

Creating Accessible Websites

Organizations use their websites to communicate vital information to their constituencies, from news about upcoming trainings to newly released publications and resources to frequently asked questions about the organization. Ensuring that your website is accessible to people with disabilities can greatly increase your reach and provide access to your resources to a population that needs them. Moreover, federal laws such as Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) legally obligate you to ensure that your websites are accessible. Regardless of what motivates you to create an accessible website, the result will be the same: More people with disabilities will be able to engage with your organization.

Planning an accessible website

It is easy to implement many accessibility features if you build them into your website development or redesign.

Fixing an inaccessible website can be significantly more complex, requiring more time and resources. As such, the most important decision you can make to ensure that you will have an accessible website is to select a developer who understands how to build in accessibility from the very beginning. Key areas to explore when choosing a developer include:

- › Is the developer familiar with web content accessibility guidelines (WCAG)?
- › Do the websites the developer has created conform to WCAG?
- › What measures does the developer take to ensure websites are accessible?
- › Do these measures include usability testing by real people?
- › Based on your community and website goals, are there any additional accessibility or usability features the developer would recommend?

Features of an accessible website

While it is essential to select a developer who knows how to build accessibility features into your website, it is also important for you to know what those features should be. Accessibility features allow all users, with and without disabilities, to experience the website fully. To make this possible, the site should provide a variety of ways for users to interact with the content—including visuals and audible/video files. The site should also provide ways for users to move through the pages, and understand the information, including:

Interaction

- › Add alternative text (Alt text) to all images on your website. Alt text is a description of the image or object that allows people using screen readers to understand the content of the graphic.
- › Ensure that you caption videos on your website. Captioning is the process of converting the audio content of a video into text and displaying the text on a screen.
- › Any audible and video files on your site should have transcripts available (printed version of the audio content).

- › Avoid using CAPTCHAs to block spam. CAPTCHA stands for Completely Automated Public Turing Test to Tell Computers and Humans Apart. These are often used to weed out spambot comments from human comments. CAPTCHAs are typically images of distorted characters that are not accessible to screen readers; even if there is an audio option, the distorted audio prevents people with some types of disabilities from posting comments.

Operation

- › Define the purpose behind each link on your website to help visitors decide whether they want to follow the link. Hyperlink text should provide a clear description of the link destination, rather than only providing the URL or “click here.”
- › Use headings correctly to provide content and structure to your website and to communicate the content’s organization on the page. Assistive technologies use them to provide in-page navigation. The most important heading has the rank 1 (<h1>), the least important heading rank 6 (<h6>). Headings with an equal or higher rank start a new section; headings with a lower rank start new subsections that are part of the higher ranked section.

- › Include a mechanism for those using your website to pause, stop, or hide moving, blinking or scrolling information.
- › Avoid time limits for completing tasks so that keyboard-only users are not timed out.
- › Include a system for bypassing a long list of links, such as a “skip navigation” feature, reducing clutter that is difficult for screen readers or people with motor disabilities to navigate.

Understanding

- › Use the most readable font such as a sans serif (i.e., Arial or Verdana) and avoid using cursive or fantasy fonts.
- › Ensure that the foreground text sufficiently contrasts with the background colors. This includes text on images, background gradients, buttons, and other elements.
- › Summarize long articles.
- › Identify your site’s language preferences in code to help with screen readers.

Maintaining the accessibility of your website

While building accessibility into your website is an important first step, ongoing maintenance of the site’s accessibility features is also critical. If you have the staff capacity, you can handle this task internally. If not, you can often contract with the web developer to update and support the site. Whichever direction you take, make sure that the support personnel have training and resource guides outlining the key access features. There are also online tools for monitoring the site’s accessibility, such as:

- › **WAVE** (<https://perma.cc/MZ8T-Q7XL>)—a suite of tools for facilitating web accessibility evaluation, providing a visual representation of accessibility issues within the page;
- › **Cynthia Says** (<https://perma.cc/5Y9E-PGSN>)—which helps users identify errors in site content related to Section 508 standards and/or the WCAG guidelines for web accessibility;
- › **SortSite** (<https://perma.cc/YY6D-77MN>)—a one-click website testing tool used by federal agencies; it checks websites against WCAG and Section 508 guidelines.

- › **Accessibility Color Wheel** (<https://perma.cc/59WQ-VPY6>)—which helps to improve site accessibility by analyzing the contrast of a color pair and showing how color-blind people will see it. It simulates three kinds of vision deficiencies: deuteranopia, protanopia, and tritanopia. If the contrast between the colors is good, a checkmark will appear.

Some of the tools can be used online; other tools require a download or plug-in. For a list of all available tools, see the **Web Accessibility Evaluation Tools List** (<https://perma.cc/MZ8T-Q7XL>) from the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI).

Involving users in evaluating website accessibility

Users with disabilities and older users can provide valuable feedback as you create your website. Not only can they help to identify accessibility problems, they can spot usability problems that could affect all site visitors. When choosing people to assess the website as you build it, it would be helpful to hear from:

- › people who use screen readers;
- › people with cognitive disabilities;
- › people who use different means of interacting with the computer (keyboards, voice controls, mouth sticks, etc.)
- › older adults
- › Deaf people

Give your reviewers an accessibility check list. Some examples of tasks you may have them do include but are not limited to:

- › looking for a specific page or topic on the website;
- › moving from page to page;
- › filling in online forms;
- › using built-in accessibility features such as a skip content button;
- › opening and reading files on your website; and
- › viewing or listening to online audio and video files.

If your evaluators seem confused or are having difficulty with the tasks you've assigned them, offer assistance. Get individual or group feedback about their experiences interacting with your website.

Conclusion

Removing barriers that prevent interaction with or access to your website by people with disabilities is essential for reaching all audiences. Correctly designed, developed, and edited sites allow every user to have equal access to information and functionality.

Additional resources

For additional information on creating accessible websites:

Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI)

<https://perma.cc/4PFG-2ANB>

Web Accessibility Basics for Nonprofit Leaders

<https://perma.cc/WFH7-NMBF>

Improving Website Accessibility

<https://perma.cc/NT9G-B9XN>

Accessibility Basics

<https://perma.cc/3BWM-ZYN2>

Website Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities: The Why & How

<https://perma.cc/QTQ2-UKQ6>

Involving Users in Web Projects for Better, Easier Accessibility

<https://perma.cc/4MZN-JRVZ>

For more information

The Center on Victimization and Safety (CVS) at the Vera Institute of Justice works with communities around the country to fashion services that reach, appeal to, and benefit all victims. CVS's work focuses on communities of people who are at elevated risk of harm but often marginalized from victim services and the criminal justice system. We combine research, technical assistance, and the training to equip policymakers and practitioners with the information, skills, and resources needed to effectively serve

all victims. To learn more about CVS, contact cvs@vera.org.

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