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Guide to Digital Accessibility at GSE

Harvard's updated digital accessibility policy requires digital content to conform to WCAG 2.1 AA accessibility standards. The policy encompasses Canvas course sites, teaching materials created with Word, PowerPoint, or other authoring tools, and third-party teaching materials. This guide aims to enhance the digital accessibility of courses in order to comply with the new University rules. This guide is based on one developed by the SLATE (Strengthening Learning and Teaching Excellence) and EdTech departments at the Harvard Kennedy School, whom we thank for their generous collaboration.

Each section has tips for key elements of your courses and teaching practice and includes contacts for help when you need it. Harvard's Digital Accessibility Services Team (DAS) is also a vital resource for information.

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Canvas

Responsibilities and Resources

Faculty are ultimately responsible for the accessibility of their Canvas course sites. Anyone who edits a Canvas site should complete a HGSE Canvas & Digital Accessibility training which covers general principles of digital accessibility that apply to all digital teaching materials. All Canvas course sites should undergo an accessibility review before publishing.

- Sign-up for live accessibility training and/or ensure TA/TFs who will be responsible for Canvas sites take the training. All FCs have taken the training.
- Once trained, the Canvas accessibility cheat sheet will aid you while designing and editing Canvas sites.
- Review the Canvas & Digital Accessibility page on the HGSE IT Canvas support site. This page will also house the latest version of the Canvas accessibility cheat sheet and of this guide.

Use of Other Instructional Technologies

Supported tools have been reviewed for accessibility; for example, Zoom, Panopto, Harmonize, Teachly, and Slack. If you wish to use a non-supported technology tool in your teaching, please first consult with the HGSE IT Instructional Technology team.

Resources:

- Consult Dean Redfearn, Senior Mgr. Instructional Technologies, for any support or questions on digital accessibility: canvas@gse.harvard.edu.

General Principles of Digital Accessibility

The general principles of digital accessibility are covered in more detail in the Canvas & Digital Accessibility training provided by HGSE IT.

Layout and Text Formatting

Use inbuilt style and template functions to provide accessible and aesthetically clean layouts and looks.

- Use the standard/default font and font size.
- Write detailed text for hyperlinks rather than linking to non-descript words such as “here”.

In Microsoft Word and PowerPoint:

- Use the Styles tool to create headers and subheads in your document. This provides baseline accessibility for students using assistive technology.
- Use the Templates tool for complex structures like columns, sections, etc. Template formatting is accessible.

In Canvas:

- Use the Cidilabs template provided, or choose an inbuilt Cidilabs theme, and use the theme for layout and formatting of all content. See the Canvas accessibility cheat sheet for a reminder of Canvas and digital accessibility principles.

Resources:

- Canvas accessibility cheat sheet from HGSE IT found on the Canvas & Digital Accessibility page.
- “Identify headings, lists, and tables” from Harvard DAS
- “Write helpful links” from Harvard DAS
- “Create Accessible Word Documents” from Harvard DAS
- “Create Accessible PowerPoint Presentations” from Harvard DAS

Color

Color needs thoughtful treatment to ensure accessibility. When you want to use color, think of how someone who cannot see the colors could miss out on the meaning.

- Do not rely on color alone to identify or distinguish information.
- Do not use color to emphasize words in text. Use *italics*—they are visible to screen readers.
- Any combination of color must have enough contrast to be legible; this applies to colors in charts, graphs, maps, etc., as well as any text.
- In charts or graphs, use line thickness, outlines, or patterns to differentiate data instead of or along with color; use labels and keys along with colors for lines, bars, etc.

Resources:

  - Consult our page on color palettes for brand approved and accessible color combinations.
  - For color contrast and choices, go to Data Visualizations, Charts, and Graphs from Harvard DAS.
  - The Coblis Color Blindness Simulator is a free tool that lets you test visuals for color accessibility.

Describing Visuals (alt text versus descriptive text)

- Check that you have included titles, axis labels, and keys for any complex visuals, as needed.
- Some visuals may be available in a form or a link that is digitally accessible. Consider this option rather than taking a screenshot or using a flat image file (usually in a format such as png, jpeg, or gif).

A visual, whether it's a graph, chart, photo, drawing, etc., needs a written description to be accessible if it is not a simple decorative image. The written descriptions have two distinct forms: alt text (required) and descriptive text (optional based on need).

Alt text is hidden from view until a student uses a screen reader, or hovers their mouse over a visual to make it appear.

- Write meaningful alt text for all visuals you include in digital content.
- Alt text should be short and clear and related to the context – 120 characters maximum (about two sentences). The purpose of alt text is to answer the question "What would I want to know about this image if I couldn't see it?"; ask yourself why you're using that image.

Descriptive text appears next to a visual (above, below, or beside it) and is always visible as part of the text on a page in digital learning material.

- If short alt text does not fully convey the intended meaning and purpose of the image, then descriptive text is necessary. Complex charts, graphs, maps, infographics etc., may require longer descriptive text.

