

## Focus on Website Accessibility

*By Sharon Clapp from Connecticut Libraries, January 2007*

**Improving access to information resources is a primary goal for libraries. Accessibility is about giving all** users equal opportunity to use online resources, regardless of their physical and/or cognitive impairments and regardless of how they access a website.

Though accessibility issues sometimes get pushed to the bottom of the list of website design concerns, library webmasters must remember that they have a legal mandate to ensure that their web services are accessible. Consider a 2006 ruling in *National Federation for the Blind vs. Target.com* that upheld violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act as a basis for website accessibility lawsuits. Ethical and legal considerations aside, accessibility is also a key aspect of website usability.

Fortunately, standards and tools exist to help webmasters achieve the goal of an accessible website. *Section 508* ([www.section508.gov](http://www.section508.gov)) standards, for example, were developed to make sure that the technology used by federal agencies and their contractors is accessible to all potential users. Compliance with this set of standards is required when seeking LSTA grant funding for *any* project that includes a web component.

An example of the type of issue covered by *Section 508* is the inclusion of alternative--a.k.a. ALT--text when adding an image to your web page. Alternative text provides an explanation of what the picture is about. It is used by screen-reading software and visible in text-only browsers. The simple act of adding ALT text can reduce accessibility errors on a website

significantly. But the ALT text standard is not exclusively the purview of *Section 508*. It can also be found in the more comprehensive, internationally adopted guidelines approved by the World Wide Web Consortium: *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines* (WCAG) at [www.w3.org/TR/WCAG](http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG).

Core concepts of WCAG are “graceful degradation” and navigability. The notion of graceful degradation is similar to that of backwards compatibility, i.e., a website scales to whatever level of complexity the end-user needs. A common misperception about creating accessible websites is that only static, text-based html pages meet accessibility standards. Javascript, CSS, forms and dynamically generated web pages play an important role in today’s websites. The concept of graceful degradation states that these sites must not be rendered unusable to visitors whose technology or physical ability prevents them from taking advantage of these features.

The other key WCAG concept is to make web-based resources easy to navigate. A combination of strategies, such as the use of consistent menuing, the provision of “breadcrumb trails” to help users return to higher-level pages, careful organization of the site, and/or creation of a site map, can all improve accessibility. Besides increasing usability, clear navigational cues help visitors who suffer from cognitive impairments such as short-term memory loss.

For a single set of guidelines that combines aspects of *Section 508* and WCAG, consider following the State of Connecticut’s Website Accessibility Guidelines at [www.access.state.ct.us/policies/accesspolicy40.html](http://www.access.state.ct.us/policies/accesspolicy40.html). Online tools such as Cynthia Says ([www.icdri.org/test\\_your\\_site\\_now.html](http://www.icdri.org/test_your_site_now.html)) and WebXact ([webxact.watchfire.com/](http://webxact.watchfire.com/)) or tools built into WYSIWYG web editors

like Dreamweaver and FrontPage 2003 can test web pages for accessibility. They offer basic instruction and priorities for improving websites. Because they lack human intelligence, however, they usually generate a list of items that must be manually checked by the webmaster.

Some testing tools report empty ALT tag values on spacer images as errors. Since screen-reading software recites the ALT text of images, adding ALT text for a graphic that has no importance for anything beyond layout can actually reduce a website's usability. Having more than 80 characters' worth of description in ALT text is also a mistake, though testing tools may not check for this.

The best way to test for accessibility is to turn to users. Those who rely on screen-reading software can provide invaluable feedback. Another method webmasters can use to capture the true experience of differently-abled users is to try out assistive technology themselves or to emulate the experience through the use of tools like text-only browsers.

Once website accessibility problems are identified, webmasters have to work on their remediation. Checklists provided by testing software can help. WebAIM ([www.webaim.org](http://www.webaim.org)) provides tutorials on everything from how to make a PDF accessible by using Adobe's tagging capabilities to using the testing tools on Dreamweaver and FrontPage. It also provides links to additional tools such as one designed to make Microsoft Office documents into accessible web pages. The *30 Days to an Accessible Website* guide at [diveintoaccessibility.org/](http://diveintoaccessibility.org/) breaks down the website accessibility project into daily steps that are easily understood. It even discusses making blogs accessible.

Finally, library webmasters should remember that accessibility is both a goal and a process. Each step taken to improve

accessibility improves the overall usability of a library's online resources. That is a goal that any librarian can embrace!

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