

a workbook to write, record, sign

Tacti**e**

Descriptions

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What is a tactile description?

A tactile description puts experiences of touch into words. It communicates how it feels to touch, be touched and be in touch with a **touchthing**.

A touchthing is a new word that describes anything tactile: ranging from an object, to the fur of an animal, the slope of a ramp, or a breeze of air. Touch is relational: It is not possible to touch a touchthing without being touched by a touchthing, and it remains to be felt if there is such a thing as a thing.

This workbook is here to guide you through the process of describing experiences of touch. It begins from disabled tactile knowledges and embraces description as a crip access method. Come feel along!

How can tactile descriptions make access?

There are a lot of resources available to describe images as a way of making access for Blind, low vision and other disabled folks. There are few to describe tactile experiences. The reason for this is that in many nondisabled and even disabled spaces, touch has not received the same attention as sight.

For humans, touch is a shared sense. The skin is our largest sensory organ and most people have access to perceiving touch with some parts of their bodies. This is why tactile descriptions can be invented by many people, and why many people can feel with and relate to tactile descriptions. Tactile descriptions generate tactile knowledges: Ways of knowing and participating in the world through touch.

DeafBlind poet John Lee Clark describes how the knowledges of tactile communities and people are devalued. He has invented a term for this: distantism. Distantism means that senses that work at a distance such as sight and hearing are privileged, and that using the proximate sense of touch is often shamed or deemed inappropriate. This project is positioned against distantism, and learns from the ways that DeafBlind inventors are working with tactile imagery and descriptions.

Tactile descriptions communicate experiences of touch. They describe experiences that are proximate and embodied. This means that they offer a connection to the perceptions of someone who was in a haptic engagement with a touchthing at a certain point in time.

As a crip access method, tactile descriptions are about all the ways that our bodyminds create worlds by being in touch.

What is touch?

Humans may perceive touch through pressure, vibrations, the stretching of skin, pain, and changes in temperature. Complex sensations such as wetness emerge through an interplay and interpretation of what our receptors perceive. Touch happens in relation: between you and touchthings. When you are in touch, you co-create sensations.

This workbook takes existing language around tactile experiences as its starting point. It facilitates engagements with **contours of tactile experience** that many people are familiar with: the dimensions of a touchthing, its weight, temperatures, textures, and more. These contours are interconnected and their separation under different headlines is done to help you hone in on and find words for specific sensations, rather than for scientific accuracy. And: Perhaps you'll find more or other contours?

How to use this workbook

1) Pick a touchthing. This can be anything you have consent to touch.

2) Choose a path.

Short path: Pick the three contours that interest you the most. Plan in about 20-30 minutes per touchthing.

e.g. ice cube: *temperature / humidity / state of matter + texture + residue*

Long path: Move through all the contours. If a prompt does not apply, skip it. Plan in 45-60 minutes per touchthing.



for co-touchers: Touching is relational, and interdependence is crip wisdom. Take a co-navigator, access assistant, loved one, or colleague along. Co-touching can enrich your tactile descriptions.

Do it accessibly

Decide how you want to record your tactile experiences. If you want to sign or record audio, bring a smartphone or computer. If you wish to write, digitally open or print this booklet and bring pen and paper.

Audio version: tactiledescriptions.com


A note on **safety:** Please make sure your touchthing does not get too hot, releases toxins, could fall onto you or hurt you in any way.




for co-touchers: Check in about the access requirements of all group members. You can all do the writing / recording, or one of you can volunteer to take notes / record.

Context & Consent


1) What kind of touchthing have you chosen?


 *Take note of what you know about the touchthing. Is this a common object such as a cup? An ancient sculpture? The paw of a beloved cat?*

2) Where are you? Are there any (unwritten) rules in this space that you have to consider?

 *Write down a few words about the space that you are in. What does touch mean in this space: Is it encouraged, forbidden, ignored?*

3) Consider, address and confirm that you have consent. This guide is made for touching inanimate objects. If you are touching another living being, you will have to check in about consent continuously. If you are touching an inanimate object, you will still have to make sure that you are treating the object in a way that other people (e.g. someone who lent you the object) have agreed to.


 *Take note of what consent means in your context. If you are touching a living being, what signs will you interpret as consent being withdrawn?*

 for co-touchers: Check in with each other about what kinds of touch everyone in your group feels okay with.

Space for Notes & Agreements

Contours of Tactile Experiences

This section of the workbook guides you through sensory explorations.

