NRTC RESOURCE SHEET

Accessibility Basics for Communications Professionals

Introduction

Accessibility means ensuring everyone, including people with disabilities and those who use assistive technology such as screen readers, can access, understand, and use the products and information you share. Accessible content is easier to read, scan, and use, and works better on mobile devices.

As a communications professional, your work directly affects whether people can access and use information and products, from reading an email to watching a video to using a website.

This guide is designed to help you build accessibility into your everyday work. It focuses on clear, practical steps and plain language, not technical standards or legal requirements. You do not need to be an expert to create accessible content.

Use this guide as a resource to understand accessibility basics, and use the accompanying checklist before you publish. Small changes in how you write, design, and share content can make a big difference for your audience.

Who This Guide Is For

This guide is for communications professionals who create:

- Emails and e-newsletters
- Websites and web pages
- Flyers, graphics, and PDFs
- Social media posts
- Videos and audio

You do not need a technical background. This guide focuses on practical habits you can apply right away.

Core Accessibility Principles

These principles apply to all types of communications.

Use Clear, Simple Language

- Use common words
- Keep sentences short
- Explain acronyms the first time you use them
- Avoid jargon when possible

Good example: Sign up by March 1 using the registration form.

Not as good: Complete the registration form by March 1 in order to initiate the enrollment process.

Keep Designs Simple and Uncluttered

Simple designs reduce confusion and help people focus on what matters most.

- Leave white space using built-in spacing options (e.g., paragraph or line spacing) rather than blank lines
- Avoid cramming too much into one page or graphic
- Limit font styles to one or two
- Group related information together
- Limit colors and decorations to reduce visual clutter

Use Enough Color Contrast

- Make sure text stands out from the background
- Avoid placing text on busy images or backgrounds

Do Not Use Color Alone to Communicate Meaning

- Screen readers do not announce font color.
- Color can support meaning, but should not be the only way meaning is conveyed.

Writing and Formatting Content

Headings and Structure

Headings help screen reader users understand how content is organized and allow everyone to scan content quickly.

- Use headings to organize content, not just to make text look bigger
- Use headings in order (Heading 1, then Heading 2, then Heading 3)
- Do not skip heading levels

Text Formatting

Appropriate text formatting benefits people with visual, cognitive, and learning disabilities and improves usability for everyone.

- Use left-aligned text
- Avoid large blocks of all caps
- Use bold sparingly
- Use bulleted or numbered lists (rather than manually numbering items)

Links

Accessible links describe where the link leads. Screen reader users often navigate by listening to links out of context, so the link text must make sense on its own.

To make links accessible, use meaningful words that describe the destination or action. Avoid vague phrases like "click here" or "learn more." Instead, provide link text that

explains what the user will find, such as "Read the accessibility guide" or "Register for the event."

Links should also be easy to see. Make sure links are visually distinct from regular text and do not rely on color alone to indicate they are links.

Images and Graphics

What Is Alt Text?

Alt text (alternative text) is a written description of an image (e.g., photos, graphics, graphs) created for people who cannot see them. Screen readers read the alt text when they come to an image. If there is no alt text, the screen reader user has no information about your image. Alt text should explain what the image shows and why it is important in the context of the content.

What Makes Good Alt Text

- Focused on the purpose of the image:
  - Keep alt text as short as possible, but make it as long as necessary
  - Provide more detail when the image carries important information (such as graphs, a diagram, or a detailed photo)
  - Consider what the image conveys to the sighted reader, and include the pertinent information
- Written in plain language
- Does not repeat surrounding text
- Does not include phrases like "image of" or "photo of"

Examples of Good Alt Text

Informative photo example: Students walking across campus on a sunny day.

Headshot example: Headshot of University President Dr. Jane Smith.

Graphic with text example: Apply by the March 31 deadline.

Decorative image example: Do not apply alt text, mark the image as decorative instead so screen readers skip it.

Social media image example: Guest speaker Tom Moore presenting at the Accessibility Workshop.

Accessibility by Communication Channel

Emails and E-Newsletters

Accessible emails use clear text, simple layouts, and images with alt text so everyone, including screen reader users, can understand the message.

Key Practices

- Use a simple, single-column layout

- Use 12 to 16 pt font and left alignment
- Use headings to structure the message if needed, rather than bold text
- Ensure high color contrast and avoid text over images
- Add alt text to all images
- Use descriptive link text ("Register for the event," not "Click here")
- Avoid image-only emails and animated GIFs

Buttons and Templates

- Use built-in buttons, not images of buttons
- Choose simple, mobile-friendly templates with strong contrast

Platform Tools

Most email marketing platforms (Mailchimp, Constant Contact, etc.) provide:

- Alt text fields
- Accessible headings
- Built-in color contrast tools
- Mobile-responsive layouts
- Basic accessibility warnings

Final Checks

Before sending:

- Preview on mobile
- View the email with images turned off
- Run the platform's accessibility checker

Social Media

Accessibility applies to social media just like any other communication channel.

- Use Camel Case for hashtags
- Limit emojis and place them at the end of sentences
- Add alt text to images
- Caption all videos
- Add audio description to videos as needed

Video and Audio

Videos and audio must be accessible to people who cannot hear or see them.

