Creating accessible online information

Field-researched, critical election design techniques to help ensure that every vote is cast as voters intend.

The Field Guides are online at civicdesign.org/fieldguides
About web accessibility

The people who come to your website have a wide range of needs. When we talk about making websites and other materials accessible, the focus is usually on making them work for people who use assistive technology. They might use screen readers or ZoomText to read visual materials, use special keyboards or pointers to navigate and type, or rely on captions and transcripts for audio.

The same techniques for designing accessible websites also help people who may not think of themselves as having a disability. When we design websites to be flexible and accessible, people with low literacy or limited English skills, aging eyes, or a temporary injury can all use websites more easily.

— Dana Chisnell, Field Guides Editor

Resources behind this Field Guide

This Field Guide is based on a substantial body of knowledge on creating accessible websites, including our own research watching voters with disabilities try to use local election department websites.

We found two reports helpful in understanding barriers that voters with disabilities experience:

- Access Denied: Barriers to Online Voter Registration for Citizens with Disabilities
- Understanding Voting Experiences of People with Disabilities

A few more resources to help you make elections accessible include:

- The EAC Quick Start Election Management Guide to Accessibility
- How People with Disabilities Use the Web at the W3C Web Accessibility Initiative
- Web Accessibility in Mind (WebAIM) online articles and technical resources
- A Web for Everyone: Designing Accessible User Experiences by Sarah Horton and Whitney Quesenbery
No. 01

Make sure information about accessible voting is easy to find.

Don’t make voters hunt through your site for information about access to polling places or how the accessible voting system works.

No. 02

Make information easy to read.

Start with large enough text, a clear sans-serif font, and good contrast. Make it easy for voters to adjust the appearance to their own preferences and needs.

See also:
Vol. 01.03: Use big enough type.
Vol. 08.09: Use icons to reinforce instructions
No. 03

Structure the content with headings.

Support the visual presentation by using styles for formatting.

Heading styles should be visually distinct and use correct HTML coding. This helps people using assistive technology (from screen readers to specialized keyboards) read the page.

See also:
Vol. 07.10: Help voters see at a glance what each chunk of information is about.

No. 04

Write helpful, meaningful links.

Avoid repeating the same words (like “learn more”) for a series of links.

Listen to what it sounds like when you read it aloud. Use enough of the right words in links so they make sense and stand alone.

Avoid:
Using the same words for many different links
- Read more
- Click here
- Continue...

Use:
Text that says where link leads
- Find your polling place
- Register to vote
- How to vote by mail

See also:
Vol. 07.06: Write links that use words voters use and that help voters know where they will end up.
Vol. 07.09: Use words that voters use in links, headings, and graphics.
No. 05

Make it easy to jump to the main content on the page.

Create links to skip over banners and menus that are repeated on each page.

Or identify different types of content in the code.

No. 06

Code forms so they are accessible.

Make sure everyone can use voter registration forms, absentee ballot requests, and “My Voter Information” features.

A few simple coding techniques make forms accessible. Connect each label or prompt to its field.
No. 07
Provide alternatives for images, audio, and video.

For all images and multimedia, you need a text alternative for people who cannot see or hear it. This means:

• descriptions of images
• transcripts for audio
• captions for video

No. 08
Keep alternative formats together so voters can choose.

When you post a document or media file, put links to different files together so it’s easier for voters to choose the format that works best for them.
No. 09

Make sure everything works with a keyboard.

People using assistive technology often do not use a mouse. Check your site by using it without a mouse. Instead, try to move through it with the tab and arrow keys. Check to make sure the cursor moves through the page in a logical order.

No. 10

Test the website with voters with disabilities.

There’s nothing like seeing real voters try to use your website to find information to learn how to improve it. Use the same techniques as for testing ballots.

Be sure to check the website for different settings and interaction styles used by people with different disabilities:

- Text size, color and contrast with browser settings
- ZoomText
- Keyboard only
- Screen readers — both JAWS and VoiceOver
- Large and small screens
- Without audio

See also:

Vol. 03: Testing ballots for usability
Tip
Check that the website allows voters with disabilities to use it easily to prepare for voting.

Can voters with different disabilities find, read, and use:
- all the content on the website?
- their sample ballot?
- their own voter registration status and preferences?
- information about accessible voting systems?
- requests for absentee ballots?
- early voting locations and hours?
- the location of their polling place?
- online voter registration forms?
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