

Making your web site accessible for people with a learning disability

The Internet has helped to change the way that people work and communicate. But without more effort by web creators the 1.4 million people with a learning disability in the UK , who are likely to have low literacy and information technology skill levels, will never experience its benefits. Everyone can find using the internet difficult, but for people with a learning disability it is even more of a challenge.

These guidelines are intended to provide help for web designers when developing their sites, to ensure that the web is truly accessible for all.

They support the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) published by the Web Accessibility Initiative* (WAI), aimed at making sites accessible for all people with disabilities, and highlight the particular needs of people with a learning disability.

Worldwide, organisations have already been fined for failing to make their sites accessible to disabled people, so getting it right has become not just a moral issue but a legal one.

Designing a site with the needs of people with disabilities in mind will also help everyone who visits your site.

Make sure your site makes sense to all.

The Basics

Making the words understandable

As a general rule, use clear and simple text (plain English) with short sentences, simple punctuation and no jargon.

- Use headings, bullet points and summaries to make the main points clear.
- Plan what you want to say. Cut out unnecessary detail and present the important information in a logical sequence, one step at a time.
- Try to write as you speak. Don't use jargon, unnecessary technical detail or abbreviations. If you need to use difficult words, include a 'dictionary' or 'list of useful words' to explain them.
- Keep sentences short. If you remember to have only one main idea per sentence this will happen naturally. See if any sentences using commas or joined with 'and' could be broken in two.
- Use simple punctuation. Avoid semicolons (;), colons (:), hyphens (-), or sentences broken up with too many commas.
- Use active and personal language. Using 'you' and 'we' makes your writing more direct and understandable.

- Be consistent. For important concepts, use the same words and phrases consistently even if it sounds repetitive. For example, don't begin writing about 'the delegates' before using different words, such as 'attendees' or 'participants', to describe the same thing.
- Use images such as photos, drawings or symbols to support your text. Aim to make the subject of your material clear at a glance, even to a non-reader. Place images that help explain the text next to (and not as a background to) the relevant words to make your meaning clear.
- If a large number of visitors to your site are likely to be people with a learning disability, consider using computer software symbols, like Widgit or PCS. For more information on using symbols, consult the Accessibility unit at Mencap on 020 7696 5551 (site link).
- When using images make sure the ALT text (Alternative text attribute) of the image tag conveys what is important or relevant about the image for people who might be accessing the page in a non-graphic way (e.g. text only, speech or braille). For more information on making sites accessible for people with sight problems visit www.nib.org.uk/digital/hints.html.
- Because Mencap's own site had to use lots of graphics and tables to help people with a learning disability, a separate site with the same content has been prepared using text only for people with sight problems.
- If using animated graphics, make sure that they can be turned off easily to allow users to focus on the site content.
- Consider the use of audio and video clips for those with low literacy skills.

Making the words easy to read

- Use at least medium size text on each page, making sure you do not use absolute font sizes so that users can adjust their browsers to make text larger if needs be.
- Use a clear typeface such as Arial or Univers without serifs. If saving fonts as a graphic, avoid ornate fonts. Use plenty of spacing. Avoid capital letters, but do highlight important points in bold.
- Use a ragged right edge (text aligned to the left) rather than centered or right justified as that makes it easier to read.
- Used in the right way, colour on your site makes it more attractive and appealing for users. Make sure the colour contrast is strong enough. Avoid a heavily patterned background and don't use too many bright clashing colours which can be distracting. If you do not have a separate text only site for people with sight problems, allow the user to adjust the colour using their browser settings.
- For people using assistive technologies such as braille or screen readers, sites must be written in a valid hypertext mark-up language (HTML)

Navigating the site

- Carefully plan the layout of the home page so that it is immediately obvious what service or information is being provided. Avoid pop-up boxes or moving text that make the page difficult to concentrate on. Pages that are too busy can also confuse people and be distracting.
- Include large, clear, home and help buttons on every page of the site, and in the same place on each page.
- Use the same navigation bars in the same place on your pages, and a clear linear route through, so that users can become familiar with what other information is contained in the site
- Make it clear on the home page who you should contact if you are having difficulty accessing the site or need to contact the organisation by telephone or letter. An e-mail address is not sufficient if you are having difficulty using the Internet.
- Ensure links through to other pages contain enough useful information about their destination and do not just say 'click here'

Testing the site

- Ask a range of people with a learning disability to test your site for you. You will quickly discover that things you had assumed were easily understandable can be confusing to people with a learning disability. Mencap's Accessibility Unit runs focus groups and provides feedback to organisations who are keen to improve the accessibility of their information. Call 020 7696 5575 for more information (link to website).
- Bear in mind that "Bobby" (www.cast.org/bobby/), the accessibility programme that can check your pages for compliance with the WAI Web Content Guidelines works automatically to check the technical aspects of accessibility and does not cover the language needs of people with a learning disability. Feedback from a range of individuals will be more helpful to you.

Moving forward

Making the web truly accessible for all people with a learning disability is not easy, but simply using common sense will help. Mencap's own website – www.mencap.org.uk – has been extensively tested by people with a learning disability and although no site will ever be perfect, shows what can be done.

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*The Web Accessibility Initiative (www.w3.org/WAI/) is part of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) (www.w3.org). The site contains full technical details for building accessible web sites.