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Be an Ally for Accessibility: Tips for All Librarians

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Be an ally for accessibility
Tips for all librarians

Accessibility is a concern for librarians in digital as well as physical spaces, and we have a responsibility to uphold the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).[1] However, regardless of legal requirements, librarians endeavour to make content available to everyone. People with disabilities are no exception. While some of the more complex accessibility issues should be left to instructional technologists and web developers, there are plenty of things that anyone posting content online can do to increase content accessibility. Here are five tips that we have found useful for creating guides, posting handouts in our Learning Management System (LMS), building online tutorials, or similar activities.

Tip #1: Be the boss of browser extensions. Browser extensions can go a long way toward helping content creators be accessible, although it is not an accessibility requirement. There are a variety of extensions available to those interested in building accessible content. First up: accessibility checkers. These extensions comb through the code on a web page and highlight accessibility violations based on the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines standards. While these extensions are most useful for someone with more robust web editing permissions, like a webmaster, they can still highlight issues with content on platforms like LibGuides or an LMS. A handful of such extensions exist, but we find WAVE (from the folks at Web Accessibility In Mind or WEBAIM), and Site Improve to be easy to use and effective. The second group of extensions to have are link checkers. These extensions crawl through a web page and highlight any broken links. This makes finding broken links on subject guides a breeze. There are dozens of such extensions available. Feel free to experiment with different options. We currently use Check My Links, which is available for Chrome and Firefox. It highlights all links on a page in green if they are working or in red if they are not. The last group of extensions worth getting are disability simulators. These extensions, as the name implies, simulate a variety of disabilities so content creators can experience firsthand how a disabled person would view their content. The standout extension in this category is Funkify. Funkify simulates around a dozen different disabilities ranging from color blindness to loss of motor control.

Tip #2: Be the leader in linking. Linking is at the heart of the web, and it is, therefore, essential to make links as accessible as possible. While creating links is a simple process, there are a couple of nuances to be aware of when it comes to making those links accessible. First, links need to be written in a fashion that conveys their destination. That means links should not be written in generic language like "click here" or "more." They should, in a

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concise manner, indicate where that link will take a user. For instance, a link to a tutorial on searching PsycINFO should say something like "PsycINFO searching tutorial" or "PsycINFO tutorial." This is important. Many users with a visual disability may quickly navigate a page by jumping from link to link ignoring the context surrounding that link. Second, links must be unique. Links that do not go to the same destination cannot have the same clickable text. This can cause issues for subject guide creators. For example, we do not want to have a link in our subject guides for "journals" if there is already a link for "journals" that is part of the main navigation for our site. In this case, it is better to be specific. If our subject guide is for sociology, then a link to "journals" could be changed to "top sociology journals" or something similar. This makes it unique and also makes it more descriptive.

Tip #3: Be the officiate of Office docs.
Content creators often choose to post items, such as handouts, online as Word documents or PDFs. It is essential to ensure that these types of materials are also accessible. There are a few practices that can dramatically improve the accessibility of these items. First, we should use the built-in styles for titles, headings, etc. that exist in platforms like Microsoft Word and Google Docs. These built-in styles do more than change the appearance of our documents. They build a navigation tree in the document that lets users quickly jump to various sections of the document. A sighted user can easily navigate a document by simply scanning th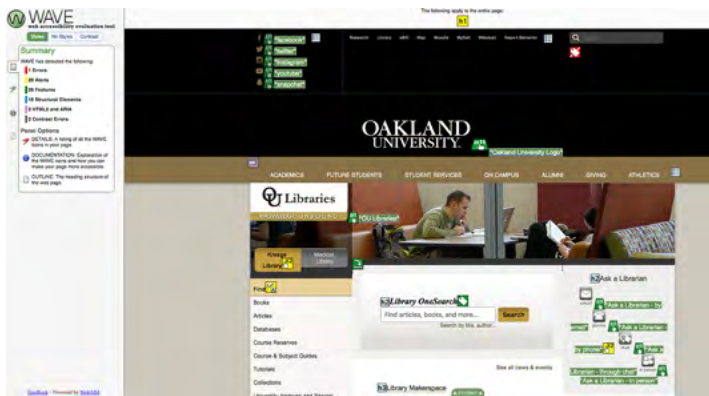rough the headings and reading the section they want. This is not true for a visually impaired user who may be relying on a screen reader to access the document. Without a navigation tree, the screen reader would have to "read" through the document sequentially until the user found the desired section. With a navigation tree, though, a visually impaired user can quickly go to the desired section. Second, like with web pages, it is vital to include alt-text descriptions of images that are included in Office documents. Thankfully, most platforms provide an easy way to do this. In Microsoft Word, for example, after inserting an image into a document, we can add alt text by right-clicking the image and choosing "Edit alt text," which will bring up a box where we can add a description of the image. Last, we do not have to rely on our own knowledge to ensure our documents are accessible. Microsoft Office includes an accessibility checker that highlights accessibility issues in a document. It is located under File > Check for Issues > Check Accessibility.

