



THE 508 XPRESS IS ROLLING INTO YOUR STATION NOW. HOP ABOARD!

Section 508 and Social Media

With increasing interest and excitement around using social media for outreach and communications, the subject of accessibility and Section 508 compliance can be overlooked. What do you need to know?

First the bad – and sadly, unsurprising – news: No social media site is known to fully conform to Section 508 requirements. There are issues with all of the well-known sites.

Does that mean you can't use them?

No it doesn't. Since it would be difficult to put the cork back into the social media bottle, there are some approaches you can take to ensure your social media content is accessible. Below, we'll talk about some of the popular sites, their accessibility shortfalls and how to work to mitigate those issues.

TWITTER

Although there are accessibility issues on both Twitter's primary and mobile sites, there are many Twitter clients that are accessible. Some of these are mainstream clients for desktop computers and mobile devices. Others are specifically designed for users with disabilities. One such client is a web-based client called easychirp, www.easychirp.com. Try checking it out next to [Twitter's standard interface](#) to compare the differences.

While Twitter can be accessible to everyone, there are other issues when posting information to Twitter. If you are sharing photos, make sure they are hosted some place that supports alternative text. If you are sharing links to other web sites, make sure that the content on those sites complies with Section 508 standards.

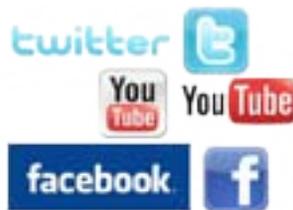
YOUTUBE

YouTube is a bit of a mixed bag when it comes to accessibility. YouTube now supports video captioning, which is a Section 508 requirement. However, the YouTube video player is not fully compliant. There are buttons on the YouTube player that are not labeled. Our solution: Host the video on your own site as well, and make sure you are using a video player that complies with Section 508.

FACEBOOK

Facebook creates one of the bigger problems for accessible social media. Although it undergoes frequent redesigns, accessibility is never fully addressed. Besides wildly inconsistent support of keyboard-only access to many features, there is no way to provide alternative text descriptions for photos.

Unlike with Twitter, using alternative clients cannot fully address these shortcomings. For these reasons, it is best not to depend solely on Facebook. When your information is posted to Facebook, be sure to also list a link to your site to provide the same information and meet Section 508 requirements. Additionally, provide an alternative contact method in conjunction with your Facebook page.



If you have the time, drop a note to any of these sites or others not mentioned above letting them know that accessibility and Section 508 compliance matter to you and your audience.

Resource Spotlight: Captioning

Software applications, web-based streaming, real time, closed, open, etc. Today captioning solutions come in a variety of formats depending on need and the type of video media. Explore a few of the many choices available below and more from our [Captioning Resources list](#).

- [Captionate](#)
- [Caption Wrap](#)
- [MAGpie](#)
- [Caption Mic](#)
- [Subtitle-horse](#)
- [National Captioning Institute](#)

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508 Liaison

Have you ever considered having a Section 508 liaison to interface between VHA Section 508 and your development team? This could be an informal position for someone who serves as a gatekeeper to examine electronic content before it is submitted to VHA Section 508 for testing. It can also be someone who has taken the time to understand how Section 508 applies to various media types and knows how to efficiently locate and interpret accessibility resources. A 508 liaison would be a great resource for any development team working to determine potential pitfalls in the planning stages of a project or a product. Of course, our office also is available for guidance, but developers often feel comfortable going to someone they can talk with face-to-face and who is both intimately aware of the content being created and who knows about accessibility.

VHA Employee Education System (EES) created a Section 508 Compliance Specialist position about six months ago and Lara Dolin was selected for the job.

George Abbott from the VHA 508 office interviewed Lara to find out what benefits this arrangement provides and to share any advice she wants to pass along to anyone considering establishing a similar relationship between their team and VHA Section 508.

George Abbott: *Now that you have been in the position of VHA EES Section 508 Compliance Specialist for a little over six months, do you find there are benefits to EES with you being a point person to our office?*

Lara Dolin: Absolutely. There are many benefits. Aside from the obvious benefit of having a central point of contact acting as a conduit, an in-house liaison serves as a subject matter expert (SME) that staff can discuss what they perceive to be little things in a more informal way rather than launching a full scale inquiry with the 508 Office. This is sometimes more comfortable for developers who just need a few minutes of input or a different viewpoint.

