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Who is this How To... guide for?

Any arts organisation with a website, or who is intending to have a website or make other materials available online.

Why is this resource necessary?

The web is increasingly important for communicating with all our audiences, and just as we need to make provision for those with disabilities in our venues and through our printed material, we also need to do this when we make information available online.

An "accessible" website is also a well-designed website, so that if you make your website accessible, then all of your audience will benefit. Besides, as part of the Disability Discrimination Act, it's now a legal requirement.

The arts is often at the forefront of considering the needs of audiences who might otherwise be excluded, and yet there is a perception, that because web developments are usually designed by outside companies, and can be costly to build and maintain, that it is difficult and costly to make your website accessible.

This guide takes you through the basics of web accessibility, and gives you an understanding of the issues, so that you can take a look at your own website and ensure that it follows best practice.

What is web accessibility?

Web accessibility is a phrase used to mean that the information available on your website is also available to those people who may have disabilities.

The internet has been a wonderful resource for many isolated groups, providing information, communication and entertainment for people with a wide range of disabilities. That means that there's not one "magic bullet" that can make your website perfect for all!

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Things to bear in mind

There are a number of different accessibility issues that you should consider.

- working with screen readers: blind and partially sighted users will have software that “reads” the page to them. An accessible website will work well with screen readers.
- user preferences: there are a number of user preferences that you can incorporate into your site, including variable sized text, different colour schemes, (often useful for users with dyslexia), and different navigation methods for those who do not use a mouse.
- browser compatibility: everyone accesses websites through a “browser” whether on a computer or a mobile device; newer websites and more advanced features should still work in older browsers
- clear writing and design: it is not just people who define themselves as disabled that can benefit from a well-designed and well-written website. Your audience may well include people with learning difficulties or for whom English is a second-language.
- using rich content: the arts has lots of rich content, including photographs and videos, and this can be both useful to disabled users and a problem.

Working with Screen Readers

Many people with sight problems use screen readers to access the web. Because this software may not be updated as often as other software, it may be designed to work with older browsers. A screen reader “reads” the content of a website. This is fine when it’s just reading text, but as you know, most websites contain graphics, images and layout. A few years ago many websites used “tables” for layout – so that a screenreader would have to read all the different formatting on a website as well as the content. You can imagine how annoying this was!

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Luckily, web standards have improved website design to the extent where the standard now is to separate layout from content. How this works is through a technology called CSS ("Cascading Style Sheets") which applies a "style" to the content of a page. You might be used to styles in Microsoft Word, where you can apply a "style" to a heading or a section of a document. It works in just the same way, but covers all elements of layout. The CSS template is just a "holder" for the text on a web page. If you change the template, the layout of the page will change, but the content will remain the same.

User Preferences

User preferences allow you to change the settings of your internet browser, and therefore how particular websites look. Some websites also allow you to change the settings on their website, and store your preferences so that next time you come to the website using the same computer, your settings are stored.

The most common user preference is "text size". This is why it is important that all text on your site can be changed. If you have "buttons" or navigation bars that use pictures then the text within these pictures will not be resizable. "Text only" versions of your website are also possible, and the BBC developed "Betsie" as a free programme which could create a "text only" version. However, a well-designed standards-compliant website should alleviate the need to use this.

One of the issues around "web accessibility" is that not all users have the same needs – and indeed, anyone with dyslexia may have opposite requirements to someone with other site problems. The internet has been very helpful for dyslexics, but providing user preferences, around choosing text and background colour, will improve your website's accessibility.

Although the use of a "Mouse" or trackpad (on a laptop) is how most people use their computer, there is no reason why you need to use these to browse the web. People may prefer to navigate your website using their keyboard. This may include using the tab and backspace keys to "tab" through links on the site, or through providing a "skip to content" option at the top of the page.

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Access keys, where different keys have been assigned a different function, can only be used, however these are not standard across all browsers.

For instance, the following are the access keys across all BBC sites:

'Alt' + '0' - link to access keys documentation.

'Alt' + '1' - link to BBC online homepage (www.bbc.co.uk/).

'Alt' + '2' - 'Skip to main content' link.

'Alt' + '3' - Link to sitemap (a-z index at www.bbc.co.uk/a-z/).

'Alt' + '4' - link to search (places cursor in the search form box at the top of the page).

