FACULTY GUIDE:

Best Practices for Accessibility in Online Courses

SUNY Broome Community College

http://www.sunybroome.edu/trc

Online@SUNY Broome
http://www.sunybroome.edu/online

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For the most part, the Blackboard Learning Management System itself is accessible. The content, files you upload, and the links you add to your course, however, must also be made accessible to ensure that your material is accessible to all learners. In this Faculty Guide, we will look at the best practices for online course design and explore the common issues that are found in online courses with respect to accessibility.

ONLINE COURSE LAYOUT

The first step in making sure your course is accessible to all learners making sure your overall course layout is accessible. By layout, we are referring to the way items are organized in the course, how they are accessed by students, and the opportunities provided to students to receive alternative formats of information if needed. Below are basic guidelines to keep in mind when designing the layout of your online course and strategies for making a more accessible layout for all students.

The course is organized in a logical, consistent, and uncluttered fashion.

- Utilize a module structure for course content where information is broken down into "chunks" based on a Unit, Chapter, or common theme.

- Establish consistency within modules. For example, begin each module with a heading that outlines each of the activities contained within the module. Also provide consistency with your naming conventions for course items. If your first assignment in the course is named "Assignment #1: Chapter 1 Review Questions," then your second assignment should be named something similar.

- Make sure your course has a clear starting point and provides clear instructions for moving through course content. A Course Information folder should be located at the top of the course content page.

- Course Information area contains a clear outline for course content and expectations.

- Organize content sequentially and avoid moving items once the course has started. Students with a visual impairment who rely on a screen reader or other assistive technology will have difficulty locating out of order or items that have changed location.

- Avoid including extraneous material and make sure course content contributes directly to your course's stated learning objectives. If adding material not related directly to learning outcomes, label it as such. One idea might be to include an "Extras" or "Bonus Material" folder within each module to house this type of information.

- Ensure that the course is easy to navigate. This includes items that you include in the Course Menu on the left side of the Blackboard window. Items provided there should include links to important course content or tools and not be used to link to every piece of content within the course. Keep it uncluttered and organized.

- Minimize the number of clicks it takes to access your course content. Avoid the "folder within a folder, within a folder" approach unless there is a logical reason for it.

- Avoid using frames or tables for layout.

Course content is provided in a variety of formats to accommodate all learners.

- Text-based content is available in an easily accessible format, preferably HTML or Tagged PDF. These file types are not only supported by Blackboard but are accessible with assistive technologies such as screen readers.

- Course content can be printed for students who may be unable to read text on the computer screen.

- Transcripts are provided for audio files

- Captioning is included for video files

SYLLABUS AND COURSE INFORMATION

The material that you provide students up front will go a long way toward making your course accessible and give those students who require assistance the information they need. Below are strategies for your syllabus and course information regarding accessibility. Several of these strategies are part of best practice in online pedagogy and will benefit all learners in your course, not only those with disabilities.

- The syllabus contains the SUNY Broome ADA Compliance Statement and contact information for the Accessibility Resources Office. An example from the CAI Approved Syllabus Template is below:

  ADA Compliance Statement
  SUNY Broome Community College is committed to learning environments that are inclusive of and accessible to students with disabilities. Any student who requires reasonable academic accommodations or use of auxiliary aids in class should contact the Accessibility Resources Office at ARO@sunybroome.edu or call 607-778-5150. Please note that in order to receive accommodations in this course, a student must present a valid Campus Accessibility Plan and discuss individual needs with the instructor in a timely manner.

- The Syllabus or Course Information area should contain a clear outline for course content and expectations for the course.
- Course Information area should list an expected turnaround time for online communication.
- Standards of appropriate online communication are stated.
- Contact information for technical assistance is provided.
- The syllabus, itself, is available in an accessible format.

TEXT-BASED CONTENT

When presenting text-based content in your online course, there are several guidelines to follow with respect to accessibility. For the purposes of this Faculty Guide, we will focus on content that is created from within the Blackboard Learning Management System. Additional Faculty Guides are available regarding accessibility best practices for content created in Microsoft Word and PowerPoint. Below are a few of the guidelines regarding text and accessibility as well as instructions for correcting issues from within Blackboard if applicable.

Headings and Styles

Headings provide context and a way to navigate quickly for users of assistive technologies like screen readers. These technologies ignore text size and formatting to provide emphasis (bold, italic, underline) unless certain styles, such as Headings, are applied. Headings communicate order and levels of importance on a content page. Without the use of heading styles, the entire page will look like regular text to a screen reader even if certain text has been manually made larger (and/or bold) to indicate its significance.

