PUBLIC RELATIONS INSTITUTE

Introduction to Digital Accessibility

Special Guest

Lori Martin, CPACC, DHS 508 Trusted Tester, DMI-CDMP

Digital Communications Consultant

What you'll learn in this course

Watch the Video

In this course, you'll master the basics of digital accessibility to ensure your website is usable by everyone, including people with disabilities.

This course covers:

- Why accessibility is critical for ethics
- Market reach
- Search engine optimization
- Legal compliance

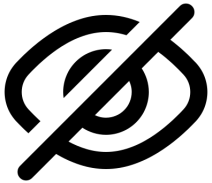
You will learn about the nationally recognized minimum standard for digital accessibility, **Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 AA**, and the fundamental POUR principles:

Perceivable, Operable, Understandable and Robust.

By the end of this course, you will understand how editors like yourself directly contribute to a site that is usable by all visitors by controlling key accessibility factors like **headings, alt text and links.**

What is digital accessibility

Digital accessibility means your website can be used by everyone, including people with disabilities.



Blind users

Physically impaired

Low vision

Cognitively impaired

Why is digital accessibility important?

As a content editor, you want users to find your information valuable and easy to use. Properly formatting your content positions your site as a trusted and reliable source of information.

How content editors can make a difference

You don’t need to know code to make accessible content.
Editors impact things like headings, alt text, links and structure — all of which directly affect accessibility.

- Clear structure, descriptive links and accessible documents improve usability.
- Accessible content reduces confusion and supports diverse learning styles.
- Your work can directly impact recruitment and retention by removing digital barriers.

WCAG 2.2 AA Overview

Digital Accessibility Standards

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) is widely recognized as the minimum international standard.

By April 24, 2026 public agencies in the state of Louisiana must create and maintain content at **WCAG 2.1 AA**.

Level A
MINIMUM

Level AA
REQUIRED

Level AAA
HIGHEST

Who sets the standards

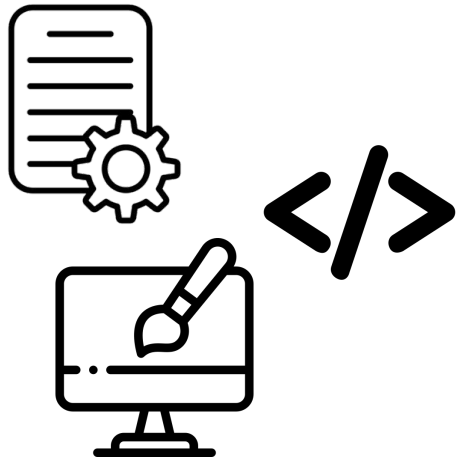
WCAG is developed by the **World Wide Web Consortium (W3C)**, an international community that develops open standards for the web. Our focus is on WCAG 2.2 AA, finalized in 2023.

Web accessibility content guidelines

A set of guidelines that help website designers, developers and content managers make websites usable for everyone.

A comprehensive checklist to ensure content works for many types of users:

- Someone using a screen reader.
- Someone who cannot use a mouse.
- Someone with low vision or color blindness.
- Someone who processes information differently.



WCAG POUR

WCAG has three levels (we'll focus on Level AA), built around four core principles, known as **POUR**.

There are various success criteria. But don't worry — we'll focus only on the ones content editors can affect.

1. **Perceivable** - Alt text, captions and transcripts for audio and video, content presented in different ways, color contrast and font size for readability.
2. **Operable** - Keyboards, mobile devices considerations from a technical standpoint.
3. **Understandable** - Avoid jargon, explain acronyms on first reference, keeping the audience in mind.
4. **Robust** - Code is useable across a variety of technologies, browsers, screen readers, etc.

