

Digital Accessibility Guide & Checklist

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What web accessibility is, and why it matters

Web accessibility is designing and building your website so that everyone can use it, including people with visual, auditory, motor, or cognitive disabilities.

Web accessibility comes down to 3 questions:

Can people read your text?

Not everyone sees color, size, and spacing the same way. Low vision, color blindness, and even just a sunny day glaring on a screen, can make text unreadable if it's too small or there isn't enough contrast.

Can they navigate without a mouse?

Some people can't use a mouse or trackpad due to motor impairments, tremors; or they rely on a keyboard, switch device, or voice control instead. If your site only works when someone can point and click precisely, you're locking out anyone who navigates differently.

Do images make sense if they can't see them?

People who are blind or have low vision often use screen readers, which read a page aloud - including descriptions of images. If you haven't written one, the image becomes a gap in the story. Good alt text means the information comes through, even if the visual doesn't.

The business case & how it helps you

About 1 in 4 adults in the US live with some form of disability. An inaccessible website could quietly be turning a lot of people away.

Plus, accessibility benefits aside, the changes listed in this document can help and protect your business in other ways, too.

SEO Benefits

Many accessibility best practices (alt text on images, clear page structure, descriptive link text) overlap directly with what search engines look for. Accessible sites tend to rank better.

Better UX for Everyone

Accessibility improvements almost always make a site easier to use for everyone, not just people with disabilities.

Brand Trust

An accessible website signals that you've thought about who's visiting it. That consideration builds trust.

Legal Exposure

We've been seeing an uptick in lawsuits for inaccessible websites via the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act). Complying could protect you from legal action.

What standard are we working toward?

The global standard for web accessibility is called WCAG: the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, published by W3C.

WCAG has three levels. For this guide, we're focused on WCAG AA. It's the practical, real-world standard that will cover the vast majority of what your visitors need.

A

Minimum

This is the bare minimum in order for your website to be usable at all. This is the baseline, and not enough on its own.

AA[★]

Standard

Meeting AA means your website has been tested to be perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust.

AAA

Maximum

This level is very strict and isn't practical in every context. It's great to have where possible, but it's not required.

Color contrast

Color contrast is probably the most common accessibility issue on small business websites, but it's also one of the easiest to fix once you know what you're looking for.

The Basic Idea

If the text on your site doesn't have enough contrast against the background it sits on, it will fail WCAG AA. This not only affects people with low vision or color blindness, it also affects anyone reading on a bright phone screen in sunlight, using an older monitor, etc.

The Contrast Ratio

This is measured as a ratio. It compares the relative brightness (luminance) of two colors. I.E. A ratio of 1:1 means the colors are identical (no contrast at all). A ratio of 21:1 is the maximum possible contrast, which is black text on a white background. Different elements require different ratios. For example, body copy needs a higher ratio than design elements.

Normal text

Under 18pt (14PT IF BOLDED)

AA	Standard Ratio	4.5:1
AAA	Maximum Ratio	7:1

Large text

18+ pt

AA	Standard Ratio	3:1
AAA	Maximum Ratio	4.5:1

UI components

Buttons, form fields, etc.

AA	Standard Ratio	3:1
AAA	Maximum Ratio	N/A

Design elements

No information conveyed

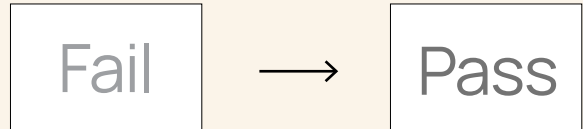
AA	Standard Ratio	No requirement
AAA	Maximum Ratio	No requirement

Common mistakes to watch for:

Light gray text on white backgrounds

Though it may look readable, it fails contrast almost every time.

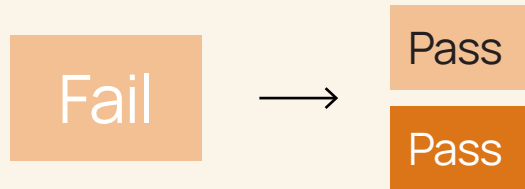
Solution: Use #737373, the lightest gray that can be used on white.



