there is a full version of each symbol and a short explanation of what they represent.

**ACCESSIBILITY SYMBOLS IMAGES**



**INTERACT WITH ANOTHER PERSON**

The game requires you to interact with at least one other person you may or may not know.



**INTERACT WITH A GROUP OF PEOPLE**

The game requires you to interact with a group of people you may or may not know.



**PERFORM IN FRONT OF PEOPLE**

The game requires you to perform an action in front of a group of people you may or may not know.



**HEAR**

The game requires you to use hearing.



**COMMUNICATE VERBALLY**

The game requires you to verbally communicate.



**READING**

The game requires you to read something.



**SEE**

The game requires you to use sight.



**DIFFERENTIATE COLOUR**

The game requires you to differentiate colours.



**READING ALOUD**

This game requires you to read aloud.

## Accessibility Symbols



### REMEMBERING

The game requires you to remember something or someone.



### THINK LOGICALLY

The game requires you to think logically about something.



### THINK ABSTRACTLY

The game requires you to think abstractly about something.



### RESPOND IN A TIME LIMIT

The game requires you to respond or act in a certain time limit.



### HANDWRITING

The game requires you to hand write or draw something.



### MOVE ARM OR HAND

The game requires you to move your arms or hands in some way.



### MOVE THROUGH SPACE

The game requires you to move through a room or space.



### PHYSICAL TOUCH

The game requires you to make physical contact with another participant.



### CHANGE PHYSICAL POSITION FREQUENTLY

The game requires you to change physical position frequently.

### ACCESSIBILITY GUIDELINES

These are a set of guidelines to help you when conducting your next icebreaker game. It is not the goal of these guidelines to construct or facilitate the perfect icebreaker game which is fully accessible to all humans - that does not exist.

It is our goal to enable you to have knowledge of accessibility so that you can make intentional choices around icebreaker design and facilitation to suit your current and future participants' needs. It is this intentionality and awareness which Weiner (2015) identifies as crucial for icebreakers to be more meaningful, effective and inclusive. The guidelines are broken into categories below based around the components of an icebreaker game.

#### Physical Space

- Make sure the environment is clear of any obstacle which would limit movement in a wheelchair or via use of a walking frame
- Make sure the environment is well-lit
- Make sure the environment enables voices to be heard throughout the room
- Make sure the environment allows excessive noise to escape
- Make sure the space has a clearly accessible exit, and a safe, quiet space for participants who need to leave (see Emotional Safety)
- Often relevant to the following symbols



### MOVEMENT AND PHYSICAL ACCESSIBILITY

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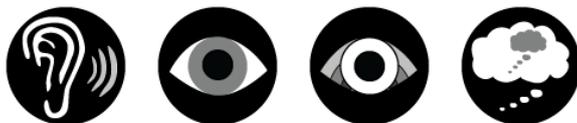
- Allow participants to choose whether they stand, sit or position themselves another way during your icebreaker, and allow them to change this position. If there are specific physical actions required within your icebreaker, allow participants to choose an action physically comfortable for them to perform
- Make items the participants will handle (cards, props, writing equipment, etc.) of a reasonable size
- Often relevant to the following symbols



### CONVEYING INSTRUCTIONS/PROCEDURES

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- Use large, clear fonts for all written instructions
- Use expanded spacing between letters on printed materials so that it can be read more easily by people who have dyslexia
- Break instructions down into small steps using clear language and/or pictures
- Use high contrast, colour-blind friendly colours on all materials
- Use visual and audio cues to supplement each other during your icebreaker
- Often relevant to the following symbols



### COMMUNICATION ACCESSIBILITY

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- Facilitate the use of a variety of communication methods within your icebreaker game (Braille, sign language, verbal, written, picture/symbol-based, speech generating device, gestures, etc.)
- Provide interpreters where needed
- Use symbols or shapes to supplement colour differentiation to allow colour-blind individuals to participate
- Repeat what participants have said to the whole group if communication across the room is not possible
- Often relevant to the following symbols



### COGNITIVE ACCESSIBILITY AND TIMING

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- Provide name tags or other visual identifiers to aid with memory
- Provide alternatives to reading, writing and spelling requirements
- Be flexible with time limits for responses, and where possible avoid the use of icebreaker games which rely on reaction time
- Be mindful of the different speeds participants may engage with an instruction in your icebreaker game and provide support where needed
- Most often relevant to the following symbols



### EMOTIONAL SAFETY

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- Create an accessible “opt-out” option for all stages of your icebreaker. Reinforce this as an acceptable action for any participant to take.
- Facilitate an environment where consent is required for all physical contact
- Allow time for participants to prepare themselves before beginning
- Be mindful that some people find the presence of (new and familiar) people to be draining.
- Be mindful of people with public speaking fears, performance anxiety or social anxiety who may experience distress or panic at participating in icebreaker games, particularly those involving speaking or performing.
- Create team environments where possible, relieving the pressure for participants to act or speak in a solo capacity
- Avoid using sexist, racist, ableist, homophobic, transphobic or aphobic language in all instructions and communications
- Use gender neutral language when presenting instructions
- Avoid creating gender-based groups to fully include non-binary and gender diverse participants
- Ask people what their name and pronouns are before beginning
- Most often relevant to the following symbols



#### Final Words

- If your icebreaker game requires a participant to do a thing they physically, cognitively or emotionally cannot do - you need to rethink what you're doing.

