

Accessible Communications Guide

Communications teams, program staff, and content reviewers

Clear communication starts with the audience

AI can help draft. Readers and reviewers help determine whether it works.

Choose the task

Identify who needs the information, what they need to do, where they will read it, and how they can ask for help. Ask about preferred formats instead of assuming a single format works for everyone.

Writing and structure

Use clear headings, short paragraphs, familiar words, descriptive link text, and explicit instructions. Explain necessary acronyms. Preserve deadlines, eligibility, costs, and choices when simplifying.

Images and media

Meaningful images need a useful text alternative. Decorative images can use an empty alternative in HTML. Captions and transcripts help convey media content. Review automatic drafts against the actual media.

Scope of this guide

A simpler reading level alone does not establish accessibility. Layout, document structure, assistive-technology behavior, and audience needs also matter. This guide and its PDFs have not received a full accessibility-conformance audit.

Reference

W3C WAI, Writing for Web Accessibility:

<https://www.w3.org/WAI/tips/writing/>

The practical exercises that follow are original HLTF examples.

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Prompts for clearer drafts

Use approved public text and check meaning after every rewrite.

01 / Plain-language rewrite

Rewrite [PUBLIC TEXT] for [AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE] using familiar adult language. Preserve dates, eligibility, costs, choices, and limitations. Explain necessary jargon. Do not remove important conditions or invent services. Return the rewrite and a list of meaning changes or uncertainties for staff review.

02 / Instructions people can follow

Turn [APPROVED PROCESS] into numbered steps for [AUDIENCE]. Give each step one main action. Identify prerequisites and how to get help only if supplied. Flag missing instructions. Keep the order and deadlines accurate. Do not imply a step is optional unless the source says so.

Worked example

Source: "Participants must submit the registration form prior to the commencement of orientation."

Rewrite: "Send in the registration form before orientation starts."

Staff still need to add the actual deadline and submission method if those details belong in the message. The rewrite cannot supply them from inference.

Reader feedback

Ask: What does this message ask you to do? What is unclear? What information is missing? Revise based on specific feedback without testing or judging the reader.

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Alt text, translation, and review

Keep the actual source available to the reviewer.

03 / Alt-text draft

For an image I have permission to use, its visible content is [ACCURATE DESCRIPTION] and its purpose on this page is [PURPOSE]. Suggest concise alt text that communicates the relevant information. Do not infer identity, disability, emotion, or intent from appearance. Flag when a longer description may be needed. A person will compare it with the actual image.

04 / Translation preparation

Review [APPROVED PUBLIC TEXT] before translation into [LANGUAGE]. Identify ambiguous phrases, idioms, acronyms, and terms that need a glossary. Do not translate yet. Propose clearer source wording while preserving meaning. Mark terms requiring organizational confirmation.

Translation boundary

A language-fluent reviewer should check an AI translation against the source and the intended context. A translation back into the source language can miss errors. High-stakes instructions need an appropriate qualified review process.

Release review

Check that a text alternative matches the image's purpose. Confirm any translation with the right reviewer. Test the published message in its actual channel rather than assuming the draft format survives export.

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Communications review worksheet

Use one record for each message or format.

Message details

Audience and purpose: _____

Channel and format: _____

Requested alternative formats: _____

Content owner/reviewer: _____

Content checks

- ☐ The main action and deadline are clear.
- ☐ Important conditions and choices remain accurate.
- ☐ Respectful adult language suits the audience.
- ☐ Images/media have reviewed alternatives where needed.
- ☐ Links and instructions explain their purpose.
- ☐ Translation or specialized communication needs received review.

Use checks

- ☐ Reviewer checked the actual published/exported format.
- ☐ Structure and reading order received appropriate testing.
- ☐ Intended readers had an opportunity to provide feedback where practical.
- ☐ A help/contact route is available and accurate.

Feedback and revision

What readers found unclear: _____

Revision made: _____

Reviewer/date: _____

Unresolved access needs and owner: _____