White text on light backgrounds

A brand color might not have enough contrast when white text sits on top of it.

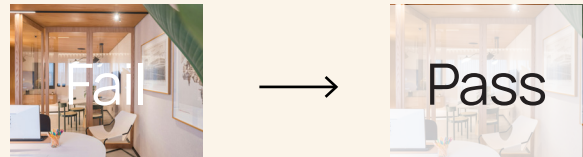
Solution: Use black text, or darken the background.



Text overlaid on photos

Even if the text passes contrast in isolation, a busy photo behind it can destroy readability.

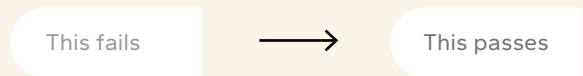
Solution: Use a colored overlay on the image.



Placeholder text in forms

Forms are notoriously low-contrast by default. Don't trust templates, always double check its ratio.

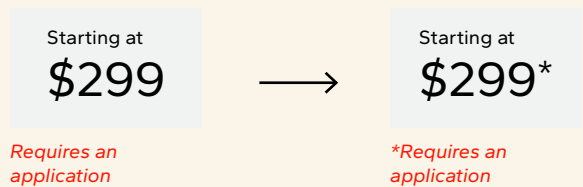
Solution: Use black on light colors.



Color alone conveying information

Messages identified by color fail for people who can't distinguish one color from others.

Solution: Always pair cues with something other than color (an asterisk, a label, etc.).



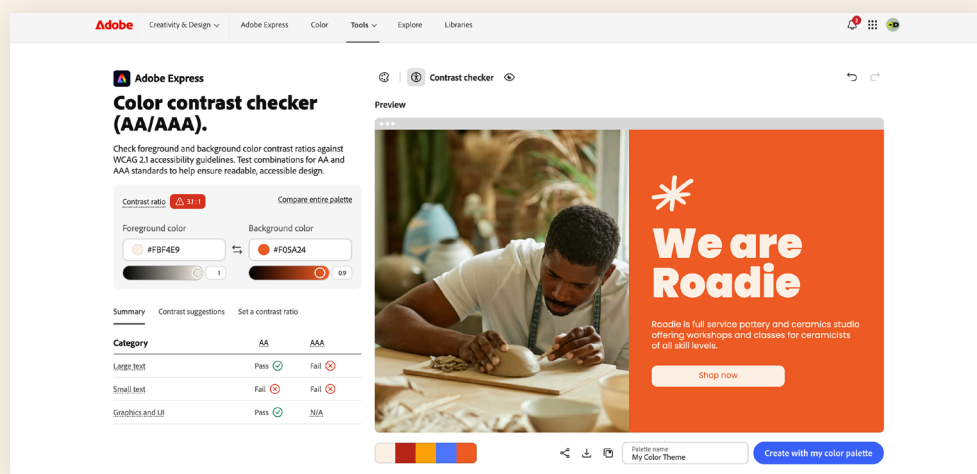
How to check your color palette

You don't need any technical knowledge to check your color contrast. There are free tools that do the math for you.

Color contrast tools

What you'll need first:

Your brand's hex codes (6 characters that define your exact colors. I.E. #224734). You can find them in your brand book, or use a browser extension like ColorZilla to grab them directly off your website.



Adobe Color Accessibility

color.adobe.com/create/color-contrast-analyzer

Adobe Color is a great tool for a few reasons:

- It receives your HEX codes and shows an easy-to-understand assessment on if it passes or not.
- They offer you suggestions if your combination didn't meet AA - which saves you time trying to find the perfect shades of each color.
- Aside from ratios, it also shows you what your color combination will look like to different types of color blindness.

Check every color combination you use. Common examples include:

- Your body text color on your background color
- Your headline color on your background
- Buttons (button text vs button color, button color vs background color, etc.)

Once you've identified what passes - be sure to save that information. It's likely something you'll need to reference again.