Screenshot of the WAVE browser extension. View this article online for detailed images.

Tip #4: Be the captain of captions. Captions are necessary for a person who is deaf to be able to understand a video with sounds or spoken words. Adding captions may seem straightforward: just type up the transcript and you're good to go, however, there are best practices to make captions as accessible as possible. The Described and Captioned Media Program (DCMP) has developed a captioning key with suggestions on making captions more readable.[2] First, captions are not the same as subtitles or a raw transcription. Captions contain not only spoken words, but also

describe any sounds or music that play during the video. Second, captions need to be readable to be accessible. DCMP suggests that a timing for captions should be between three-to-seven seconds for each set and to limit the sequence to only two lines of text. Additionally, they suggest that captions be written in a sans serif font. We recommend reading the DCMP Captioning Key in its entirety, as it also goes into great detail about grammatical rules for creating readable captions. Lastly, adding captions may seem like a daunting task, but players such as YouTube and TechSmith Relay can do some of the heavy lifting for content creators. These video platforms have speech-to-text tools that can generate captions that serve as a good starting point.

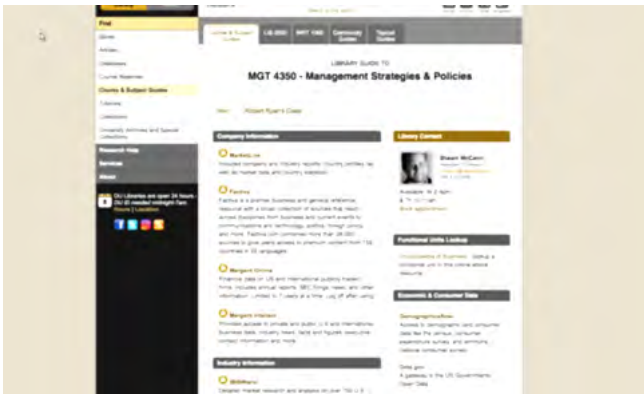**Tip #5: Be the authority on audio descriptions.**
While captions provide the necessary information for a person who is deaf to understand a video, audio description (or described audio) provides the same for a person who has low vision or is blind. So what is audio description? According to the American Council of the Blind, audio description is an additional soundtrack added to a video that describes necessary visual details that cannot be understood from the regular audio.[3] These tracks play audio during available pauses in a video so as not to disrupt the flow. If there are no appropriate pauses, the track can pause the video in order to deliver the description, which is called an extended audio description. Many mainstream video players, such as YouTube, do not support these added tracks. However, You-Describe.org, a project by The Smith-Kettlewell Eye Research Institute, is changing that by allowing users to add audio description to personal videos (or any public video on YouTube).

The Funkify browser extension simulating a web page view with blurred vision and trembling hand.

Creating an account at YouDescribe is easy, but does require a user to have a Google account. For even more information on audio description, DCMP provides an Audio Description Key with detailed instructions on creating your own described media.[4] They also provide webinars on their site that discuss alternate video players and additional fine points.

Conclusion

These tips are not comprehensive, but they are a great place to start for anyone looking to make their content more accessible. We have had success in our institutions by adopting these practices and encourage others to investigate them to see which may easily tie into existing workflows. Finally, check out the content from the folks at Web Accessibility in Mind (webaim.org) to learn even more valuable techniques for creating accessible content.

Notes

1. "Information and Technical Assistance for the Americans with Disabilities Act," U.S. Department of Justice, accessed August 29, 2018, https://www.ada.gov/.

2. "Captioning Key," Described and Captioned Media Project, accessed August 29, 2018, www.captioningkey.org/quality _captioning.html.

3. "What is Audio Description," The Audio Description Project, American Council of the Blind, accessed August 29, 2018, www.acb. org/adp/ad.html.

4. "Description Key," Described and Captioned Media Project, accessed August 29, 2018, www.descriptionkey.org/index.html. ⅌