To apply a built-in heading style in Blackboard:

1. While in *Edit Mode*, select the text for which you would like to apply the style and click on the dropdown arrow next to *Format* on the toolbar.
2. Select the heading level from the drop-down.
3. Continue with remaining text on the page where you would like to apply this style.
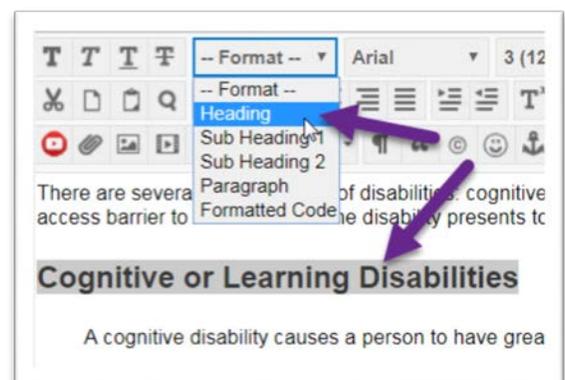
Bullets and Numbered Lists

Bulleted and numbered lists should be used not only to organize information into meaningful chunks or present sequencing so that they can be easily scanned by sighted users, they also provide the hierarchy and coding necessary for assistive technologies to interpret properly. When creating bullets or numbered lists on a Blackboard page, **always** use the built-in functionality (the buttons on the toolbar). **Never** create lists manually by simply typing numbers, characters, images or other symbols before list items.

Font Formatting

Font Typeface and Size

Stick to simple, *sans-serif fonts* that are *at least 12 points* in size, particularly for longer text blocks and paragraphs – Arial, Helvetica, Tahoma, and Verdana are good choices, particularly for content that will be displayed on the web. They are all examples of sans-serif font, a grouping of typeface that does not have small decorative lines as part of the characters. **Times New Roman** is an example of a serif font. Notice the added decorative shapes that form the letters. These shapes (serifs) can make the text appear more crowded and less readable to individuals with certain disabilities such as dyslexia.

Flashing or Blinking Text

Content that flashes or blinks on the screen *should be avoided* as it can trigger seizures in susceptible individuals. It can also be very distracting for those with cognitive disabilities and also for those with no disability at all.

Use of Color

When formatting text on a page, there are a few guidelines to keep in mind with respect to the use of color. Below are the several of the most common design tips for creating accessible text and using color.

- *Never use color alone to show emphasis* – Individuals with color blindness, low-vision, or those who are simply viewing your content in black and white or in bright sunlight, would have difficulty distinguishing emphasis of information if color is its only cue. If you would like to use color for emphasis, be sure to pair it with another formatting option, such as bold, italics, or text size. In charts and graphs, color should be paired with a pattern.

- *Make sure your foreground and background have strong contrast between them* – Web Accessibility Guidelines require specific contrast ratios based on the size of the text. If you are unsure whether your particular choice of colors fall within these ratios, you can visit the [WebAim color contrast checker](https://webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker/) (https://webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker/). Also pay particular attention to text that is overlaid on a background image, as some or all of the image may not have sufficient contrast in relation to the text.

- *Avoid certain color combinations* – In addition to contrast, there are certain color combinations that should be avoided whenever possible. These include: green/red, green/brown, blue/purple, green/blue, light-green/yellow, blue/grey, green/grey, green/black. Individuals with color blindness are often unable to distinguish between these color pairs, particularly green and red.

- *Avoid using color for coding* – We've all seen this done, particularly in email. ("Please see my answers typed in purple…"). Formatting text this way in a document, particularly one that will be viewed on a webpage, presents a challenge to those with colorblindness or a visual impairment that relies on a screen reader. As screen readers do not allow for a way to search on text color, another form of emphasis should be used in addition to the color (such as italics).

HYPERLINKS

For individuals who use assistive technology, links within Blackboard should convey clear information about the destination. Rather than displaying the URL as the hyperlink text or linking through text labeled "click here," you should include descriptive text around the link to explain its destination.

Example of an inaccessible link:
"For more information [click here](.)."

Example of a more accessible version:
For more information on web accessibility, visit the [Online@SUNY Broome webpage](). (if the document is meant to be posted online)
   Or
*For more information on web accessibility, visit the Online@SUNY Broome webpage at [http://www.sunybroome.edu/online](). (if the document is meant to be printed)*
   Or
For more information on web accessibility, visit the [Online@SUNY Broome webpage]()
(http://www.sunybroome.edu/online). *(for a combination of web viewing and print)*

ALTERNATIVE TEXT FOR IMAGES

Alternative text (Alt Text) is text contained within the settings of an image that describes the appearance or function of the image to those who are unable to see it. A screen reader for a visually impaired user will read the alternative text to them out loud so that they have a better understanding of its content. To add Alt Text to an image on a content page in Blackboard:

