



Accessibility for Publishers

Meeting Customer's Needs to Maximize Your Market

Updated Edition

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ABOUT US

KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd.

KGL, a [Benetech Global Certified Accessible™ \(GCA\) vendor](#), is a top industry provider of cutting-edge content solutions. KGL has long been a champion of digital equality, designing and developing digital products that are born accessible. KGL has decades of experience offering expansive accessibility services: comprehensive accessibility evaluation of digital assets, accessibility remediation of web, PDF, ePub, art, interactivities, and media; and accessibility-integrated workflows to develop born-accessible digital products, learning courses, videos, and interactive content.

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Riverwinds Consulting

Riverwinds Consulting is a publishing consultancy that specializes in creating and delivering valued content for associations, publishers, and other organizations. John Bond is the President of Riverwinds Consulting; offering RFP Process Management, Strategic Planning, Market Insights, Product Development, and other services in the digital and print arenas. John is the author of a series of books with Rowman & Littlefield on book publishing, journal publishing, and other scholarly communications.

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In the realm of publishing, accessibility is not just a regulatory checkbox—it’s an opportunity to broaden the audience, enhance the usability of content, increase discoverability, and showcase the publisher’s commitment to inclusivity. For organizations still navigating the landscape of accessibility, this report offers practical insights to help integrate accessibility into the publishing process effectively.

Accessibility of books, journals, digital products, websites, and other content is essential to individuals with disabilities. Accessibility also holds important benefits for users (including students, researchers, and libraries) and publishers. Yet it remains a secondary consideration with some in the publishing community. When accessibility is well executed, it can expand readership and provide a higher-quality user experience for everyone. It aids publishers with the rapidly growing area of search and keeps content vibrant for future applications. Overlooking accessibility is akin to ignoring the artificial intelligence discussion taking place.

Compliance with key standards in accessibility will become increasingly important as libraries, consortia, and governmental bodies require publishers to verify that content complies with the many well-established

standards such as the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#), [European Accessibility Act of 2025](#), and others.

What does accessibility actually mean to publishers, and how do these diverse content creators take advantage of this important business opportunity?

Many publishers remain skeptical that there is a true ROI for making content accessible. This report examines the importance of accessibility for a publishing organization and provides key takeaways to implement accessibility into publishing strategies and workflows.

Accessibility: The Baseline

Accessibility is an approach to publishing and design that makes content available to all, including those with disabilities who use assistive technologies on the computer. The aim of accessible publishing is to make content accessible to users who have difficulties or disabilities including the blind, partially sighted, deaf, people with hearing difficulty, and people with learning disabilities. Making content accessible enables readers to experience content in the most efficient format and allows them to absorb the information in a better way. The term “accessibility” is used to address issues of content structure, format, and presentation.

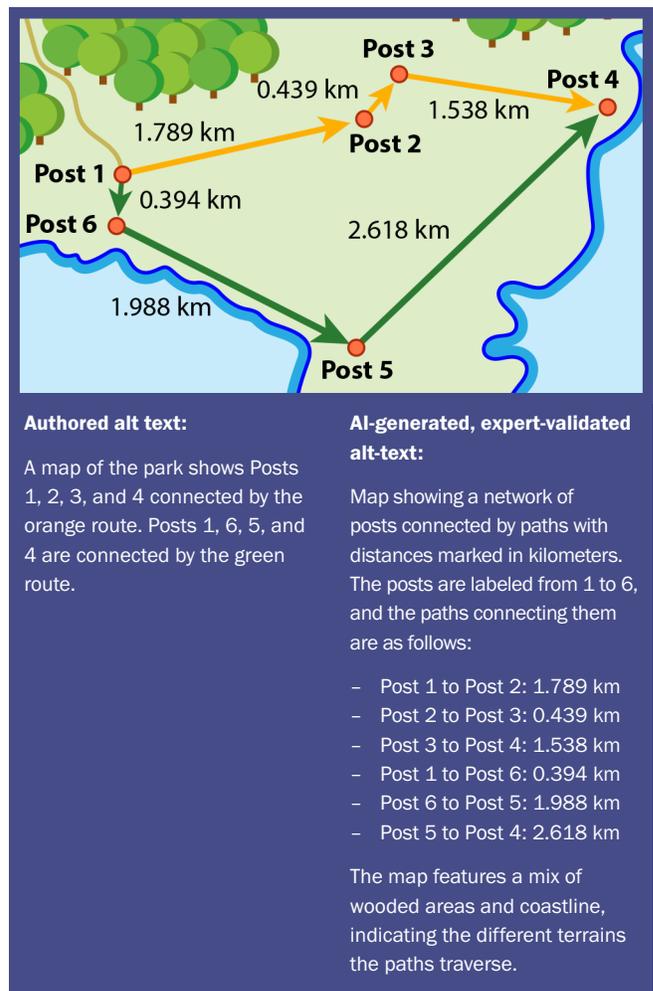
The most tangible form of accessible publishing, predating the digital era, is Braille. Today, accessible publishing means much more. It allows users to adjust font, font size, color schemes, and other features on a host of devices. The expectation is that content, including text, tables, equations, and images, reflows and retains a logical presentation and reading order.



