WordPress VIP

Best practices for accessibility on government websites

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Introduction

Government websites are built to help people. Whether for annual events like registering a car or significant life events like retirement or the death of a spouse, the community is counting on your website to help them find the information they need. In some circumstances, people need to navigate a combination of government phone numbers, offices, and websites to access the services they depend on.

Imagine trying to complete this journey with a visual, cognitive, or neurological disability. How would you manage?

If you are part of the team responsible for a government website, your job is to help make information and services available to everyone in the community. Website accessibility helps you achieve this goal by designing and developing your website in a way that is functional for the widest range of users, including people with visual, auditory, cognitive, or motor disabilities, to adhere to legal requirements.

One positive side effect of building for broader access is a better experience for all users.

Why accessibility matters

Take a simple example like trying to read text on a screen. For some people, readability is improved by increasing the font size on your phone or turning on a feature that increases text contrast. Those are accessibility settings used by many people—even those who don't consider themselves to be disabled.

Accessibility is for everyone

It's generally accepted that 20% of all people have some form of recognized disability. According to a [study by the Appt Foundation](#), 45% of Dutch iOS users and 61% of Android users have at least one accessibility setting active on their device. This underscores the notion that accessibility is for everyone.

Following accessibility standards is also beneficial to populations who don't necessarily have a recognized disability. Aging starts impacting vision long before most people would consider themselves "old". As we age, it gets harder to read text when the background behind it has a low contrast ratio. It's also additional work for our eyes to read long blocks of text.

Imagine finding yourself as an aging citizen caring full-time for your grandchild, while trying to engage with services you spent your entire life interacting with in person, by phone, or with a pen and paper.

In 2019, WebAIM conducted an accessibility evaluation of the top 1 million websites. They found that 97.8% of them had issues like low contrast text and missing alt text on images. As of the [2025 version of their study](#), that number has only decreased slightly to 94.8%, which shows there's still a great deal of work to be done. At the Federal level, the United States considers making accessibility and other customer experience improvements important enough to dedicate an [entire department](#).

Modernizing your government website by following the U.S. Web Design System and Web Content Accessibility Guidelines makes sure that both disabled and aging populations can easily navigate to find important government content. Actively working to meet people where they are and be responsive to how they navigate life.

Some accessibility features are highly practical in situations that have nothing to do with any kind of impairment. Audio transcripts and captioning for videos are two great examples. Both create accessibility for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. They also enable your content to be understood when turning up the volume might be inappropriate.

Key standards and legal requirements for compliance

There are a number of legal requirements for complying with website accessibility, depending on where your government site is located. They all leverage Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) as a set of standards for knowing whether you are in compliance or not.

Overview of WCAG

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines are the recognized international standard for making your website accessible to the widest audience. The standards were developed by the [W3C's Web Accessibility Initiative](#) and have gradually evolved over time based on four core principles.

Perceivable
The information presented on a website and the user interface must be provided in a way that can be understood using only one of their senses.

Operable
Website interaction must be possible without requiring touch or mouse input, including navigation by keyboard-only input or voice commands.

Understandable
Website users should be able to understand what's presented on your website pages.

Robust
Your website must effectively communicate with all users and remain compatible as new assistive technologies emerge.
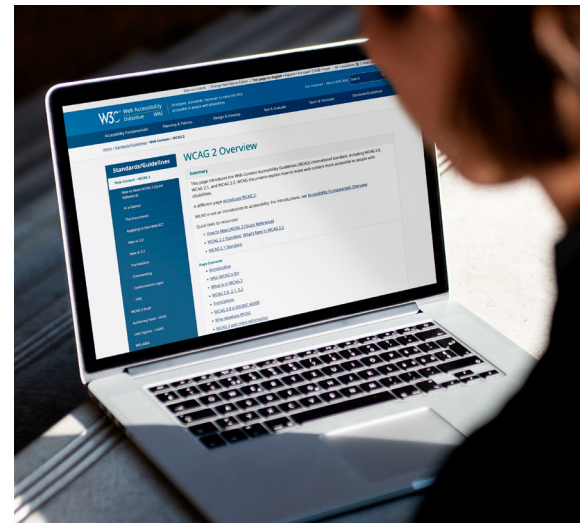
WCAG Guidelines

The guidelines are intended to be a technical standard that defines what needs to be implemented in order to achieve an accessible user experience. The guidelines continue to evolve, with WCAG 2.2 being the latest version updated in December 2024. Most legal requirements in the US and EU align to WCAG 2.1 Level AA.