1. While in **Edit Mode**, right-click on the image and choose the Image option from the short-cut menu.
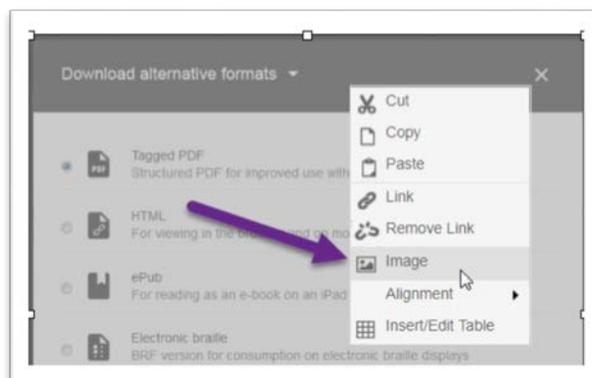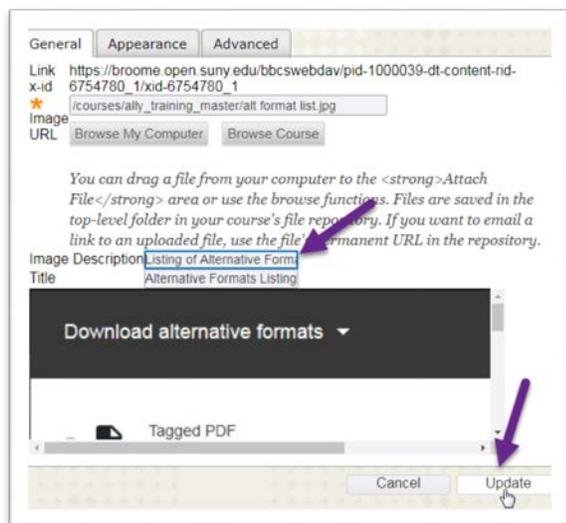

2. On the **General Tab**, type the Alternative Text in the **Image Description** field. You can also include a Title, but it is optional.

3. When finished, click the **Update** button.

TABLE HEADERS

The use of tables should be limited to organize data that have logical relationships in grids. When they are used, they need to be marked up properly for accessibility. This includes identifying a row in the table (typically the top row) as the Header. To do this:

1. While in *Edit Mode*, click anywhere within the top row or the table and click the "*Table Row Properties*" Button on the toolbar.

2. Select *Header* from the *Row Type* dropdown menu and click the *Update* button.
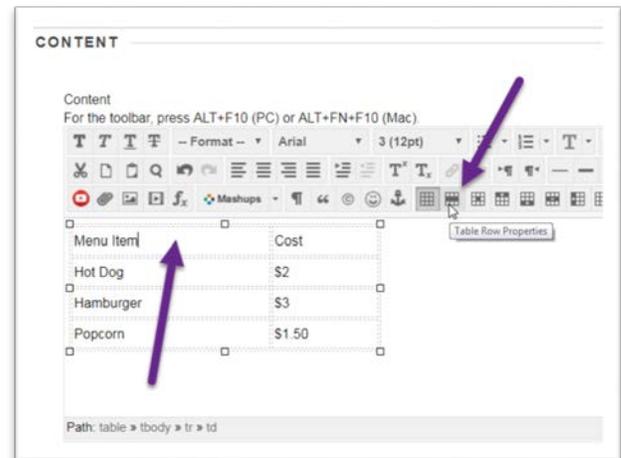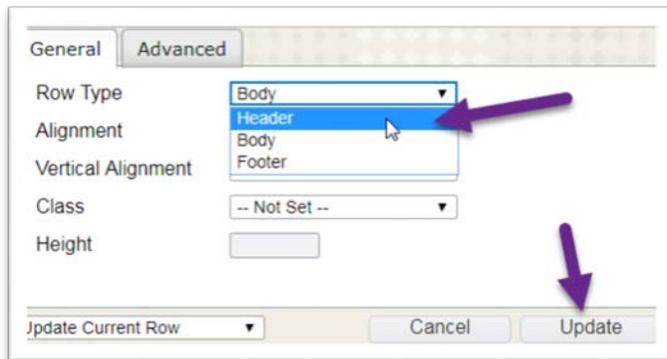
3. This will set the first row as the Header. Be sure to click the *Submit* button to save your work.

AUDIO AND VIDEO

In order for your course to be accessible, transcripts must be provided for all embedded audio and videos must be captioned. The College has a tool called Ensemble which can assist you in captioning video! Contact the Teaching Resource Center (tch_ctr@sunybroome.edu) for additional information.

SUMMARY

Applying a few basic guidelines will make your online courses more accessible to all learners. If you are ready to begin reviewing your course for accessibility, please be sure to see the "*Accessibility Checklist for Online Courses*" document posted on the Online@SUNY Broome website!

Online@SUNYBroome

Please visit the Online@SUNYBroome website (www.sunybroome.edu/online) for additional information pertaining to distance education. The site contains information for Students, Faculty and Chairs. A repository of informational/instructional documentation is included on the site as well as a listing of training opportunities and frequently asked questions.

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