

15 Minutes to Better Website Accessibility

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Though estimates vary, most studies find that about one in five people have some kind of disability. Some of them are in severe need of assistance, for others small adjustments can make a big difference. This way, the Internet has become an essential tool for communication and empowerment for many people with disabilities in the past decade.

At the same time, even those of us that consider ourselves able-bodied might be facing reduced visual or auditory perception, or lower motor-related or cognitive skills due to injury or aging at one point in our lives. Making websites more accessible is thus not just about people with disabilities.

Most of us have experienced the challenge of using the web without a “normal” computer. How often do dropdown menus fail to open on a touch screen? And why do the buttons need to be tiny when I access a page using my phone? Now imagine you’re using a braille display, a screen reader, or any other assistive technology to communicate with the world.

Making websites more accessible does not have to be difficult, and often has surprising

benefits: A radio button in a form without a proper label, for example, requires you to click the radio button itself, but if you have properly implemented the label tag, the text is also clickable. Semantic markup, while making the site more understandable for blind people, also has SEO benefits and maintainability benefits.

Almost everyone benefits from helpful illustrations, properly organized content, and clear navigation. Similarly, while captions are a necessity for deaf users, they can be helpful to others, including anyone who views a video without audio. Since

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not everyone has the same abilities or equal use of the same senses, one of the main keys to accessibility is ensuring that information is transformable from one form into another, so that it can be perceived in multiple ways. Text is unequaled for its universality: it remains accessible when viewed on large and small screens, when read out loud, or through touch. We can even automatically translate it from one language to the next.

THE 3-STEP ACCESSIBILITY AUDIT

To check your website for potential accessibility issues, you can review it from three different angles.

1) Try without visuals: Your website should still make sense when you switch off images, stylesheets, and other visual cues. You can do so, for example, using the Web Developer extension in Firefox or Chrome. A few things to check:

- Does the reading order make sense? Is content organized logically (using semantic markup, e.g. headings and lists)?
- Can you skip the navigation – or do you need to read through it on every single page? Even better: Is there a search box at the very beginning to jump directly to the content you’re looking for?
- Can you navigate the website using the keyboard only? Are form fields in the right order? How about beautifully responsive javascript?
- Have you defined alternative text for images? Is it meaningful?

2) Try without sound: Videos, slide casts, and audio interviews are great tools for storytelling and to add depth to

your communications. They should still remain accessible with the sound switched off. A few things to check:

- Do you provide captions and/or transcripts for your multimedia content?
- Is it possible to pause and rewind during playback?

3) Try without complexity:

Websites can be hard to navigate, even in the best of times. Simple adjustments can help us make it easier for ourselves (and all other users). A few things to check:

- How readable is your copy? Can you make it shorter? Easier?
- Does your website remain usable

The quickest way to test your website for accessibility issues is with the WAVE evaluation tool. The BBC website does a good job with accessibility of constantly updated content and multimedia.

if you enlarge the font in your web browser by 150%?

- Does your website use sufficient color contrast? This is particularly important for people with reduced color vision.
- What happens if users make errors, e.g. when filling in forms? Is it easy for them to correct and try again?

Utah State University's Center for Persons with Disabilities offers a handy tool to evaluate web accessibility and color contrast at wave.webaim.org that will highlight issues with your site, e.g. missing form labels and image descriptions.

If you want to delve deeper, you can find a more comprehensive set of criteria in the **Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)**, an international technical standard

for web content accessibility. They are the basis for most web accessibility laws in the world.

Links and References

1. Web Developer Extension for Firefox and Chrome: <http://chrispederick.com/work/web-developer/>
2. Web Content Accessibility Guidelines: <http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/>
3. WebAIM: Quick Reference Testing Web Content for Accessibility: <http://webaim.org/resources/evalquickref/>



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sustainability issues and seemingly intractable communications challenges. She loves perfect, simple solutions that increase impact, accessibility and inclusiveness. Find her at [@wiebkehere](https://twitter.com/wiebkehere).

The screenshot shows the WAVE web accessibility evaluation tool interface. On the left, a sidebar displays a 'Summary' of detected issues: 1 Error, 51 Alerts, 77 Features, 165 Structural Elements, 0 HTML5 and ARIA, and 95 Contrast Errors. Below this are 'Panel Options' and links to 'DOCUMENTATION' and 'OUTLINE'. The main area shows the BBC News website with a red header and navigation menu. A prominent article is titled 'HSBC 'helped clients dodge tax'' with a sub-headline 'Britain's HSBC, one of the world's biggest banks, helped wealthy clients avoid vast tax bills, documents seen by BBC Panorama show.' Other articles include 'An equation that reads blank plus blank equals a heart!', 'woman with baby', and 'Nasa blended wing concept plane'.