

Accessible Documents and Web Content for Courts: A Short Introduction

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Overview

Why is accessibility important?

Accessible court documents and web content ensure that everyone, including people with disabilities, can access important information and resources about the courts. If court documents and web content are not accessible, people with disabilities could be deprived of equal access, legal rights, or basic needs, such as housing.

Also, accessible web content is required by law. On April 24, 2024, the United States Department of Justice issued a rule requiring that state and local government web content meet accessibility standards called the [WCAG 2.1, Level AA](#). This rule applies to state and local courts. Most state and local courts have until April 24, 2026 to comply with this rule. More information is available in the [DOJ Rule Fact Sheet](#).

To understand web accessibility and common barriers, it is important to understand [how people with disabilities use the web](#). It is also important to ask court users with disabilities in your jurisdiction what they need from court documents and web content and what barriers they experience.

About this Resource

NCSC developed this resource to help courts identify common accessibility problems with documents and web content and to provide courts with tools that can help ensure documents and web content are accessible. The WCAG 2.1 AA standards also contain requirements about website structure and navigation capabilities that are not addressed in this resource but that courts must also follow under the new DOJ rule. This resource is not meant to act as comprehensive guidance nor is it meant to cover all accessibility needs.

For more information, or if you would like to discuss, contact Grace Spulak at gspulak@ncsc.org.

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General Accessibility Resources and Checklists

The following are general resources outlining document and web content accessibility standards and needs:

- [A2J Tech Accessibility Guide](#) for documents and web content. Includes an [accessibility checklist](#) for quick reference.
- The U.S. General Services Administration (GSA)'s [Create Accessible Digital Products](#) resources.
- The [Washington Post's Accessibility Resources](#) have general information about accessible documents and websites, including information about website structure, color and font, alt text, audio and video, and keyboard navigation.

Tools to Check for Accessibility in Documents and Websites

There are several tools and checklists to help identify common accessibility problems with websites or documents. This section offers information on some of these tools. However, these tools will not catch all accessibility problems, and even if a document or website passes accessibility checkers, there may still be accessibility problems.

To make sure documents and web content is truly accessible you should also **ask for feedback from people with disabilities**, including people with visual, auditory, sensory, cognitive, and motor disabilities.

You can also **use a screen reader or read aloud features** to understand how your content will be viewed and read by the screen readers. [NVDA](#) is a free screen reader for PCs (there is not a Mac-compatible version) that you can download and use to check your content. For Mac-users, WebAIM has a [resource on voiceover](#).

Documents

Many document creation programs have accessibility guides and accessibility checkers that can be used to identify accessibility problems in a document.

- **Microsoft Word:** Microsoft Word has a [resource on accessible Word documents](#) that includes information about using document headers and adding alt text. (For more information about alt text, look at the [Alt Text section of this guide](#).) Word also has an accessibility checker that is available in the bottom ribbon of the document and that flags accessibility concerns.
- **PowerPoint:** You can use the [PowerPoint Accessibility Guide](#) to ensure that PowerPoint presentations are accessible. The Guide includes information about unique slide titles, correct reading order, and alt text. PowerPoint has the same accessibility checker feature as Word. It is also available in the bottom ribbon of the document.
- **Adobe:** Adobe has created instructions for [developing accessible PDFs](#) that cover topics such as PDF tags, document structure, and alt text. Adobe also has an accessibility checker that is available under All Tools->View More->Prepare for Accessibility.

Website Accessibility Checkers

The following tools can help check website accessibility:

- WebAIM has developed a [website accessibility checklist](#) that identifies basic requirements for websites to meet the WCAG standards.
- WebAIM also has a browser extension, called [WAVE](#), for Chrome and Firefox that can identify accessibility problems with websites.
- [Google Lighthouse](#) is another browser extension that can check websites for accessibility issues.

Many browsers have built-in accessibility checkers, but it can be difficult for people who are not technologists, IT specialists, or familiar with accessibility needs to interpret these results.

Font and Color

This section highlights some general accessibility best practices and requirements that apply to text-based resources regardless of document format. These practices apply to paper documents and web-based documents.

- **Font size:** Use at least 12-point font to ensure that text is large enough to be easily read. This is particularly important if a document is printed. Many screen readers can adjust text size when the text can be viewed on a screen.
- **Font style:** [Sans serif fonts](#) are preferable, particularly for content that will be displayed on a screen. Serif fonts can be difficult or impossible for some people to read.
- **Text spacing:** [WCAG 2.1 AA Success Criterion 1.4.12](#) requires line height spacing of at least 1.5 times the font size and spacing following paragraphs at least to be at least 2 times the font size.
- **Avoid color coding:** Do not use color alone to convey meaning. People with some disabilities and visual differences will not be able to access color coded content. [WCAG 2.1 A Success Criterion 1.4.1](#) requires that color not be the sole means to convey information.
- **Color contrast:** [WCAG 2.1 A Success Criterion 1.4.3](#) requires a color contrast ratio of 4.5:1 for text and 3:1 for large text (14-point font or above). This ratio refers to the contrast between the text color and the background color and ensures that all users are able to view and read text. Word and Adobe have built in contrast checkers (look at the [Tools to Check for Accessibility in Documents and Websites section](#) of this guide for more information about these tools). [TPGI](#) is a free contrast checker that can be used to check color contrast. WebAIM also has a [color contrast checker](#).
- **Background colors:** For content that will be read on a screen, avoid black text on a pure white background or white text on a pure black background. Using pure white or pure black backgrounds in these situations can make text difficult or impossible to read for some users.

