Tips for Creating Inclusive Content

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This is the second of three stories covering the Inclusive and Accessible Design [1] series presented by University Libraries [2] and the Disability Resource Center [3].


The first story [6] in the series was published in early February.

With a campus community of more than 60,000, there's a lot worth sharing at the UA. That's reflected in the myriad newsletters, emails, videos, images and other forms of communication that are posted, published and shared every day.

But how inclusive is the content you're producing? Are the videos on your website captioned? Can someone using a screen reader easily understand the visual elements displayed on your website? Is your text written in plain language so people whose first language isn't English can understand your message?

Experts from University Libraries and the Disability Resource Center covered these topics and more. Their tips and guidance can be found below.

Use plain language

When writing for the web, it's best to use plain language that most people will understand, said Rebecca Blakiston, an associate librarian and user-experience strategist for University Libraries. This usually can be accomplished by writing the way you speak, and treating your written content as a conversation between you and the reader.

"Plain language is really part of user-centered design," Blakiston said. "So, as we're thinking about creating experiences for our students and faculty and employees on campus, let's think about how we can use plain language to better that experience."

Blakiston covered a number of ways to achieve plain language, and provided examples:

- **Use active voice instead of passive voice.** Instead of writing "Your eligibility will be verified," opt for a better, more active approach, such as "We will verify your eligibility."
- **Write as a conversation.** The phrase "interested parties can inquire via phone" is not common in day-to-day conversation, which can make it difficult to understand. "Call us if you're interested" is a better option.
- **Avoid unnecessary words.** A phrase like "very small" can be made shorter with the word "tiny," which also is a stronger adjective. Similarly, "request a consultation" could stand in for a longer phrase such as "consultation request form." For readers whose first
language isn't English, avoid colloquial phrases; instead of "piece of cake," just say "easy."

**Use inclusive language**

Certain words and phrases also can make some readers feel more or less included, Blakiston said. She offered these suggestions:

- Use "they" as a gender-neutral pronoun.
- When requesting personal information in web forms, such as religion, gender or ethnicity, allow submitters to write their own or select a "prefer not to say" option.

Be aware that words can carry certain meanings when describing people with disabilities. Blakiston covered words or phrases to avoid and offered alternatives:

- **Avoid** "impairment" or "handicap." **Use** "disability."
- **Avoid** "wheelchair bound" or "confined to a wheelchair." **Use** "wheelchair user."
- **Avoid** "visually impaired." **Use** "blind" or "low vision."
- **Avoid** "special needs." **Use** "accommodations."
- **Avoid** "hearing impaired." **Use** "deaf" or "hard of hearing."

**Provide accessible images**

When displaying images on websites, consider those using screen readers and provide alternative text to describe what is being depicted, said Dawn Hunziker, senior IT accessibility consultant in the Disability Resource Center. Alternative text — or alt text — can be written in HTML image tags or in alt text fields in a website's content management system.

Hunziker added that alt text should include brief, simple descriptions of an image.

"How would you describe that picture to someone if you're just talking to them?" she said.

Decorative images, such as horizontal lines, do not need alt text descriptions, Hunziker said.

However, if images contain text, the text should be included in the alt text. Blakiston noted that messages sent to campus email lists sometimes include flyers that have been inserted into the text area, which isn't helpful to those using screen readers. Instead, the text contained in the flyer should be included in the message.

More information on image accessibility and alt text can be found on the UA IT Accessibility website.

**Caption videos**

All publicly accessible videos must include captions, regardless of when they were posted. Ideally, the captions should be available at the time the video is posted, as opposed to being added later, said Annissa Corsi, senior program coordinator at the Disability Resource Center.

For units with videos that need to be retroactively captioned, Corsi offered these tips for making the process easier:

- If a video’s material is outdated or irrelevant, consider removing the video.
• If a video is not intended for or relevant to the public but is still posted on a public site, consider restricting its access by requiring users to provide their NetID credentials.

For new videos, Corsi suggested:

• Being wary of auto-generated captions, provided by platforms such as YouTube. These captions aren't always accurate, but they can be edited.
• Working off a script for a video or creating a transcript after a video has been created. If captions can't be inserted into a video, consider uploading the transcript with the video.
• Using a professional captioning company. The DRC contracts with several [9], and the cost is about $2 per minute.

Corsi noted that the majority of caption users are not deaf or hard of hearing. Captions also help with search engine optimization, Corsi said, since the caption text can be referenced in search results.

More information about captioning resources is available on the IT Accessibility [10] website. For live events, captioning services can be requested through the DRC [11].

Design webpages to be accessible

Making your online content easier to visually comprehend often starts with how it's written. Blakiston suggests keeping sentences and paragraphs short to allow for easier skimming. Good rules of thumb, she said, are to keep sentences to 25 words or less, and paragraphs to no more than three sentences.

When it comes to placing content on a webpage, Hunziker and Blakiston suggested:

• Adhere to the correct HTML heading order. Screen reader users typically navigate unfamiliar webpages using headings. To make this easier, it's best to use cascading style sheets rather than choosing headings based on the way they look.
• Hyperlink the relevant text. Instead of hyperlinking the words "click here" or "learn more," it's better to hyperlink the name or title of the content the link will lead to.
• Use bulleted or numbered lists. These are particularly useful for organizing related items or instructions. Screen readers will identify these as lists to users.
• Use tables wisely. Tables are great for "if, then" content, such as varied pricing information. Avoid using tables for layout purposes, such as making a column a certain width.
• Pay attention to color. To maximize site accessibility for those who are blind or have low vision, ensure that your site uses good color contrast. This generally involves displaying dark text on a light background, or vice versa. Also, avoid using color to indicate meaning, since some colors cannot be seen by everyone. Links that are only indicated with color, for example, can be made clearer if they also are underlined.
• Don’t make text difficult to read. Avoid justified text, which aligns text to the left and right margins by varying the spacing between words. A better option is to justify text to the left only. Also avoid using all-caps or italics.

Find more information about accessible website design on the IT Accessibility [12] website.

*The slide deck for "Creating Content for Everyone" [13] is available on Box. A Zoom recording of the presentation [14] is available via Panopto.*