From http://www.bbc.co.uk/accessibility/win/keyboard/mouse_alt/accesskeys.shtml

Browser Compatibility

Ask any web developer what they like least about their job and chances are they will say "making it work in older browsers." Although the web was designed to be platform-neutral, and has a worldwide standards committee (www.w3c.org) to enforce this, there are still issues of compatibility across different browsers.

At the time of writing the following were the 10 most popular browsers.

| | |
|-------------------------|--------|
| 1 Internet Explorer 7.0 | 19.33% |
| 2 Internet Explorer 8.0 | 19.06% |
| 3 Firefox 3.5 | 18.74% |
| 4 Internet Explorer 6.0 | 12.83% |
| 5 Firefox 3.0 | 11.59% |
| 6 Safari 4.0 | 4.37% |
| 7 Chrome 3.0 | 3.90% |
| 8 Firefox 2.0 | 1.56% |

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| | |
|--------------|-------|
| 9 Opera 10.0 | 0.93% |
| 10 Opera 9.6 | 0.57% |

Given the millions of people who use the web it is important that your website works in all of the most popular browsers. Each of these browsers, even different versions of Internet Explorer or Firefox, will read your website slightly differently.

Think about who your users are. IE 6.0 and other older browsers may still be common in large public sector organisations for instance, where they have a standard software build. Apple computers have a smaller market share than PCs, but your website will need to work with the most commonly used browsers on an Apple, Safari and Firefox.

Your website will also be viewed on mobile phones and other portable devices, with a smaller screen size. Popular websites like the Guardian may have a web-optimised version of their site, but it's unlikely that yours will. It's still worth testing to see how it looks on a mobile phone.

Clear Writing and Design

Although the web grew up as a text-based medium this is no longer always the case. Our most popular websites include music, video and photographs. Even when we read text on a website it might not be written by professionals, but by friends and acquaintances, through our web-based email, or through social networks such as Twitter and Facebook.

When your organisation is communicating with it's audience, you should be as clear and concise on the web as you would be in a print publication.

A web page can be made more readable by good use of short paragraphs, and by dividing it into sections with clear headers. If you can fit an article or story "above the fold" (i.e. so that no scrolling is required) then it may be easier to navigate. However, different computers, operating systems and browsers will have different screen resolutions.

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As an organisation, consider what information is critical. Also, if you are advertising an event, try and put all the information relating to it in one place, so it's easy to find contact details, time and date, and information on how to book a ticket.

If you work a lot with audiences who have learning difficulties, children, older people or people for whom English is a second language, you should consider their needs. Sometimes "picture clues" can help (for instance, using a Word or PDF icon when there's a document of that format to download).

Dada, www.dadahello.com, the Liverpool based Deaf and Disability Arts Organisation, went as far as creating an "easy read" and a "normal read" version of their website – with a content management system developed to allow them to input both versions. Even if you're unlikely to go this far, it makes sense to test some of your web content with different audiences, to see if they are able to navigate and understand what you have written.

Using Rich Content

The web would be quite boring to look at if it only contained text. Pictures can improve the look of a web page, encourage people to stay longer on your website, and can showcase what your arts organisation does. Showing pictures of your building, your shows, or simply pictures of people who have attended in the past, can help encourage audiences to interact with your organisation.

If you are using pictures, graphics and video on your website you want to ensure that they can also be read by screen readers. All pictures, whether photographs, graphics or images, should have an "alternative text" description. This allows the pictures to be read by screen readers. For instance you might want to describe a logo as "BBC logo", or a picture of a show as "The audience shows its appreciation for last year's impressive firework display." You should avoid meaningless descriptions like "festival picture 1".

Video can be more problematic and require more work. It may be that video on your website is there to illustrate other content (e.g. a case study) where you

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already have text. You can provide a text transcript of a video, or a description of what the video is about, or even add captioning to a video. A lot depends on the audience it is for, and what you are trying to say.

For organisations working with a particular group of people, for instance the deaf community, video might be an intrinsic part of your website, allowing sign language versions of other material on the website.

If you use audio on your website, then its important that you provide a text equivalent.

Working with 3rd Party Websites

Many websites now incorporate 3rd party services. These might include content sharing sites such as Flickr and YouTube or social networks like Facebook and Twitter. If you are using these, then you might want to consider how you use them. It may well be better to "embed" content within your own web pages, rather than be directing users to an external site.

Auditing your own website

Whether you're looking to upgrade your website or not, there's nothing to stop you doing a basic audit of your website.