Coolors and WebAIM.org/resources/contrastchecker work similarly, if you prefer either.

What to do if it fails

Darken your text color

Moving toward black increases contrast. Even a slightly darker shade can push you from failing to passing.

Lighten or darken your background

Moving toward white or black increases the gap between foreground and background.

Avoid making your brand colors do everything

Your signature brand color doesn't need to be your body text color. Use it for accents, headings, and UI elements, while letting a high-contrast black or dark neutral carry your body text.

Quick accessibility wins beyond color

There are other accessibility basics worth checking, most of which also have quick fixes.

Non-color accessibility basics

Font size

Though WCAG doesn't mandate specific font sizes, the generally accepted minimum for website body text is 16px. Anything smaller becomes hard to read, especially on mobile or for users with low vision.

Make sure to check your website on your phone - if you're squinting, so are your visitors.

Keyboard navigation

Some users navigate website entirely by keyboard. Can you get through your entire website using the Tab and Enter keys? If you get stuck somewhere, that's a problem.

Additionally - make sure there's a visible focus indicator (a highlight or outline) on whatever element is currently selected. Without it, keyboard users can't tell where they are on the page.

Form labels

Every form field on your site should have a visible label (not solely the placeholder text inside the field).

Placeholder text disappears when someone starts typing, leaving them with no reminder of what the field is asking for. A proper label (above or to the left of the field) stays visible and is readable by screen readers.

SECTION 04

Button and tap target size

Buttons and interactive elements should be large enough to tap reliably, particularly on mobile. WCAG 2.2 recommends a minimum tap target size of 24x24 pixels. If your buttons are small text links or tiny icons, users with motor difficulties (and frankly, anyone using a phone one-handed) will miss them.