Consider asking an accessibility consultant or someone knowledgeable about diverse groups of people to review (a colleague, a supervisor, etc.)

### CREATING AN INCLUSIVE SPACE

The success of an inclusive icebreaker is mutually entangled with the effectiveness of its facilitator to create an inclusive and welcoming space. The same icebreaker game can be run in the same location, with similar participants, and yield a completely different experience because of a change in facilitator. Therefore, a lot of the creating of an inclusive space comes down to what a facilitator says and does.

Facilitators need to clearly define what respect **looks like**, **sounds like** and **feels like** within that space.

This will vary depending on who your icebreaker is for, and its purpose. Some useful things to consider might include:

- How we respond if someone asks for help or needs support / encouragement
- What sort of language is acceptable to use
- How we respond if someone chooses not to participate
- How we respond if someone uses inappropriate language or actions
- How we respond if someone does the activity a little differently than expected

This is important for allowing each participant to feel valued and included, in whatever way they can. It enables participants greater clarity around how they can interact with the space and with each other (Ableson, 2018) and allows them time and space to prepare themselves for how they wish to engage in the icebreaker (Seg, 2016).

This can be **done in character, or within the context of your icebreaker**. It shouldn't need to be something that removes participants from the icebreaker activity, but should be worked into the design, instructions and atmosphere (Rose et al., 2015). This allows for participants to understand that respect is something integral to this activity, and not something tacked on as an afterthought.

Facilitators also need to do this themselves, to **lead by example**. Participants will be watching the facilitator for guidance around how they should speak and act within the space. Any difference between how participants and facilitators engage in respectful behaviour (for example, facilitators may be allowed to cut people off if they are talking for too long, but participants may not be allowed to do so) should be outlined or made explicit early on.

Facilitators also need to **be prepared to respond to disrespectful or inappropriate behaviour**. They need to know what this sort of behaviour will look like, sound like and feel like, and what actions they will take in response to such behaviour occurring.

It is important that the facilitator **clearly defines when the icebreaker begins and when it ends**. This may be as simple as announcing an icebreaker will begin, or as complex as inviting people to enter a hidden room with a password and fancy hat.

It is also important for the facilitator to **outline how long the icebreaker will take, or how many things participants will need to do**. This may help ease the anxiety or tension for anyone who is uncomfortable, as they have a defined end point.

## Creating An Inclusive Space

Facilitators may need to show everyone **how to indicate whether they are participating or not**. This may or may not be necessary within your icebreaker space. For example, if participants are only working independently for part of your icebreaker, there is no reason everyone needs to know whether they are participating or not. If participants are interacting with or working with each other for part of your icebreaker, it is important everyone knows how to indicate whether they are participating or not.

There are many ways this can be worked into an icebreaker activity. For example, participants may be asked to move to a certain location in the room if they wish to participate, or to hold or wear a particular prop (Seg, 2016). It is best if this indicator is simple to execute and change and can be changed at any point with minimal effort or confusion.

This is important for allowing participants to choose how and when they participate in your icebreaker activity, thus ensuring their agency is respected. Facilitators then also need to show everyone **how to tell someone who is participating from someone who is not participating**.

Next, facilitators need to **explain what non-participation looks like** and **what it means for the remaining participants**, and **how it differs from participation**.

It is important to explicitly state what non-participation means. This may include:

- whether participants can talk to those non-participating
- whether non-participants can re-join later and what this process looks like
- how participants should respond if someone they were interacting with chooses to stop participating

This is important for facilitating respect and acknowledging consent between those within the icebreaker space. Using these tips will help you as a facilitator create a safe, welcoming and inclusive space for your icebreaker game. This will greatly enhance the potential of your icebreaker being engaging and successful!

### INCLUSIVE AND RESPECTFUL GROUP FORMING

Some icebreakers are designed assuming everyone participates, and don't actively provide a way for people to disengage. Icebreaker games which rely on this method **are not useful** when creating inclusive and welcoming spaces.

For some people, especially those with social or performance anxiety, the sheer act of being in a room with other people may push them beyond their comfort zone and beyond what they are able to do. Asking them to engage with a group of unfamiliar strangers may cause significant distress, tension and panic, which would build up more ice rather than breaking any down.

Other people may simply feel more comfortable if they are in a group with someone they know or have met before. For example:

- a non-dude in a group of dudes is likely to feel more comfortable if they can join a group with another non-dude
- a participant who is unfamiliar with the language of use may find it easier to engage when they join a group with someone who can translate for them

For these reasons, it is important people are given options when finding groups. This can be done in a few different ways:

- Facilitators allow participants to form their own groups
- Participants are allowed to change from their assigned group into another group if they choose to
- Participants are given the option to work on their own, or to disengage from the icebreaker instead

It is the responsibility of the facilitator to **pay particular attention to participants who are not engaging well with their groups** and construct alternative options. It is also the responsibility of the facilitator to ensure there are **options for solo participation wherever possible** (dependent on the purpose of the icebreaker, of course) to enable folks who find group engagement difficult to still receive maximum engagement from the activity.