Visual items such as images that are important to the content should include alternate-text descriptions (alt text), which help the user understand the information conveyed in the visual or image. It improves searchability of images, making it easier to find specific images based on textual queries.

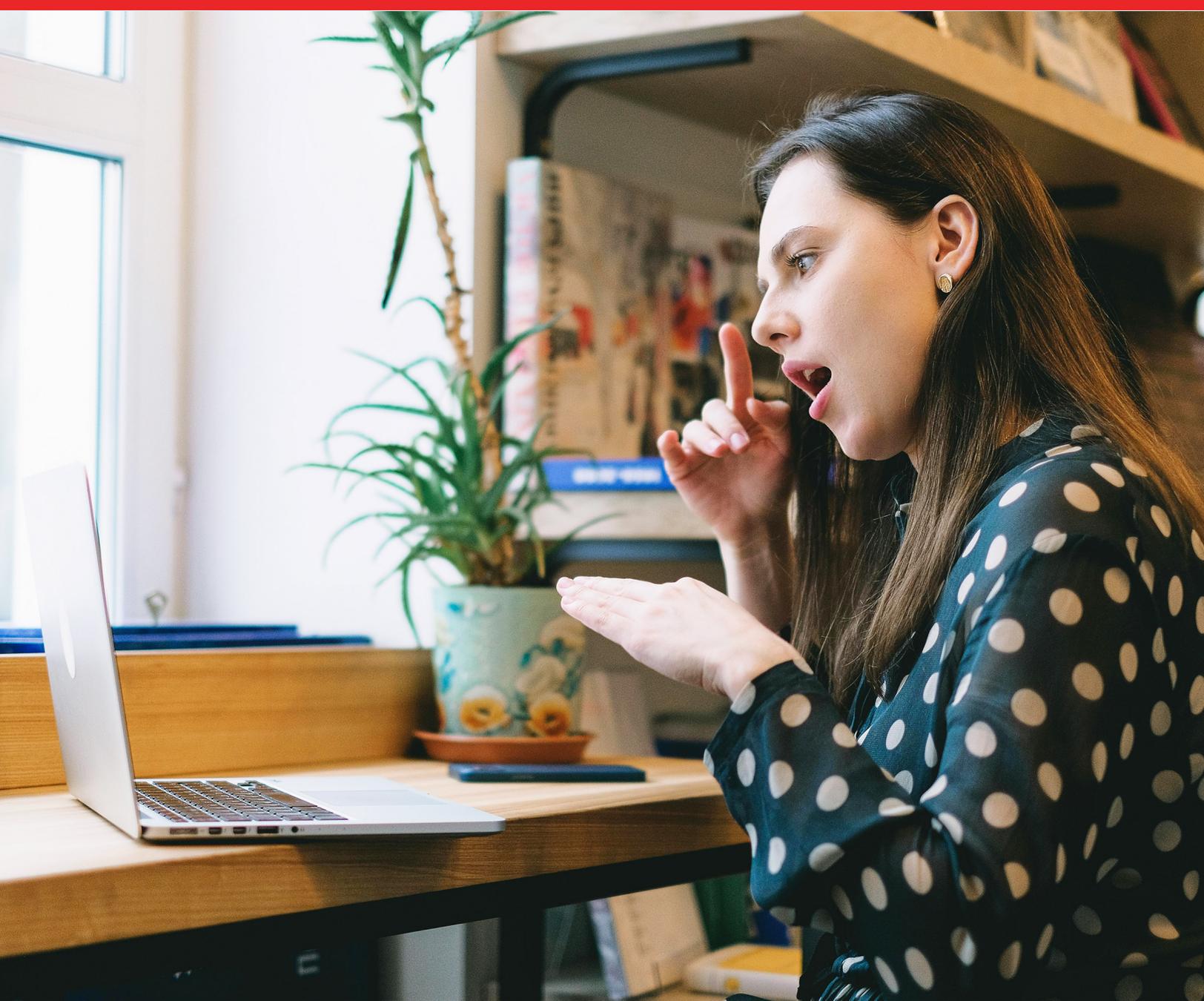
Alt text descriptions should capture information that is not included in the caption or surrounding text and convey meaningful information to the user from the visual item. Descriptive alt text provides a detailed description of an image for the visually impaired reader.

