ASA Digital Accessibility Toolkit

Contents

About This Toolkit

This toolkit was written by **Betsy Dorsett**, Founder of the **Miles Ahead Project**, in collaboration with the **American Society on Aging**, to help people in aging services and others working with or on behalf of older adults to create more accessible websites and digital content.

Betsy is a digital accessibility advocate, educator, and nonprofit communications consultant who brings deep experience developing accessible digital materials and helping organizations integrate inclusion into their communications and design practices. Betsy's approach to digital accessibility is rooted in disability justice and lived experience—emphasizing access not just as a technical requirement, but as a collective practice of care, connection, and belonging.

This toolkit was created for people who may not have technical or coding expertise but who want to make meaningful changes and improvements to online spaces. Small, thoughtful choices (like how you write headings, add alt text, or structure a page) can make a real difference for the people who visit your site.

To that end, this toolkit focuses on principles and practical steps you can take right away to reduce barriers, improve usability, and make your digital spaces more welcoming to older adults and disabled people. While it does not promise full compliance with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), it offers clear, actionable practices that strengthen accessibility, build trust, and expand who can engage with your work.

Introduction

In a world increasingly shaped by technology, digital access has become a necessity for connection, participation, and belonging. Yet for many older adults and disabled people, the digital world remains full of barriers. Websites that can't be read by screen readers, videos without captions, or online forms that can't be completed without a mouse all create daily obstacles that exclude people from essential information, community, and opportunity.

These exclusions are not accidental. They reflect longstanding inequities in how technology is designed, funded, and prioritized. When accessibility is treated as optional, older adults, disabled people, and those with limited digital access and/or literacy are often left behind. The result is a digital divide that mirrors—and compounds—the inequities of our offline world, disproportionately affecting people with low incomes, those in rural areas, and Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities.

Accessibility is more than a technical issue; it's a matter of justice. The ability to read a newsletter, register for an event, or access care resources online should not depend on someone's physical ability, vision, hearing, or access to high-speed internet. As our systems move more services and information online, the responsibility to ensure access grows. Digital inclusion is essential for aging with dignity, independence, and community.

By integrating accessibility into everyday practice, we can move toward a future where digital spaces reflect the values of care, connection, and equity and where older adults and disabled people are not merely included, but centered in the design of our digital world.

Principles for Creating Inclusive Digital Spaces for Older Adults

The following principles offer a framework for designing digital spaces that honor autonomy, inclusion, and care. These principles can guide teams in aging services, nonprofits, and community organizations toward practices that make the digital world more accessible and welcoming for all older adults.

1. **Honor Agency and Self-Determination**

   Ensure that users have the ability to control and personalize their experience. Digital spaces should allow older adults to make choices about how they engage with content, ensuring they feel empowered and in control of their interaction with the site. Design websites and digital content that works seamlessly with people's own device or browser accessibility settings, rather than relying on add-ons or overlays. This approach respects individual preferences and keeps users in control.

2. **Prioritize Accessibility as a Right, Not a Privilege**

   Accessibility is not an add-on or afterthought; it is a fundamental right. Every older adult, regardless of ability, should have equitable access to digital spaces that respect their dignity, independence, and needs.

3. **Design with Empathy and Respect for Diverse Needs**

   Recognize the diversity of experiences within older adults, including those with disabilities, cognitive impairments, or language barriers. Design digital spaces that are inclusive and responsive to a broad range of needs and experiences, fostering an environment of care and respect.

4. **Provide Clear, Supportive Guidance**

   Use clear, simple language and intuitive design to guide users through digital spaces. Avoid unnecessary complexity and provide easy-to-follow instructions, especially when completing tasks such as forms or navigating complex content.

5. **Promote Inclusion by Design**

   People, including older adults, bring their whole selves into digital spaces. These spaces must be designed to foster a sense of belonging for all. Design choices should reflect inclusive practices by ensuring accessibility for multimedia content, using images that authentically represent diverse identities (including race, gender, sexuality, and ability), and choosing language that is welcoming and avoids alienating or othering individuals.

6. **Design for Digital Equity**

   Recognize that not everyone has the same level of access to high-speed internet, up-to-date devices, or digital literacy support. Older adults—especially those living in rural areas, low-income households, and/or Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other racialized communities—are disproportionately impacted by the digital divide and by digital redlining. Design websites and materials that work well even on slower connections and smaller screens, and offer multiple ways for people to access information, such as downloadable text documents, phone contact options, or print materials when possible. Digital accessibility and digital equity go hand in hand.

7. **Respect Privacy and Autonomy**

   Ensure that older adults' privacy and personal data are protected. Digital spaces should prioritize user consent and allow individuals to make informed decisions about what information they share, ensuring autonomy is respected in every interaction.