Editor vs developer responsibilities

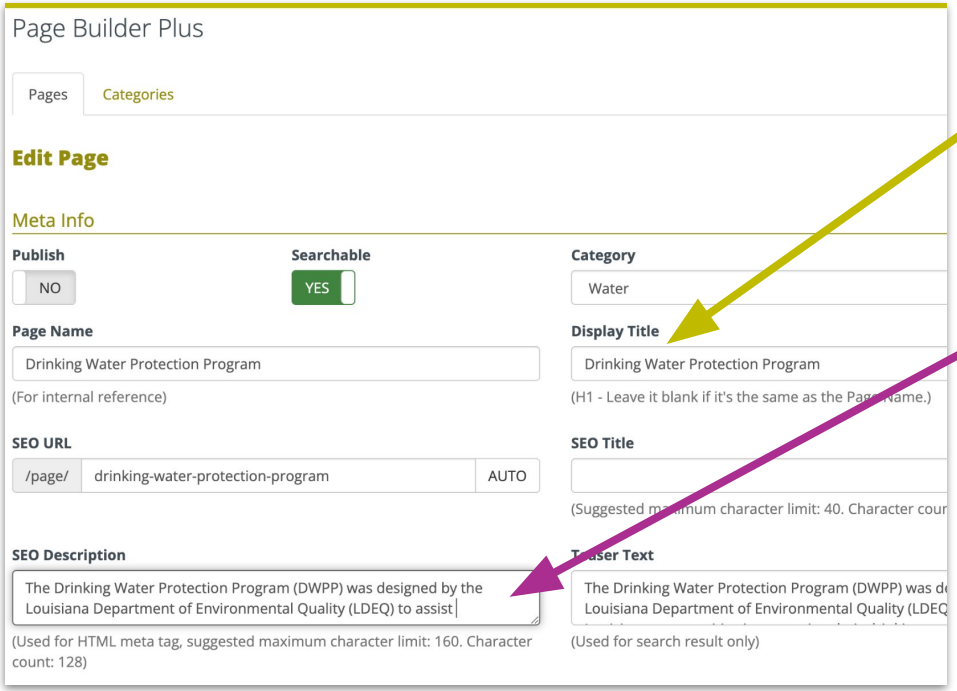
You may not control templates or code, but you do control what people read, click and experience. Editors influence headings, alt text, links, tables, lists, color use and more. These are all editable in your CMS.

Why It Matters

One missed heading or unclear link can throw off users who rely on screen readers or keyboards. Small fixes = big impact.

Applying WCAG to Your Content

Page properties



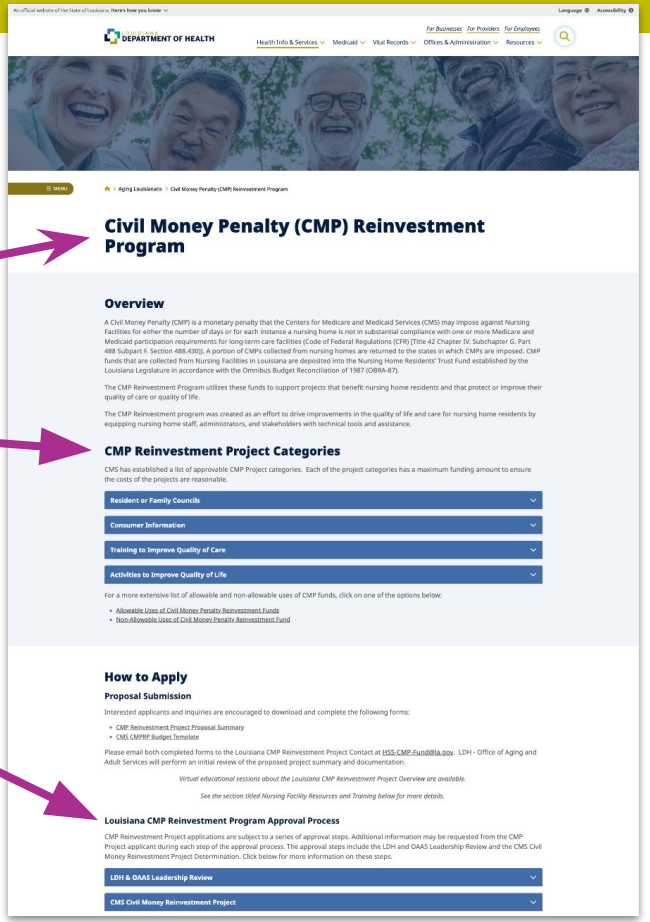
Page title (h1) is meaningful and reflects the content on the page.

Page description provides a concise summary of content.

Headings & page structure

Use heading styles (h1-h6) to organize your page. Don’t just make text bold or big.

- **Heading 1**
  - **Heading 2**
  - **Heading 2**
    - Heading 3
    - Heading 3
      - Heading 4
  - **Heading 2**
    - Heading 3
      - Heading 4
  - **Heading 2**
    - Heading 3



Tables

- Use tables for data, not layouts. (See Tables Tutorial for proper table formatting.)
- Include header rows (<th>).
- Use scope to associate header cells with data cells.