WCAG has three levels of conformance:

A—minimum accessibility

AA—recommended accessibility to meet most government requirements

AAA—highest accessibility

Accessibility laws in the United States and the European Union

A number of laws in the US and EU impact government websites. Failing to adhere to the requirements puts your website in violation of the law.

United States laws

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act
Section 508 requires federal agencies to make their information and communication technologies accessible to people with disabilities.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
The ADA was originally designed for physical spaces. Courts in the US increasingly interpret the ADA to apply to websites, particularly government websites and large public companies.

21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act (IDEA)
IDEA mandates federal agencies to modernize and make improvements to their digital services, including usability, security, and accessibility improvements. It also requires optimization for mobile devices.

European Union laws

Currently, some member states within the European Union have their own particular standards and enforcement requirements. There is, however, an effort to create more consistency across governments through the European Accessibility Act.

European Accessibility Act (EAA)
From June 28, 2025 onward, the EU mandates accessibility for all new products, including websites and apps. By 2030, there's an expectation that all websites and apps be compliant— regardless of when they were originally released. The goal of the EAA is to standardize requirements across member states, which currently have inconsistent standards in place. WCAG 2.1 Level AA is currently an accepted standard for compliance with EN 301 549, which is the EU standard for measuring website accessibility.

Web Accessibility Directive of 2016
Government websites and mobile apps created by EU member states are mandated to comply with WCAG 2.1 Level AA.

Tips for implementing government website accessibility requirements

Reading through all the steps involved in complying with website accessibility requirements can feel overwhelming. Fortunately there are tools you can use to test your current level of compliance, along with tools that make implementing changes for the purpose of compliance easier. In this section we will highlight some ways you can simplify the process of designing your site, formatting your content, improving multimedia accessibility, and enhancing the overall user experience.

	Contrast Ratio	WCAG
A	21:1	✅ AA ✅ AAA
A	9.4:1	✅ AA ✅ AAA
A	2.78:1	❌ AA ❌ AAA

Color contrast

While all of the WCAG guidelines improve the accessibility of your website, one of the easiest wins to help almost every site visitor is making sure the contrast ratio between the color of foreground text and the background color is high enough. Paying attention to contrast ratios greatly benefits users with low vision while also having a positive impact on all users as they age.

According to the WCAG guidelines, meeting WCAG 2.1 Level AA requires a contrast ratio of 3:1 for large text and a ratio of 4.5:1 for small text (where the font is 13pt or less). There are tools like the WebAIM Contrast Checker that can help verify contrast levels for specific color combinations. Block-based editors like Gutenberg for WordPress make it easy to adjust colors to comply with these contrast requirements.

Responsive layouts

Responsive layouts adapt the on-screen display to the size of the screen you are using. The layout may look very different on a phone than on a 4k monitor. By resizing and reordering the content to fit the screen, usability with assistive technologies is maintained. Many WordPress themes are designed to be responsive by default. Picking one as a baseline for your site design is a good way to start with a more accessible experience. Browse over to the current WordPress Twenty Twenty-Five theme, and test drive the out-of-the-box responsiveness for a demo of what good looks like.

Additionally, theme flexibility is a superpower of WordPress. What might require custom coding by a front-end software developer on many platforms takes just a few clicks in WordPress. This creates efficiencies in digital service delivery and earning constituent trust.

Content description

Content description represents an ongoing challenge that needs to be addressed each time you add new content or interactivity to your website. This includes using appropriate alt text on images, making sure link text is meaningful, and that form fields and buttons are labeled.

Alt text on images

Missing alt text commonly gets flagged as a test failure when addressing website accessibility. While it's generally true that descriptive text should be present, there's some nuance to when and how to add it. If an image is on a page for decorative purposes only, no alt text is required. If an image represents a metaphor, the alt text should explain the metaphor not describe the contents of the image.

Descriptive link text

When you add a link to a page, it's important to make it clear why a user might want to click that link. Words like "click here" or "read more" are vague and don't provide the right level of context for someone who may be using assistive technology. Choose concise but informative text instead.

