

# Web accessibility in media

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Disclaimer: All opinions are mine, not WaPo's

# A bit about me

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/pr/2023/01/25/first-ever-accessibility-engineer-na-med-washington-post/>

“Went to school in the Bay Area”

Majored in CS, but didn't have a CS internship until June 2020, when I ...

... started as an engineering intern at The Washington Post

Went in with mostly a journalism background, having done the college paper thing













Joined WaPo full-time and worked on live elections results coverage from 2021-22

Became The Post's first-ever dedicated Accessibility Engineer on Jan. 18, 2023

# What is accessibility?

According to [Indiana University](#):

“Accessibility is the degree to which a product, device, service, environment, or facility is usable by as many people as possible, including by persons with disabilities.” A common accessibility practice is wheelchair-accessible seats at event venues, which may be reachable via ramps and/or elevators instead of only stairs.

	Permanent	Temporary	Situational
Touch	 One arm	 Arm injury	 New parent
See	 Blind	 Cataract	 Distracted driver
Hear	 Deaf	 Ear infection	 Bartender
Speak	 Non-verbal	 Laryngitis	 Heavy accent

# What is web accessibility?

Basically the same, but in the context of digital products:

Per W3C (a very credible organization), “Web accessibility means that **websites, tools, and technologies are designed and developed so that people with disabilities can use them.** More specifically, people can: perceive, understand, navigate, and interact with the Web. contribute to the Web.”

# What makes something “accessible”?

At its core, inaccessibility is about assumptions. If you assume your users can read, navigate and otherwise understand your content in the same way as you, then you are paving a path to inaccessibility.

In reality, there is no “100% accessibility” score. Automated tools may claim this. You must manually analyze your content to identify assumptions and act on them.

This makes your work more inclusive, and reaching the widest audience possible with the most useful information is what journalism is all about.

Luckily, we have some tools and resources for this.

# Web accessibility in the news

The serif font controversy:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/01/18/state-department-times-new-roman-calibri/>

NASA's alt text:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/07/20/nasa-images-accessible-text/>

The perils of automated “fixes” to website accessibility:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/13/technology/ai-web-accessibility.html>

# Web accessibility in the news (continued)

ProPublica's plain language coverage:

<https://www.propublica.org/article/arizona-promised-to-help-people-with-developmental-disabilities-but-some-had-to-wait-a-long-time-some-did-not-get-help-at-all-plain-text>

Social media accessibility:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/2022/11/18/disability-support-twitter-harassment/>

... and much more

# Web accessibility at a major newspaper

At The Post, we care about the accessibility of our digital products. We have a [statement on our website](#) outlining some of our goals. We aim to include alternative text (alt text) on images, captions on videos and transcriptions of audio content such as podcasts. We also know that accessibility considerations stretch far beyond these fundamental measures. The underlying code of our products should be written with accessibility in mind.

There are extensive guidelines to consider, such as [the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) international standard](#). I've blogged in the past about some of our steps toward [screen reader](#) and [keyboard](#) accessibility.



# So whose job is it, then?

Accessibility is everyone's job in some way, whether they're a journalist in the newsroom or an engineer behind the scenes.

# Some considerations of journalists

- Alt text for articles needs to be written and edited by the newsroom.
- Journalists should write with clear language to make their work accessible to people with cognitive disabilities, lower reading levels or less familiarity with the language or topic. (I wrote [an easy read version of my job blog post.](#))
- Flashing videos, audio, animations and other content needs to be vetted by the newsroom with accessibility in mind before sending it out into the world.

# Some considerations of engineers and designers

- Engineers and designers need to write effective alt text and (in the case of interactive elements like buttons) aria-labels for components on a page.
- Engineers and designers need to build pages with clear, understandable UI/UX.
- Engineers and designers need to build responsive, clean and flexible components, ensuring via manual testing that the content can be accessed in multiple ways (think: screen readers, keyboard controls, dark/light mode, etc.)

# Common accessibility questions

- Do I need to memorize every rule and consideration? No, but document everything that comes up
- Do we really have users with disabilities? What if we don't? (a) disabilities are not static, and neither is your audience; (b) why would you want to exclude even one person from content you care about? (c) the curb-cut effect exists (more on that next)
- How do I know what's relevant for each project? Do your research, and engage with stakeholders

# Making dedicated space for accessibility

My progression at The Washington Post:

- Assigned tickets on accessibility
- Joined #accessibility Slack channel
- Organized “accessibility working group” with bi-weekly knowledge-shares
- Pitched the Accessibility Engineer role and title

So what happened in between each of these? Let's examine the day-to-day work.

# Alt text

Alt text (or alternative text, or an image description) describes an image or gif for people who are blind, have low-vision or otherwise cannot see the image itself.

It is NOT a caption. It should be clear, concise and informative relative to the content in which it appears. (An image of a crowd may need one person to be the focus of the alt text for one story and another person to be the focus for another.)

This is a more complicated subject than it may seem at first.

I'll go over it via a blog post I wrote in 2021:

<https://washpost.engineering/we-cant-automate-alt-text-here-are-some-mistakes-lessons-and-what-we-can-do-for-accessibility-4e8631c2b3>

# Screen readers

How does alt text manifest for people who use screen readers?

Let's find out.

# Keyboard accessibility

Not everyone uses a mouse in order to navigate page content.

