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How to weave accessibility into your content

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8–11 minutes

Everyone I spoke to agreed that accessibility must be built in from the start.

Accessible content depends on web browsers, add-ons, author tools, websites, and access technologies all working together. It's much easier to line up all those complex elements from the start, rather than worrying about accessibility when the content is already live.

“Every product should be thought of and designed with accessibility in mind,” says Orrù.

“Accessibility is one of the foundational ingredients of the product research and development process.”

1. Always have options

One simple rule of thumb is to make sure that every piece of content uses at least two senses.

“When digital content involves only one sensory channel, it generates exclusion,” explains Orrù.

“So videos should always have subtitles to be accessible; images should always include alternative texts; audio should

always come with a transcription, etc.”

There is a popular perception that too many options can be overwhelming, or that rich media might cause a sensory overload for some people — for example, users with autism. But accessibility doesn't have to mean a bare-bones webpage.

Bailey-King is clear that your content can still be multimedia, immersive, and exciting, as well as accessible.

“You shouldn't have any feature that a person can't switch on or off,” she says.

“But so long as those controls are available, you can include whatever you like. The more that you design content where the user can be in control, the more limitations you take away.”

2. Use the right code

The foundation of the internet is HTML. And that's the foundation of accessibility, too.

“Good, clean, solid, semantic HTML,” recommends Bailey-King. “That costs no more money and takes no more time, but it makes a massive difference for accessibility.”

Semantic HTML means labelling the different elements in your content correctly, such as headers, tables, and forms. This makes a huge difference to assistive technologies and screen reader users. If components of your website are labelled incorrectly, then they'll be rendered incorrectly on assistive devices.

You can also use supporting code, such as ARIA, to mark up features specifically for screen readers. Use this to add helpful shortcuts and timesavers, such as a “skip to content” link at the top of the page. But be aware: [the first rule of ARIA](#) is “if you can

use HTML... do so!”

3. Create clear structure

Semantic HTML takes care of the structure behind your content.

But what about the visible structure of the content? How do people experience, search, and navigate through your content?

According to Prill, searchability and structure are essential to accessibility.

“Make sure you have a proper structure, that you have a proper site hierarchy.”

It should be easy to find information through headings, links, and a clear layout.

If you need more incentive to include a clear structure, search engines also appreciate clearly structured HTML.

4. Write readable text

Text is one of the dominant forms of media online. It’s especially important for information-heavy websites, such as content from government agencies, educational institutions, banks, and healthcare.

There are lots of simple, instant ways to improve readability:

- Check that the font size is readable, especially for people with low vision. Make it easy for people to adjust if necessary.
- Break up long pieces of text with bullet points, numbered lists, and headings.
- Never use images of text. Always provide text alternatives — i.e. type out what you want to say. If you have to show graphics or images with text in, use captions so that people with screen

readers can understand.

- When in doubt, favour plain language.
- Don't forget to check that your webpages are still functional when users zoom in. This is a surprisingly common issue!

For best practice, all your features should work at up to 200% zoom. At 400% zoom, the page should automatically reorganise content into a single column for easy reading.

5. Always describe links

Hyperlinks are an essential part of search and navigability. They're also often examples of inaccessible writing.

Think about how many times you've seen a link simply labelled "click here" or "see more". That means nothing!

Instead, link text should always include a unique description. Users should know exactly what to expect when they click on a link.

6. Give users control

The vast majority of internet traffic today is video. And in accessibility terms, that can be great news!

"Video is so amazing... if it's properly captioned, and if you provide transcripts," says Bailey-King.

"The captions must be able to be switched on and off, because the burn-in ones tend to be less accessible and can get really complicated for people who are using different tech."

Similarly, every video should come with effective controls to play, pause, and stop. Autoplay videos can be overwhelming, distracting, or disruptive to assistive technologies.

The same advice applies to audio content such as interview clips and podcasts. Audio-only content should also include visual descriptions when useful; for example, to describe body language or facial expressions that are relevant to a conversation.

The good news is that these actions can also be beneficial for SEO.

7. Make graphics clear

Tables, charts, scrolling animations, and other visual content can all help to convey complex information with clarity. But they only work if you make accessible.

Here are some basic rules to keep in mind:

- Choose colour palettes which are visible for a wide range of people. There are many online tools which will help you preview colours from the point of view of someone with colour blindness or other visual impairments.
- Be wary of colour contrast. Never use colour as the sole method of contrasting information. For example, bars on a bar chart should be differentiated by patterns or labels, as well as colours.
- Avoid flashing or strobing graphics which could trigger seizures. Make it easy for people to scroll away or close graphics which might cause discomfort.
- Check your HTML mark-up and use additional ARIA labels if necessary, especially for tables. Make sure that any interactive features, such as inputting information or editing columns, work for people using assistive tech.