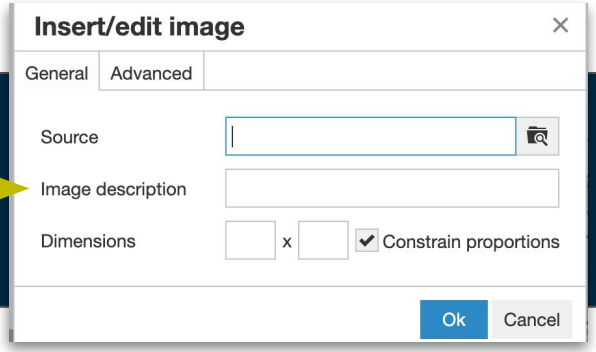
Sample Test Table

Column Heading A	Column Heading B	Column Heading C	Column Heading D
Link Test	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text
Sample text	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text
asdf	asdf	Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit	asdf
Sample text	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text
Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate	Excepteur	Excepteur	Excepteur

Images & Adding Alt Text

Alt text should describe the image's function and support the overall context of the page it's being displayed on. If decorative, leave the alt blank.

In your CMS



Alt text examples - Same image, 3 scenarios

Scenario 1
Biography page

Alt text - Dr. Nathan Cole, a field ecologist with Bayou Environmental Systems, collects water samples from a Louisiana wetland as part of the Marsh Rescue Hydrology Project to track nutrient levels and early signs of ecosystem stress.

Scenario 2
Page describing research

Alt text - Bayou Environmental Systems conducts phase two of its Marsh Rescue Hydrology Project to support broader Gulf Coast conservation efforts, with field ecologist Dr. Nathan Cole collecting wetland water samples using a long-handled pole to monitor nutrient patterns and ecosystem health.

Scenario 3
Page about boat leasing

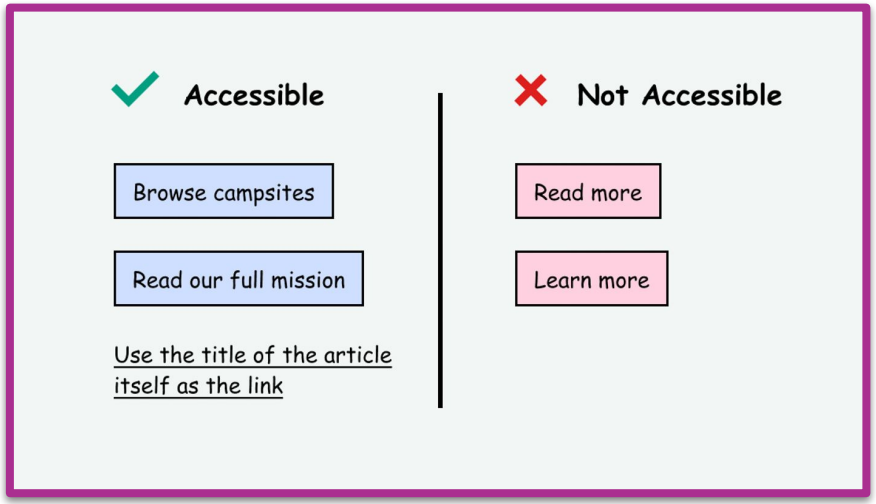
Alt text - A flat-bottom aluminum jon boat leased at a discounted rate from River Runner Research Fleet supports the phase-two MarshRescue Hydrology Project, with Dr. Nathan Cole using the boat’s outboard motor and stable platform to collect wetland water samples alongside his five-person conservation team

Descriptive link text

Links should make sense when read with no other context.

- Make links descriptive.
- Avoid 'click here' or displaying the URL.
- Say where the link goes.

If there are multiple links on a page serving a similar purpose, differentiate each one. “Register Now” vs “Register for the Monday Webinar Now.”



Forms

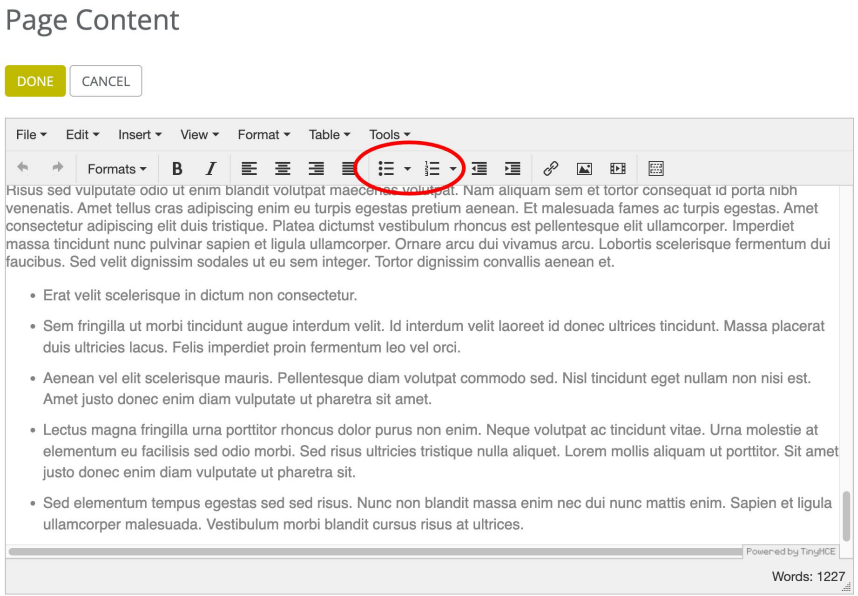
- Ensure fields have clear labels.
- Provide meaningful error messages. Do not rely on colors alone to identify errors.
- Group related fields with fieldsets and legends.

