

# Digital Accessibility: What Is It And Why Does It Matter?

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## [What is Digital Accessibility?](#)

Have you heard the term, “Digital Accessibility” before? For many people, this article may be their introduction to the concept. Digital Accessibility is the degree to which people with diverse abilities can perceive, navigate, or interact with websites; documents created in Microsoft Office Suite programs, Google Docs, and other applications; PDFs; videos; etc. A document is accessible when it can be perceived, navigated, and manipulated by the greatest number of people, those with and without disabilities. Ideally Universal Design principles—designing for all users and providing multiple means of interacting with content—are foundational and are considered at the planning stages of websites, documents, and course materials. Content created using these principles is accessible from the start without having to redesign, revise, or remediate when you identify the need to support a specific user population, for example, users who are blind or have low vision. The needs of that user population, along with other user populations, were considered in the planning stages of the project and built into the content. However, materials that were built without these principles being considered from the inception of the project can usually be revised to be accessible.

## [Why Does Digital Accessibility Matter?](#)

Technology creates and facilitates our ability to access and engage with information, use electronic documents and forms, and communicate with distant family and friends every day in ways barely imaginable a few decades ago. By making websites and documents accessible, we enable more people to communicate effectively and use technology to cross boundaries that might have prevented them from actively interacting with the world before. People with and without disabilities can complete accessible online forms, job applications, gather healthcare information, and other everyday tasks from their computers and mobile devices. [This inclusion also benefits businesses](#), reaching new customers who, without accessible websites and assistive technology, could not locate their goods and services or place orders easily.

If a webpage or document is created properly people with a spectrum of hearing, visual, mobility, or cognitive abilities can use the content, allowing for inclusive communication. Digital accessibility is vitally important for everyone to have equal access to educational opportunities, goods and services, employment, healthcare, and social media.

In an educational environment, providing accessible materials can allow diverse students the opportunity to learn with less struggle to interact with course content. Accessibly designed course materials facilitate understanding with clearly defined information architecture and layout that can be utilized by students' assistive technology, lowering barriers to learning. This design also benefits people who do not rely on screen readers, captioning, or transcripts. Having multiple means of accessing the information allows users of all abilities to find the specific way to interact with content that matches their preferences and situations. For instance, an accessible journal article can be read by a mobile device's screen reader or virtual assistant to enable you to listen to the content via a car's audio system on the drive into work. At a noisy Starbucks you can still view and understand a [video if it has captions or a transcript](#), even if you left your earbuds at home.

### [What are some characteristics of accessible content?](#)

Below are some basic elements of accessible content. While this list is not exhaustive, it lists many elements that provide many benefits to various people. Documents, such as PDFs, especially PDFs that are scanned, Word documents, PowerPoint presentations, etc., should be constructed or remediated so assistive technology applications, such as screen readers or magnifying software, can render the content perceivable. This means that documents and web pages require:

- A logical semantic heading structure based on the way the information is organized in the content. Screen readers use headings as a quick navigational method to allow users to "skim" or "scan" content to locate areas of interest within the document. (Do not use headings to apply formatting for aesthetic reasons only. Headings should be used to define how information in the document is organized and related.)
- Images within content should have alternative text descriptions (alt text) that explains/describes the image and its context within the content or indicates the image is decorative.
- Color or shapes should not be the sole indicators of information in any part of the content.

- Font size should be large enough to be easily read, usually at least 11 point.
- Content should allow magnification up to 200% without text overlap or concealment of controls. (Assistive technology such as ZoomText can magnify up to 36x; however, even without the use of specialized applications, content should meet the 200% magnification requirement.)
- If a document was created by scanning a hardcopy, the resulting PDF must be made accessible through OCR (Optical Character Recognition), properly tagged, and have alt text that describes all images. (These functions require the use of Adobe Acrobat.)
- Tables should have defined header rows.
- Charts and graphs should have alternative (alt) text attributes and/or captions. Consider providing data tables that, if properly constructed, can be more easily accessible by users of assistive technology, particularly if the chart/graph displays complex information. (Often the most accessible way to display data, especially complex data tables, is in HTML. Consider linking to a webpage containing the data, particularly if the data is complex.)
- Link names should be meaningful out of context. Avoid using link names such as "Click Here," "For More Information," etc. (Just as organizing content information using headings can provide a means for assistive technology to effectively skim documents, users of assistive technology can also elect to display all the links included in a document or webpage to navigate quickly to specific areas of interest.)
- Documents and webpages, particularly if they are long or complex, benefit from Tables of Contents with anchors/links to navigate to specific information.