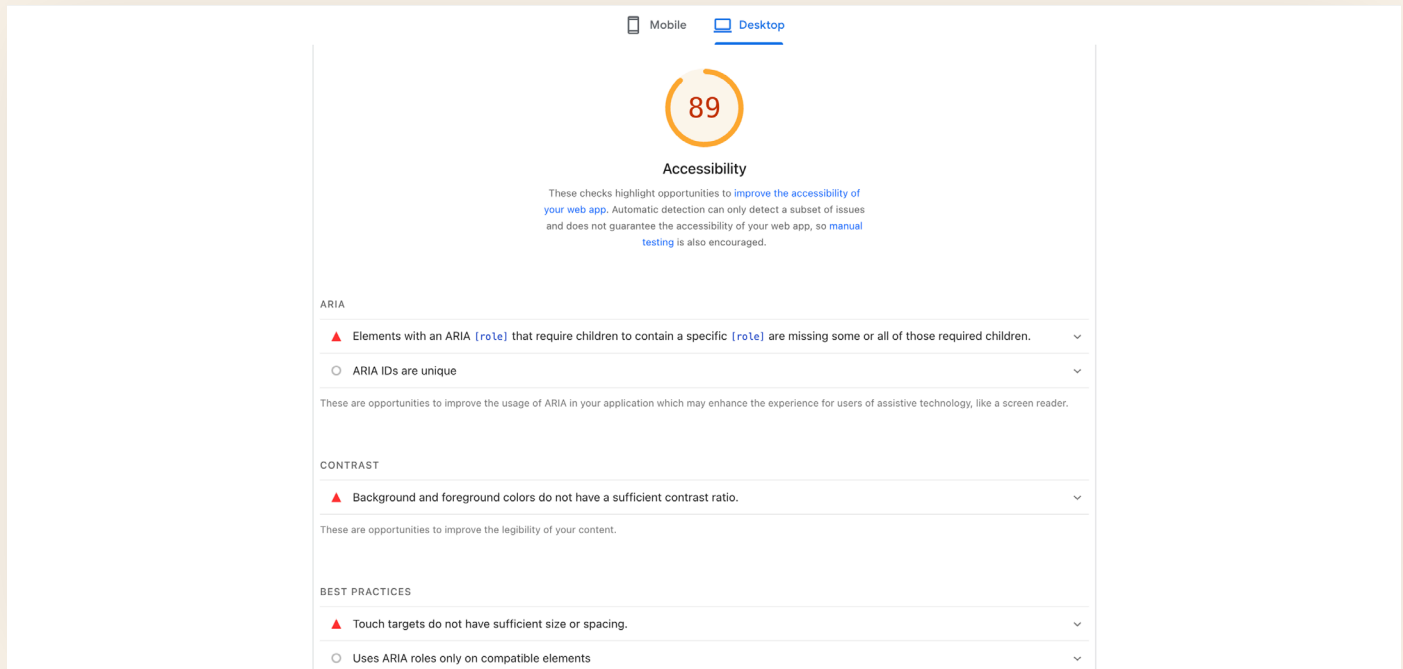
Descriptive link text

“Click here” and “learn more” are fairly useless for screen reader users. Always ensure buttons describe where they’re going.

INSTEAD OF THIS...	TRY THIS:
“Click here to learn more”	“Learn more about the Snapshot Audit”
“Read more”	“Read: How to check your brand’s accessibility”
“Download here”	“Download the accessibility checklist (PDF)”

Tools to check your website

Now that you know what to look for, here are the tools that will help you find errors on your live website.



Google Lighthouse

developer.chrome.com/docs/lighthouse

Lighthouse is an automated auditing tool built directly into Google Chrome’s developer tools.

It gives you an accessibility score (0-100) and a list of specific issues to fix. It doesn’t catch everything, but it’s a great starting point and only takes about 60 seconds to run.

Focus on the “failures” first, then work through the “needs review” items. Aim for an accessibility score of 90 or above.

How it works

1. Click on the link provided.
2. Click “Test a site”.
3. Type in the webpage you’d like to audit.
4. Wait about 60 seconds for the results.
5. Review your score and the list of flagged issues (each one has a description and a link to learn more). Make sure to check mobile and desktop separately.

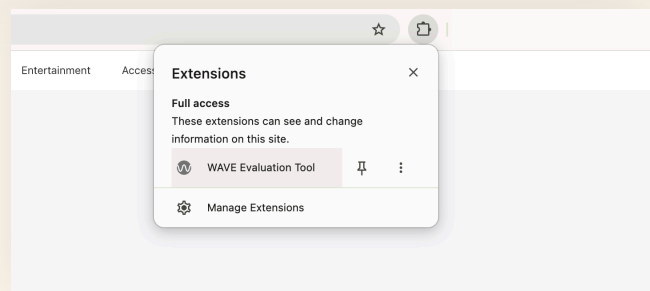


WAVE Browser Extension

wave.webaim.org

WAVE (Web Accessibility Evaluation Tool) is a browser extension from WebAIM that overlays visual markers directly on your website showing you where issues are.

Unlike Lighthouse, which gives you a score and a list, WAVE shows you exactly where on the page each problem lives.



How it works

1. Install the WAVE extension.
2. Navigate to your website.
3. Click the WAVE icon in your browser toolbar.
4. The tool will overlay colored icons on your page: red icons are errors, yellow are alerts, green are passing features.
5. Click any icon to get a description of the issue and suggestions for fixing it.
6. Pay particular attention to red contrast errors and missing alt text markers.

Making the necessary updates

Use this checklist to work through your website systematically. Check off each item as you confirm it, or flag it for fixing later.

Fixing what failed

It's easy to get overwhelmed if there's a lot to fix. Here are simple suggestions for how to work through your findings.

Fix the quick wins first

Start with the small things you can do in an afternoon. Alt text, link text, form labels, etc.

Run the contrast checker on every color combination you use

Update the ones that fail (pg 12). This may mean you need to alter your brand colors, but for good reason. This is the single highest-impact thing you can do for accessibility on most websites. Make sure you track which color combinations pass, as you'll likely want to refer to it repeatedly.

Run Lighthouse on your 3 most important pages

Pages that are frequented the most, or are used to sell something, need updates first. I.E. Homepage, Main offer page, Contact.

