

AccessCyberlearning 20 Tips for Teaching an Accessible Online Course

By Sheryl Burgstahler, Ph.D.

I taught the first online learning course at the University of Washington in 1995. My co-instructor was Dr. Norm Coombs, who was, at the time, a professor at the Rochester Institute of Technology. We designed the course to be accessible to anyone, including students who were blind, deaf, or had physical disabilities. Norm himself is blind. He uses a screen reader and speech synthesizer to read text presented on the screen. We employed the latest technology of the time—email, discussion list, Gopher, file transfer protocol, and telnet (no World Wide Web yet!). All online materials were in a text-based format, and videos, which were mailed to the students, were presented in VHS format with captions and audio description. When asked if any of our students in this course had disabilities, we were proud to say that we did not know why. No one needed to disclose a disability because all of the course materials and teaching methods were designed to be accessible to everyone.

Today the technology is more advanced and there are more options to choose from for teaching an online course, but the basic issues are the same when it comes to accessibility. We need to make sure that the screen readers of students who are blind or have a reading-related disability can access content in a text-based and structured format; that content is accessible by using the keyboard alone since assistive technology can be used to emulate keyboard commands, but not necessarily movement of a mouse; that videos are captioned and audio described; and that content is presented in a clear, consistent format.

As they choose content, document formats, and teaching methods, it is important for instructors to remember that potential students have a wide variety of characteristics that may relate to gender, race, ethnicity, culture, marital status, age, communication skills, learning abilities, interests, physical abilities, social skills, sensory abilities, values, learning preferences, socioeconomic status, religious beliefs, etc.

But what does “accessible” mean with respect to an online course? According to the Office of Civil Rights, “accessible” means that “a person with a



disability is afforded the opportunity to acquire the same information, engage in the same interactions, and enjoy the same services as a person without a disability in an equally effective and integrated manner, with substantially equivalent ease of use. The person with a disability must be able to obtain the information as fully, equally, and independently as a person without a disability” (uw.edu/accessibility/requirements/legal-cases-by-issue).

There are many comprehensive resources that share accessibility checkers, legal issues, technical guidelines, vendor-specific information, and promising practices—many presented on DO-IT’s AccessDL website at uw.edu/doit/programs/accessdl and AccessCyberlearning website at uw.edu/doit/programs/accesscyberlearning. In this document I share twenty simple guidelines, along with URLs of resources that provide further explanations, that provide a good place to start when designing an accessible course.

For course web pages, documents, images, and videos, consult *Accessible Technology* (uw.edu/accessibility), in particular, follow these guidelines:

1. Use clear, consistent layouts and organization schemes for presenting content.
2. Structure headings and lists—using style features built into the Learning Management System (LMS), Microsoft Word and PowerPoint (PPT), PDF, etc.—and use built-in designs/layouts (e.g., for PPT slides). uw.edu/accessibility/documents
3. Use *descriptive wording for hyperlink text* (e.g., “DO-IT Knowledge Base” rather than “click here”).



4. Avoid creating PDF documents. Post instructor-created course content within LMS content pages (i.e., in HTML) and, if a PDF is desired, link to it only as a secondary source of the information. uw.edu/accessibility/documents
5. Provide concise text descriptions of content presented within images. uw.edu/accessibility/documents
6. Use large, bold fonts on uncluttered pages with plain backgrounds.
7. Use color combinations that are high contrast and can be read by those who are colorblind. developer.paciellogroup.com/resources/contrastanalyser
8. Caption videos and transcribe audio content. uw.edu/accessibility/videos
9. Use a small number of IT tools and make sure they present content and navigation that require use of the keyboard alone and otherwise employ accessible practices. uw.edu/accessibility/web/keyboard/

With respect to instructional methods, consult *Equal Access: Universal Design of Instruction* (uw.edu/doit/equal-access-universal-design-instruction). In particular, follow these guidelines:

10. Assume students have a wide range of technology skills and provide options for gaining the skills needed for course participation.
11. Provide options for learning by presenting content in multiple ways (e.g., in a combination of text, video, audio, and / or image format). uw.edu/doit/equal-access-universal-design-instruction
12. Provide options for communicating and collaborating that are accessible to individuals with a variety of disabilities.
13. Provide options for demonstrating learning (e.g., different types of test items, portfolios, presentations, single-topic discussions).
14. Address a wide range of language skills as you write content (e.g., spell acronyms, define terms, avoid or define jargon).
15. Make instructions and expectations clear for activities, projects, discussion questions, and assigned reading.
16. Make examples and assignments relevant to learners with a wide variety of interests and backgrounds.

17. Offer outlines and other scaffolding tools to help students learn.
18. Provide adequate opportunities to practice.
19. Allow adequate time for activities, projects, and tests (e.g., give details of project assignments in the syllabus so that students can start working on them early).
20. Provide feedback on project parts and offer corrective opportunities.

For explanations of why these guidelines are important, how to implement them, and how to locate other resources, consult the websites above as well as the book *Universal Design in Higher Education: From Principles to Practice* described at [hepg.org/hep-home/books/universal-design-in-higher-education-\(1\)](http://hepg.org/hep-home/books/universal-design-in-higher-education-(1)).

Video

A video, *20 Tips for Instructors about Making Online Learning Courses Accessible*, may be freely viewed at uw.edu/doit/videos/index.php?vid=79. Permission is granted to reproduce DO-IT videos for educational, non-commercial purposes as long as the source is acknowledged.

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