Recently, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been helpful in creating meaningful descriptions for images. There are multiple Large Language Models (LLMs) in the market; a good generative AI offers several benefits—efficiency, consistency, scalability and most important cost effectiveness. Reducing the human intervention of a subject matter expert alt-text writer can significantly lower the costs, especially for businesses that need to process large volumes of images.



The figure above illustrates an example of accessible alt text that is authored by a subject matter expert alongside alt text generated by AI but validated by a human expert.

Tables in content can be made accessible by using proper HTML markup to ensure all users including those using assistive technology can understand and navigate the table effectively. Best practices include using captions to give a brief description of the tables' content for users to understand the tables' context. Include summary for complex tables. Avoid complex structures; use a simple layout for tables and associate header cells with data cells.



Making Math accessible to all users including those with disabilities involves multiple strategies. Key approaches involve use of MathML and MathJax. Multiple representations of the math can be provided by including text descriptions for equations, tactile graphics for users who are blind or have low vision, and ensure screen reader compatibility. Provide multiple ways for students to interact with math content, such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic methods.

The accessible content should support reading by screen readers in a logical reading order. It should also be navigational to facilitate easy navigation, allowing a user to jump to a specific location.

These basic attributes apply to books and journals, videos, and digital products. Audio transcripts and closed captioning are minimum requirements for audio/video content.

The content should come with complete, accessible metadata that allows users/stakeholders to discover the content and know the accessibility features available in the product.

These points are the baseline. Some may ask if the effort is necessary.

Examining the Business Case for Accessibility

While fewer publishers still ask,



why make the effort to have content accessible to readers with disabilities?



some are still skeptical about the business case. Accessibility comes with a cost, but it also comes with real benefits. Publishers (and readers) indeed benefit from embracing this essential initiative. Several business cases can be presented to leadership and stakeholders in publishing organizations.

The first reason is market size. Many in publishing have incorrectly assumed that there are few customers in their market with disabilities. The statistics say otherwise. The [World Health Organization estimates](#) that 2.2 billion people live with vision impairment. Of that, 43 million are blind and 293 million have moderate to severe vision impairment, according to a [study published in The Lancet](#).

This does not even address the fact that over 7% of any given population has dyslexia. [The International Dyslexia Association](#) reports that “13–14% of the school population nationwide has a handicapping condition that qualifies them for special education. Current studies indicate that one half of all the students who qualify for special education are classified as having a learning disability.”

As the global population ages, the percentage that fit the visually impaired criteria only grows. This makes the market for accessible content very significant. Accommodating this market is as essential as considering publishing in other languages or having content available on all computer operating systems.

The second reason is a better product experience. When content is “[born accessible](#),” the reader enjoys a better experience, whether they have a disability or not.

The content flows better. The navigation is cleaner. Tables are more thought out. Higher quality content structuring promotes increased usage.

The third reason for creating accessible content is that greater discoverability in search. Whether traditional search or voice search, accessible content is vastly more discoverable in the SEO-driven era. Amazon’s Echo Dot, Google’s Nest, Apple’s HomePod and countless other devices consistently rank as some of the top selling product by these mega-companies. Accessible content means greater discoverability and perfectly positioned to take advantage of booming number of searches. Content that does not meet accessibility standards will be penalized in search rankings.

