

# Building Accessible Websites

We believe that everyone, regardless of disability, should be able to access web pages. But the reality is that millions of people around the world have disabilities that make it difficult to use badly produced websites. Incredibly, the large majority of websites (around 80%) still fail to meet accessibility standards.

Web pages are tested against the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) guidelines. There are three levels of conformance, with 'Triple-A' being the most stringent test for web access. All our sites meet 'Double-A' standard. If 'Triple-A' is required, please let us know.

Website Accessibility can not only help disabled users, but it can also improve your search engine rankings and web page download speeds.

## What does building an accessible website entail?

Let's start by considering different types of disability: blindness or partial sight, deafness or hearing difficulties, dyslexia, limited motor skills (i.e. users who find it difficult to operate a mouse and therefore have trouble navigating a site with, for example, DHTML drop-down menus), cognitive disability and learning difficulties.

Here are just some of the simple things you can do to dramatically improve the accessibility of your site:

### **Avoid abbreviations**

How can a blind person see a website? Well, they can't. They can read it using a Braille ticker tape, or they can hear it using special software called a *screen reader*. However, without help, screen readers can't tell that an abbreviation isn't a word. They will often try to pronounce it. So, where possible, try to avoid abbreviations. Either use the full word or add an `<abbr>` tag (with the full word in a `title` attribute).

### **Make text scalable**

Partially-sighted people need to be able to resize text. Internet Explorer doesn't let text be resized that has been set in pixels (px), so use points (pt) for text sizes

instead. Also remember that, although screen-magnification software can increase the size of the display, older people generally have poorer eyesight, and so may require text on a web page to be larger too.

### **Use a spell checker**

Strive to make sure all text is error-free. Screen readers don't know how to pronounce misspelled words. Their guesses can confuse blind people, so try to make as few mistakes as possible.

### **Write meaningful ALT text**

Always label ALL your images with ALT (alternative) tags; without ALT tags a website might be virtually unusable for a blind visitor.

### **Use valid code**

Make sure the HTML code you use is valid against W3C standards. Not only does valid code make it easier for assistive technologies such as screen readers to 'understand' your web pages, but browsers and browsing technologies tend to prefer it too!

### **Use high contrast colours for text**

Always try to use dark text on light backgrounds – for most people, this increases site readability. Also, consider that 10% of men are colour blind so red/green or blue/yellow combinations can potentially cause a problem.

### **Ensure links make sense out of context**

Blind people often skip through the links on a web page. This makes it vital that links make sense out of context. 'Click here for more information on our latest holiday offers' is a lot more useful to a blind web user than 'Click here' or 'Find out more'.

### **Make contact forms accessible – give the user a large target to click on**

All form fields should have 'prompt' text associated explicitly with them. These are called `label` tags. A web user can then click their mouse or pointing device on this prompt text to move the cursor into that form field.

## **Think inclusive not exclusive**

### **Accessibility for people with hearing difficulties**

People with hearing difficulties benefit greatly if captioning is provided on a website. Without it, a student with hearing difficulties who is trying to participate in a classroom lesson provided, for example, through a site's audio file, will have problems.

### **Accessibility for people with dyslexia**

For those with reading problems like dyslexia, reading web pages can often be harder than reading the printed page, so write in short and clear sentences and paragraphs. Also, following the modern trend of not using proper punctuation or capital letters doesn't help people with dyslexia to read a web page at all. The simple advice is: Don't.

### **Accessibility for people with cognitive disabilities or learning difficulties**

People with cognitive disabilities or learning difficulties can benefit greatly if the need for reading and writing skills is removed from web pages as much as possible. This can be done by using graphic representations and 'point and click' interfaces instead. Also, reducing information overload can be helpful, by simplifying text, offering alternative methods for online forms (using images instead of words, for example) and by sticking to a simplified, consistent design throughout the site.

### **Accessibility for people with limited motor skills**

Breathtaking imagery and quirky animation can look amazing on a web page. But for people with limited motor skills it can be a liability. Don't hide your site navigation in images and animation. It can make it difficult for people with limited motor skills to use a menu that flies around a screen. Adding a site map can be helpful too, and an excellent alternative to animation if you really can't bear to not include it on your site.

Also, as a different input method, a person with limited motor skills may also use a modified keyboard, software that works with one or more switches that can emulate a keyboard or mouse, or a trackball to make site access easier.

## **Properly written, accessible SEO web copy**

When it comes to writing for the web, accessible writing is vital. The name of the game is to keep the writing short and simple. Grab visitors with headlines, but don't try to be clever, and don't fill your pages with long wordy passages that are just plain boring and make the user look elsewhere for the information they seek. Let the visitors to your site have the information they are looking for in the quickest way possible, and, before writing, ask yourself why they have come to your site. What do they want to know?

SEO Copywriting is critical if your site is to achieve high search engine rankings. SEO Copywriting, or to give it its full name, **search engine optimisation copywriting**, is a technique of writing readable web page text that targets specific search terms. Its purpose is to rank highly in the search engines for the targeted search terms. Strategically placed words and niche phrases on a web page can make all the difference to the site's search engine accessibility.

By implementing the suggestions above, working to WAI guidelines and using semantic mark-up, your website can be easily accessible.

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