GA: *Has your increased knowledge on Section 508 proven helpful?*

LD: Definitely. I am always gathering and cataloging feedback from my coworkers. Another benefit I hear mentioned often is that my coworkers like having someone to work with directly, and on a daily basis, which can dispel some of the mystery that Section 508 has held in the past. Section 508 has many aspects, and a great deal of emphasis is placed on accessibility in VA. My coworkers truly want to comply, but many times they don't know exactly how. They are often under the misperception that they need to sacrifice their significant talent and creativity in favor of developing

products that are much less robust but are likely to pass a full compliance review. They understand that my job is to help them utilize their full set of creative skills to come up with innovative, interactive learning products while still conforming to design and interaction concepts that meet Section 508 standards.

GA: *How did you acquire your Section 508 knowledge?*

LD: I learned by reading material on the Internet, attending face to face classes and having time to work directly with people who rely on assistive technology to do their jobs. I took an interest in accessibility prior to being selected for my position as an official Section 508 Specialist, but my true defining moments came from spending time observing the Section 508 testing process. Witnessing first-hand as people who navigate, interact and master electronic information and learning in a world that primarily caters to people without disabilities was not only humbling, but absolutely inspiring.

GA: *What advice would you give to anyone considering establishing a Section 508 point person?*

LD: Make sure the person in the coordinator role has the freedom to learn about Section 508 by studying the standards and best practices, as well as by observing a variety of users of assistive technology.

The person that takes on this role must truly believe in why accessibility is important. Enthusiasm is key, and a can-do attitude is a must. I find if I am enthusiastic and assure my coworkers that no matter what they want to create, we can most likely make it accessible, they are much more receptive to incorporating accessibility into their designs. The person must be empowered to be an active SME – I am lucky to have extremely supportive management that allows me to perform my role to its greatest extent, and I attribute much of my success to that. Sometimes, I must be firm and direct with people who see accessibility as a roadblock. Complying with Section 508 is a federal mandate and circumventing accessibility not only puts the agency at risk, but provides a disservice to our Veterans, colleagues and others who rely on the electronic information we produce.

GA: *Do you have the impression that your coworkers support this new role?*

LD: Yes. Having a central point of contact who has knowledge of Section 508 practices, knowledge of developing with accessibility in mind, and having someone who is close at hand has really made an impact on EES in terms of accessibility awareness.

Creative and Accessible

The VHA Section 508 team would like to recognize the development team of Eric Esplin and John McQuaid for their approach with their course titled "Home Telehealth: The Basics". A user may choose between a multimedia version of the course or an interactive HTML version. Both versions are fully Section 508 compliant.



Section 508 standard 1194.22(k) states: "A text-only page, with equivalent information or functionality, shall be provided to make a web site comply with the provisions of this part when compliance cannot be accomplished in any other way. The content of the text-only page shall be updated whenever the primary page changes."

The Section 508 standards were promulgated over a decade ago. At the time, there were some aspects of online technologies that could not be made Section 508 compliant. Unfortunately, it became an accepted practice to allow for a text only page to serve as the accessible part of many web sites. Today, it is possible to make just about any aspect of online content 508 compliant.

Individuals with disabilities want and deserve to have the same options as everybody else. We cringe when we see web pages that state: "Accessible Version" or "508 version". It is like the developer is saying that they have this cool flashy version and they also have this boring version for people with disabilities.

Just as people with disabilities want to have options, so do people without disabilities. Plenty of folks choose a non-multimedia version of a web site either because it is their preference or because they have limited time and want to get the content in a hurry.

The development team for "Home Telehealth: The Basics" has complied with the spirit of Section 508 as well as with the letter of the law. Recognizing that everyone wants equality, they created a media rich Flash version of the course and an interactive HTML version.

Congratulations to the "Home Telehealth: The Basics" development team.

Get Onboard!

It is now possible to be alerted when a new edition of the 508 XPress becomes available. Just visit <http://www.ehealth.va.gov/508/newsletter/> and activate the link to Subscribe to Our List.



Visit the VHA Section 508 Web site to review Section 508 checklists; training materials for developing accessible content in Flash, HTML, Word, PDF and PowerPoint; and to locate additional resources.