8. **Anticipate and Remove Barriers Before They Arise**

   Proactively identify potential barriers to accessibility and remove them before they affect users. Continuous feedback from older adults should be incorporated into the design process to ensure the ongoing usability and effectiveness of digital spaces. Follow established accessibility best practices, such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), to ensure that barriers are minimized and accessibility is built in from the start.

9. **Ensure Flexibility and Adaptability**

   Provide options for older adults to adjust content and interface elements to their needs. This could include resizing text, adjusting contrast, or changing layout configurations, ensuring that everyone can interact with the digital space in a way that works best for them.

10. **Design with Older Adults, Not Just for Them**

    Actively involve older adults in the design and testing phases to ensure their needs, preferences, and feedback directly inform the digital experience. Involving older adults in the design process ensures that digital spaces are not just built with their needs in mind but are actually shaped by their lived experiences. This approach leads to more meaningful, effective, and inclusive designs that truly reflect their perspectives and empower them to engage confidently with the digital world.

Ten High-Impact Accessibility Fixes You Can Make Right Now

1. **Add Alt Text to Every Image**

    - What is Alt Text? Alt text is a description added to images that provide their meaning and/or function to people who can't see the image.

    - Alt text should focus on the meaning and context of an image and doesn't need to include every visual detail. More tips for how to write good alt text are included in the Alt Text Best Practices section of this toolkit.

2. **Use Good Color Contrast**

    - Color contrast is the difference in brightness between two colors—usually between text and its background. Good contrast ensures that text and images are readable for people with low vision, color blindness, or visual fatigue. It is measured as a ratio (for example 1 : 1 is no contrast.)

    - For strong readability:

        ✓ Regular-sized text should have a contrast ratio of **at least 4.5:1**.

        ✓ Large text (bold and 14pt+, or 19pt+ regular) should have a ratio of **at least 3:1**.

    - The Web AIM Color Contrast Checker is a free online tool that tells you whether your color choices meet accessibility standards.

3. **Use Clear, Descriptive Link Text**

    - Clear, descriptive links make it easier for everyone—especially screen reader and keyboard users—to navigate and understand your site.

    - Links should make sense on their own and clearly describe where they go or what they do. Screen readers can pull up a list of all links on a page, so vague phrases like “Click here” or “Read more” can be confusing when read out of context. Instead, write links that describe the action or destination. Example:

        ❌ *Click here*

        ✅ *Learn more about our fall programs*

4. **Structure Content with Headings**

    - Headings help organize information on a page so people can scan, navigate, and understand content more easily.

    - Screen readers rely on headings to move through a page, so they must be *programmatic*, meaning they’re marked as actual headings in the code, not just text that’s been bolded or resized to look like one.

    - Use proper heading styles (H1, H2, H3, etc.) to create a clear hierarchy:

        H1 – Page title (used once per page)

        H2 – Main section headings

        H3 – Subsections within those topics

- Descriptive, well-structured headings make it easier for everyone, including screen reader and keyboard users, to navigate, understand, and trust your content.

5. **Provide Captions and Transcripts for All Media**

   - Captions and transcripts make audio and video content accessible to people who are Deaf or hard of hearing, as well as those who prefer or need to read instead of listen. They also help people watching in noisy or quiet environments and make your content more searchable and shareable.

   - Tips:

     ✓ Provide captions for all videos and transcripts for audio-only content.

     ✓ Always edit auto-generated captions and transcripts, especially names, acronyms, and technical terms.

     ✓ Include meaningful non-speech sounds (e.g., [Phone rings], [Applause], [Laughter]).

     ✓ Ensure captions are synchronized with speech.

     ✓ Use a legible font, high contrast, and avoid covering key visuals.

     ✓ Identify speakers whenever it isn't clear who's talking, or when more than one person is speaking.

6. **Write in Plain, Respectful Language**

    - Clear, straightforward language helps everyone understand your message—especially people who may be reading in a second language, using a screen reader, or experiencing cognitive fatigue. Avoid jargon, acronyms, or overly complex sentences.

    - Write with your specific audience in mind. For general audiences, aim for a 6th–8th grade reading level.

    - Use language that is respectful and person-centered, especially when referring to disability, aging, or identity.

    - For more information on avoiding ageist and ableist language, see the Language Guide in this toolkit.

7. **Make Sure Forms Are Labeled and Keyboard-Friendly**

    - Forms are how people sign up, register, donate, or contact you, so accessibility here is essential. Each form field should have a clear, visible label that explains what information is being requested. Labels help everyone, but they're especially important for people using screen readers or voice navigation.

    - Avoid relying on placeholder text inside form fields. Placeholders disappear when someone starts typing and aren't always read by assistive technology.

    - Also make sure every form can be completed and submitted using only a keyboard. This means people can move through fields with the Tab key, select options, and submit without needing a mouse.

- Form Checklist:

  - ✓ Every field has a clear, descriptive label (e.g., “Email address,” not “Enter info”).
  - ✓ Labels are programmatically connected to their form fields.
  - ✓ Error messages are clear and easy to find.
  - ✓ The form works with only a keyboard.

