Creating an accessible web: the editor's role

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About the author

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Introduction

In recent decades, the web has made it possible for people with disabilities to be increasingly independent: to do more and more for themselves without relying on the support of others. People with sensory or motor disabilities can do their own shopping, manage their own money and communicate across the world.

Many elements of accessibility depend on the work of designers and developers; others rely on the content, and are firmly in the domain of editors.

Editing for web accessibility

Part of an editor's job is to act as an advocate for the reader. On the web, even more than in print, the reader can be anyone: they may be deaf, blind, colour blind, or have a condition—permanent or temporary—which makes it difficult or impossible for them to use a mouse.

So if editors are to advocate for the readers of web content, they need to know how to identify and in some cases address the barriers that might prevent disabled readers from gaining access to that content.

What is web accessibility?

Once an edition of a book is published, everyone who picks it up sees the same thing. On the web, a design may change depending on the software used to read it: different browsers interpret code (particularly non-standard code) differently and people use different operating systems, screen sizes and magnification. Some people may view the site on the small screen of a mobile phone; blind people may use screen readers (which read out the content of pages) or refreshable Braille displays.

What is WCAG 2.0?

WCAG 2.0 stands for Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, version 2. They provide an international standard for measuring web content accessibility.

To be accessible, content needs to be:

- perceivable
- operable
- understandable, and
- robust.

Why does it matter?

Under Australia's *Disability Discrimination Act*, anyone who provides goods or services (for payment or not) must not refuse to provide them, or to provide them under less advantageous conditions, to people with disabilities.

Commonwealth government websites are required to comply with the web content accessibility guidelines (WCAG 2.0) level A by 31 December 2012, and to level AA by 31 December 2014. (Many agencies have been given extensions to these dates.)

Other websites are still required to meet the requirements of the *Disability Discrimination Act*, and while WCAG has no formal status in Australian law, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission recognises WCAG 2.0 as providing an international benchmark: if a site owner can demonstrate compliance with these guidelines, a complaint is unlikely to succeed.

But the main reason for concerning yourself with accessibility isn't to avoid a legal complaint: it's to meet the needs of the site's visitors, whether or not they are paying customers. (And if a site owner can't be bothered meeting visitor needs, why do they have a website at all?)

What should I edit?

Many website owners (and indeed many developers and designers) are unaware of their legal obligations in this area—just as many are unfamiliar with copyright law.

That lack of awareness provides an opportunity for editors to offer additional value by highlighting and addressing accessibility issues on a website.

If you're editing content in a Word or PDF file, you can check the following:

- Is the title of each page appropriate?
- Are the headings within the text scannable and self-explanatory?
- Does every image have appropriate alt text and title text?
- Is each hyperlink unique on the page and self-explanatory?

If you're editing content in an HTML file, whether it's live or on a staging server, you can also check:

- Can all the text on the page be re-sized?
- Is the colour contrast adequate for people with vision impairments?
- Are the headings marked up correctly?
- Can the site be navigated without a mouse?

Editing the content before it's in HTML

I'll address each of these points in turn.

Is the title of each page appropriate?

Every page on a website should have a unique title that clearly describes the content of that page. If you have twenty news items, avoid using 'News' as the title for each of them.

Are the headings within the text scannable and self-explanatory?

Headings help readers (and search engines) to scan a page to identify its key messages. They should accurately describe the content which follows them, using the keywords you have identified. When possible, place the keywords towards the beginning of each heading—this makes them easier to scan.

The heading hierarchy of a page should reflect its organisation. If your level 1 heading is 'Pets', your level 2 headings might be 'Mammals' and 'Reptiles'. Resist the temptation to choose headings based on their visual appearance—if you think that your top-level heading is too heavy, speak to the site's designer or developer rather than choosing a lower-level heading.

Does every image have appropriate alt text and title text?

Images on a web page may be used:

- to convey information
- to draw attention to areas of particular interest
- as purely decorative devices.

Every image which conveys information must have alt text. This text is read out by screen readers and appears in the place of an image in text-only browsers. It is also used by search engines to understand the content of an image.

Decorative images should be placed into the background by the developer. If they are not in the background they should have empty alt text (alt=""). If the alt text is just omitted, most screen readers will read out the file name, which is rarely helpful.