A fourth reason is compliance with a growing series of mandates and requirements for universities and libraries, particularly when public funds are used. Publishers selling content to these large customers, including consortia, increasingly need to provide documentation such as a [Voluntary Product Accessibility Template](#) or VPAT (which translates accessibility requirements and standards into actionable testing criteria for products and services).

The fifth reason to make content accessible is to have an edge over competitive products or companies. Many times, the features and benefits touted by marketing may be very similar to other products being considered by institutional customers. Including statements that trumpet the robust nature of fully accessible content, independent of device or operating system speaks volumes.

The sixth reason is futureproofing the content. For the most part, publishers have incorporated their legacy content into new platforms or systems. Some have had to convert older content multiple times due to lack of foresight. Having content meet accessible standards ensures a robust and vibrant format that will serve future reuse well. As AI becomes fully entrenched in publishing (and life), new formats and avenues for delivery will surely emerge. Accessibility ensures a publisher is poised to take advantage of it.

The seventh reason is increased access to funding. Some publishers or non-profits may gain access to grants or funding from interested parties. Being proactive in this area may help with partnerships for some highly influential organizations.

The final reason to have content accessible for people with disabilities, and certainly not the least important one, is that it is the right thing to do. Anna Selden, the Associate Director of Journals and Publications, Georgetown Law, said,



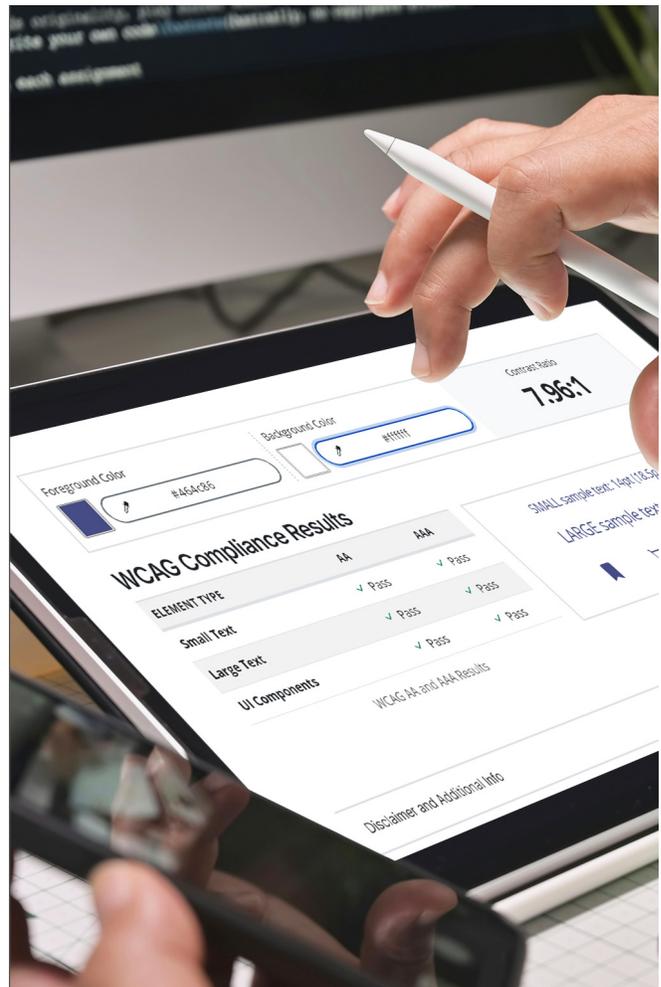
We are committed to accessibility from the moral viewpoint. We have incorporated accessibility measures into our current workflow and are exploring the best method for making legacy content accessible.



Michael Johnson, the Vice President of Content at **Benetech**, which is a nonprofit social enterprise organization that empowers communities with software for social good, echoed these points.



