

## **Web Accessibility: Web Standards and Regulatory Compliance**

Jim Thatcher and colleagues. 2006. Berkeley, CA: friends of ED. [ISBN 978-1-59059-638-8. 696 pages, including index. \$49.99 USD (softcover).]

Readers of *Technical communication* understand the importance of accessible Web design. The newest title from friends of Ed will help us translate that knowledge into action because the book presents usable information as well as compelling arguments for *why* we should care about building accessible online material. The authors provide the means to understand the issues so we can bring about positive change; this is important to designer-activists and business-savvy decision makers.

Web accessibility is a growing challenge for information designers. The 2000 U.S. census recorded almost 50 million people with disabilities, and many people with disabilities use the Web. Unfortunately, Web resources are not always accessible. It often falls to technical writers and/or designers to educate others about accessibility. Further, it's our decisions that help—or hinder—the accessibility of documents viewed by millions of online users. It's in this context that *Web accessibility* proves a timely addition to our bookshelves and briefcases.

For readers new to disability studies, *Web accessibility* defines the issues and explains accessibility law. The book also discusses strategies for implementing accessibility within organizations. For novice and expert designers, *Web accessibility* provides instructions for building and retrofitting accessible Web sites using HTML, XHTML, CSS, JavaScript, Flash, and PDF. In addition, *Web accessibility* explains accessibility testing. Useful appendixes include a glossary, a guide to the Section 508 standards, and an overview of the PAS 78 guide to good practice in commissioning accessible Web sites.

*Web accessibility* is organized into three parts. Part 1, “The impact of Web accessibility,” explains major issues, overviews laws and guidelines, and suggests strategies for integrating accessibility in organizations.

Part 2, “Implementing accessible Websites,” contains the “how-to” by reviewing accessible technologies and guidelines for developing accessible content, navigation, and online forms. The section clarifies how to compose accessible JavaScript, Flash, and PDFs and explains accessibility testing with software tools, including Watchfire's Bobby. Part 2 introduces readers to the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C's) Web Accessibility Initiative, which developed the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0. It concludes with a retrofit case study.

Part 3, “Accessibility law and policy,” discusses the Americans with Disabilities Act and how it applies to the Internet and then outlines international accessibility laws. After reviewing these sections, I wanted to *use* the information.

I recently started work on my Web site, and I've just taken a course in accessibility theory, so I was anxious to apply some of the “how-to” steps. I use Dreamweaver MX to compose my site in basic HTML, so I was interested in how I could improve the accessibility of my HTML pages.

Jim Thatcher points out, “The one accessibility issue that is probably more important than all others is providing text information for web content that is nontextual” (131). My pages contain a picture of a campus fountain and the University logo linked to the school's homepage. I began my retrofit with these images.

Thatcher states designers should use alt-text tags to provide information for non-textual items. The alt-text tag instructions in the book are easy to find and follow, and the code is simple, even for novices. I was confused, however, when I encountered the space in the alt-text

code after the alt equal sign on page 133: “alt= “go” />”. I know enough about code to be concerned with such details, but I didn’t have a way of immediately testing my work. Nevertheless, I continued knowing I could use the testing tools in Chapter 13.

When I updated my page and viewed it online, the image looked fine. Heartened by this success, I repeated the alt-text tag steps for the University logo link. Again, after coding and loading, all seemed well. I then tested my retrofits in Watchfire’s Bobby.

While my site did not pass the W3C Priority 2 or Priority 3 requirements (I hadn’t worked on my tables), it did pass Priority 1. The alt-text requirement also passed. In addition, I found that the space after the alt equal sign hadn’t spoiled my code. The authors urge designers to conduct usability tests, however, to determine true accessibility. By using three concepts outlined in *Web accessibility* (understand the issue, take action, test the results), I improved the usability and accessibility of my site with alt-text tags.

While the book is timely and useful, there are three areas of the text I thought would be better. First, the book’s tone is, at times, sardonic. The sarcasm goes over the line, however, when Patrick Lauke writes, “I’ve come to know many managers who treat Excel like a poor man’s layout tool . . . these are usually also the people who think PowerPoint is a web design tool in its own right and proudly hand over their mock-ups with an ‘I’ve already done the layout of my pages for you as well’ remark” (488).

Shawn Henry states accessibility advocates should use “education and encouragement, not criticism...” (49). If one of the book’s themes is cooperation rather than conflict, Lauke’s comments seem to dig ditches rather than build bridges.

Second, color graphics would improve the usability of visuals. Grayscale pages make some graphics hard to read, especially when black text sits on gray backgrounds (page 90, Figure 4-2, page 115, Figure 5-7). Third, instructions would benefit from numbered lists rather than prose directions. While these limitations are distracting, they do not hamper the overall effectiveness or the value of the volume.

*Web accessibility* is a landmark text. Technical writers, programmers, and decision makers will learn about the policies dictating accessibility standards worldwide. Furthermore, the book also works as a how-to. The authors provide practical information to increase accessibility of online material. Technical communication readers will benefit from *Web accessibility*’s detailed, *usable* information.

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