Labeling fields and buttons

Labeling form fields or buttons happens in the HTML. It's important so that screen readers can help users understand what is required in each field or why they might want to interact with a button. This is another case where the WordPress Block Editor can make it easy to create reusable components that comply out of the box.

User experience

Keyboard accessibility

Keyboard navigation support is essential for users who may not be able to use a mouse for page navigation. It allows a user to move between onscreen elements using a combination of the tab and enter keys. If you use dropdown menus, it's important to check that those remain functional when using a keyboard instead of a mouse.

Focus order

Testing navigation both on page and throughout your site using a screen reader like VoiceOver helps you understand the focus order, or sequence, in which users experience the site.

A good example of where this benefits users is in filling out a form. Take a simple form with a name field, email field, and submit button. If someone is navigating your site with a keyboard, you want to make sure they start with the name field and enter an email address before being asked to use the submit button.

Language declaration

The language on the page might be obvious to you, but a screen reader won't automatically know the language unless you make an explicit declaration in your website pages. There are WordPress plugins that can make this declaration for you. This becomes more important when you have a multi-language site or when subsections within a page might be in another language.

Audio and video content

One area where artificial intelligence (AI) is simplifying the process of complying with accessibility requirements is multimedia. A number of great tools exist that will automatically caption your video or output a transcript based on an audio file. It's worth noting that while these tools are a fast track to getting captions and transcripts generated, they aren't perfect.

Testing and maintaining accessibility

To understand what it's like to navigate your site using accessibility features, there are a couple of ways to simulate the experience. Try navigating your site using only the keyboard, without a mouse or trackpad. Or turn on VoiceOver on your computer. Cover your monitor with a sheet of paper and use VoiceOver functionality to navigate the site.

If you get stuck in either of these scenarios, it's likely because your site has accessibility gaps. The good news is that a number of automated and manual testing resources are designed to help you identify these gaps.

For government sites, WordPress VIP provides many out-of-the-box accessibility features. We look at accessibility from the perspective of your end website reader, your website administrator, and your content creators. This means that whether you're in the WordPress VIP Dashboard, WordPress Admin, or reading the website, accessibility is taken care of across all levels.

Suggested AI tools for accessible multimedia production:

Descript

Automatically creates both captions and transcripts, including translation into multiple languages.

Synthesia

An interesting option for creating videos by starting with a script. The tool takes your written script and creates a video using AI, which then gives you full captions and a complete video.

Testing resources

One advantage to using a CMS like WordPress is the ability to leverage plugins to test for accessibility. One option that analyzes and scores all content on your site is the Equalize Digital Accessibility Checker.

After installing this plugin, you can see how each post and page on your site scores related to the WCAG level of your choice. It catches issues at the theme level that might impact every page on your site, as well as issues within a post, like missing alt text.

Another option is to use tools like WordPress VIP's website metric tool. It analyzes your site for a number of performance factors as well as for accessibility.

For a deeper understanding of your website's accessibility experience, services like Fable Engage provide teams of testers. The service allows you to construct a test scenario, including requesting the type of accessibility technology to use during testing. The testers are people who rely on assistive technologies, so you get feedback from real users instead of lab test scenarios.

WebAIM offers their Web Accessibility Evaluation Tool (WAVE) as either a browser plugin that checks pages as you navigate them on your site or as an API that can run tests in a more scaled fashion. The browser plugin is free and can give you a sense of how the tool works before you consider licensing the testing engine.
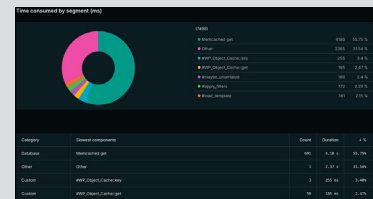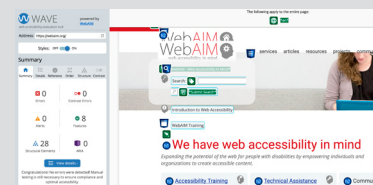

WordPress VIP performance metrics
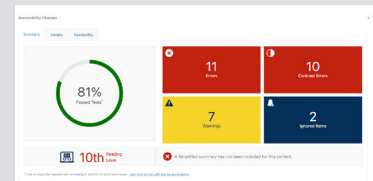
Dashboard view of the Equalize Digital Accessibly Checker

Fable Engage real user accessibility testing

WebAIM's WAVE accessibility panel

Auditing your website

The work doesn't stop once you've done an initial round of accessibility testing. Periodic audits help catch issues that can crop up over time. Missing alt text or button labels can increase over time as organizations increase their total content or change personnel. An audit is a good way to uncover the gaps and create a prioritized list of what to fix.

