Digital Accessibility Basics

Simple ways to make a big difference

Quality content doesn't happen by accident—it is intentionally designed with the audience in mind. Whether you're publishing information on a website, sharing updates on social media, or creating documents for the public, thoughtful design decisions help people find, understand, and use your content.

By applying a few core principles - organizing content with headings, writing clearly, providing descriptive links, using color intentionally, and describing important images - you can create content that works better for everyone. These practices are the foundation of both good content design and digital accessibility.

POUR Principles

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) are the standards that government entities strive to meet. They are built around four core principles known by the acronym POUR: Perceivable, Operable, Understandable, and Robust. Together, these principles provide a simple framework for evaluating whether content is accessible and user-friendly.

In practical terms, accessibility means people can find information **(perceivable)**, use different methods and tools to navigate to and interact with content **(operable)**, understand what the content means **(understandable)**, and access it using a variety of devices and assistive technologies **(robust)**. The five practices in this guide support these principles and help create a better experience for all users.

Headings

People scan webpages and documents, choosing which sections to read. Headings guide both sighted and screen reader users by showing how a page is organized.

- Headings should be descriptive and give people an idea about the content that follows them.
- There are different levels of headings (h1 to h6).
- Heading 1 (h1) should be the page title.
- Headings must be nested properly.

Nested Heading Order Example

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<h1>Making chocolate chip cookies</h1>
    <h2>Ingredients</h2>
    <h2>Make cookie dough</h2>
        <h3>Mix wet ingredients</h3>
        <h3>Mix dry ingredients</h3>
        <h3>Combine ingredients</h3>
    <h2>Bake cookies</h2>
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Writing

Writing clear, organized content makes it easier to read and understand, including screen reader users, people with cognitive disabilities, those unfamiliar with the topic, and people who are tired or distracted.

- Write content based on your audience's familiarity with the topic, not yours.
- Use short sentences and paragraphs.
- Choose common, everyday words.
- Avoid jargon or complex terms.
- If you use acronyms, spell them out the first time they are used.
- Organize content logically with descriptive headings. Put the most important information at the top of the page.
- Include lists when appropriate. They break up content and help readers scan information. Bulleted lists should be used when the order of the items doesn't matter. Numbered lists should be used if the order of items is important.
- Check readability using Hemingway Editor (https://hemingwayapp.com/) or another tool. Aim for a reading level of 8th grade or less.

Links

Links allow people to choose if they want to take an action such as viewing another page or website. Descriptive links provide clarity and build trust with your audience.

- Describe where the link goes or what action it performs.
- Screen reader users can pull up a list of links, so make sure the link text is descriptive and understood without needing to read the content around it.
- Avoid link text of Click here, Learn more, Read more.
- Don't open links in new windows or tabs without letting people know.
- Make sure links are styled to stand out, and don't use color as the only indicator. The common link indicator is using an underline.

Color

Color helps draw attention, conveys emotion, and can help with branding. However, when color is used without accessibility in mind, key information can be lost for people with low vision, color blindness, or who are viewing content on low contrast screens.

- Don't rely on color alone to convey meaning. Think about links, charts, graphs, etc.
- Make sure there is sufficient contrast between text and its background color. Use the WebAim Contrast Checker (https://webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker/) or another tool to check color contrast.

Images

When including images in digital content, consider how they enhance or detract from the experience of screen reader users. Alternative text (alt text) is a short, written description of an image that is read aloud by screen readers so people who can't see the image can still understand its purpose and meaning. It's an important piece of ensuring all users have an equal experience with your digital content. Writing good alt text is more than just describing what's in the image – it takes into consideration the intent and context of the content associated with it.

Best Practices for Alt Text

Alt text should communicate meaning, but you don't have to include every detail. Let the image's purpose and surrounding content guide your description.

- Explain what is in the image, taking care not to let your description be driven by your opinion or bias. Provide enough information for the screen reader user to draw their own conclusions just like a sighted user would.
- Don't include "image of" or "picture of." That is already announced by the screen reader. If it's helpful for the user to know that it's an illustration or a designed graphic, include that detail.
- Decorative images that don't provide value don't need alt text. Mark the image as decorative so screen readers skip over it.
- Always end your alt text with a period, even if it isn't a full sentence. This puts a reading pause between the alt text and the next piece of content on the page.

Questions to Ask When Writing Alt Text

- What is the purpose of this image and why was it included? Is it decorative?
- How does the image connect to the surrounding content?
- Who is my audience? What context do they need?
- What information is essential to convey about the image?
- Does the surrounding text already explain what is in the image? If so, then make sure you don't duplicate that text, but complement it instead or consider marking the image as decorative.
- If someone can't see this image, what would they find helpful to know about it? Focus on the key takeaway in the image, not all the non-essential details.