8. **Avoid PDFs When Possible**

   - PDFs can be useful for printing and sharing documents, but they often create accessibility barriers online. Even when made “accessible,” many PDFs are difficult to read on phones, hard for screen readers to interpret correctly, and require extra software to open.
   - Whenever you can, share information as a web page, email, or accessible document format instead. This makes it easier for everyone—including older adults and people using assistive technology—to read, search, and interact with your content.
   - If you must use a PDF:

     - ✓ Make sure it was created from real text (not a scanned image).
     - ✓ Add proper heading structure and tags.
     - ✓ Include alt text for images.

- ✓ Test it with Adobe Reader's "Read Out Loud" feature or a screen reader.
- ✓ Offer a text-based (web or accessible document) alternative version.
- ✓ If the information could just as easily be shared as a web page or accessible document, choose that option. It's faster, easier, and more inclusive for everyone.

9. Use Consistent Navigation

- Consistent navigation helps people find what they need quickly and confidently. When menus, buttons, and links change location or wording from page to page, it can confuse visitors—especially those using screen readers, keyboards, or cognitive supports.
- Keep your site's navigation structure simple and predictable:
  - ✓ Use the same main menu on every page.
  - ✓ Keep important links (like "Contact" or "Donate") in consistent, familiar locations on every page.
  - ✓ Use clear, descriptive menu labels that tell people exactly where each link goes.
  - ✓ Avoid sudden layout changes that move navigation elements around.
- Consistent navigation doesn't just make your site easier for people with disabilities—it improves everyone's experience, building trust and reducing frustration.

10. Ask for Feedback and Keep Learning

- Accessibility is an ongoing practice, not a one-time project. The best way to make sure your digital spaces work for everyone is to ask the people who use them.
- Encourage feedback from visitors, staff, and community members about accessibility and usability.
- When someone shares that they experienced a barrier, treat it as an opportunity to improve, not as criticism. Each piece of feedback helps you learn and make your site more welcoming for all.
- Stay curious. Accessibility standards and technologies evolve, but the core goal remains the same: to make sure everyone can connect, participate, and belong.
- You can continue your accessibility journey with many of the resources and suggested readings in this toolkit.

Alt Text Best Practices Guide

What is Alt Text and Why it Matters

Alt text (short for alternative text) describes images for people who can't see them. It's read by screen readers and, in some browsers, displayed when images don't load. But it's more than a technical feature. It's a way to make content more inclusive, accessible, and grounded in respect and justice.

Writing good alt text means thinking about what the image is doing—what it contributes to your message—and describing that clearly.

When to Include Alt Text

Include alt text for:

- Photos, illustrations, infographics, charts, and logos (when meaningful)
- Icons that act like buttons or links (e.g., search, download, social media)

Leave alt text blank for:

- Decorative images (e.g., background elements, visual flourishes)
- Redundant images (e.g., image next to a caption that already says the same thing)

Decorative images should still have an alt attribute, just left empty (alt="") so screen readers skip over them without confusion.

How to Write Effective Alt Text

Say what matters, no more, no less

Alt text should be as long as needed to describe the important content or function of the image, but no longer. One sentence is often enough, but two or more is fine if it's necessary for clarity. Avoid filler words and overly literal detail.

Describe the purpose, not just the appearance

Good alt text goes beyond what something looks like: it focuses on what it *means* in context.

Not just: Two people sitting at a table.

Better: Two older adults smiling while learning how to use a tablet at a digital literacy workshop.

If the image does something, describe what it *does*

If the image is linked or clickable, write alt text that reflects its function. A logo in a website header that links to the homepage? Alt text should be:

alt="Home" or alt="Homepage"

Other examples:

- alt="Search" for a magnifying glass icon
- alt="Download our Annual Report (PDF)"

- alt="Watch video: Older Adults Leading Community Climate Solutions"

Reflect identity when relevant and accurate

Describe people in ways that affirm how they identify, but only if you know or have their input. Don't guess.

> An older Southeast Asian woman speaks to a large crowd at a community rally about aging and inclusion.

See the "Describing People in Alt Text" section, for more detailed guidance.

Don't start with "Image of..." or "Picture of..."

Screen readers already announce images so you can jump straight into what the image conveys.

> Instead of: Image of a smiling child on a swing.
>
> Write this: Smiling child on a swing.

However, if the *format* of the image is relevant to understanding its content or function, it's helpful to include that, especially for things like screenshots, diagrams, or maps. In those cases, be specific:

- Screenshot showing error message on a login page.
- Map showing locations of community centers offering meals and activities for older adults.

Include visible text in the image

If the image has important visible text (like on a poster, sign, or graphic) include that text in the alt description.

- "Flyer with bold text: 'Free Fall Prevention Workshop. Tuesday, Sept 12, 1pm at Evergreen Community Center.'"

Note: Whenever possible, avoid using images of text.

