How to Build Accessible Digital Content for Every Learner

Most people think accessibility is about adding captions or fixing colour contrast. In reality, it's about reshaping the learning experience so everyone can participate fully. Whether you have an internal learning team or work with outside contractors, accessibility needs to be built into every stage of your learning programs.

This article will walk you through what accessible content really means, why it matters, and how your team can make it part of everyday practice.

Image description: A woman sits at a desk in a bright living room, looking at her smartphone while working on a laptop. A coffee mug, notebook, and pens are on the table and colourful geometric wall art in the background.

Why accessibility matters in digital learning.

It's easy to assume engagement problems come from the content itself. That the topic is dull or the module needs more interactivity. But in many cases, the real issue isn't what you're teaching, it's whether people can actually access the material in a way that works for them. When training is clear and designed with different needs in mind, learners stay present longer and absorb information much easier.

There's also an important compliance layer. Standards like the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) outline how digital content should be built so that people with disabilities can use it without barriers. Meeting these standards helps organizations avoid legal and reputational risk, but compliance is really just the starting point. It sets the minimum.

Meaningful accessibility goes further by considering how people with diverse needs actually move through your learning materials day to day.

Too often, accessibility is treated as a handful of technical fixes. But for employees who rely on these features, they're essential tools that determine whether they can complete a training module, understand a concept, or keep pace with their peers.

A video without captions shuts out someone who is Deaf or hard of hearing. A document that isn't screen-reader friendly turns a simple task into an obstacle. These barriers add up, shaping how

shaping how included, or excluded, a person feels in their workplace.

Understanding what "accessible content" really means.

Accessible content is rooted in intentional design and clear communication. It means thinking about how different people absorb information, move through a page, or interact with a learning module. It also means making choices that remove friction instead of adding it.
Some key features include:

- Image descriptions and alt text for images.
- Captions and transcripts for audio and video.
- High colour contrast and non-colour indicators.
- Keyboard navigation for those who cannot use a mouse.
- Screen reader compatibility.
- Plain language, simple structure, and clear instructions.

These elements make your content usable for a much wider audience, including those with visual, auditory, motor, or cognitive differences. When these needs are considered from the start, they directly influence whether someone can understand the material clearly and participate in training at the same level as others.

Designing and developing accessible learning experiences.

Building accessibility into your project from the beginning saves time and money. Retrofitting content later can be costly and frustrating, especially if entire modules need to be rebuilt. Include accessibility requirements in your project briefs, RFPs, or vendor discussions right from the start. This sets clear expectations for everyone involved.

Accessibility best practices for content creators.

Whether your content is a slide deck, eLearning module, webinar, or PDF, the following best practices support accessibility:

- Use clear headings and consistent formatting.
- Keep layouts simple and avoid clutter.
- Provide descriptive link text (e.g., "Download the guide" instead of "Click here").
- Test materials using actual assistive tools, such as screen readers.
- Be mindful of cognitive load (shorter sections, less jargon, more breaks).

Designing for neurodiversity is also a core part of the process. Avoid fast-moving animation, flashing elements, or overuse of motion. Provide options for learners who need more time or prefer written content over video.

How to choose the right contractor.

Working with a contractor can be a great way to build high-quality learning content, but accessibility needs to be part of that partnership. The right vendor will understand accessibility, build it into their process and communicate it clearly.

What to ask when hiring content developers.

A strong contractor won't hesitate to demonstrate their experience or walk you through how they build accessible learning. As you're evaluating potential partners, ask about:

- Examples of accessible content they've created and what made it accessible.
- Their accessibility testing process, including how they verify content with real users of assistive technologies.
- The tools they use for quality assurance and remediation.
- How they stay current with WCAG updates and evolving accessibility standards.

A vendor who's confident in their approach will be able to speak clearly about these areas and provide recent, relevant examples.

Setting expectations early.

Once you've chosen a contractor, setting clear expectations helps avoid surprises and ensures accessibility stays front and centre throughout the project. Consider providing:

- Accessibility guidelines or style guides.
- Templates for documents, videos, or learning modules.
- Checklists or standards that outline your expectations.
- Review cycles that include accessibility checks at each milestone.

When everyone understands the requirements upfront, accessibility becomes a natural part of the workflow rather than something added at the end. This makes the partnership smoother and the learning experience more inclusive.

How to make accessibility an ongoing practice.

As your organization grows, your tools change, and your learners' needs evolve, your approach to accessibility needs to evolve with them. Treating accessibility as an ongoing practice helps you catch issues early and keep your learning materials current.

Below are a few ways to make accessibility a sustainable part of your learning ecosystem.

Conduct regular audits and improve over time.

Frequent audits help you identify gaps before they become problems and ensure that new materials meet the same standards as your original content.

Automated tools can be helpful as a first pass, but they can't catch everything. Manual reviews, especially with assistive technologies, offer a clearer picture of the real learner experience. Learner feedback is also an important source of insight and can highlight accessibility challenges you may not see in testing.

Train your team for long-term success.

If you have an internal learning team, regular training helps keep everyone aligned with current standards and best practices. This can include:

- Workshops on writing inclusive content.
- Refreshers on WCAG updates.
- Accessibility checklists and style guides.

Even if you work mostly with contractors, building internal awareness helps your team set strong expectations and review materials with confidence.

Final thoughts.

Embedding accessibility into your planning, design, development, and vendor relationships sends a clear message: everyone deserves the opportunity to learn in a way that works for them. It also strengthens your learning ecosystem over time, making it more adaptable, more inclusive, and better equipped to support a diverse workforce.

Accessibility isn't a finish line. It's an ongoing practice that keeps your learning programs relevant and respectful as new tools, needs, and expectations emerge. When you prioritize accessibility from the start, you're ensuring every learner can take part fully in their training.

About Petra Mayer & Associates Consulting

Petra Mayer & Associates Consulting is a proud member of the Community of Accessible Employers and is built on the belief that learning should be accessible, practical, and aligned with the needs of today's workforce.

The firm supports clients through LMS implementation, custom training development, and strategic consulting that strengthens the entire learning lifecycle. Each project is guided by clear processes, thoughtful expertise, and a learner-first approach that helps organizations deliver training that truly makes an impact.