More Resources

- U.S. General Services Administration (GSA)'s [resource on font and typography](#).
- GSA [resource on use of color](#).
- More information from the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C)'s Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) on [color contrast](#).

Considerations for Forms and Documents

This resource has some general information about form and document layout and commonly used features that may cause accessibility problems. NCSC has also created resources on this topic through [Forms Camp](#) available under [Accessibility](#) and in this [video](#).

It is good practice to test your forms and documents with a screen reader such as [NVDA](#) to make sure that all content is read correctly.

General Document Layout

- **Headings and Styles:** Avoid using font size, bold text, or lines to organize documents. Use Headings and Styles features instead to help with document layout and format. This lets people to easily navigate through a document with a screen reader and understand hierarchies of information in the document.
- **White Space:** Use document spacing options to create white space rather than using a hard return.
- **Text Boxes:** Text in text boxes may not be identified by screen readers. If content needs to be inside a box, you can often use Borders and Shading properties to create borders around the text.
- **Headers and Footers:** Headers and footers may not be read by screen readers. It is important not to include essential information in the header or footer unless it can be made “readable” (e.g., by using document properties in Word).
- **Tables:** Tables can be difficult for screen readers to read correctly. Make sure that tables are simple and small and that all column and row headers are labeled. Avoid using nested tables, merging cells, or using tables to visually format documents. The University of Colorado Boulder has a [guide to creating accessible tables](#).

Fillable Forms

Accessible fillable forms need to have properly tagged form fields so that a screen reader can tell the user where the form field is and what information goes in the field.

- **Adobe:** To create accessible PDF fillable forms, it is best to build the form in Adobe (i.e., you cannot easily convert Word fillable forms to PDF and keep accessibility features). Use this [Adobe fillable form guide](#) to tag form fields in a PDF fillable form.
- **Word:** To create accessible fillable forms in Word, you will need to add “Help Text” to the form fields to make them readable to a screen reader. [This video](#) shows how to do that at the Field Properties and Labels timestamp in the description.

Alt Text

What is Alt Text?

[Alt text](#) is text substitute for non-text content. This can include images, data visualizations, and QR codes. Screen readers will read alt text so that people who cannot see non-text elements on a webpage or document understand the content. [WCAG 2.1 A Success Criterion 1.1.1](#) requires that all non-text elements have a text alternative. This resource offers links to resources about alt text and tips for writing alt text.

Tips for Writing Alt Text

- The Government Services Agency (GSA) has a [resource about writing alt text](#) with examples of good and bad alt text.
- Web AIM also has [general information about alt text](#), including information on the importance of describing both the content and function of the image.
- **Data Visualizations:** This Medium article has helpful information about writing [alt text for data visualizations](#) (charts, graphs, etc.) include information about the chart type, type of data, reason for including the chart, and a link to the data. The [GSA resource](#) also has information about writing alt text for visualizations.
- **QR Codes:** Illinois State University has helpful information about writing [alt text for QR codes](#) including making sure to indicate that the image is a QR code and including the target link.

How to Add Alt Text to an Image

Typically, you can right-click on an image in a document you are editing and be given the option to add or edit alt text. However, there are also guides available:

- **Word:** To add alt text in Word, use the [Microsoft Word Guide to adding alt text](#).
- **PowerPoint:** To add alt text to an image in PowerPoint, you can use these [instructions for adding alt text](#).
- **Adobe:** To add alt text to images in PDF, use this [Adobe Guide to adding alt text](#).
- **Website Images:** Many web platforms allow you to include alt text when editing an image uploaded or embedded on the site. You can also use the [HTML alt attribute](#) to specify alt text.

Audio and Video Content

Any audio and video content will need to be accessible to people who cannot see or hear the content.

General requirements for ensuring that audio and video content are accessible include:

- Ensure that any media players are accessible and can interact correctly with screen readers.
- Provide captions and transcripts for audio content. [WCAG 2.1 AA Success Criteria 1.2.2](#) and [1.2.4](#) require captions for recorded and live audio content.
- Provide audio descriptions of visual information in videos. [WCAG 2.1 AA Success Criterion 1.2.5](#) requires audio description for prerecorded video content in synchronized media.
- Providing sign language interpretation for people who need it.

For more information on planning for and developing accessible audio and video content, check out the following resources:

- W3C WAI's [Making Audio and Video Media Accessible page](#). This includes an example of an accessible video.
- W3C WAI's in-depth guidance on [Audio Content and Video Content](#).
- This [YouTube guide](#) explains how to use YouTube to create auto-generated captions which can be downloaded and edited to create a transcript.