Text in images is less accessible to assistive technology, often doesn't zoom well (which impacts people with low vision who may not use screen readers), and can't be easily translated by language tools. Use real text on the page whenever you can, and reserve images for visuals that can't be expressed in text alone.

Match tone and purpose

If the image is celebratory, joyful, somber, or urgent, let that tone come through in your alt text. Think about the emotion or message the image is helping convey.

> Two older adults laughing and clapping at a community center celebration.

Use long descriptions for complex images

For charts, graphs, or infographics, provide a brief summary in the alt text and offer a longer description nearby on the page.

> Alt text: Bar chart comparing internet adoption rates among adults 50–64 and 65+ from 2010 to 2024.

Nearby: Full data breakdown and analysis in body text or image description.

Don’t Rely on Auto-Generated Alt Text

Some platforms and tools offer auto-generated alt text using artificial intelligence. While this may seem helpful, these descriptions are often vague, inaccurate, or incomplete, and can cause more confusion than clarity.

- **Write alt text yourself** based on what the image is doing in the context of your page or post.
- **Review and replace** any auto-generated alt text with a thoughtful, accurate description.

Use all appropriate punctuation

Alt text should include proper punctuation—starting sentences with capital letters, capitalizing proper nouns, and generally ending with a period. Screen readers use punctuation to determine where to pause and to help them mimic natural speech patterns, enhancing comprehension for users.

- Graphic with text that reads: “Aging with Dignity Is a Human Right.”
- Two older adults speak into microphones at a town hall meeting about affordable and accessible housing.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

- Alt text that's too short to be meaningful
    - Instead of: Tree
    - Write this: Oak tree growing through cracked sidewalk in front of an apartment building.
- Including too much unnecessary detail
    - Instead of: A young girl, age 3, with curly brown hair and freckles wearing a red polka-dot shirt and blue jeans with light-up sneakers...
    - Write this: Toddler smiling and reaching up to catch bubbles.
- Forgetting to include visible text shown in the image
- Leaving alt text off linked images or buttons
- Using vague language like "see above" or "click here"

Describing People in Alt Text

Describing people who are in images requires care and intention. Avoid guessing about someone's identity, especially race, gender, disability, or other characteristics, unless you've been given that information directly. If a person's identity is relevant to the image and context, and you do have that information, reflect it accurately and respectfully. Here are some general guidelines:

Use the description people prefer, if you know it

If someone has shared how they identify (in a caption, bio, or consent form), use that language. Respect self-description.

A transgender elder shares their story during an online webinar.

Don’t assume someone’s identity

If you don’t know how someone identifies, avoid guessing. Focus on what’s observable and relevant to the content.

A group of people chatting outside a community center.

An older, light-skinned person wearing a blue sweater smiles while talking on the phone.

Using visual descriptors like “light-skinned,” “medium-skinned,” or “dark-skinned” can be helpful when relevant and done respectfully.

Include racial identity when relevant

Disability rights advocate Haben Girma reminds us:

“When you do image descriptions, don’t skip race. Don’t leave room for harmful assumptions.”

Omitting race can unintentionally reinforce the idea that whiteness is the norm. If race contributes to the meaning or context of the image, and you know how the person identifies, include it.

Three Black women share a laugh during a health fair.

> A white man and a Latine teen work together to set up tables for a community meal.

Focus on action and role

Describe what the person is doing rather than what they look like, unless appearance is important for understanding the image.

> Two staff members talk while setting up an information table at a community center.

> An older adult using a powerchair holds a sign that reads: “Free Health Screenings Today.”

Consider context

If the image is being used to tell a story about race, disability, or other identity-based experience, then identity may be important to include—but it still needs to be grounded in accuracy and consent wherever possible.

Stock photos are an exception. When using stock images, it’s generally appropriate to describe observable identity markers (like race, gender presentation, disability, age) in a respectful and relevant way, even without knowing the individual’s preferred terms. Stock photo subjects have consented to public use of their images, and thoughtful descriptions help avoid defaulting to whiteness or making people invisible.

Prioritize respect and agency

Avoid language that objectifies or reduces people to a single trait. Always ask: What is this image showing, and how can I describe it in a way that honors the people in it?

Alt Text Workflow: Who Writes It and When?

Alt text is part of how we make content more inclusive, human-centered, and respectful. As accessibility advocate Alexa Heinrich puts it:

"Alt text isn't extra work. It's missing work."

But for alt text to get done well and consistently, it needs to be part of your team's workflow, not the sole responsibility of one person.

Accessibility is a shared responsibility

Truly accessible content is a community act of care. Everyone involved in creating, approving, or publishing content has a role to play.

The person who knows the image best should write the alt text

If a photo, graphic, or chart is created as part of a blog post, social media campaign, or report, the person who wrote or commissioned that content is usually in the best position to describe what the image is doing and why it matters.

- They understand the story.
- They know what the image is meant to communicate.

