

Tips for accessible content design

Service Design in Government 2019 — Lorena Sutherland

Headings

Use consistent headings and subheadings with clear hierarchical order.

- H2 headings should nest under the relevant H1 heading, H3 headings should nest under the relevant H2 heading
- don't use local formatting to create the appearance of a heading, as it breaks the structure for assistive technologies and browser mark-up
- don't use a heading format to format non-heading text

Headings and sub-headings must accurately reflect the content.

Use descriptive headings (but the text should make sense without them).

Front-load headings. It makes them easier to read and is better for search engine optimisation.

Avoid generic headings, such as 'introduction', 'overview', 'other'.

Use the active voice.

Avoid question formats.

Body copy

Use summaries. They help users quickly decide if it's the right content. Front-load summaries for search.

Consider page length. Shorter is usually better.

Write short paragraphs. They are easier to read and the white space around them helps users with reading disorders.

Write short sentences. Avoid complex sentence structure.

Use the words your users use. These 'keywords' will help people find your content in search, but don't push your luck (no keyword-stuffing).

Your text should make sense, even without the headings and sub-headings.

Get to the point. Use the inverted pyramid:

- most important ‘headline’ information at the top
- then other important details
- then general or background information last

Use bulleted or numbered lists to create structure. This adds white space and makes it easier for users to scan a page.

Use meaningful links but don’t send people away for no reason.

Use clear language

Use clear language and plain English (or its equivalent).

Avoid jargon and difficult words or phrases. If you must use a specialist term, give a clear alternative explanation.

Write short sentences. The usual advice is no more than 25 words to a sentence but aim for much shorter sentences.

Avoid complex sentence structure. Break your sentences down into more than one sentence if necessary.

Use short, simple, unambiguous phrases.

Avoid figures of speech and metaphors. Be as literal as possible so users with cognitive disabilities don’t have to decipher implied meaning.

Explain acronyms and abbreviations.

Avoid double (or multiple) negatives as they are harder to understand.

Links and buttons

Be descriptive. Don’t say ‘click here’. A link should make sense out of context (screen readers can jump from link to link without reading the text between).

Make it clear where the link or button will send the user.

Give buttons short, specific labels.

If the button is an image, use alt-text to describe the action, not the image, for example 'search' instead of 'magnifying glass'.

Try to avoid links mid-sentence as they can slow users down and be distracting, especially for autistic readers.

Images and graphics

Generally, try to use images only if they add meaning. Where a user has difficulty with reading comprehension, images can help illustrate meaning.

Give alt-text for all images unless they are purely decorative. If the image is not needed for the page's context, leave alt-text blank so screen readers ignore it.

Make your alt-text descriptive, for example 'a jeep parked near a waterhole at sunset' rather than 'jeep'.

Use good quality images and avoid stock images.

Always attribute correctly and don't steal.

Use meaningful file names, for example, 'a doctor talking to a patient', not 'IMG1024.jpg'.

Transcribe or summarise the contents of a chart or graph.

Don't use images of text to convey the content of the image. Always transcribe the text if it is necessary for understanding.

Punctuation and other expressions

Keep punctuation simple. Restructure sentences instead of using complex structure and punctuation.

You can't predict how screen readers will handle punctuation. Some pause at commas, similarly to speech, and some don't. Some announce punctuation, such as the @ symbol, but are silent with a minus symbol in an equation.

Avoid capital letters except in proper nouns as they can be harder to read.

Use 'and' instead of ampersands, unless part of a trademark or official name.

Use digits for numbers above 'one' unless they are part of a phrase.

Tables and forms

Give tables header rows and make sure they read row by row, column by column with assistive technology.

Make form labels active.

Give clear instructions about what input is needed.

Create clear, informative error messages which tell the user what went wrong and what they need to do to fix it.

Useful sources

WebAIM articles, particularly ‘HTML accessibility’. <https://webaim.org/articles/>

Readability guidelines – a universal style guide, created by Sarah Richards of Content Design London. <http://readabilityguidelines.wikidot.com/>

Dyslexia Style Guide 2018: Creating Dyslexia Friendly Content, by the British Dyslexia Association. www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/employer/dyslexia-style-guide-2018-creating-dyslexia-friendly-content

GOV.UK content design guidance, particularly if you’re working on GOV.UK content and services. www.gov.uk/guidance/content-design