 *If you picked the short path, draw a circle around the contours you will focus on. You can also make a recording naming the contours you would like to engage.*

Dimensions, Weights, Shapes

Skin, Body, Directionality

Around-it-ness

Texture

Temperature, Humidity, State of Matter

Sound / Vibration

Affect, Feeling, Memory

Friction

Magnetism

Electricity


Movement

Residue

Thingness

Dimensions, Weights, Shapes

- 1) Trace the outlines of your touchthing. Get a sense of its width, height, depths. How big is it in relation to your body and/or other objects that you have touched before? Does it fit between your fingertips? Is it so voluminous that you can only touch parts of it?
- 2) How heavy or light is the touchthing? Can you lift (parts of) it (together)? Does it have the same weight throughout or can you perceive one or more centers of mass? Can it hold (parts of) your weight?
- 3) What shapes do you recognise? Is it flat? Round? Does it have edges? Are there holes? Is it made from parts and if so, how are they distinct?

 *Use the scales below to record the touchthing's dimensions and weights. Once you have found positions on the scales, consider if there are more specific words to describe your touchthing. Write them down.*

as high as one

... ~ grain of sand ~ ~ ~ ~ your height ~ ~ ~ skyscraper ~

as wide as a

~ ~ smile ~ ~ arms stretched ~ ~ ~ ~ horizon ~ ~

as deep as a

~ ~ puddle ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ bucket ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ lake ~ ~

the weight of a

~ ~ feather ~ ~ ~ ~ you ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ tree ~ ~

with shape(s) that are

~ ... ~ round ~ edged ~ flat ~ ~ complex ~ triangular ~ ~

Skin, Body, Directionality

1) With which parts of your body are you touching the touchthing intuitively? Does the touchthing communicate a certain way of being touched, held, used through the way it was designed? Do you have any habits of how you usually touch, hold, use the touchthing? Are any of these habits non-compliant?

2) What changes if you touch the touchthing with different parts of your body? Notice any sensations that arise by touching with hands, lips, your back, through a shirt or directly on your skin.

3) How does touching the touchthing from different angles and positions influence the experience?

4) How is your skin adapting? Notice small effects like the flattening of the skin of your fingertip when pressing down, or any marks that the touchthing leaves on your body.



for co-touchers: How do your experiences differ depending on your ways of being in the world, e. g. your heights, mobility aids, sensory profiles? Can you touch the touchthing together? How about changing the direction of the touches by moving the touchthing across a chosen body part of another toucher?



Take some notes (writing/video/audio) about your default habits of touching the touchthing. Then write a sentence for each part of your body that was in touch with the touchthing as though this body part was the writer.

Around-it-ness

1) What kind of space surrounds you and the touchthing? What are you touched by while touching the touchthing: Is the air dry, humid, dusty, warm or cool, are there sun rays, sound waves or smells meeting your skin, what does the ground feel like? Is the touchthing in touch with other objects? Can you feel the presence of other people nearby?

2) What kinds of movements help you find the touchthing in this space? Are these larger arm swings or gently reaching fingers? Are you moving with a co-navigator?

3) How does the touchthing influence its surroundings? Does it influence air by blocking wind? Does it influence sound by dampening or directing sound? Does it influence how people move and act in the space?




for co-touchers: Can you probe the touchthing? For example, test the air movement around the touchthing by one person gently blowing air against it and another person perceiving the airflow from the other side.



Move through the space and allow your attention to wander, to expand, to hone in on small spatial sensations. After a while, find a position where you can easily write, audio record or sign what you have noticed about the various ways your body is in touch with this space. If you are writing, you are invited to write continuously without stopping your pen in between words. If you are recording audio, keep humming until a next word comes to mind, and if you are signing or lorming, keep your hands moving.

Texture

- 1) What does the surface of the touchthing feel like? How many surface textures can you detect? Find adjectives to describe each texture.
- 2) How would you describe the interplay of multiple textures that make up the touchthing? Is the surface ordered, complex, opulent...?
- 3) Which tactile references come to your mind? Is a texture smooth like silk or smooth like leather? For each of your adjectives, write down a tactile reference. Get as expansive as you like: Maybe the way your finger travels across a texture feels as slick as a sledge on icy snow, or a spiky plant reminds you of the whiskers of a cat.
- 4) In which ways can you probe the material and surface qualities of the touchthing? What do you learn by moving your fingers against the grain of the touchthing, by knocking, tapping, or squeezing a surface?