- They often know more about the people or context in the image.

Content managers and publishers play a key role

If you're managing a website, social media, or overseeing final content uploads, it's important to make sure alt text is included. But if you're not the one who created the image or wrote the content, you may not have everything you need to write it well. Rather than skipping it:

- Ask for the alt text at the point of handoff (e.g., from a content author).
- Draft the alt text and request feedback.
- Flag it as missing if it hasn't been provided.
- Edit alt text when needed, using the guidelines in this document.
- Treat alt text like any other essential content element (because that's what it is).

Shifting Left

The key to consistent, effective alt text is to shift accessibility earlier in your content process, often referred to as "shifting left." Here are a few ways to build that habit:

- If you're designing a graphic, selecting a photo, or building a chart, include a short description of what it communicates and why it's being used.

- When handing off content to someone else, include a quick alt text suggestion for any images.
- When reviewing content, check for alt text just like you'd check for spelling or clarity.
- If alt text is missing, say something. A simple reminder can help build a culture of access.

Language Guide: Avoiding Ableist and Ageist Language

Language shapes reality: how we see each other, how systems treat us, and what kind of world we believe is possible. When we talk about disability and aging, the words we choose often reflect deep-rooted societal attitudes. But language is also a tool for worldmaking. It's one way we build futures rooted in care, dignity, and justice. By choosing words with intention, we help shape spaces, both online and off, where more people can belong and thrive.

When we use disability-related words as insults (e.g., "crazy," "lame"), or as metaphors for something undesirable ("I'm so OCD about my desk"), we reinforce the idea that disability is something negative, broken, or to be fixed. Similarly, phrases like "the elderly" or "our seniors" may sound respectful, but they can flatten the complexity of aging into a single, often patronizing identity.

Even positive language can cause harm. Saying someone is "still active" at 85 or describing a disabled person as "inspiring" just for existing may sound like

compliments—but they often reflect surprise that someone disabled or older can live a full life. This reinforces the idea that aging or disability is a tragedy, rather than a normal and expected part of human diversity.

Ableist and ageist language, whether negative, euphemistic, or overly positive, can contribute to environments where people feel underestimated, excluded, or reduced to a stereotype.

The goal of this guide is to help us become more intentional and inclusive in how we speak and write. Thoughtful language:

- Affirms people's dignity and complexity
- Highlights barriers rather than blaming individuals
- Avoids stereotyping or assumptions
- And makes space for everyone to show up fully

When we choose words that welcome, respect, and reflect the communities we're trying to reach, we're not just avoiding harm—we're actively building something better. Every choice we make in language is a small act of worldmaking. We help shape digital spaces rooted in dignity, care, and justice.

"Disabled" Isn't a Bad Word

Some people still feel uncomfortable using the word *disabled*, opting for euphemisms like "differently abled," "special needs," or "handi-capable." But for many in the disability community, these terms feel dismissive or patronizing.

Disability isn't shameful—it's a natural part of human diversity. Naming it directly helps bring attention to the real barriers disabled people face and the changes society needs to make.

Many disabled activists and scholars have worked hard to reclaim the term *disabled* as a source of identity, culture, and pride. Using the word respectfully:

- Shows solidarity with the disability rights and justice movements
- Affirms that disability is not a bad thing—it's society's inaccessibility that's the problem
- Helps us talk clearly about what people need to thrive

Tip: When in doubt, follow the lead of the community or individual. Both identity-first ("disabled person") and person-first ("person with a disability") language are valid—it's about respect and context.

Principles to Guide Your Language

Inclusive language is about practicing care, accuracy, and respect with the words we choose. These principles can help guide your language when talking about disability and aging:

1. **Disability and aging are not metaphors.**

   Avoid using disability- or age-related terms to describe unrelated problems. Phrases like "that idea is lame," "I'm blind to the issue," or "having a senior moment" reduce real experiences to punchlines or shorthand for failure.

2. **Focus on barriers, not bodies.**

   Language like "suffers from" or "confined to" suggests that disability or aging is inherently tragic. Often, it's not the condition itself that's limiting, it's the barriers society has built. Centering those barriers

("the building lacked an elevator" vs. "he can't walk") reflects a more accurate and justice-oriented view.

3. **Respect how people describe themselves.**

   Some people use *identity-first* language (e.g., "disabled person"), while others prefer *person-first* language (e.g., "person with a disability"). Similarly, older adults may prefer specific generational terms (e.g., "older adults," "people in their 70s") over vague or paternalistic labels like "the elderly" or "our seniors."

   When possible, ask or follow the lead of the community or individual. There's no one-size-fits-all rule.

4. **Avoid euphemisms that obscure or minimize.**

   Phrases like "special needs," "handi-capable," or "differently abled" may be well-intentioned but often come across as patronizing. They suggest discomfort with naming disability directly and can undermine efforts to create real change. Similarly, avoid infantilizing language for older adults (e.g., "sweetie," "cute little grandma").

