

## **Written Discussions—General Information for Participants<sup>1</sup>**

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### **1 General Information: What Is a Written Discussions?**

Written discussions (WD) are a purely written form of online communication. Along with speech-to-text interpreting (STI), it is a low-barrier alternative communication format for people with hearing impairments that happens exclusively in writing, without sound or a simultaneous display of images.

Written discussions serve as a practice and testing ground for collaborative written communication, in which participants interact on an equal footing—i.e., as equals and in the same mode of communication. This means that all participants can communicate directly with each other at the same pace. However, this also means that some people may experience new barriers because of this format (see section 3.3).

Written discussions take place online in a shared document such as an Etherpad. They can be adapted for different contexts as needed and can be prepared accordingly. A trained moderator is essential.

Overall, written discussions are a much more active tool than speech-to-text interpreting,<sup>2</sup> as all participants write on an equal footing and adhere to a set of rules. There is no speaking; instead, only writing and reading. Essentially, a transcript is created along with the discussion itself, which can be retained if desired. All persons authorized to participate in the written discussions have access to the transcript at any time for the duration of the shared document that is being used for the written discussion (e.g., Etherpad, which can last up to one year). The Etherpad (or other shared document) has to be set accordingly. The transcript's duration is extended automatically depending on the activity in the document. If the document is inactive, the document is retained for up to 12 months if the appropriate settings were selected beforehand. It means that during that time period, the Etherpad can be restarted at any time, from which moment it will be active for another 12 months or less (depending on the settings). The chat, which is visible in a window next to the text window, is also preserved. However, in contrast to the text in the document or text window, the chat cannot be changed once it was published.

### **2 Guidelines for Written Discussions**

Preparation:

- All participants should enter their names in the Etherpad. Please do so by clicking on the colored, square button with the group icon in the top right corner (sometimes it is at the bottom of the website).
- Select a writing color by clicking on the color circle.

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<sup>1</sup> A more detailed guide is available on our website at <https://www.uni-erfurt.de/to/JnyVqtQTZbLB1Qrh>.

<sup>2</sup> For information on speech-to-text interpreting, see the guidelines on our website at <https://www.uni-erfurt.de/to/JnyVqtQTZbLB1Qrh>.

→ The color must be different from that of the other participants and contrast well for good readability (for example, you should make sure not to use dark blue if another participant has black).

#### Conducting a Written Discussion:

- Begin in the chat with a welcome message ("Hello everybody"). All participants reply to show their active presence.
- Read the rules that should be pasted at the top of the Etherpad text window.
- If you wish to write something in the text window, please inform the moderator first by writing "request to speak"—or a short version like "rst"—in the chat. The moderator will tell you in the chat when to write in the text window.
- The moderator determines the writing order.
- Write one after the other.
- After completing a contribution in the text window, write "finished" in the chat.
- Be careful not to delete anything by accident.

→ If you accidentally deleted something, please notify the moderator via chat. The technical assistant/moderator will restore the previous state.

- The moderator will indicate where to write in the Etherpad, e.g., at point "xyz" or from line "123."
- If you lose track or are temporarily absent from the Etherpad, please notify everybody in the chat field.

#### Notes:

Please note that in a written discussion, you are usually sitting at a computer in front of a text screen. You cannot see the other participants. **All relevant information is communicated exclusively in writing.** This also means that, for example, particular facial expressions or the tone of voice are not visible or audible, as is the case in a spoken conversation. But they also convey information and make the communicative dynamics tangible. This means that such non-verbally communicated information has to be added in writing. For example:

→ If you are not available, please write "not available" and "back again" in the chat.

→ If you wish to point out irony or modify your text in other ways, please add "(meant ironically)" or "(meant seriously)" in parentheses in the text window where appropriate.

Please also note that **everything in the text window can be edited at any time**, whereas **the chat cannot be edited or deleted** and remains visible to everyone.

### 3 Advantages and Challenges of Written Discussions

#### 3.1 Advantages

- No additional notes are necessary, as the written discussion can be used as a record.

- All participants are at the same level of knowledge and communicate at the same speed. There are no changes of modality and speed during the transfer of information, as is the case with speech-to-text interpreting.
- The written discussion has a clear structure, which ensures that it is carried out with focus.
- It is always possible to return to a previously point of discussion and expand on—or even correct—the original points and wording.
- If instructed by the moderator, several or all participants can write simultaneously in different lines.
- It is also possible that several participants work in different places of the shared document simultaneously. The different colors of writing for each participant make it easy to distinguish between them. However, participants should be careful not to delete anything accidentally.
- Since there is no speaking involved, a written discussion can also be conducted on the go or in a public place via cell phone or other mobile device.

→ A stable internet connection is a prerequisite.

- You can join the written discussion at any time and read everything back and comment on or correct it at a later point. Rules and time frames need to be agreed upon in advance if people join the conversation at different times.

### **3.2 Slowing Down Discussions**

- One challenge is that written discussions move at a slower pace than spoken conversations.
- While there is less time to explain content-related matters, written discussion are more structured, intensive, and comprehensible.
- There is sufficient time for thinking and formulating ideas for every participant.
- There is more time for reflection.
- You can return to previous discussion points and re-read the exact wording.

### **3.3 Written Discussions as a Communication Barrier for Some Groups of People**

New barriers can arise for non-native speakers, sign-language users, people with dyslexia, people with visual impairments, etc. It is therefore important to seek appropriate solutions well in advance of the written discussion, for example, by combining different conversation formats and by organizing assistance for the persons who cannot easily read and write.

## **4 Special Working Methods Specifically for Written Discussions**

Written discussions are well-suited for collaborative and non-linear working methods. For instance, simultaneous writing during a written discussion is possible.

→ The moderator coordinates this via the chat.

What do the collaborative working methods look like?

- Prepared tasks/answers can be inserted.
- The task/answer can be inserted at the desired time and place (determined by the moderator).

- Practical, asynchronous exercises can be conducted in groups, which will then be evaluated together.
- If there are more than one points of discussion, some participants may already respond (provided they have been fully formulated), while another person is still writing about an earlier point.

## **5 Conclusion: Raising Awareness of Written Discussions**

As an alternative form of communication, written discussions greatly expand the possibilities for participation on an equal par for hearing-impaired people. They can also be helpful for other groups of people, e.g., people with caregiving responsibilities who might not be able to follow a discussion attentively from beginning to end, or for people with ADHD who can concentrate better in low-stimulus environments. To summarize:

- Written discussions are versatile. They can be integrated into online and events in place as time-limited work segments.
- They require discipline and a sensitivity for the change in communicative pace.
- Quantitatively speaking, written discussions cannot compete with spoken communication; qualitatively, they offer significant advantages for all users if potential barriers are addressed and solutions found.
- With good preparation, structure, and active facilitation, written discussions can both raise awareness for the need for alternative communication formats. They can thus be beneficial beyond a small group of people with special needs.