

Basic Accessibility “Do List”

Below is a basic accessibility “do list,” based on the principles of universal design. These should be implemented immediately in your classes. Most of them are fairly simple to accomplish, and do not change the overall look or feel of your materials or web site.

Add Alt Text to All of Your Images

Alt (or alternative) text provides a textual explanation for any non-text content in documents and web sites. If people who are blind or have low vision use a screen reader, the alt text should provide the equivalent in text of what is included in the image, whether it be a picture, graph, or other visual object.

Below are some basic principles of using alt text:

- The text should be succinct.
- The information should not be redundant, such as including information already included by context.
- The alt text should not include additional information from what is in the actual image or the surrounding context.
- If the image contains text, use that text as the alt text.
- Don’t use phrases such as “image of…” or “graphic of…” to describe the image. It is already apparent to the user.
- If the image is merely decorative or a spacer, you must let the user know so that they aren’t wondering what is missing. You can put something like “non-essential” as the alt text in a document or use a null alt text in html (coded as: alt= “”).
- If the image is complex, like a graph, provide a full description of the information contained in the image.

Make Sure That Data Tables Have Headings

In order for screen readers to read tables correctly, the column and rows headings must be labeled as such.

Be Careful in the Use of Color

You can use color for highlighting and design, but be sure that color is not used to convey meaning or distinguish between elements. This information may not be visible to those who are colorblind and will not be read by screen readers.

For example, don't write something like: "You are required to know the words in red, while those in green are optional."

Additionally, low contrast differences (such as light text on a light background) may not be perceived by people with colorblindness or visual impairments. If you print out your page in black and white, this will give you a good sense of the readability of it.

It is preferable, although not required, to use dark text on a light background rather than light text on a dark background. This is easier for most people to read and can be viewed when printed on white paper. Readers with very low vision, however, often set their own computers to have a black background with a white or yellow font.

Label Links and Buttons So That They Can Be Identified Out of Context

Screen readers allow users to skip from one link to another on a web page by using the tab key, so make sure that you label the links with adequate information.

For example, never just write "Click here" or "More." You should instead label the link with the name of the web page or other pertinent information. You can also write something like "Read more about disability legislation." There is no need to state "Link to" because it is already identified as a link by the screen reader.

Make Sure Your Page Layout is Clear

As a general rule you should provide an outline of what you will cover at the beginning of a document or web page and then use clear headings to separate each point. Screen readers are designed so that the user can jump between the different levels of headings (Heading 1, Heading 2, etc.). This is available in both HTML and in Word by using the style elements. Merely bolding the font does not make it an actual heading and won't give the screen readers any structural understanding of the document.

Avoid the underlining of text that is not a link. In the online world, underlined segments generally mean that it is a link. Therefore, students will expect this to be the case if they see underlined words or phrases.

Break up your material into small, digestible chunks. On web sites, using links is preferable to long pages which contain a lot of information and require considerable scrolling. If you must put a lot of information on a single page, use skip links at the top of the page to allow the user to navigate to the other sections easily.

If you use lists, make sure to bullet or number them. Unordered or bulleted lists should be used when there is no order of sequence or importance. Ordered or numbered lists are used for progression or level of importance.

Use Easily Readable Fonts

The best practice is to use standard and easy-to-read fonts. Below are some basic principles of using fonts for accessibility:

- Documents and web pages with only one or a few fonts are easier to read. Using too many fonts can create a confusing visual layout.
- Stick with serif (Times New Roman, Georgia, Book Antiqua) or sans-serif (Arial, Tahoma, Trebuchet, Verdana, Calibri) fonts. Cursive and fantasy fonts might look nice but cause readability problems for people with vision impairments.
- Verdana is one of the most popular fonts online because of its wide spacing and its distinction between the lower case “L” and the upper case “l”. Georgia is another popular font. See the comparison of these fonts with Arial, a common print font, below:
 - Illustration (Arial)
 - Illustration (Verdana)
 - Illustration (Georgia)
- Avoid any blinking or moving text which distracts the reader’s attention.

Use Graphics and Illustrations Effectively

A document or web site with too many graphics can be hard for people with disabilities to use, especially if many of those graphics serve no content purpose. However, for students with cognitive disabilities, it often helps to supplement and enhance text with illustrations. Graphics can also make the page more engaging for the average user. Therefore, you should include graphics, but make sure they are largely relevant, and do not overuse.

Caption and/or Provide Transcripts for any Audio or Video Media

If you plan to use any video with audio in your course, be sure it is captioned. Captioning not only assists those who are deaf or hard of hearing, but can also help students who may not be fluent in the language used. If captioning is not possible, a transcript of the video will suffice. A transcript of audio-only media, such as a podcast, is required.

Transcripts can be useful for all online students because they allow students to access the content without having to review the actual media. A transcript also provides a searchable and printable document.

If you are using live discussions, real time captioning is possible or taped sessions can be transcribed and made available.