



Introduction to Accessibility

What Is It?

Accessibility is really a subset of *usability*. Making electronic content usable means ensuring effective access to all users, including people with disabilities, but also recognizing that we, as designers, have no control over how a user interfaces with our materials. The principles of universal design allow us to build sites that meet the needs of the broadest possible range of users.

Who Benefits?

Your users benefit. An accessible Website will be useful for a blind user, but the same techniques used to ensure this will make it useful for many others as well - including handheld and mobile device users, people browsing from text-only interfaces, and anyone with a specific need to control how content is displayed.

You also benefit! Universal design forces you to think about how information is organized. The process of ensuring accessibility will give you an opportunity to view your site methodically, looking at navigation, visual design, and organizational elements as part of a well-constructed whole.

How Do We Design for Accessibility?

Use World Wide Web Consortium standards, building with the goal of validating to an established grammar (such as HTML 4.01 loose, or XHTML 1.0).

Ensure pages function equally well when the user does not have style sheets, JavaScript, or specific applications or plug-ins. Separate content and presentation!

Provide metadata, descriptions, and alternate means of accessing content. Use `alt` in your `` tags and `summary` in your `<table>` tags. Add captions or transcripts to all multimedia content. Don't assume a user will have a specific input device, like a mouse - design for device independence.

Consider how your content will render when linearized (read from the beginning of markup to the end). Validate and test, both for markup and accessibility. Employ a "skip navigation" feature.

Run it by actual users and ask for feedback!

Why Do It at All?

Building an accessible site means building a strong, well-designed site. Beyond reaching the widest possible audience, you can take pride in knowing that your work is valid by recognized international standards.

UNC-Chapel Hill has strong ethical and legal obligations to serve students with disabilities. Under Sections 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 508 of the U.S. Workforce Investment Act, and the North Carolina Persons With Disabilities Protection Act, students with disabilities are guaranteed equivalent or alternative access to course materials and other information relevant to their academic careers.

Handy Links

Contact me at jason_morningstar@unc.edu

UNC's accessibility site is chock full of useful information: <http://www.unc.edu/webaccess>