Multimedia (audio & video)

- Videos need captions that are 99% accurate.
- Audio-only files need text transcripts that are 99% accurate and must include timestamps and speaker denotations. (See captions/subtitles overview)
- Avoid auto-play. Provide a pause function!
- Plan for accessibility from the start.

Styled Lists

To create accessible styled lists, you **must use the appropriate semantic markup (HTML tags or built-in software functions)** and ensure that styling choices support, rather than hinder, the underlying structure. Screen readers use the semantic structure, not visual styling alone, to identify lists and their items.



Shopping List

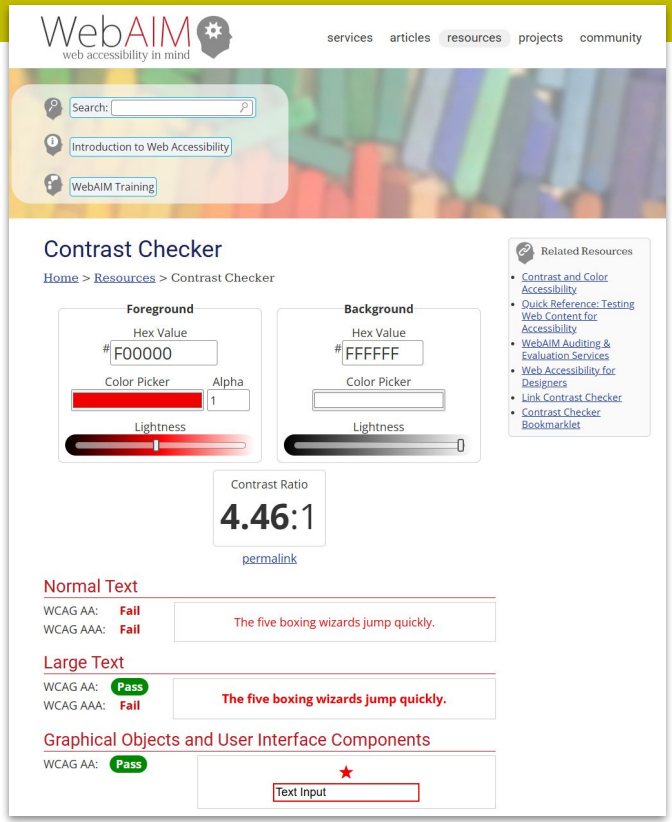
- Pear
- Pecans
- Lettuce
- Avocado

```
<ul>
  <li>Pear</li>
  <li>Pecans</li>
  <li>Lettuce</li>
  <li>Avocado</li>
</ul>
```

- Use actual list formatting.
- Avoid ALL CAPS and big blocks of text.

Color & contrast

- Don’t rely on color alone.
- Check contrast using a tool (like WebAIM).
- Use icons or text labels in addition to color



