

# PDF ADA Compliance\_ What It Actually Means

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

ADA compliance, PDF accessibility, screen readers, assistive technologies, Microsoft Word, Google Docs, Adobe Acrobat Pro, alt text, document structure, color contrast, tab order, document properties, web accessibility, marketing with purpose.

## SPEAKERS

Monica Pitts



Monica Pitts 00:00

This may seem just a teensy bit over the top for me, but I have to do a public service announcement letting you know that your PDFs are probably breaking the law right now, but like not in a dramatic FBI busting down your door, sort of way, like more in a quietly excluding people who need your information, kind of way, because, well, things have changed, my friends and that innocent looking PDF that's sitting on your website, the one that you probably uploaded because it was way easier than actually editing your website itself. It's not actually considered just a digital piece of paper anymore, and it hasn't been for quite some time. It's like a mini website that needs to work for everyone, including people who are using screen readers or keyboard navigation and other assistive technologies. And if you're like most people, you have probably been creating your PDFs the same way since 2005 and I, that's, I, it happens, man, I'm, I was one of those people, all right, and you were just blissfully unaware that there are actually break rules about this stuff now, and I'm sorry I'm about to, like, ruin those carefree PDF website slapping days forever, but in this episode, you're also gonna learn how to fix it without losing your mind. So yeah, I'm Monica Pitts. Welcome back to marketing with purpose. Let's talk about how to make ADA compliant PDFs and why. Let's get to business. You're on a mission, and you just need more people to know about it. And whether you're brand new to marketing or a seasoned pro, we are all looking for answers to make marketing decisions with purpose. I'm Monica Pitts, a techie, crafty business owner, mom and aerial dancer who solves communication challenges through technology. This podcast is all about digging in and going digital. I'll share my marketing know how and business experience from almost 20 years of misadventures, I'll be your backup dancer so you can stop doubting and get moving towards marketing with purpose. So if you are a regular listener to the marketing with purpose podcast, usually you would be hearing some type of sponsor, thank you to one of our resources in the resources section on the mayecreate website. And you know, today I don't have, like, some downloadable resource for you. Instead, I made these fancy videos that actually take you step by step where to click, and show you exactly how to make an ADA compliant and fully accessible PDF using Microsoft Word and Google Docs, while using Adobe Acrobat Pro and a free downloadable program called pack to actually validate them. And then I give you tricks and tips on how to remediate those PDFs so it's not something you have to give me your email address for. It's just something that I'm giving you. So head on over to

mayecreate.com these videos and their accompanying step by step instructions with screenshots, because I'm going all educator on you are available just right inside of the may create blog, and if they're not right up at the top, you can just search Ada and they're going to pop right up for you. Okay, so now let's really get to business. The rules have changed about PDFs, so you're not just going to get to export them from Word and put them on your website anymore and call it a day. Those simpler times are gone. The government decided quite some time ago, actually, that digital documents on your website need to work for everyone, not just people who can see perfectly or click with laser precision. Okay, and that's not really a bad thing, because why wouldn't you want everyone to be able to use your website? Like 26% of adults in the US have some type of disability, and that's a lot of people who might want to read your content or buy your stuff or donate to your cause. So excluding them through ignorance isn't just legally risky at this point, it's actually just not a great way to treat people. So hey, it's actually a good thing. I'm okay with it. And these new rules that are coming down from the Department of Justice underneath the ADA act and like enforcing title two, which we have a whole episode about. If you want to know all about that, basically say that now the PDFs linked from your website need to work for people who use screen readers to hear your content, navigate with keyboards instead of mice. They need to have high contrast to read your text, and they rely on document structure to understand your content. And no, your current PDFs probably don't do all of that. I'm sorry. I've ran a lot of tests on PDFs over the past, like, I don't know, couple months, and none of them actually do all that. So yours probably don't. Either, unless you're like some type of savant. So what makes a PDF actually compliant? In a nutshell, an ADA compliant PDF allows a screen reader to navigate it just as easily as a sighted person could read visually. So think of it like you're building a website. Everything needs to have proper structure, labels and organization, which is why I'm totally geeking out over this, because it makes me feel like I'm at home, because usually I'm building websites, and now I get to build PDFs like websites, so it kind of makes me feel, you know, all warm and fuzzy inside. So the first thing that those PDFs need to have are proper tags and structure. So it's basically like HTML for PDFs. So every meaningful element that lives inside your PDF has to be inside of a tag tree. And if that sounds really technical, then I mean, it kind of is. But the good news is, is that you create this tag tree by the way that you format your document, so you're going to use the actual headings that they have inside the document to create your H ones, but you only get one h1 that's the title of your page, and then your H twos, and your H threes and so on and so forth. It allows the screen reader to actually scan the content inside of the page, just like you would with your eyes. So you can't just make things bold and bigger anymore. You need to actually use the headings inside of your program, which is great because it makes things consistent. It saves you time, it makes it easier to edit and whoop it also makes it easier for people with disabilities to use. So that's pretty cool. Your paragraphs are tagged as paragraphs if you export your PDF the right way, your lists need to actually be lists. You can't just use icons or emojis on the edge of your content and divide it with a paragraph or a return. You actually need to use the list elements that are provided for you inside of your word processor. So you do that because it keeps the content together in the list, and then the screen reader knows all of this information is related, and it's related to the thing above it, which is the heading. And then, if you are using tables, you're not really supposed to use them for layouts. I know, I know. I use them for layouts too, but we're really not supposed to do that friends. If you are, you need to let people know, like as in the screen reader, know that that's what you're doing, and you also need to clearly identify the headers on your tables, so that way screen readers can announce things like column two, row three, budget, amount, instead of just like reading random numbers to People, because that's really confusing. What's exciting about those things is they're all actually very simple to attain. You're just going to use the headings and the formatting tools that are provided for you in the word processing program, which is actually going to make it way faster for you to put the document together. And then you'll do a