5. **Don't frame inclusion as surprising.**

   Saying someone "still runs at 70!" or "overcame their disability" may seem like a compliment, but it often centers your ableist or ageist assumptions. Instead of being surprised that disabled people or older adults are capable, celebrate the person without implying they're exceptional *for* being who they are.

6. **Use precise, people-centered language.**

   Instead of shorthand terms like “the disabled,” “the elderly,” or “the deaf,” use specific, people-first terms: “disabled people,” “older adults,” “Deaf community.” This reflects the diversity and humanity of those you're referring to—and avoids reducing people to a diagnosis or a demographic.

7. **Center agency and self-determination.**

   Use language that affirms people’s right to make choices about their own bodies, minds, and lives. Avoid framing disabled or older people as passive recipients of care or support, or as objects of pity or charity.

8. **Refer to adaptive strategies, not “overcoming” disability.**

   Framing disabled people as having “overcome” their disability suggests that disability is inherently negative and must be triumphed over. Instead, describe how people navigate the world using tools, supports, and adaptations without turning those strategies into inspiration or surprise.

Common Phrases to Reconsider (and Why)

Many of the phrases we use to describe situations or emotions—like calling something “lame” or “crazy”—aren’t just ableist or ageist. They’re also vague. Often, there’s a more accurate word that better communicates what we actually mean.

Instead of saying something is “lame” when we mean it’s boring, or calling a plan “insane” when we really mean it’s chaotic or risky, we can choose words that are more precise, more inclusive, and more respectful.

This isn't about being perfect—it's about being intentional. Language evolves, and we're all still learning. The list below offers some common phrases to reconsider, with suggestions for alternatives that are clearer and more inclusive.

Problematic Phrase	**Why It's Harmful**	**More Inclusive Alternative**
Wheelchair-bound	Implies confinement or limitation	Wheelchair user, uses a wheelchair
Home-bound	Suggests someone is trapped or confined in their home	Primarily spends time at home, requires support to access the community
Bed-bound, Bedridden	Implies total helplessness or confinement	Person who spends most of their time in bed, primarily in bed
The elderly	Reduces people to a category, often with stereotypes	Older adults, elders
Crazy / Insane	Stigmatizes mental illness	Wild, intense, unpredictable, overwhelming, chaotic

Problematic Phrase	Why It's Harmful	More Inclusive Alternative
Blind to	Uses disability as a metaphor for ignorance	Unaware of, overlooking, choosing not to see
Still hiking at 80!	Implies it's unusual or inspirational just to exist	Hikes regularly at 80, active older adult
Dumb / Stupid	Historically used to mock people with speech or cognitive disabilities	Confusing, unclear, misinformed, thoughtless
OCD (as an adjective)	Trivializes a serious mental health condition	Meticulous, detail-oriented, organized
Lame	Derogatory slang rooted in mobility disability	Disappointing, ineffective, boring
Crippled (metaphorically)	Uses disability as a metaphor for dysfunction or failure	Hindered, overwhelmed, blocked, limited

Problematic Phrase	Why It's Harmful	More Inclusive Alternative
Paralyzed with fear	Uses paralysis as a metaphor for emotion	Frozen with fear, overwhelmed, terrified
Falling on deaf ears	Assumes Deaf people don't understand or listen	Ignored, unacknowledged, disregarded
Suffers from [condition]	Frames disability or illness as tragic or pitiable	Experiences [condition], Person with [condition], Lives with [condition], has [condition]
Our seniors	Paternalistic; suggests ownership or infantilization	Older adults, older people, community elders
Special needs	Euphemistic and vague	Disabled, has access needs, support needs
Handicap / handicapped	Outdated and considered offensive	Disabled, accessible (e.g., accessible parking)

Reframing Examples

Instead of...	Try...
“She suffers from arthritis.”	“She has arthritis.”
“Despite his disability, he…”	“He… (no need to qualify)”
“Struggling with aging eyes”	“People experiencing changes in vision”
“Confined to a nursing home”	“Lives in a care facility” or “receives long-term care”
“The elderly need extra help”	“Some older adults may need additional support.”
“She doesn’t let her disability stop her.”	“She uses adaptive strategies that work for her.”
“She’s having a senior moment.”	“She’s pausing to recall something,” or “She needed a moment to remember.”
“He’s totally ADD about it”	“He has a nonlinear focus style.”

Why Language Matters for Digital Accessibility

Inclusive language is foundational to digital accessibility. The words we use shape how people are welcomed (or excluded) from online spaces, and they influence our mindset and approach to access work.

When we use ableist or ageist language, whether casually or with good intentions, we reinforce a worldview where only certain kinds of bodies, minds, or experiences are expected and valued. That same worldview often shows up in inaccessible websites, rigid systems, and exclusionary design.

