

Guidelines for website accessibility

Accessibility, in the strict sense of taking account of disabilities, aims to restore the universality of Internet access. In this respect, visual impairment reveals most clearly the reality of a drift towards a lack of accessibility of the Internet, as the equipment and software for visually impaired persons are specific (vocal synthesis, Braille terminal). For visually impaired persons, accessibility is of critical importance: consulting an accessible website requires more time and concentration for a visually impaired person, but consulting a website that is not very or not at all accessible is simply impossible. In order for a website to be made fully accessible to all, several fundamental issues must be taken into consideration:

Simplify search methods

It is important to re-examine the CITA website (“Centrale d’Information des Transports de l’Aisne”, Information Centre for Transport in the Aisne Region), when considering the needs of disabled persons. For example, the search method seems difficult – this should therefore be simplified, in order to make the website accessible to blind or visually impaired persons. For those with a visual impairment, accessibility is of critical importance: consulting an accessible website requires more time and concentration for them, and consulting a website that is not very or not at all accessible is simply impossible.

Ensure that the website pages are compatible with all the equipment, software, browsers or screen readers, and all interfaces used by disabled persons.

Those who find it too difficult to read text on a screen can use a reading system. This system converts the data on the screen into a format which is compatible with a Braille display (or “Braille terminal”, an electro-mechanical device connected to the screen which displays Braille lettering), or with a vocal synthesiser, or the “BrowseAloud” service: www.browsealoud.com/page.asp?pg_id=80002. It is also possible to use a screen magnifier (which enlarges an area of the screen). It is very important for each website page to be compatible with any equipment, software, browser or screen reader used to navigate the site – which means that the site must not include text in dialogue boxes, in columns, using menus, etc. It should be noted that most visually impaired people do not use Braille – less than 10 per cent of visually impaired persons know Braille, and this number is decreasing – but that the use of vocal synthesisers will increase in future.

The site must be compatible with all interfaces used (use of the keyboard or of the mouse, for example), and with all technologies (a 17 inch flat screen, a laptop, a mobile telephone connected to the internet, etc.) – the use of mobile telephones to access information about public transport will rapidly increase in the near future.

Physical handicaps (difficulty using the mouse and/or the keyboard, use of specific equipment) must also be taken into account in the fundamentals of website accessibility.

Facilitate the perception, operation, navigation, clarity and structure of the website

The website must give all users, whatever their physical capabilities, an equivalent ability to access its services. A mental handicap or even reading difficulties cannot be circumvented by using specific software or equipment. They require content design in specific formats: simplified language for mental handicaps, broadcasting of audio content for illiteracy, and translation into sign language for deafness. In addition, the perception, operation, navigation, clarity and structure of the website must present an unambiguous and logical tool.

Essential points for making a website accessible

Perception

- Use clear, neutral backgrounds, with no patterns
- Do not use green and red together, use combinations with little contrast
- A beige or pale mauve background can help dyslexic persons
- Use dark text on a light background, rather than the opposite
- Check legibility by alternating the background colours – it is best to offer a choice to the reader
- The length of the line of text must be between 60 and 70 letters per line at most
- Columns are not compatible with Braille terminals and screen readers, but, if columns are necessary, each column must be separated by a margin
- The recommended letter and font type is basic “sans serif”, of medium thickness, for example, Arial, sans serif, Century Schoolbook and Universal
- The font size must be between 12 and 14 points, with letters between 2mm and 4 mm
- The use of more than two different fonts is not recommended

Operation

- Define hot keys (especially useful for those who cannot or can no longer use a mouse to navigate)
- A visually impaired person could use “screen magnifier software” in order to enlarge the size of the pages they are browsing, and thus read its content properly
- A blind person could use a Braille terminal or a vocal synthesiser (offers a text variation for auditory equipment)

Navigation

- Add titles to your links
- Define the browser used (Netscape, Internet Explorer...)
- Do not open new windows: do not require links to be opened in a new window, which interrupts the “back” and “forward” buttons
- Allow for searching everywhere

Clarity

- Identify your language (on the screen – useful for readers – and in programming language – for the software that the reader is likely to use)
- Give proper titles to tables and calendars
- Explain any acronyms
- Provide a summary for tables

Structure



- Choose a DOCTYPE (an indication of the programming language used to code a website, allowing browsers to correctly interpret this code and display it appropriately), and use the same configuration on each page in order to establish visual and operational markers which will facilitate navigation.
- Present your most important content first

Other useful references

- <http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10/> - Guide to website accessibility
- <http://www.w3.org/WAI/> - Guide to website accessibility
- <http://www.tiresias.org/> - A clear text created by the RNIB, the organisation for blind and visually impaired people