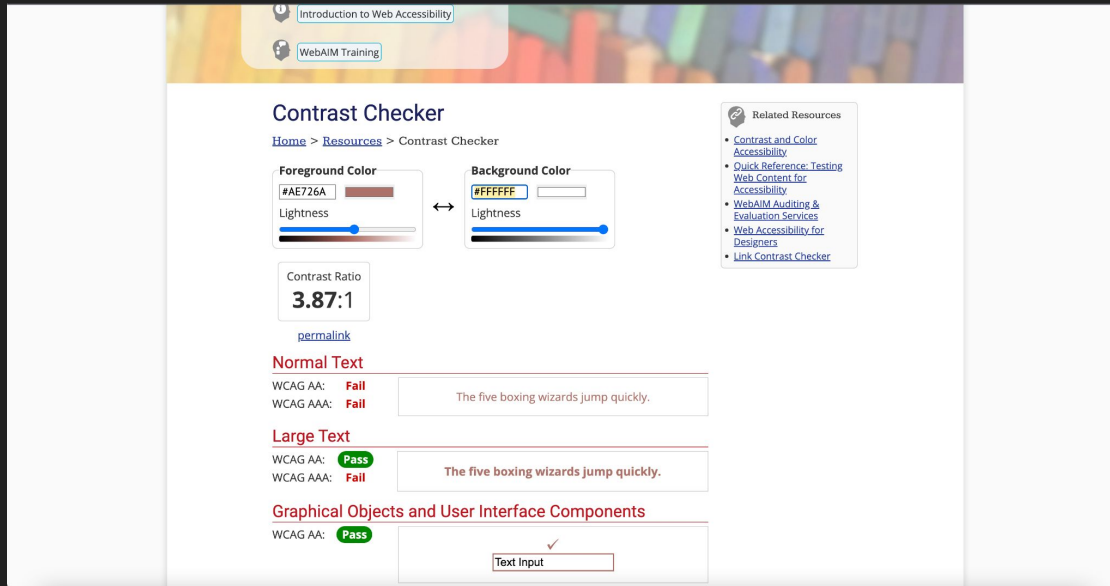
For a user to know whether they can "click" an element like a button or link with keyboard controls, that element must be "focusable."

To be focusable means the element can be selected individually and signals to the user when it is selected. Try tabbing through a website. If the site is built properly, you will notice certain elements are highlighted as you keep pressing tab, but not every element. The only elements that should be highlighted are the ones that can be interacted with via the keyboard. For instance, all links should be focusable, but a paragraph of plaintext without any links in it would generally not be focusable.



# Color contrast

<https://webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker/>



The screenshot shows the WebAIM Contrast Checker tool interface. At the top, there are navigation links for "Introduction to Web Accessibility" and "WebAIM Training". The main heading is "Contrast Checker", with a breadcrumb trail: "Home > Resources > Contrast Checker".

The tool features two color selection panels: "Foreground Color" and "Background Color". The foreground color is set to #AE726A, and the background color is set to #FFFFFF. Below each color selection is a "Lightness" slider. A double-headed arrow indicates the relationship between the two colors. The "Contrast Ratio" is displayed as 3.87:1, with a "permalink" link below it.

On the right side, there is a "Related Resources" section with a list of links: "Contrast and Color Accessibility", "Quick Reference: Testing Web Content for Accessibility", "WebAIM Auditing & Evaluation Services", "Web Accessibility for Designers", and "Link Contrast Checker".

The tool evaluates the contrast ratio against WCAG standards. Under the heading "Normal Text", it shows "WCAG AA: Fail" and "WCAG AAA: Fail" for the text "The five boxing wizards jump quickly.". Under the heading "Large Text", it shows "WCAG AA: Pass" (in a green box) and "WCAG AAA: Fail" for the same text. Under the heading "Graphical Objects and User Interface Components", it shows "WCAG AA: Pass" (in a green box) for a "Text Input" field, which is represented by a text box with a checkmark icon.

# Color blindness

You might be able to distinguish colors that other users can't, leading to confusion and inaccessibility. Remember, never assume.

Really cool tool for this:

<https://davidmathlogic.com/colorblind/#%23D81B60-%231E88E5-%23FFC107-%23004D40>

# More on color

Halation:

[https://medium.com/@h\\_locke/why-dark-mode-causes-more-accessibility-issues-t  
han-it-solves-d2f8359bb46a](https://medium.com/@h_locke/why-dark-mode-causes-more-accessibility-issues-than-it-solves-d2f8359bb46a)

# Hovering

Content that requires hovering to read is always going to exclude people.

Consider elections as an example:

<https://washpost.engineering/accessibility-case-study-pairing-election-data-visualizations-with-tables-6bd5db221a1c>

# Examples from elections work at The Washington Post

Demo time!

<https://washpost.engineering/we-cant-automate-alt-text-here-are-some-mistakes-lessons-and-wh-at-we-can-do-for-accessibility-4e8631c2b3>

[https://washpost.engineering/keyboard-focus-helping-users-navigate-the-post-without-a-mouse-83c572385240?source=collection\\_home---4-----0-----](https://washpost.engineering/keyboard-focus-helping-users-navigate-the-post-without-a-mouse-83c572385240?source=collection_home---4-----0-----)

[https://washpost.engineering/accessibility-case-study-pairing-election-data-visualizations-with-tables-6bd5db221a1c?source=collection\\_home---4-----6-----](https://washpost.engineering/accessibility-case-study-pairing-election-data-visualizations-with-tables-6bd5db221a1c?source=collection_home---4-----6-----)

# Questions?

(May take some notes here)