Think about the following -:

1. Have all pictures and graphics got alt. text descriptions?
2. Does your site provide another way of getting in touch if people have any problems
3. Have you any accessible features on your website (e.g. access keys) and if so, is it clear, and do they work.
4. Can you alter the text size on your website – including navigation and buttons?

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5. If you use video on your website is there a text based alternative?
6. Have you tested it with a screen reader such as Jaws?
7. Have you tried it in different browsers, with different screen resolutions, on different machines (inc. PCs, Macs and mobile phones)
8. Is the text on your site easy to read and understand?
9. Is there anyone you can ask to test your website for ease-of-use and accessibility? (This might be a member of staff, a volunteer, a friend or relation even.)
10. Are all staff aware of accessibility issues?

Chances are you'll come up with a list of requirements – some of which you might be able to do yourself, other's might require help. It might be that when you next put in a funding application you can highlight the importance of accessibility as one of the reasons for needing to update your site.

Don't Assume

Providing an accessible website should be top of all arts organisations' priorities. However, it is important that you don't make assumptions based on either your own understanding of accessibility or that of your web developers. A website might be technically accessible, but still be difficult for certain individuals to access. Provide alternative methods for people to get in touch with you if they need to. This might be particularly relevant if you are using online registration or similar systems.

It is important that you don't assume what needs your audience might have. The most accessible venues aren't just the ones that have been adapted to particular needs, but where the staff have an understanding of accessibility issues.

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Get Advice

Just as you are an expert in your particular art form, there are plenty of people and organisations out there who have expertise in web accessibility.

There are a range of good resources from disability organisations including RNIB, AbilityNet and others. A list of relevant links is at the end of this guide.

Many voluntary sector support agencies also provide advice and support, which is just as relevant to the arts sector as to the voluntary sector.

The BBC are often, rightly, cited as an exemplar, and they share their good practice with others.

Finally, your own audience are often the best place to go for advice about how you could do things better, or to identify things that aren't working.

Working with Developers

Web development remains a specialist job. Even if you have an in-house web developer, the chances are that you will bring in a web developer and/or designer to work on your website.

This "how to" guide is not aimed at developers, but at arts organisations. Don't be afraid about asking your web developer what they mean by accessibility.

A few don'ts....

- Ask your web developer to what standard he works. He should mention W3C standards.
- Flash websites can be inaccessible. Flash is a technology that can still be useful (e.g. all videos on Youtube are essentially Flash movies).
- Your developer should be using CSS to separate layout and content, and not using pictures for buttons and navigation bars
- if developing a site yourself, avoid cheap or free "web building" software as it's likely that it doesn't provide much in the way of accessibility

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- if in doubt, ask. However this is not always the case. An open source website platform such as Wordpress has been developed according to web standards, and may be far more accessible than anything you could design yourself.
- don't assume that because another website is deemed accessible that yours will be, think about who your audience is

A few do's....

- web standards are a good thing. The W3C (world wide web consortium) provides "web standards" and different accessibility ratings. Your web developer should be aware of these, and be able to explain what they mean
- check your current website to make sure pictures and photographs have alternative text descriptions
- ask your web developer about what "user acceptance testing" and "browser testing" he will undertake – the latter should include IE6 as well as more recent versions, and look at the website being used on PCs, Macs, and mobile phones
- your content management system should prompt you to provide alternative text for images as standard, rather than an option
- ensure that anyone updating your site is aware of the site's accessibility features – it's no use having them, and not using them

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Understanding web accessibility :

The BBC – My Web, My Way <http://www.bbc.co.uk/accessibility/index.shtml>

AbilityNet - <http://www.abilitynet.org.uk/>

RNIB – Web Access Centre http://www.rnib.org.uk/professionals/webaccessibility/Pages/web_accessibility.aspx

NCVO – ICT Hub <http://www.ictHub.org.uk/>

Webaim - <http://www.webaim.org/>

Dada – exemplar site www.dadahello.com

Four Quarters – web development consultancy <http://www.fourquarters.biz/>

Disability Discrimination Act <http://www.webcredible.co.uk/user-friendly-resources/web-accessibility/uk-website-legal-requirements.shtml>

Web development:

W3Schools - <http://www.w3schools.com/>

Bruce Lawson - <http://www.brucelawson.co.uk/>

A List Apart - <http://www.alistapart.com/>

Webcredible - <http://www.webcredible.co.uk/>

PAS78 Guide to Accessible Websites - <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/footer/accessibility-statement/general-web-accessibility-guidance/> (Please note, an updated version of this is due in 2010.)