Testing resources like the ones mentioned in the previous section are a great way to audit your site in an ongoing way.
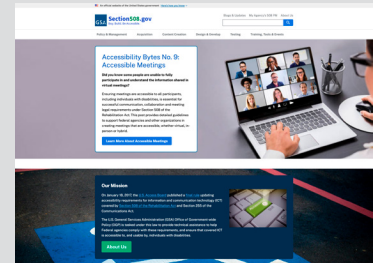

section508.gov

Accessibility resources

A number of resources exist to help your organization implement and meet accessibility requirements.

gov.uk

> WCAG documentation provides a deeper dive into each of the guidelines for making your website accessible.
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> Government resources like Section508.gov and ADA.gov offer deeper dives into building websites that meet accessibility requirements.
>
> Design systems with accessible components are available as a baseline for building compliant websites. Both GOV.UK and the US Web Design System are great resources for this.
>
> Training resources are available from a wide variety of providers. The W3C is a good starting point.
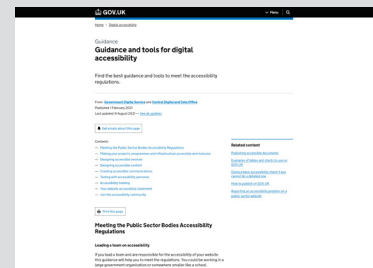
How WordPress VIP improves website accessibility

WordPress VIP simplifies the process of meeting website accessibility requirements. A number of WordPress themes are designed to meet WCAG standards. Customizing one of those themes within your WordPress VIP environment is a great way to fast-track accessibility compliance.

The WordPress VIP admin experience is designed to be accessible, giving your internal users an accessible experience out of the box. The Gutenberg Block Editor is also designed for accessibility so that content creation is an accessible experience for all users. We can help you modernize your site using WordPress while quickly complying with WCAG 2.1 Level AA in a way that passes accessibility testing.

Assistive technologies are used by a much wider percentage of the population than those who might be legally designated as disabled. By implementing accessibility guidelines, you benefit every user of your website, which means that you are helping a much larger percentage of the governed population. Accessibility modernizes and future-proofs government services, which demonstrates a commitment to supporting your constituent community.
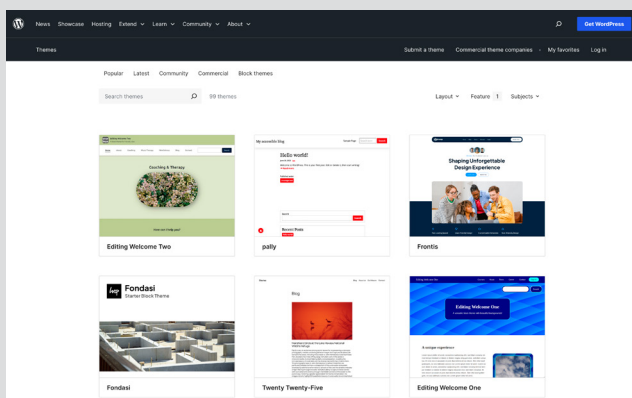
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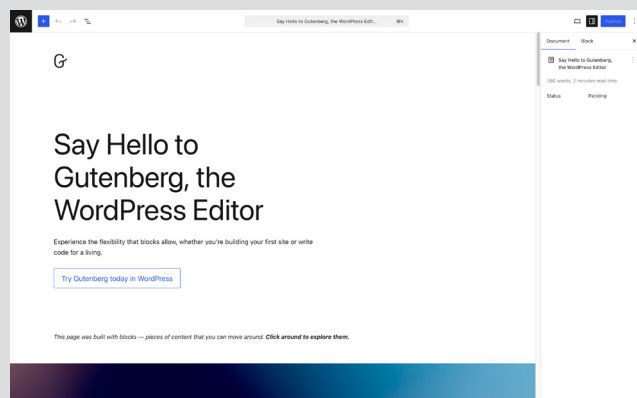
Gutenberg Block Editor

W VIP

WordPress VIP combines the ease and flexibility of WordPress with unmatched scalability and security for the world's largest organizations.