Internet: www.ehealth.va.gov/508/

Intranet: vaww.vista.med.va.gov/508workgroup/*

**Links designated with an asterisk are available to VA internal users only.*

508 Champion

The Section 508 office recognizes Lara Dolin, VHA Employee Education System (EES)



Section 508 compliance specialist as a true 508 champion. Before stepping into this newly created position six months ago, Lara was the

Cleveland EES writer/editor. After acquiring her Contracting Officer's Technical Representative (COTR) certification, Lara actively manages two accessibility contracts and also performs accessibility remediation work for EES staff.

Lara has been a believer in accessible design for several years. She started to read about it on the Internet and then she observed people with disabilities who relied upon assistive technology to do their jobs.

"Those interactions were what made me a huge advocate for accessible design practices – not just to meet the strictures of the law, but to make information and interactive learning available to everyone – those with and without disabilities," she said.

Once Lara took on her new responsibilities, she spent time with the VHA Section 508 evaluation team, getting thoroughly acquainted with the processes, requirements and intricacies of accessibility.

"My coworkers know that accessibility is something I highly value and I will do anything to help our office be front-runners in creating accessible learning materials," she added.

Thank you, Lara, for all that you do to promote accessibility!

Avoiding Common Violations

LEARN HOW TO AVOID THESE ISSUES SO YOUR CONTENT WILL PASS ACCESSIBILITY TESTING

During the second quarter of FY 2012, the most common violations our office helped remediate fell into one of three categories.

ENSURE THAT FLASH OBJECTS CONTAIN TEXTUAL NAMES, DESCRIPTIONS, ROLE, STATE AND VALUE

It is important that Flash objects have textual names and that the object's role, state and value are also made available for assistive technologies to identify and report such information to users. Using standard components, such as standard checkboxes and radio buttons, will ensure such information is accessible.

What do role, state and value refer to?

- Role is the type of control – checkbox, radio button, etc.
- State indicates the status of the control – a checkbox is checked, a radio button is selected, etc.
- Value describes what the control is about – a checkbox that says, "Yes, add me to your mailing list".

COLOR CONTRAST

This accessibility violation continues to be among the most common, but it is one of the easiest to avoid. Providing good color contrast is useful to most users; however, it is especially useful for persons with a variety of visual impairments. Regardless of media type—HTML, PowerPoint, PDF, Word—applying the following guidelines is an easy way to ensure sufficient contrast in most cases.

- Text under 18-point requires a ratio of 4.5:1.
- Bold text under 18-point or text that is 18-point or greater requires a contrast ratio of 3:1.
- Use a color contrast checking tool such as one of the following:
 - [Color Contrast Checker](#)
 - [Contrast Analyser](#)
 - [Contrast Checker](#)

Follow these steps:

1. Open the page or document.
2. Use the tool to check that all text and meaningful images have contrast ratios within the appropriate range.

Note: Black and white text will pass and does not need to be tested.

IMPLICIT HEADINGS FOR WORD, PDF AND HTML

How we structure content conveys meaning to the reader. Headings, in particular, provide document hierarchy and show relationships among the various sections of information. Assistive technology (AT) is able to report this structure, but only if headings are not just implied through font and color changes.

Create explicit headings in Microsoft Word by using Styles to apply various heading levels. When Word documents are converted into PDF, these heading styles then become heading tags, which the AT can also relate to the user.

In HTML documents, the heading tags, <H1>, <H2>, etc. are extremely useful, because many ATs allow users to quickly navigate by section, making their experience very efficient. Manually altering font and text attributes to create an implicit heading prevents many AT users from determining the document structure and navigating the content easily.

Quick Tip: Creating Custom Controls

One of the key guidelines in Section 508 says that controls need to expose their role, name, state and value. Role means the type of control, button, checkbox, etc. Name indicates what the control is used for – "Submit", "Subscribe", "Address". State indicates whether a checkbox is checked, or which item in a drop-down list is selected. Value indicates which choice was made (i.e., "Yes" or "No" in a group of radio buttons).

For regular HTML, all of this information is provided automatically. So, if you are using standard controls, you only need to make sure that they are marked up correctly.

For custom controls, including those developed with JavaScript and Flash, some extra work needs to be completed to make sure this information is provided to assistive technology users. Besides custom versions of common controls, this also includes tree and accordion controls, sliders, etc. There are a number of ways controls can be designed for web apps, including providing the information in the alt tag of icons that are used. Investigate this [in-depth discussion of the custom controls subject](#).

We do not advise using custom Flash controls. If you do, be sure to [review our general course on Flash accessibility](#) so that you can design the controls to be accessible.