Tools to Check Your Work

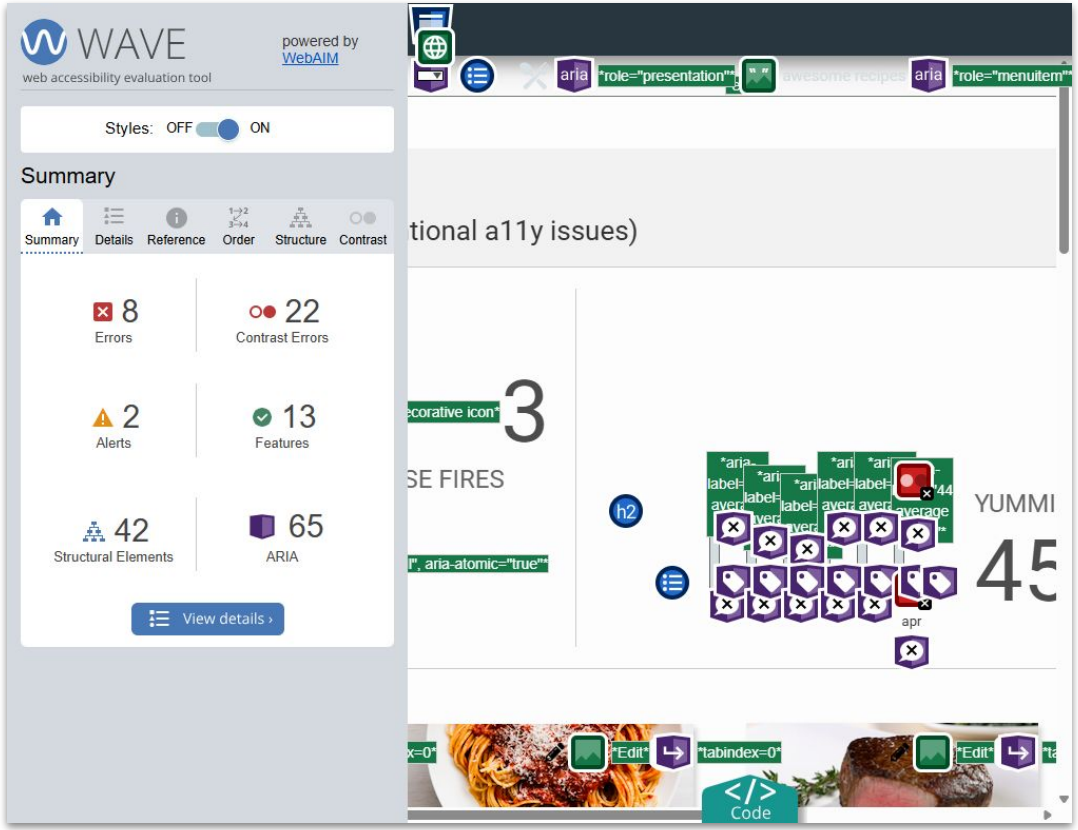
Free tools to help!

- WAVE (WebAIM), Siteimprove browser plugin
- WebAIM Contrast Checker
- CMS and Microsoft Office checkers (always run spell check!)
- Document checkers:
    - Use Microsoft accessibility tools in Word, Excel, Powerpoint
    - Use Grackle Extension Add-ons for Google Docs, Sheets and Slides
    - Use Adobe accessibility tools in InDesign, Acrobat

Testing and Maintenance

Remember to run an accessibility check every time a new document is created or an existing document is updated, even for the smallest and simplest content update.

Let’s walk through WAVE



Red = Issues
Green = Successes

Editor power

These tools help, but your choices matter most.
Don’t just check a box — think like your users.

Communicating About Accessibility with Your Team

If you’re asked to publish inaccessible content, try framing your response around inclusion and effectiveness. For example: “Can we adjust this so it’s easier for all users to access—especially students using screen readers? It also helps us stay compliant and avoids issues down the line.”

This positions you as a thoughtful communicator focused on quality and institutional goals.

Wrap-Up & Quiz

Pop quiz!

1. Is it acceptable to leave an image's alt text blank if the image contains a visible caption?
2. Can Heading 3 immediately follow Heading 1?
3. When creating digital content, when should color contrast be measured?
4. Is it okay to use "click here" as link text if it is the only link being used on a webpage?
5. When referring to adjacent elements on a webpage, it is acceptable to say "see the table on the right"?
6. What are some ways that properly formatted lists can elevate content?
7. Is it acceptable to use acronyms and abbreviations without explanation if they are commonly used?
8. Is it acceptable to use a table to ensure that content stays in two columns for visual presentation?

(answers on the next page)

Quiz answers

1. **No.** Alt text provides assistive technology users with an understanding of the image. If a caption for all users is provided, the alt text and caption should not provide the same information.
2. **No**. Headings should be used in rank order, levels should not be skipped.
3. Always check color contrast levels when creating new text and background combinations.
4. **No.** Link text should be concise and meaningful when read with no additional context.
5. **No.** Some users do not see the position of elements and mobile devices may not retain the position; instead, use the name of the element being referred to or use a more general reference like “preceding” or “following.”
6. It makes it easier for assistive technology and mobile device users to scan content. It helps search engines index and rank content.
7. **No.** Acronyms and abbreviations should always be explained.
8. **No.** Tables should only be used for tabular data.

Additional resources

WebAIM: Contrast Checker

Tables Tutorials

Captions and Subtitles

Homework

What’s next?

Questions? Comments? Conversation?

Amy LeJeune
Amy@CovalentLogic.com

PUBLIC RELATIONS INSTITUTE