Map out a schedule to check every page

Using your site map, flag the pages that still have errors, and add it to your task list to tackle a few per week. Don't get stressed about immediately getting your score to 100 - but consistently work on it until it gets there.

Add accessibility to your ongoing website maintenance

Every time you update your site by adding a page, changing colors, adding new images - run a quick check. It's much easier to build correctly from the start than to fix retroactively.

Web Accessibility Checklist

Color & Contrast

- Body text passes 4.5:1 contrast ratio against its background
- Heading text passes 3:1 contrast ratio of 18pt+
- Button text passes 3:1 contrast ratio against button background
- Links are distinguishable from surrounding text (color + underline or weight)
- Text overlaid on images has sufficient contrast with the image beneath it
- Placeholder text in forms passes contrast
- No information is conveyed by color alone
- Color palette tested with WebAIM Contrast Checker or equivalent
- Color combinations viewed through a color blindness simulator (pilestone.com or similar)

Typography & Readability

- Body text is at least 16px
- Body copy line height is at least 1.5x the font size
- Text is not justified
- No large blocks of italic or all-caps text
- Sufficient spacing between paragraphs and sections

Navigation & Structure

- Page has a logical heading structure (one H1, followed by H2s, then H3s)
- Entire site is navigable by keyboard (Tab, Enter, arrow keys)

Images & Media

- All important images have descriptive alt text
- Decorative-only images have empty alt text
- Logos have alt text with the company name
- No text is embedded in images (screen readers can't read it)
- Videos have captions or a transcript
- Auto-playing audio or video can be paused or stopped

Forms & Interactive Elements

- All form fields have visible labels (not just placeholder text)
- Required fields are marked clearly (not just with color)
- Error messages explain what went wrong and how to fix it
- Buttons and tap targets are at least 44x44px
- Form can be submitted by keyboard alone

Links

- All link text describes the destination or purpose
- No generic link text ("click here", "read more", "learn more" without context)

Technical

- Pages have descriptive unique titles
- 90+ accessibility score on Google Lighthouse for desktop and mobile
- No red errors via the WAVE extension

Accessibility is just one part of a healthy brand.

To see if the rest of your business is passing best practices - book an audit that covers your branding, messaging, graphics, and more.



The Snapshot Audit \$699

A review of your brand, website, and top analytics (delivered in two weeks or less). You'll walk away with a High-Level Brand Report Card, a findings walkthrough, and an Action Plan that you can start using immediately. It's a mini version of The Intensive Audit.

Best for: Small business owners who are ready to start taking their brand seriously and want a clear, affordable starting point.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT THE SNAPSHOT →](#)



The Intensive Audit \$3,999

A comprehensive review of 240+ data points across your brand ecosystem. This audit includes design, messaging, website, social, email, marketing materials, analytics, your top competitors... the whole shebang. You'll walk away with a list of data-backed moves in order of importance.

Best for: Established businesses with traction who are ready to make intentional, data-backed decisions.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT THE INTENSIVE →](#)

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Hey!

I'm Chelsea.

I'm a Fractional Brand Strategist with nearly 20 years of experience in the creative industry. I'm on a mission to give small businesses access to the kind of strategic creative thinking that's usually reserved for boardrooms with big budgets.

Most founders are more impressive than their brand suggests.

Not because you haven't worked your ass off, or you don't have the expertise to back it up. But because somewhere between your vision and what the world actually sees, something got lost. Built one piece at a time. Assembled under pressure. Never quite cohesive enough to say what it needs to say.

And the hardest part is that you *know* that. You can feel the gap between who you are and how you're showing up. You have the vision for your brand, but no idea how to make the world see it.

That's the work I'm passionate about. Finding what's been sitting just below the surface, the belief that drives everything, the thing that makes you different... the version of you that you feel on the inside but haven't been able to get across. I'm here to build the brand that makes you feel seen.

So that when you see your brand reflected back to you for the first time, you don't think "I like it" - you *feel* "oh my god, finally".

Let's connect!

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