few extra clicks so you can identify those header rows, and then when you export the PDF, you're going to use the right settings, so that way it keeps all those tags intact. So that's pretty manageable. I feel like I know you can do it. Now the next thing that's up to you is making sure that you put your content in an order that makes sense. So even if you use all the right tags and all the right formatting in there, it still has to be logical to people. So your PDF should flow logically from top to bottom and left to right, which, I mean, makes sense, because that's how most humans read. But if you are doing something super designing, designing and stuff is all over the place, then it's really important that you have the structure set up correctly for a screen reader, and that's something that you will probably need to do and check in Adobe Acrobat Pro, because it gives you a pretty good rundown of what is happening in your document. And if it is super fancy, then you're going to need to be careful with that content. Also, if your PDF has clickable stuff like links or form fields, then you need to make sure to set the tab order, because you want to make sure that people who don't have access to a mouse are able to go through all of your form fields in a logical order. Because it really stinks when you're like, going 125, and then suddenly you go up to three and four after, you know, eight, it's really confusing, and it happens in PDFs all the time. Actually, it's not an uncommon thing, and it's pretty easy to fix just inside of Adobe Acrobat Pro. So just testing those things and making sure that it's all logical, the third thing that you're going to do after you've made sure that you have all your structure together and that things are properly tagged, you've got the reading order that makes sense is you're going to have images that actually help instead of confuse. So all of your meaningful images need to have alt text. Those are descriptions that screen readers can announce to people who are using your pdf. Right?



Monica Pitts 10:00

So, yeah, it can't just say DCIM underscore, 1234, that doesn't mean anything to anyone. Instead, it should say chart showing 30% increase in sales. And the way that I usually write these is I just think to myself, How would I describe this to somebody who has a blindfold on? And that's my alt tag. Yeah, it's as simple as that. Now there's going to be a lot of images actually, that are just decorative in your documents, and that's not a bad thing. So if it's a border or it's a shape, I mean any type of flourish, right? Even a stock photo that's there, but doesn't give any extra meaning to what's on the page that can be considered a decorative image, and so you would just mark those images as decorative. All you do is check a box okay, and then screen readers are just going to skip it and focus on the actual content for the person who's using it. It's super easy to do this. Both Microsoft Word and Google Docs have ways that you can add alt text to your images, and if you add an extension onto Google Docs, you can also mark those decorative images as decorative. It comes native in Microsoft Word, though, and this public service announcement is specifically to my designer types, because my friends, I know it feels so much easier to just go out into Canva and make this fancy design thing and put all the words in and have them look exactly the way that you want and position exactly the way that you want to. But that is not ADA compliant. It's not ADA compliant because the screen reader can't read the words that are on top of your image. So if you absolutely have to do that, then make sure that every word that is sitting on top of that image is represented in alt text. But if you can avoid it, avoid it because words stuck in images are not ADA compliant, not on websites and not in PDFs either. Okay, so then we're going to make sure that all the links in your document actually tell people where they're going. Well, I feel like it could be giving a class in web design, because this is the same thing that we want websites to do, right? So instead of just saying, click here, because does that tell you where you're going? No, it doesn't tell you where you're going. You would say, download the 2024 annual report. Yeah, it because then you know exactly what's going to happen, right? Because screen readers, like or the users

