

9 ways to make your website accessible

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Improving website accessibility

Did you know that 20 percent of your audience has some kind of disability? That is 1 in 5 Americans, or 54 million people who are affected by a disability. It is very likely that one of these individuals has visited your organization's site or will visit it. Are you confident they will find the information they seek? Does your site successfully convey your organizations' message? Will this individual take the desired action after coming to your site? It is important to ask these questions and to consider this audience when creating a web site.

You want all your users to be able to successfully navigate your site, especially if the site acts as a channel for fundraising or volunteer recruitment. Whether the disability is blindness, deafness, color blindness, arthritis, or even the natural aging process, how you design your site can greatly impact the emotions people feel and the actions they will take after visiting your site. Don't miss the opportunity to harness the enthusiasm of this unique group.

Here are some easy ways to better reach this large and important audience.

1. Provide equivalent alternatives to auditory and visual content.

Some people cannot access images, sound, and movies. However, when browsing a web page they can understand text information that has been substituted for auditory or visual content. Using a variety of assistive technologies, you can convert non-text information so that it is accessible to people with disabilities. For example, text can be converted using speech synthesizers or Braille displays.

All images should contain alternative text descriptions. This includes images used as maps, spacers, bullets in lists, graphical buttons, and links. A good test to determine if alternative text is useful is to imagine reading the document aloud over the telephone. What would you say, upon encountering this image, to make the page comprehensible to the listener?

2. Don't rely on color alone to convey information.

People who cannot see color or differentiate colors will not receive information that is conveyed by color. Therefore, it is important to ensure that the text and graphics you use on your web pages are understandable when viewed without color.

To test whether your document still works without colors, print it on a black and white printer, or view it with a browser whose colors are turned off. If certain text or images are no longer visible, then revise your color choices.

3. Check that the foreground and background colors contrast sufficiently with each other.

When foreground and background colors are too close to the same hue or brightness, they may not provide sufficient contrast when viewed by people who have difficulty seeing certain colors. To test whether color contrast is sufficient, print pages in black and white (with backgrounds and colors appearing in gray scale). Try taking these printouts and copying them

several times to see how the page degrades. This will show you where you need to add redundant cues, such as underlined hyperlinks on web pages, or whether the cues are too small or indistinct to hold up well.

It has been shown that black text on a white background produces the best contrast.

4. Create tables to show data, do not use tables for layout.

Tables were designed to format tabular data, rather than for laying out pages. Whether used for data or layout, it is important that tables have the necessary HTML code that enables them to be transformed by accessible browsers. Table headers should be used to label rows or columns of data. Identify table headers by using the TH (table header) element instead of the TD (table cell) element.

It is important not to use the TH element to achieve formatting (such as bold text in layout tables); use other means to do that. The semantic meaning of the TH element is important to many screen readers. This is important to the computer's ability to speak the contents of a table using a speech synthesizer. Browsers and assistive technologies rely on structural markup such as headers to customize presentation to meet a user's needs.

5. Ensure that pages featuring new technologies work with older browsers.

As new technologies are developed and implemented, it is important to ensure that your web pages are accessible and able to work with older browsers. For example, style sheets are a new feature and are not supported by older browsers. On the other hand, there are assistive technologies that were developed to support HTML and not style sheets. Consequently, striking a balance between the two can be tricky.

To accomplish this balance, try reading your web pages when the style sheet is turned on and when it is turned off. If it is readable in both modes you've accomplished accessibility. Otherwise, realize that users with older browsers may not be able to access your site.

6. Make sure pages are still usable if programmatic objects are turned off.

Programmatic objects are scripts, applets, and other plug-ins that provide content and navigation features on the page. It is important to design the page in such a way that, if these objects are turned off, users can still access the content and navigate the website.

Other types of programmatic objects are frequently used to add content to the page, or to enhance the navigation interface. These objects are often not directly accessible, or require a technology that a user is unable to install and use. Any functionality provided by these plug-ins should also be provided in the HTML.

There is no guarantee that a particular object will perform as intended or at all. Browsers vary widely in their support of these objects and many of these objects do not have intrinsic accessibility features. Although authors are encouraged to use new technologies that solve problems raised by existing technologies, they should ensure that their pages continue to work with older browsers and work for people who choose to turn off features.

7. Make sure pop-ups don't interfere with navigation.

Inform the user that clicking on certain links or areas of a window will open pop-up windows or change the active window. Creating or switching windows changes the "system focus," which can interfere with access devices. It may also surprise and disorient users.

If scripts create pop-up windows or change the active window, make sure that the user is aware this is happening. Sometimes scripts are used to create new pop-up windows; avoid doing this unless it is necessary. If you must do so, inform the user that it will happen.

8. Make links clear.

You can make it easier for your website visitors to find what they are looking for if the links you use on the web pages are clear and consistent. Create link phrases that make sense when read out of context. Authors should not use phrases like "click here" as link text; this requires a user browsing the page with a screen reader to step through each link and read the surrounding text to determine the purpose of the link. Instead, link text should carry sufficient information, "view the full version in HTML," or "for the text version select this link."

9. Ensure that documents are clear and simple.

When you are creating content, use clear and simple language, consistent page layout, and recognizable graphics so that the pages are easy to understand.

Using clear and simple language promotes effective communication. Access to written information can be difficult to impossible for people who have cognitive disabilities, learning disabilities, or who are hearing impaired or hard of hearing. This consideration also applies to the many people whose first language differs from that of the web page.

Where appropriate, use icons or graphics (with accessible alternatives) to facilitate comprehension of the page. Some information is more easily conveyed visually than textually. For instance, graphs and charts present an easily comprehensible overview of data that is difficult to grasp by examining the data detail. The function of some buttons may be more quickly grasped by an image, such as an "up" arrow, than by a text label such as "go up one level." This is especially true for people with reading disabilities who do not process textual information quickly.

Source: Bobby Online Help