 Let's build tactile vocabularies. If you write and use this sheet, collect adjectives on the left. On the right, note down any tactile references that come to mind. Use a pen to connect adjectives with references. If you record voice or sign, fully sound out the words or feel into the way your hands move. Do any tactile references emerge?

<i>smooth</i>	.....			<i>silk</i>	.....
	.....	<i>gelatinous</i>			.....
	
			.....		<i>water</i>
<i>bumpy</i>				.....
			... as ...		

	<i>metallic</i>	<i>spongy</i>			
			.....	<i>tree bark</i>	
<i>fuzzy</i>	.....				<i>a stone</i>
	<i>coarse</i>	.....		.....	.....

Temperature, Humidity, State of Matter

1) How would you describe the temperature of the touchthing compared to your body temperature? Is the temperature the same throughout the touchthing or are there warmer and cooler areas? Is the temperature stable or does it change in contact with your skin or the environment you are in? Does the touchthing influence your skin's temperature? Does it produce any sensations such as comfort, pain, tingling?

2) Is the touchthing dry, moist, wet? Does it change its state of matter? Can the touchthing contain other materials similar to a glass that surrounds water? How does the touchthing react to humidity or moisture? Would water pearl off or soak in—and is this something you could try?

3) How do temperature, humidity and state of matter of the touchthing change in relation to one another? Consider for example an ice cube in touch with warm hands.




for co-touchers: Try to feel the touch of a previous toucher. Did their touch change the temperature or state of matter of the touchthing?




Invent three words: one for temperature, one for humidity and one for state of matter. How would the shape of the written, spoken or signed words change in touch with the touchthing? Can wetness make your letters look soggy: wettttnnnneessss? Can coolness let your signing hands shake?

Affect, Feeling, Memory

- 1) Do any affective and embodied reactions emerge for you? From goosebumps to warm feelings of comfort, where in your body do you feel your responses to being in touch with the touchthing?
- 2) Are certain ways of being in touch with the touchthing (un)comfortable or (in)accessible because of your sensory access needs? Are there any tactile stimmy movements that this touchthing makes possible? Is a sensation bringing up disabled joy for you?
- 3) Does the tactile experience surface any associations, memories or moods? Have you experienced a similar tactile sensation in the past or in a different context?

 Set aside a few pieces of string or pen and paper. Imagine your perception as an ocean. What kinds of feelings or memories reach the surface when you are in touch with the touchthing? Let these sensations come up and notice if any shapes come to mind. Shape the string into lines, curls, ripples to tell a tactile story of your experiences. If you do not have string at hand, you can use a pen to draw shapes. When you are done with your string-image write down or record any words that come to mind.

 for co-touchers: Touch each others string-images and describe what you are perceiving. How are your string-images different?

? If this is too metaphorical for you, try to notice how your body reacts to the touchthing. Do your hands reach towards the touchthing or do they shy away? Is there a tightness somewhere in your body? Take some notes about your embodied reactions.

Sound, Vibration

Are there any sounds and vibrations emerging from the touchthing? What kinds of touches produce sounds and vibrations? How far in the space do vibrations and sounds travel?




for co-touchers: Play around with possible soundscapes by using the touchthing like a shared instrument. You can experiment with how the sounds/vibrations travel by some of you moving further away in the space.




Circle any words that describe touching sounds and add your own:
— high — scratchy — low — hum — bzzz — hollow — deep — wavy —
— ...

Friction


How does friction influence the tactile experience? Is there resistance? Does heat emerge? How does speed influence resistance and temperature? Try touching at different speeds and in different intensities.

 *While you touch, draw a line with a pen. When you encounter resistance, move and modulate your line into spikes and wobbles.*

 for co-touchers: Touch and move the pen together.

Magnetism

1) Is the touchthing magnetic? What kinds of pull-push sensations can you feel when moving it closer to magnets or metallic objects?

 *Tune into the sensations of magnetism. Gather some words on what it feels like when magnets or metal attract or repel your touchthing. The next page has push and pull written in the middle. If you experience a pull between magnets, or between a magnet and metal, let your words cluster tightly together. If you feel repulsion between like magnetic poles, give your words space to drift apart. If you engage this prompt through voice or sign, play with the push and pull in your motions. Stretch your words or hands slowly to feel the pull of attraction, snap them apart to feel repulsion. Let spacing, speed, and rhythm show the strength of the magnetic forces.*



strong snap fast


**push/
repel**

**pull/
attract**

feathery

Electricity

1) Does the touchthing interact with electric currents, for example by being powered through a plug or battery?

