

“Born Accessible” Publishing

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The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many of us to use technology more than ever. But it's also shined a light on the gaps in access that prevent some people—especially those with visual or hearing impairments— from using technology, or from enjoying the same ease of use many of us do. For our purposes, as a body of editing professionals, this article focuses on accessibility in publishing and its potential as a business specialty to explore.

The written word (in print or digital form) is our passion. Some of the work we produce is for entertainment, while other works are more academic or informative. For people without sight and sound, accessibility to publications becomes a [life safety issue](#), as a recent *New Yorker* column discussed related to COVID-19 and health care. Masks, gloves and social distancing hide the very communication tools that members of the blind, deaf, or deaf-blind communities use. It's hard to lip-read when a nurse's mouth is behind a mask, feel [tactile sign language](#) (words pressed by touch into another's hands; think Helen Keller), or read a consent form that does not have a braille version. These same accessibility issues also create “enormous barriers in education and employment,” according to the [Accessible Books Consortium \(ABC\)](#).

ABC points out the enormous (and often prohibitive) cost to convert published materials to accessible products *after* publication rather than *during* the publishing process. Instead they claim that as long as a book is “born digital,” it can be “born accessible.”

Enter the editor. Still, the more I read about accessibility in publishing and the related editing, the more I realized how little I knew, as this ABC resource, [Top Tips for Creating Accessible EPUB 3 Files](#), highlighted.

In an accessibility webinar sponsored by the [Bell Museum at the University of Minnesota](#) earlier this year, a light bulb came on for me as I learned that without alternative text (alt text), a phrase inserted as an attribute in an HTML document to describe an image, the picture does not—cannot—exist for someone without vision. A simple concept that I had not given thought to as I take vision for granted. The ABC tips document mentioned above explains it this way:

If content isn't described in the surrounding text, a complex image without a sufficiently descriptive caption is useless for a blind reader. Every content-rich image should have a relevant

description, caption, or at a minimum, alt text, unless the image is solely decorative—and tag decorative images so that they are ignored by a screen reader. Avoid using the alt text “image” to describe any image.

ABC calls [EPUB3](#) the future of accessible publishing: The "gold standard" in the publishing industry to produce accessible digital books. ABC reports that correct use of EPUB3 accessibility features “allows for the creation of an electronic file that can then be used to produce accessible digital books in various formats,” such as:

- Audiobooks with narration by either a human or synthesized voice
- Embossed Braille (Braille characters on paper for Braille readers to read)
- Electronic Braille (Braille read on a computer with a refreshable Braille keyboard)

This [short ABC video](#) demonstrates how three documents (a PDF file, a Word file, and a fully accessible PDF file) work on the computer through a screen reader tool. The reader, a software program, is the interface between the computer’s operating system, its applications and the user. Screen readers use speech synthesizers or Braille display to read the text displayed on the computer screen to assist persons with visual impairments.

In the video, the screen reader calls the PDF “empty,” because the PDF file is likely an image, not text. In Word, the individual can hear the content; however, it’s not structured well. In a long work, like a textbook, that becomes harder to manage and navigate.

With the added structure of page numbers, headings and tables of contents, for example, in the fully accessible PDF file, the screen reader can better guide the individual through the publication. Conversely, the use of color or specific font styles as primary ways to convey information is not suited for screen reading tools.

Depending on your area of specialty, editing text such as math equations may also be something to reconsider. Books may show math equations as images, which screen readers can’t interpret. Mathematical Markup Language, or [MathML](#) makes mathematical equations accessible to everyone. The tips document mentioned previously addresses this a bit further.

Many organizations and agencies make adaptive resources available. Yet is it right to require individuals with impairments to seek them out? Instead, should the publishing industry take steps from the

beginning to be inclusive? Does it begin with the editing process? Is that the opportunity to ask the author, “Have you considered accessibility?”

To apply the EPUB3 standards, for example, requires a collaboration of coding and editing and may behoove editors to partner with technical experts who can help prepare manuscripts in that way. This could become a niche area of the publishing business for coding and editing teams, with economic opportunities that also demonstrates social responsibility. Most importantly, we get to help others share in something we all cherish—no matter how we access the beloved publications.

Like so many societal issues, at its core, accessibility is about human rights. We—editors, PEN members, publishers, communications professionals, website designers—have work to do. We are capable, smarter than ever, with better technology than ever. The tools exist; we must have the will to use them.

Keep reading for an editor's accessibility checklist and access to additional resources.

Editor's Basic Checklist for Publication Accessibility

Editors may not have control over all aspects of publishing. We can, however, work to inform authors and publishers of considerations that deliver born accessible publications. While not intended to be all-inclusive, the checklist below provides a starting point.

- ✓ Have conversations with authors about ways to create born accessible publications.
- ✓ Follow publisher guidelines or requirements (if any) for born accessible production.
- ✓ Encourage authors and publishers to use [Unicode compliant](#) fonts that screen readers can access.
- ✓ Include descriptive alt text for images, graphs, illustrations so screen readers can interpret them.
- ✓ Use text to present tables rather than images.
- ✓ Include tables of contents, page numbers, headers, and chapter titles.
- ✓ Avoid using colors, bold or italic fonts, or all caps to denote emphasis.
- ✓ Prepare content in a logical reading order.
- ✓ Keep text layout simple and preferably linear.
- ✓ Retain the same page orientation as much as possible.
- ✓ Tag content in sidebars or callouts.
- ✓ Use meaningful text when creating hyperlinks to other content. For example, use the name of the organization being linked to e.g., Accessible Books Consortium, rather than a long URL with a string of numbers and characters.
- ✓ Use an accessibility checker or testing software to check the accessibility of your documents; these vary by the software and format being used.
- ✓ Collaborate with experts as needed to apply any of these tips.

Source: Chapter 4, ABC Starter Kit.

https://www.accessiblebooksconsortium.org/export/abc/abc_starter-kit_300616.pdf

Resources:

1. Accessible Books Consortium (ABC) resource
<https://www.accessiblebooksconsortium.org>
2. ABC's Top Tips for Creating Accessible EPUB 3 Files
https://www.accessiblebooksconsortium.org/export/sites/visonip/publishing/en/pdf/15_top_tips_for_creating_accessible_epub_3.pdf
3. ABC Starter Kit
https://www.accessiblebooksconsortium.org/export/abc/abc_starter-kit_300616.pdf
4. "Ace by DAISY," an open source "Accessibility Checker for EPUB," created in the EPUB format. The DAISY Consortium is an ABC partner.
<https://inclusivepublishing.org/toolbox/accessibility-checker/>
5. The Book Industry Study Group's (BISG) "BISG Guide to Accessible Publishing & Cheat Sheets"
<https://bisg.org/store/ViewProduct.aspx?id=13534677&hhSearchTerms=%2522accessible+and+publishing%2522>
6. BISG's store with free resources
<https://bisg.org/store/default.aspx>
7. Inclusive Publishing's, "Your Information Hub for Creating Digital Publications for All"
<https://inclusivepublishing.org/>
8. International Publishers Association
<https://www.internationalpublishers.org/our-work/visually-impaired-persons>