Idaho Education Technology Association

777 South Latah Street, Boise, ID 83705
www.idahotechtalk.org
board@idahotechtalk.org

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What is Web Accessibility?

"The inclusive practice of removing barriers that prevent interaction with, or access to websites, by people with disabilities. When sites are correctly designed, developed and edited, all users have equal access to information and functionality." - Shad Jessen, Associate Director, Boise State University.

As educational organizations, we already think about creating inclusive environments for all our students. It isn't uncommon to make accommodations for learning in the classroom for students with needs. While this is a technical activity, our goal is to provide equal access for all our staff, students, and patrons for our websites. When reviewing web accessibility it is important to consider visual, hearing, motor, and cognitive usability .

What laws apply?

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 has two sections that are frequently referred to for accessibility needs. The first is section 508 but it only applies to federal agencies and contractors. The second is section 504 which extends to state and local government entities via Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Section 504 states, "No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States…shall, solely by reason of her or his disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any Federal program or activity…"

What standard do I follow?

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) developed the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) to provide a single shared standard for web content accessibility. WCAG is currently at version 2.0 with version 2.1 due to be adopted in 2018.

There are three conformance level in WCAG: A, AA, and AAA. The conformance levels are housed within four principles for accessible web content: Perceivable, Operable, Understandable and Robust.

1. Perceivable - Information and user interface components must be presentable to users in ways they can perceive.
   - This means that users must be able to perceive the information being presented (it can't be invisible to all of their senses)
2. Operable - User interface components and navigation must be operable.
   - This means that users must be able to operate the interface (the interface cannot require interaction that a user cannot perform)
3. Understandable - Information and the operation of user interface must be understandable.
   - This means that users must be able to understand the information as well as the operation of the user interface (the content or operation cannot be beyond their understanding)
4. Robust - Content must be robust enough that it can be interpreted reliably by a wide variety of user agents, including assistive technologies.
   - This means that users must be able to access the content as technologies advance (as technologies and user agents evolve, the content should remain accessible)

If any of these are not true, users with disabilities will not be able to use the Web. For more information on WCAG please visit, https://www.w3.org/WAI/intro/wcag.

What are the highlights of the WCAG 2.0 standard?

Images generally need alternative text filled in. The Alternative text should describe content and function of the image. Images of text are not acceptable (see example below) and should be avoided or the text of the image should provide outside of the image.
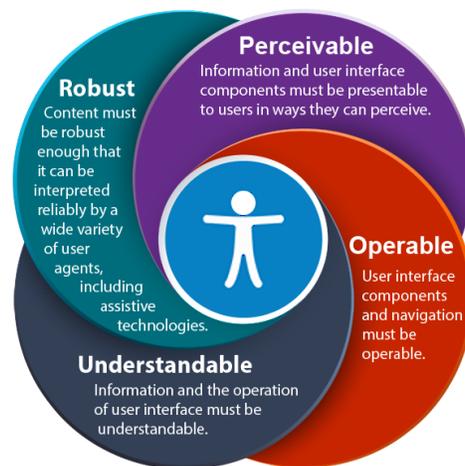
Avoid any text or images that scroll, blink, flash, or move.

Use HTML Structure correctly for good organization and navigation. Don't change the font face and size to make headings use the appropriate HTML tags and use them in a semantic fashion (ie. H1 is the page title, H2 is the next heading and so on).

Use instructions and descriptions on the page that don't require visual queues, e.g. "Click the 'Submit' button" is much better than "Click the button at the bottom of the page to submit"
.

Make it clear what is going to happen when a user clicks a hyperlink. Click Here does not work for accessibility. Click Here to view the report is not sufficient either. A good hyperlink should look like View the "Best Education School Rankings" report (PDF). Hyperlink text must be unique and different destinations must not share the same text.

The site should have style that separate from the content. These items to avoid in your content:
- Avoid centering or right-aligning headings and text
- Do not underline text
- Avoid reliance on color
- Do not use deprecated HTML
- Avoid movement and distractions

Videos on your website must be captioned and should also have text transcripts.

PDF (Portable Document Format) is probably your largest accessibility obstacle. The U.S. Department of Education ED Accessibility Requirements for Electronic Documents are good guides on creating accessible documents but understand the requirement guides are specifically targeting documents posted their website.   PDF files are frequently scanned images of other documents since it is just an image of the text a screen reader can't read the text. If the original document wasn't designed for accessibility then the PDF version of it won't be either. PDF can be costly and time consuming to make accessible. PDF files can be used legitimately for material using technical fonts and/or specialized characters (music notation, math, world languages) or providing print manuals, contracts, and/or publications in formats you are unable to edit. It is generally better convert as much of your PDF content to HTML where possible.

What typically happens?

The Local Education Agency (LEA) will be contacted by a law firm with a complaint about your website's accessibility. The LEA will have to identify how they are going to respond to complaint. The enforcement of the legal requirements is performed by the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights division.

How do you get started?

First, the LEA is going to need to identify a tool to review their website (it probably has 1000's of pages). Second, using the tool you will need to identify issues with the theme (the website styling and design) and content. A fix to the theme could correct 100's of compliance errors. The theme may be provided by a third party and you may have to work with them to correct the errors. The content needs to be corrected by the content owners.

Tools to consider for checking website accessibility:
- SiteImprove https://siteimprove.com/
- AChecker https://achecker.ca/checker/index.php
- COSN Digital Accessibility Toolkit
  http://cosn.org/focus-areas/it-management/digital-accessibility-toolkit
- U.S. Department of Education https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/assisttesting.html

Professional Development and Training for content editors/creators is a necessity. They must understand the accessibility requirements to fix the existing problems and create compliant content in the future.

An LEA needs to work towards accessible website practices to achieve compliance to get to at least A conformance level. Items to consider are adopting web standards policy and procedures for your organization because compliance for web accessibility will extend to any websites hosted outside of the LEA's main website (e.g. teacher pages sites like Weebly). Compliance is an ongoing activity that will need a process to maintain ongoing conformance to the standards (you can't fix this once and move on, it is an ongoing activity). This work should include how you will respond to a complain, if you have not already received one.

What resources would you recommend?

The colleges and universities in Idaho have already had to address these types of complains. They will most likely have staff experienced in addressing these complaints and how they developed practices to address them. Reaching out to the university in your region would be a great place to get started on this journey.

What is coming soon?

It is also important to note the new Section 508 refresh addresses additional electronic information such as Emergency notifications, Program and policy announcements, Notices of benefits and program opportunities, Surveys and questionnaires, Templates and forms, and Education and training materials. The refresh is scheduled to be released in 2018.