6 Little Things, 3 at a Time

Information and communication technology accessibility can be intimidating. Have you read through the full Web Content Accessibility Guideline 2.0 documentation? There is a lot there. And while it is all important information, it may also be more than you need to begin to make your content more accessible.

It is easy to think that there is just too much to do and become so overwhelmed that you don't do anything. But that does not help you to learn more, and it sure does not help people with disabilities to use your content.

Let's look at 3 little things that you can do to make your content more accessible. We'll look at 3 more in the next issue. These tips will work in just about any tool that you use to create content.

Disclaimer: these techniques are just a start. There is more to making your content accessible than these things, but this is a good place to start.

So cozy up next to your favorite authoring tool (like Microsoft Word, your content management system, or your learning management system) and let's make some more accessible content!

Headings

Headings are a great way to organize any content better. Short or long, lots of text or lots of images, section headings make content easier to process and navigate. You may also find that headings make it easier for you to revisit your own content for editing later on.

It's common to create a section or sub-section heading by making the text of the heading larger and/or making it bold. You may even select a different font or add an underline to make headings stand out from one another.

Unfortunately, if you just make visual changes to the font then you make the content impossible for people using screen readers or refreshble Braille displays to differentiate

from regular text. Making the font larger and bold only changes it visually. Changes need to be available to technology, like screen readers and even search algorithms.

So, use Styles to your advantage here. If you're in Word and most text editors in authoring tools then you have access to Styles. That first heading on the page? Make it a first level heading by using the Styles. Subsection heading? Make it a second level heading. And so on. You can go 6 heading levels deep if your content needs it.

Lists

Any more, a tool like Microsoft Word will see you hit the tab key, type an asterisk, and go "hey, I think you're making a bulleted list, so I'm going to format that for you so you don't have to worry about things like indentation or nested list items." Just let it do that for you. And if your editor doesn't do this automatically, then look for the little button that looks like a bulleted list and click on it when you create an unordered list.

Why? Well, from the accessibility side of things, making a list by using the tab key, asterisks, and your own time is a waste. This creates lists that are formatted only visually. So again you hide the fact that this very different piece of content is very different from surrounding headings and text. Using the text editor to format the list makes screen

readers pick up on the fact that the content is a list. The screen reader can then tell the person using the screen reader that the content is a list. This is an accessibility win.

Alternative Text/Text Equivalents

If someone cannot see the screen, then the fact that you have a great illustration that perfectly captures the ironic point you're making is totally lost. Why? Computers are not smart enough to describe images in the context of the content surrounding them. What is smart enough? You, the author of the content!

So, make sure that you have a text equivalent for your images. In general you want to answer this question: What meaning does this image convey?

How you do this depends on the image and how you use it. If it's complex then you may need to have text in the body of the document or in the caption that helps to convey the meaning of the image. If it's a logo with text, then you want the text in the logo to be available as text and you'll probably use an attribute called alternative text.

Alternative text is easy to add in Word, PowerPoint, and most text editors. In Word and PowerPoint you right click the image, select Format Picture, look for the Alternative Text tab, and type the text into the Description field. Content and Learning Management

Systems have different ways to support this, but most of them do. Don't leave that field empty if the image has meaning.

A couple of things:

- If an image is purely for decoration and doesn't convey anything meaningful, then leave the alternative text blank.

- Don't write an essay as alternative text. If the picture is worth a thousand words, then you'll want to use body text, caption, or a separate appendix or page to describe it. If the image is that complex then there is a good chance that everyone will benefit from having a text description in the body of the page or document.

Additional Reading

Some other news, notes, and helpful stuff:

- WebAIM on accessibility in Microsoft Word
  http://webaim.org/techniques/word/

- WebAIM on accessibility in Microsoft PowerPoint
  http://webaim.org/techniques/powerpoint/

- National Center on Disability and Access to Education document accessibility cheatsheets
  http://ncdae.org/resources/cheatsheets/

Association of Assistive Technology Act Programs

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