Four reasons to consider accessibility. First, it is just the socially responsible thing to do. If you have a DEI initiative in your organization or care about these issues, accessibility is a must. Second, is market size. Twenty percent or more of any audience has some reading or visual disability. No organization should ignore a group that size. Third is discoverability. Any publisher that wants their material to surface and be prominent in search, needs to be fully compliant or their content will likely not be included or deprioritized. Finally, is compliance. Either legal exposure or being excluded from large educational sales should be enough incentive to make publishers want to make all their content compliant with key legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act or European Accessibility Act.



Accessible Content Begins with Structured Content

Many publishers find they are well along the road to accessibility if they are creating content with a current workflow that implements markup language. Taking additional steps on the path, or just getting started, is usually easier than you think.

Principles of Accessibility

It's important to understand the basic attributes and principles of accessibility. The following are some of the core standards and ideas related to accessible content:

- **EPUB3:** The most widely supported XML-based eBook format independent of a specific platform. EPUB3 is the format of choice for accessibility. The standard is developed and maintained by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C).
- **HTML5:** The current version of the markup language that is the cornerstone of the Internet. HTML5 has many advantages, including cleaner markup of text, consistency, and support of rich media elements. For years, most browsers have incorporated accessibility into their settings option.
- **XML-first Workflow:** This practice helps content creators simultaneously deliver print and digital files. The process is cleaner and helps reduce costs once implemented.
- **Layout and Design:** A well-thought-out approach to content layout, including a logical reading order, goes a long way not only for readers with disabilities, but for all users. This includes a design that takes into account the basic principles of accessibility for all elements within the content.
- **Ensure Proper Contrast and Readability:** Contrast and readability are fundamental to creating accessible content. Colorblindness is a real issue with more than 300 million people worldwide, [according to the Cleveland Clinic](#). Ensure that information is not solely conveyed through color but also through patterns, labels, or text is important.
- **Alt Text or Alt Attributes:** An essential trait for accessibility involves including meaningful description for important non-text items. This practice helps in content discovery and aids in search.

- **Closed Captioning:** This practice is a must for all video content. This benefits not only disabled readers but also users who watch videos in a library or the workplace and choose to use closed captioning versus the audio, a growing trend. Consider the prevalence of those people streaming entertainment content that routinely uses closed captioning to help learn a language or navigate a speaker's dialect or speech patterns.
- **Well-Structured Metadata:** This is a crucial step, often overlooked. This task assists from a semantics point of view and aids content discovery.
- **Well-Structured Content:** Content that is well-structured often adheres to best practices that improves SEO, such as using descriptive alt text for images and creating a clear content structure. Better SEO can lead to higher visibility in search engine results, attracting more traffic and potential customers.
- **MathML:** This is a mathematical markup language for describing mathematical notations and capturing structure in documents.

Michael Johnson of **Benetech** added some pro-tips.



First, no fixed layout. There are still some publishers that insist on this, but it has to be addressed. There are ways to achieve the same end. Next is 'In Work Navigation,' such as endnotes, footnotes, images, references. Readers need to be able to jump to that link and then have a way to come back to the spot they left off. Finally, language shifts. If there is a language change, this needs to be noted, as well as when there is a return to the initial language. Important tasks like these should not be overlooked in any good accessibility program.



Standards

It's important for publishers to understand the key standards that come into play with accessibility.

- **Section 508:** The US Congress amended the Rehabilitation Act to require Federal agencies to make their content and technology accessible to people with disabilities. It applies to all Federal agencies when they develop, procure, maintain, or use electronic and information technology.
- **WCAG 2.2:** The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines are a series of web accessibility guidelines published by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), the main international standards organization for the web. They are a set of guidelines that specify how to make content accessible, primarily for people with disabilities. A Working Draft of [WCAG 3.0](#), which will have an updated structure, different conformance model, and broader scope, is currently in review.
- **DAISY:** Audiobooks have been a major area of growth across book publishing. The Digital Accessible Information System is a technical standard for audiobooks, periodicals, and digital text. It is designed to be an audio substitute for print material and is specifically designed for use by people with print disabilities.
- **European Union (EU) European Accessibility Act of 2025:** The EU has established regulations to improve accessibility across member states. This includes requirements for digital accessibility in public sector websites and mobile applications, aligning closely with WCAG.
- **NIMAS:** The National Instructional Materials Accessibility Standard. It is a provision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and was endorsed by the US Department of Education as the preferred approach for publishers to provide accessible curricular materials to students in grades K-12. The NIMAS standard guides

the production and electronic distribution for digital versions of textbooks and other instructional materials. A NIMAS fileset comprises an XML content file, a PDF that contains important content metadata, images, and a package file.