- Captions include dialogue and all relevant sounds
- Review captions that were auto-generated before publishing
- Ensure captions are accurate; errors or missing lines undermine their purpose
- Provide a transcript with all videos
- Offer auto-captioning for live video events
- Provide audio description when important visual information is not spoken

Types of Captions

- Closed: Text track that the viewer can turn on or off, delivered as a separate file or as a selectable track within the video

- Open: Created within the video and cannot be removed
- Automatic: Generated using Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) technology
- Manual: Text representation of spoken words and audio information that is created by an individual

Audio Description

Audio descriptions (AD) are essential for videos that include visual elements not explained by the audio. They should be provided for visual elements not described by the video narration or soundtrack, such as actions, settings, and on-screen text.

Section 508 compliance requires that federal agencies and federally funded organizations provide audio description for pre-recorded videos. Section 508 references WCAG 2.0 Level AA, which requires audio description under Success Criterion 1.2.5.

- Standard: Insert description into existing pauses. Required under Level AA. Note that description is not required when the information is part of the narration.
- Extended: Pauses the video to play narration. This is a Level AAA criterion (Success Criterion 1.2.7) and is not required under Section 508.

Best practices:

- Add audio descriptions where natural pauses occur in the video
- Use a neutral voice for the audio description to distinguish it from the rest of the audio
- Describe only what's needed to follow the content. Avoid interpreting or explaining motives.

Platforms like YouTube and Vimeo allow for multiple audio tracks, which can be used to include audio descriptions. Availability and features vary by platform and account type. Creating accessible videos may involve creating two versions of the video: one with audio descriptions and one without, to ensure accessibility on platforms that do not support audio descriptions directly.

Running Accessibility Checks

Accessibility checkers help catch common issues, but they do not replace human review.

- Always run built-in accessibility checkers when available, and correct any issues found.
- Zoom text to 200% (to ensure text can be zoomed to this extent without losing any content or functionality).
- Navigate content using only a keyboard because this ensures that all interactive elements, such as links, buttons, form fields, menus, and dialogs, can be operated using the keyboard alone. Many screen reader users and people with mobility limitations rely on keyboard navigation.

Accessibility by Tool

Canva

Canva offers basic accessibility tools, but it does not create fully accessible PDFs. Always review your final files in Adobe Acrobat Pro.

Accessibility Checker

To access the checker: File → Accessibility → Check design accessibility

Flags issues with:

- Text size: Larger font size needed, consistent headings, simple and readable fonts
- Color contrast: Canva alerts you to low-contrast text and suggests accessible color combinations
- Missing alt text: Right-click image → Alternative text. Write a short description of what the image is and its purpose

PDF Export

Canva supports:

- Heading tags: Go to File → Accessibility → Edit text semantics. Select each text element and assign a heading level (H1, H2, etc.) or paragraph tag
- Reading order: Canva uses the layer order from the Position panel. Arrange layers so the bottom layer is read first, then select "Match reading order to layers" when exporting
- Document language: Set a screen reader language for your design so screen readers pronounce text correctly. This language is embedded in the exported PDF
- Export: When you download, select File type "PDF Standard" and make sure "Flatten PDF" is unchecked, since flattening removes accessibility tags

Remember that a PDF created as a Canva export needs to be reviewed with Adobe Acrobat Pro. Our PDF remediation guide provides tips for this process.

Video Tools

- Auto-generated captions: Text → Dynamic → Text Captions
- Manual caption editing
- Reduce/disable animations

Adobe InDesign

InDesign can produce accessible PDFs, but the workflow has many steps and is easy to get wrong if you skip any of them. When creating documents in InDesign, follow Adobe's full walkthrough:

Creating Accessible PDFs (Adobe)

Another useful guide is available through the Oregon Health Authority:

InDesign Accessibility Guide (Oregon Health Authority)

Remember to check and finalize accessibility in Adobe Acrobat Pro after exporting.

Adobe Illustrator

Illustrator is good for graphics and illustrations but has no built-in accessibility features for PDF export. It cannot tag headings, add alt text, or set reading order. For accessible single-page documents, consider using InDesign or another tool with built-in tagging. If you must use Illustrator, you will need to manually tag in Adobe Acrobat Pro after export.

Microsoft PowerPoint

This software has strong built-in accessibility tools. Below are some tips when designing in PowerPoint:

- Use slide titles and built-in layouts
- Each slide should have a unique title
- Use high contrast and large fonts (24 pt+)
- Avoid text in images
- Add alt text to all images and graphs
- Run the Accessibility Checker and correct all issues

Closing Thoughts

Accessibility is not a one-time task or an extra step at the end. It is part of creating clear, effective communication. When accessibility is built into your process from the start, your content reaches more people and works better for everyone.

Use the companion checklist to support your daily work and make accessibility a standard part of how you communicate.

NATIONAL RESEARCH & TRAINING CENTER ON BLINDNESS & LOW VISION

STATE

nrtc@colled.msstate.edu 662-325-2001

The contents of this document were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, NIDILRR grant 90RTEM0015. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Health and Human Services and should not indicate endorsement by the Federal Government.