Each image may also have title text: this appears as a tool tip when you point to the image and should provide additional information (for example, if the image is a hyperlink, the title might be the name of the page being linked to).

Is each hyperlink unique on the page and self-explanatory?

Hyperlinks connect one image or piece of text with another part of the same web page, a page somewhere else on the same site, or a file somewhere else on the web. If it isn't clear where a link is supposed to go, there's something wrong with the link: on most sites, a visitor should not be surprised by the result of clicking on a link.

Avoid 'click here' (and 'more … '). Ideally, every link should make sense out of context, and should be unique on the page: this means that when someone using a screen reader chooses a list of the links on a page, each of them makes sense. Meaningful links also help search engines to make sense of the target document—a link that says 'Ten signs your dog has worms' provides evidence that the target of the link is about animal health, not computer viruses.

Editing the content in HTML

If you're editing content which has been converted to HTML there are additional checks that an editor can reasonably expect to make. If a page fails these tests, alert your client: the problem may need to be addressed by the designer or developer.

Can all the text on the page be re-sized?

Site visitors can re-size text using either site-specific tools or browser controls (although many are unaware of the latter). The site should be built in such a way that all the text is enlarged (or shrunk) together.

Is the colour contrast adequate for people with vision impairments?

There are a number of tools available to check contrast levels, as well as some that allow you to see what a page looks like to someone with various forms of colour vision deficiency.

For example WCAG Contrast checker is a free extension for the Firefox browser which checks contrast levels for normal vision as well as three forms of colour blindness.

Are the headings marked up correctly?

When you edit the content of a web page, you assign appropriate levels to each heading, so that the content is well structured. Some of the benefits of that work can be lost if the person building the site chooses to make the text large and bold (for example) but not mark it up as a heading. There is a range of free tools available to allow you to check heading mark-up without needing to understand HTML—for example, Vision Australia's web accessibility toolbar for Internet Explorer.

Can the site be navigated without a mouse?

Many people with disabilities can't use a mouse—not only those using screen readers but also people with tremor disorders such as Parkinson's. Test each page to ensure that you can navigate through each page with only a keyboard.

Tools

The following tools can help you to assess the accessibility of a site.

Web accessibility toolbar for Internet Explorer [free] <http://www.visionaustralia.org.au/ais/toolbar/>: offers of a range of functions that:

- identify components of a web page
- provide access to alternate views of page content
- facilitate the use of 3rd party online applications.

SortSite from PowerMapper <http://www.powermapper.com/products/sortsite/>: checks for broken links, browser compatibility, web standards and more. Free trial available.

Fangs is a free extension for Firefox which allows you to see how a screen reader would read a page <http://www.standards-schmandards.com/projects/fangs/>.

WCAG Contrast checker is a free extension for Firefox which allows you to check the level of contrast between text and background <https://addons.mozilla.org/En-us/firefox/addon/wcag-contrast-checker/>.

Where next?

An accessible web may seem like a utopian goal, and perhaps it is: there will always be *someone* who cannot use your site. However, by including accessibility checks when you edit web content, you help to ensure that the published site will be accessible to more people: better business for your client and a better experience for the site's visitors.

Surely that's worth the effort.

Further reading

The web is always changing and keeping up is a constant challenge.

Books

Horton, Sarah (2006) *Access by design: A guide to universal usability for web designers*. New Riders.

Krug, Steve (2005) *Don't make me think! A common sense approach to web usability*. 2nd edn, Circle.com library.

Neilsen, Jakob (2000) *Designing web usability*. New Riders.

Redish, Janice (2012) *Letting go of the words: writing web content that works*. 2nd edn, Morgan Kaufmann Publishers.

Websites

Jo Clark on accessibility: <http://joeclark.org/>

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0: <http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG/>

Roger Johansson's 19 checkpoints for evaluating accessibility: <http://www.456bereastreet.com/archive/200604/evaluating_website_accessibility/>

Videos

Bruce McGuire's experience with SOCOG: <http://humanrights.gov.au/twentystories/video-just-the-ticket.html>

Examples of tools used by people with visual disabilities: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lLaUx7BJ4r0>

Slides

The author's accompanying slides are to be found on: <YouTube at http://youtu.be/fYHIgMjGVPA>