By adhering to these concepts, publishers will go a long way towards compliance with these standards, as well as creating superior rich content.

An important link in the chain of accessibility has to do with knowledge and partnerships. It is important to have a go-to person in an organization who understands the broad concepts behind accessibility. They also need to be familiar with the mechanics and the process, as well as be able to make the case for the idea. This person needs to be a key player in meetings dealing with content creation and launch as well as all major online initiatives.

Also, the people in publishing tasked with implementing accessibility should be supported in their professional educational needs, such as attending publishing trade meetings, webinars, participate in community discussions, etc. A great starting point is to be a member of the [Society for Scholarly Publishing \(SSP\)](#) or the [Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers \(ALPSP\)](#). Anyone can access the ALPSP open access journal [Learned Publishing](#). Another group to consider is the [International Association of Accessibility Professionals](#).

Finally, when a publisher selects a partner for publishing services, choosing one with deep experience in working with structured content and accessibility (and other key industry initiatives) is vital. Their experience may prevent publishers from “reinventing the wheel” when it comes to established standards and optimal workflows.

Due diligence with this decision will pay off when content is assessed for compliance with the previously mentioned standards. Being connected with a partner that understands proper testing, including quality control checks on multiple devices/platforms before delivery, can make all the difference in the world.

Moving Forward

Having knowledge is important, but a plan is required.

Accessibility does not need to get mired down. Following are some simple steps to get started today:

- **Understand the key concepts:** Look through the list of attributes and terms above. Compare these to the current products being published in your organization.
- **Understand the essential standards:** Review the list of standards. Click on the links and browse the actual requirements.
- **Designate a lead on accessibility:** To start, tap someone as the person who will be the key individual on accessibility. But remember, multiple people in leadership positions need to understand and appreciate the value of accessibility.
- **Assess the organization's status:** Key personnel need to understand the organization's status with accessibility; this may not be a full-fledged audit to start, but a good assessment of which products comply, and which do not.
- **Decide on priorities:** Will current products/production be the focus, or will products with high usage or significant revenue generation point the way?
- **Develop guidelines:** Once your organization has determined how they wish to proceed, codify the standards each product will be meeting.
- **Determine costs:** Once a product is chosen to be made accessible and comply with standards, the next step is an assessment of what needs to change, including at what part of the workflow. Connect with a publishing services partner to understand how much can be done upstream at the publisher (or even the author), and how much the partner can accomplish.
- **Establish a timeline:** Create a timeline for: approval, implementation of the work, testing, and rollout, including marketing and notifying current customers.

- **Make the business case:** Review the reasons previously discussed for making products accessible. Then put together the best business case to bring to stakeholders or leadership for moving forward with making a product fully accessible for customers.
- **Execute/evaluate/repeat:** Once approval is received, execute the plan for accessibility. Test with real users instead of just in-house personnel. When the project is complete and rolled out, evaluate how things went. Document additional benefits, such as decreased time to market or increased usage. Use this new-found information to move forward with other products and other workflows.

Michael Johnson of **Benetech** added a strategy for those publishers behind the curve.



When approaching large catalogs of content that is not fully accessible, take a stepwise approach. Commit to the front list and work entering production. Next look at books that are frequently reprinted or sell well. Finally, finish up with the remaining titles.



Staying Ahead of the Curve

Publishers need to assess the additional users and markets that can be reached by providing accessible content – including new people, devices, and delivery channels.

Accessibility is the standard. The topic may not have been at the top of the list for many in publishing a few years ago, but it continues to increase in importance.

The primary reason for making content accessible is the market demand by users who have some learning disability. Publishers can no longer ignore the needs of these users, especially in the face of compliance demands from large institutional customers.

A higher-quality product emerges when accessibility standards are implemented. Logically organized content in flexible containers means happy customers. And happy customers keep coming back.



Accessibility comes with a cost, but it also comes with real benefits. Publishing (and readers) indeed benefit from embracing this essential initiative.





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