Making Online Learning Accessible to All

USABILITY, ACCESSIBILITY, CONSISTENCY

Whether our students are learning in-person or in a remote or hybrid learning environment, digital content is often part of the educational environment.

But when we ask students and families to navigate learning management systems (Schoology, Google Classroom, Canvas), student information systems (Powerschool, Aspen, Infinite Campus), and digital content platforms (Google Slides and Docs), we have to ensure that the content we're creating can be accessed and understood by all users, including people with disabilities and people using mobile devices (phones or tablets). These tips will help you create content that everyone can easily access and understand:

Top Takeaways

- **LET TEXT BE TEXT:** Whenever possible, copy and paste text directly into the content area of the platform you are using (rather than attaching a PDF or Word document). If it is necessary to attach a PDF (such as a form that is intended to be printed), provide contact information in case someone has trouble accessing or understanding the document.

- **KEEP IT SIMPLE:** Keep formatting minimal and consistent. Before adding any visual elements, ask yourself, "Will this help someone understand what I am trying to say? Will all audiences understand what this represents?".

- **USE ALT TEXT:** Any time you add an image (photo, clip art, icon, graphic, etc.), add alternative text, or "alt text," to describe the image. Alt text provides a description of the image for people who use a screen reader to navigate digital content. Alt text should describe the image in context and provide whatever meaning the image is intended to convey. If you're not sure how to add alt text in the program you're using, Google it!

- **FOLLOW THE RULES:** Use the tools in your platform in the manner in which they were intended. If you need a bulleted list, use the "bulleted list" tool — don't just use dashes. If you need the next paragraph to start on a new page, use the "insert page break" tool. Tables should be used to represent data that can accurately be divided into columns and rows. Headings should clearly delineate a new section of content, and should follow a logical and predictable sequence. Any empty table cells should be filled in with "0" or "N/A."

- **BE CLEAR AND DIRECT:** Use consistent language to refer to materials and resources. If you are linking to another website or resource, the link text should match the title of that website, web page or resource. If you are using an icon or a graphic as a link, ask yourself if the meaning of that icon is clear and explicit across all audiences.

The Four Principles

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) are organized around four principles, which make it possible for anyone to access and use digital content:

PERCEIVABLE

Users must be able to perceive the information — it cannot be invisible to all of their senses.

- **EXAMPLE**: A video must have captions so that hearing impaired users can perceive the information.

OPERABLE

Users must be able to operate the interface — it cannot require an action that a user cannot perform.

- **EXAMPLE**: A user must be able to navigate through a web page using the keyboard if that user does not use a mouse.

UNDERSTANDABLE

Users must be able to understand the information as well as the operation of the interface.

- **EXAMPLE**: Text that reads "Facebook" next to an icon linking to a Facebook page allows all users to understand that the "F" icon represents Facebook.

ROBUST

Content must remain accessible even as technologies change or advance.

- **EXAMPLE**: If you adopt an online system for students to sign up for sports teams, that system must be accessible to all users.