 *Record or write down what the touchthing feels like when powered. Does it generate any tactile sensations you did not feel before such as warmth, vibrations, tingling? Disclaimer: Be extra careful around electricity and never touch power outlets, open cables etc!*


2) Do you notice any static electricity? Contact between materials such as the touchthing and you can result in electrons being transmitted. What does this tiny charge feel like? And can you let go of it by touching a grounded surface?


Movement

- 1) Are there parts of the touchthing that move if you are not in touch? Are there external forces that cause movement such as wind, gravity, etc?
- 2) In which ways can you make the touchthing move? Do you feel any sensations such as vibrations, pressure, resistance?
- 3) How does moving the touchthing move you? How does your body move to move the touchthing? Do you bend, stretch or adjust your posture?
- 4) Are these movements continuous, is there a rhythm? Is there a direction and flow that feels aligned with the touchthing?




for co-touchers: Can you move the touchthing together? How does co-moving the touchthing change the sensations you all feel?

 *Swing (parts of) your body to tune into and replicate the movements of the touchthing. Draw these movements.*

 *Write down or record as many words as come to mind to describe how the touchthing moves, is moved, and moves you. Build upon the list below.*

drift — loop — sway — roll — pulse — spin — churn — bounce — glide — wiggle — twitch — sway — slump — pulsate ...

 *If the movements in themselves would be a feeling, how would you describe them? Note down or record some words, for example: stubborn, graceful, tired ...*

Residue

1) How contained is the touchthing? Does it rub off? Does some of it stay under your finger nail? Does it spread? Does it leave a sticky layer on your skin?



for co-touchers: Can you pass on residue such as an oily layer between you after only one of you touched the touchthing?



Build a collection of words of what sticks and stays after touching. You can circle or record words that stick, and add new ones.


Feels: gritty — slick — clingy — waxy — crumbly —

Does: smears — flakes — sticks — absorbs — repels —

Stays: tingle — dryness — oiliness —


Thingness

- 1) How sure are you about the touchthings thingness?
- 2) How sure are you about being the only one touching?

 *Experiment with what you consider a thing/object and you/subject as you continue writing tactile descriptions. If you have any thoughts on this, write them down or record them.*

Writing: Tactile Descriptions


1) Bring your notes and recordings together. What was the most interesting or surprising to you about your tactile experiences? Are there any words you particularly like? Underline, replay, remix, bolden.

 *Collect your selected words by writing them down or by signing, speaking, recording them.*


2) Add what you feel is still missing. Revisit the context of your touchthing. Would it make a difference to add words that were common in an earlier century if your touchthing is very old, or add scientific terms, or community terms etc?

 *Add any missing words.*

3) Consider the context of your description. Are you inventing it for yourself? For an archive? Is there a certain tone you want to meet?

 *Write down or record one word / sign that describes what you would like your description to feel like: e. g. a hug — detailed — experimental — poetic*

4) Revisit your spiky lines, words and sign altered by temperature, your affective drawings etc. Engage them to add some glue between your words.

 *Line up and glue together your collections of words into 3-10 sentences. Experiment with the length and level of detail of your sentences.*

5) Write down or record your tactile description.

Space for Notes & Writing

Sharing / Get in Touch

If you would like to share your tactile descriptions with me, send an email to hello@izpaehr.xyz.

For sharing your descriptions on social media, you can tag [@izpaehr](#) and use the hashtag [#tactiledescriptions](#).

Credits & Info

This workbook was developed 2025-26 during Iz Paehr's S+T+ARTS Ec(h)o Residency hosted by Salzburg Festival Archive and Ars Electronica.

Learning from disabled access practices, the workbook emerged and grew amidst conversations with my mentors Aimi Hamraie and Katta Spiel. Being part of John Lee Clark's email seminar PT Geographies was transformative. Lilian Korner and Katrin Dinges shared their tactile description practices and their tactile knowledges with me. Bojana Coklyat and Finnegan Shannon's Alt Text as Poetry project was an important reference. The workbook was playtested by the AccessTech Group at TU Vienna, participants of my seminar Touching Access in the department of Art in Context at the University of Arts Berlin, and at Science Week Berlin.

Fonts: Martin Wong and Lorenza Böttner by Nat Pyper + GT Haptik

Iz Paehr, 2026

website: tactiledescriptions.com