Resources:

- "Write good Alt Text to describe images" from Harvard DAS (also covers writing descriptive text)
- "Writing Meaningful Alt Text" Training from Harvard DAS
- "Data Visualizations, Charts, and Graphs" from Harvard DAS
- "Technique: Describing Graphs" from Harvard DAS

Class Materials (Handouts, Slides)

All handouts, slides, or other class materials should be available electronically and conform to the general principles of accessibility above.

- If you teach students who have an approved accommodation from OSA, you may be asked to share materials with a specific student *before* class.

Using Slides

- Author slides with a tool that is natively accessible, such as PowerPoint.
- Use the Template and Layout tools when you make a new slide deck instead of choosing blank slides and building them from scratch. The built-in tools ensure that assistive technology can interpret the reading order of each slide.
- Give each slide a descriptive title.
- Give each slide a single focus: one image, quote, graph, or chart. Be sure a visual has a title. If it's a graph or chart, make sure the axes are labeled.
- Avoid purely decorative images such as large borders or accents that take up slide space without adding to instruction.
- Check PowerPoint accessibility checker and use the accessibility panel to check the reading order of the slides.

Posting Materials

- Share slides in original format (e.g., pptx), not in PDF format.
- Use "Save as Adobe PDF" on Word and PowerPoint files to export correctly.
- Run a PDF accessibility report in Adobe Acrobat. Check that the PDF tags are correct.
- While it is good practice to include descriptive text for complex visuals in all cases, if slides with complex visuals are talked through in detail in class, and the classroom recording is available and captioned, that provides sufficient explanation.

Resources:

- Workshops on "Creating Accessible Slide Decks" from Harvard DAS.
- Self-Paced Course: Creating Accessible Documents Using Adobe Acrobat Pro from Harvard DAS.

Syllabus

Students with accessibility needs may decide to enroll in your course based on your syllabus.

- Include the required statement about accessibility & accommodations (see the HGSE Syllabus Template). This statement pertains to students who formally request accommodations.
- In the first class and/or course preview session, bring attention to the syllabus statement and tell students how to ask further questions about accessibility practices in your course.
- Provide specific details about accessibility options, tools, and resources for assignments that include visuals or audio (e.g., videos, podcasts).

Resources:

  - If you have questions about a specific student's accommodation requested for your course, please consult Student Support Services: hgsesupport@gse.harvard.edu

Course Readings

Faculty support staff use the Library Reserves Tool (LRT) to load and centrally manage *required* course materials by directly linking to electronic resources in HOLLIS databases or direct linking to external web resources. If an item is not directly/lawfully available electronically, PDFs that are compatible with assistive technologies are loaded.

- Electronic resources (ebooks, journal articles, newspaper articles etc.) available via HOLLIS, and loaded PDFs, have basic digital accessibility.
- External web resources have various levels of digital accessibility depending on the publisher. The University is not responsible for digital accessibility of external web resources but accommodations may be necessary to arrange.
- Note that only *required* course materials should be loaded in the LRT. Resources that are optional or recommended should be listed in syllabus or in a separate area in Canvas for students to consult and locate on their own.

Resources:

- Contact your faculty coordinator with questions on loading required course materials to the LRT.
- Contact Gutman Library with any questions on digital accessibility of library resources via Ask Us @ Gutman Library

Video & Zoom

Course Video Content

All Harvard produced videos used for course content such as asynchronous lecture recordings and course previews should be processed and delivered using Panopto. Zoom recordings (if scheduled in Canvas) and classroom recordings will be processed by, and available through Panopto. If you use slides or other visuals in your video, make those available separately.

Professional captioning is required for:

- Multimedia assets used in courses repeatedly and over time.
- Multimedia assets used for critical course content/asynchronous content delivery.

Only automated captioning is required (unless either of the above conditions apply) for:

- Multimedia assets in academic courses used for optional content.
- Recordings resulting from automated lecture capture in HGSE classrooms and event spaces.
- Recordings produced from Zoom webinars and meetings or Microsoft Team meetings.

Resources:

- "Subtitles, Captioning and Transcription Services: Facts, Resources and Guidance for the HGSE Community" document available on the Canvas & Digital Accessibility page.
- Consult Pete Shapiro for professional captioning requests, Panopto help, and other captioning questions: peter_shapiro@gse.harvard.edu

Virtual Guest Speakers

A class session with a virtual guest speaker via Zoom can be enhanced for digital accessibility.

- Enable Zoom's Closed Captions to be shown in real-time during the guest speaker's Zoom session.
- Keep a slow pace during Q&A so captioning keeps up, and repeat student questions to the speaker.
- Consider recording the Zoom session to offer students for later viewing.
- If your guest is using slides, ask them to send slides in advance, and ask that they be made accessible.

Resource: Consult Pete Shapiro for further Zoom help: peter_shapiro@gse.harvard.edu