Just as we build digital spaces to be flexible and barrier-free, our language should reflect that same care and intentionality. Language is part of the user experience, and also part of the accessible and inclusive world we're building. Thoughtful, inclusive language doesn't just remove barriers—it helps shape a digital world grounded in dignity, access, and possibility.

Quick References and Guides

Accessibility work is more than a checklist—it's a practice of care, curiosity, and continuous learning. But with that said, sometimes clear, simple reminders can help turn good intentions into consistent habits.

This section offers quick reference tools and guides to help you apply accessibility principles in everyday work. Use them to catch common barriers, build accessible habits, and make thoughtful choices that support inclusion for older adults and people with disabilities.

Quick Guide: Accessible Text

Font Size		
Context	**Best Practice for Font Size**	**Minimum Font Size**
Digital (web/document)	14–16 pt / ~18–24 px	12 pt / ~16 px
Presentations (slide decks)	28–32 pt+ for body text; 40 pt+ for headings	24 pt
Print (standard)	16–18 pt+	12–14 pt
Large Print Format	20–22 pt+	18 pt+

Line Spacing		
Context	**Line Spacing Best Practices**	**Minimum Line Spacing**
Digital (web/document)	1.5–1.75 × (≈ 150–175%)	1.4 × (≈ 140%)
Presentations (slide decks)	1.5 ×	1.1–1.3 ×
Print (standard)	1.15 +	1.2–1.4 ×
Large Print Format	1.75–2 ×	1.5 ×

Paragraph Spacing		
Context	**Paragraph Spacing Best Practices**	**Minimum Line Spacing**
Digital (web/document)	1.25–1.5 × line height	Equal to or slightly greater than one line of text (≈ 1 × line height)
Presentations (slide decks)	N/A	1 × line height
Print (standard)	6 pt (≈ half a line)	9–12 pt (≈ three-quarters to a full line)
Large Print Format	12 pt+	18 pt+

Additional Paragraph Spacing Tips:

- Use built-in paragraph spacing settings rather than extra returns or line breaks.
- Maintain consistent spacing throughout the document. This helps with tracking and reduces visual fatigue.
- Adding space between paragraphs improves readability and helps visually separate ideas.
- Add extra visual space between lists in presentations.

Quick Guide: Is my Font Accessible?

Use these guidelines to choose fonts that are clear, flexible, and accessible across formats.

Accessible Typography 101

Distinct letter shapes make fonts more legible and accessible. The examples below show how some fonts distinguish between similar characters.

Visually Distinct Letters		
Font	**Capital O and Number 0**	**Capital I, Lowercase L + Number 1**
Inclusive Sans	O 0	I l 1
Arial	O 0	I l 1
Calibri	O 0	I l 1

Table Description: Inclusive Sans includes a slashed zero, making it visually distinct from the capital O. In Arial, the capital O is rounder than the zero, and the same is true in Calibri, though the difference is more subtle. The capital I in Inclusive Sans features serifs (small horizontal strokes or “feet” at the top and bottom) while the lowercase L is a simple vertical stem, and the numeral 1 includes both a flag (the short stroke at the top) and a base (the short line at the bottom).

In contrast, the capital I and lowercase L in both Arial and Calibri are plain vertical strokes with no serifs, making them difficult to distinguish. The numeral 1 in Arial includes a top flag, while in Calibri it has both a flag and a base, improving legibility slightly.

Letter Spacing

Adequate spacing between letters helps ensure that individual characters remain visually distinct. Without enough space, some letter combinations can blend together. For instance, a lowercase r followed by n can be mistaken for a lowercase m.

Letter Spacing	
Font	**Lowercase r and n compared to a lower case m**
Inclusive Sans	rn m
Arial	rn m
Calibri	rn m

Table description: Inclusive sans includes a clear space between letters. In Arial, the r and n are almost touching, making them look like a lowercase m. The space in Calibri is small but present.

Rotating Letters

Some reading disabilities can cause letters to appear rotated, flipped, or moving. Understanding how your chosen font behaves when rotated can help you identify potential barriers for readers with certain disabilities, such as dyslexia.

This image compares similar-looking characters in Arial. The first line shows a lowercase n next to a rotated (upside-down) u. They are visually identical. The second line shows a lowercase i next to an inverted exclamation point (¡). The inverted exclamation point tapers slightly toward its dot, making the two look different from each other. The third line displays a 9, a rotated 6, and a

lowercase g. The 9 and the upside-down 6 are identical to each other, while the g is distinct, with a descender that curves and extends just above the circular bowl.

Creating Accessible Social Media Posts

Content and Structure

Plain Language

- I wrote in clear, simple language that can be easily understood by a broad audience.
- I avoided jargon, acronyms, or complex phrasing when possible.
- I kept posts concise and well-organized, using short paragraphs or line breaks for readability.

Hashtags

- I used hashtags in camel case (e.g., #DigitalAccessibility) or Pascal case (e.g., #DigitalAccessibility).
- I limited the number of hashtags to maintain readability and avoid clutter.

