

# Accessible Course Design For Online Learning

## A Guide for Paul Smith's College Faculty and Staff

As distance learning courses are being developed at Paul Smith's College it is imperative that accessibility considerations remain at the forefront of course design. This guide serves to provide advice on how best to approach this within your courses.

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### Formatting & Writing

- URLs must be embedded as unique, descriptive links ([Canvas at Paul Smith's College](#) rather than <https://www.paulsmiths.edu/canvas/> or "[click here](#) for Canvas").
- Use the bullet and numbering function of the page/content editor rather than manually typing a numbering scheme. HTML-coded bulleted or numbered lists (by clicking on the appropriate button in the Rich Text Editor), rather than typing out numbers or symbols for lists.
- Use white space and headings to break up long blocks of text.
- Pages should have unique and descriptive titles (Module 2 Quiz: U.S. Constitution vs. Quiz 2).
- Write out dates and use full stops at the end of sentences or between letters of an acronym. V.A.T versus VAT which can be confused as a singular word. (including bullet points).

### Images

- All images (except decorative images, like icons or stock photos) should have quality alt text descriptions, entered when the image is uploaded or in the properties of the image found in the "Files" section of your course.
- Alt text descriptions should convey the information of the image, not merely describe the image. Alt text should be an equivalent substitute for the image.
- Alt text should consider the context in which the image appears.
- Complex images like graphs, charts, diagrams, and maps, must also have alt text descriptions. Lengthy descriptions of complex images can be linked to on a separate Canvas page.
- Avoid using images of text as much as possible. If unavoidable, alt text must contain all text in the image.

### Color & Contrast

- Color should not be the sole means of conveying information. Use texture, pattern, size, shape, etc. in combination with color.
- Ensure a high contrast ratio between background and foreground colors. Test using tools like [WebAIM's Color Contrast Checker](#).

### Audio & Video

- All audio content (pure audio recordings and audio tracks on video recordings) must have a complete text equivalent in the form of transcripts (audio) or captions (video).
- Auto-generated captions are only 60-70% accurate and cannot be used on their own; they must be corrected to full accuracy to be acceptable.
- Ad-hoc recordings (announcements, discussion replies, etc.) should come with a text equivalent that conveys the same information.

## Accessible Documents

- Word Documents: create in latest available version of Microsoft Word and run accessibility checker. Correct all highlighted issues.
- PDFs: create in latest available version of Microsoft Word and run accessibility checker. Correct all issues. Convert to PDF using Adobe plugin. Using Adobe Acrobat Pro DC, run accessibility checker and correct all issues: read order, alt text, tables, language, title, etc. Must have OCR (optical character recognition)—a scanned book will read as an image and cannot be processed by a screen reader.
- Excel Spreadsheets: Avoid blank cells as much as possible. Use for intended purpose—organizing data. Do not include lengthy sentences, images, etc.
- PowerPoint Presentations: Use notes section to describe content of slides. Notes should serve as equivalent to the information on the slides. Images should have alt text descriptions. Ensure that read order of items on slides is correct.

## Course Resources & Learning Technology

- Text Format: digital formats are always preferable, as they can easily be read aloud by a screen reader or other text to speech software. Must have OCR. For ebooks, epub is the preferred format. Look for opportunities to obtain library resources or OERs.

## Course Content

- Pronouns and Names: in introductions, ask all students to share their names/nicknames and pronouns. Include this information in instructor bios.
- Bias: be aware of bias around gender, race, religion, sexuality, disability, etc. entering into course content (i.e. using the generic *he*, “ladies and gentlemen,” racial divisions in America being referred to as black and white). See [APA guidelines on reducing bias](#) for more information.
- Content Warnings: include annotations on all course materials, and highlight resources that contain troubling content (graphic violence, sexual assault, discussions/depictions of bigoted language, hate crimes, etc.) to empower students to make decisions about when and how to engage with it.

## Resources

- [WebAIM.org](#): excellent resource for all things web accessibility. Explains technical standards in laymen’s terms.
- [SPS Distance Learning Accessibility](#): expanded information on many of these topics.
- [University of Washington DO-IT](#): extensive resources for accessibility (both physical and web) in higher education.
- [Dos and Don’t’s on Designing for Accessibility](#): posters with general advice on design considerations for different types of disabilities.
- [“Technology Can Address Digital Accessibility—to an Extent.”](#) *Inside Higher Ed*, May 2 2018.: examines benefits and limits of automated accessibility checkers and highlights the places where human interaction is required.

\*This document adapted from a resource provided to Faculty and Staff at Northwestern University.

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