Emojis

- I used emojis sparingly and ensured they reinforce, rather than replace, meaning.
- I avoided long strings of emojis, which can be disruptive for screen readers.
- I did not use emojis as bullet points.

Images and Graphics

General

- I checked that posts make sense without visuals (for example, if someone can't see the image).

Alt Text

- I added descriptive **alt text** to every image.
- My alt text focuses on the *purpose and meaning* of the image, not every detail.
- I followed the alt text best practices in this toolkit.

Text on Images

- If the image includes important text, I repeated that text in the post caption.
- I ensured that any text within images has high color contrast (minimum 4.5:1).
- I used large, clear fonts and avoided text-heavy graphics.

Video and Audio Content

Captions and Transcripts

- I added accurate captions to all videos, including Reels, Stories, and YouTube clips.
- For short videos or Stories, I used on-screen text or auto-caption features to summarize spoken content.
- I edited auto-generated captions.
- For audio-only posts (like podcasts or clips), I provided a transcript or summary in the post or linked to one.

Sign Language

- When relevant and possible, I included sign language interpretation or linked to an accessible version of the video.

Color and Design

Contrast

- I checked color contrast for text, backgrounds, and buttons using tools like WebAIM Contrast Checker.

- I avoided relying on color alone to convey meaning (e.g., green for “yes,” red for “no”).

Animation and Motion

- I avoided flashing, strobing, or fast-moving content that could trigger seizures or motion sensitivity.

- I provided a pause option for looping videos or animations, when available.

Links and Accessibility Features

Links

- I avoided posting long raw URLs directly in captions when possible.

- If posting a link in a graphic, I also included it in the caption.

Creating Accessible Documents

Document Structure

Headings

- I used built-in heading styles (e.g., Heading 1, Heading 2) to structure my document.
- I kept headings in a logical order and didn't skip levels.

Lists

- I used built-in bullets or numbering instead of manually creating lists.
- Lists are short and focused.

Settings

- I listed my document title in the document's properties.
- I set the document's language (or languages).

Links

- I used descriptive text for links (e.g., 'Visit WebAIM's resources' instead of 'Click here').
- I did not paste raw URLs directly into the text.

Formatting

Fonts

- I used simple, easy-to-read fonts like Arial or Verdana.
- I limited the number of fonts and font styles used.
- I didn't use a font size smaller than 12pt.

- I ensured adequate spacing between lines and characters.

Color and Contrast

- I ensured good contrast between text and background colors.
- I didn’t rely on color alone to convey information or denote significance.

Images and Tables

Images

- I added alternative text (alt text) to images. The alt text describes the image’s purpose and relevant context.
- I didn’t use “image of” or “photo of” in the alt text.
- If an image had text on it, I included that text in the page content or in the alt text
- I marked decorative images as 'decorative.'
- I used in-line images rather than floating.
- I used images with sufficient color contrast, especially when they include text.

Tables

- I inserted tables using Insert > Table.
- I specified header rows/columns in tables.

Tools, Resources and Suggested Reading

Free Online Tools

- **WebAIM Contrast Checker:** Quickly test the contrast between text and background colors to make sure they meet accessibility standards.
- **Contrast Grid by EightShapes:** Enter your brand colors to see which combinations meet WCAG contrast ratios.

Resources

Media

- Meryl Evans' Complete Guide to Captioned Videos
- Accessible Social

Language

- Frameworks Institute: Aging Resources
- National Center on Disability and Journalism: Disability Language Style Guide
- Radical Copyeditor: Disability
- American Psychological Association: Inclusive Language Guidelines

Digital Accessibility

- WebAIM (Web Accessibility in Mind)
- WCAG 2 Overview
- The A11Y Project

Document Accessibility

- Microsoft Accessibility Resources
- Google Workspace Accessibility

Fonts and Text

- National Disability Rights Network Accessibility Guidelines
- American Printing House: Large Print Guidelines
- WebAIM: Typefaces and Fonts

Suggested Reading and Watching

These books offer deeper insight into disability justice, care work, and accessibility as collective practice. They provide the context and imagination that make technical work more human and remind us why inclusion matters.

- ***Year of the Tiger: An Activist's Life* by Alice Wong**
  A memoir told through essays, interviews, and artwork that explores disability, activism, interdependence, and joy.

- ***Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century* edited by Alice Wong**
  A collection of essays by disabled writers reflecting the breadth of contemporary disability experience—from culture and identity to resistance and creativity.

- ***Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha**
  Essays that center care, interdependence, and disability justice,

challenging ableism while offering models for building community-based, accessible futures.

- **Crip Camp Documentary**
  A powerful documentary highlighting the disability rights movement. Available to stream on Netflix.

- **The Power of 504**
  Documentary about the historic civil rights demonstration of people with disabilities in 1977, resulting in the signing of the 504 Regulations, the first Federal Civil Rights Law protecting people with disabilities.