of screen readers, often navigate by jumping from link to link, because they need context. So they're going to use that heading outline in your documents to jump through the document, and they'll also go through the links. And so knowing that means that you need to make sure that you let them know where they're going. And all of your form fields, if they're going to be inside of your PDF, do need to have clear labels, so like, name, email, comments would not just be inside of the field itself. It needs to be above it. So that way, when they start typing in the field, that doesn't just disappear. Okay? So we know that we need to have links that tell people where they're going. We also need to have colors that don't exclude people. So all the text on your PDF needs to have sufficient contrast against its background, and you would be surprised. Like if you can see a full spectrum of colors, you would be really surprised at how many colors don't have enough contrast with their backgrounds. For example, it's really difficult to get yellow in any version of yellow, even if it's like this cloudy Goldy yellow, to be actually compliant, even at just double A unless it's sitting on black. It's just not we think people can see it, but they can't. And red is like that. Orange is like that. There's just, it's difficult. Okay, so you can't put little text in those colors. You might be able to have big text in those colors, and that's something that you get to learn as a person. Putting together these PDFs is, what are the rules around color contrast and words, and then how big can the words be at different sizes? And the good news is, is that there's tools out there to help you do it. I like WebAIM, color contrast checker. It helps me a lot, and it tells me how big my texts can be at a certain color and what backgrounds I can put it on. I use it all the time to make sure that everything that I build for everyone can be seen by everyone, right? So your text needs to have sufficient contrast, but also color can't be the only way that you convey information. So you can't just put on a form that required fields are in red, because that does not help someone who is red green, colorblind, right? And so you have to have another way to identify that. It's a required field. You could have a star on it, because they can see the star, right? So just thinking through, like, how you're going to do that, right? You could, you can't say, oh. All Dates in blue are on a Thursday. Well, that doesn't work. People can't see blue. They don't know what's on Thursday, right? Okay, so colors that don't exclude people. Okay. So number six, the sixth thing that your ADA compliant PDF needs to have is it has to have document properties that are physically set in the document. And the tricky thing about this is that you named your file a name, right? But that doesn't get picked up as a title for the document. It can get picked up as a title for the document in Google Docs. If you are using an extension in Google Docs, it will not get picked up as the proper title for the document. If you're using Microsoft Word, you literally have to set it in the document properties, and then you have to specify the language, so screen readers know whether to announce if the content is in English or Spanish or whatever, and it's just those are just extra clicks. It's not hard, it's just to click. So, I mean, you've got this. I know all these things sound like a lot, but it's you can totally do it. Okay, okay, so that was a lot. Now let's recap the things that you control when you are making these documents. Is the actual structure of the document, using those tags, using headings, properly labeling your tables using lists that are actually lists you have control over that you also have control over the order of the content on the page. Make sure it makes sense. You're going to make sure that you have alt text on your images, and you tell screen readers to ignore the ones that aren't important and you don't have a bunch of text inside of images that don't have enormous alt tags on them. You're going to have links that tell people where they're going, colors that don't exclude people. And you're going to set up your document properties, and then you're going to export your document using the proper settings, so that way, it will capture all the information inside there and keep it not just strip it out. Because a normal PDF export doesn't keep all that stuff, it just strips it out. Then what you will do is you will run your PDF through a PDF checker now in Microsoft Word, and if you add an extension on a Google Docs, both of those softwares have a way that you can check your document for ADA compliance, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's going to be fully compliant. So you need to make sure that you're doing your due

diligence if this is really important, or if you're mandated by the government to run it through a secondary check. My two favorite secondary checkers are Adobe Acrobat Pro and PAC, which is PAC, and it's a free software that you can download to your computer. Now, the thing is that you actually have to know the stuff that I just explained to you, though, that's why we started with it, because your PDF checker, even the validator that's living inside of your word processor, it's not magic, because it doesn't know. It doesn't know the things that you can see, right? So it's going to check to make sure that the guts of your document have all the right technical pieces, like the tags and the alt text and the structure, but it can't tell if those pieces actually make sense to a human. And so it will give you a report, and it'll say that you have missing tags or color contrast ratios or missing document properties, but it can't tell you if your text makes sense, or if your images are displaying text so it's not in the alt tag, or if your reading order is logical, or if your link text is descriptive, or if your table headers actually relate to their data. I mean, like, literally, it just can't tell you if the content inside of your document makes sense to someone who can't see it. So you need to both have these automated tools, and you need to use your own brain to make sure that you're getting this right, so you are part of the testing process. And yeah, that makes you pretty important, right from the very beginning, setting it up to make sure that it comes through the test clean, to making sure that it's actually right.



Monica Pitts 19:09

And if you are the person who's in charge of making all these PDFs that well, that might make you feel important. It's probably making you freak out a little bit inside, because you're thinking, holy cow, this is going to be more work. And okay, I have to be completely transparent. It is going to be a little bit more work with each PDF that you make. At first it might take you, you know, 15 to 20 minutes to really figure it out. And then after you figure it out, it's going to be exponentially faster. It will only take you maybe an extra five minutes per PDF to make sure that it's absolutely right. And here's the good news I know earlier I said, you know, the government is saying that you have to have ADA compliant PDFs, right? And for some organizations, it's a bigger deal than others. Just because, with the new title two rules, the Department of Justice is actually mandating that any government entity, and that includes school districts and libraries and the whole ball of wax, have completely ADA compliant websites by April 2026 or 2027 and so you're sitting there going, well, if I have to have a completely ADA compliant website, and a PDF is like a baby digital website, then this is a huge problem, because a lot of nonprofits have an enormous like section of PDFs on their website. Okay? So you do not have to have a collective meltdown. You do not have to seize all the amazing things that you do. Just take a deep breath, because there are exceptions for both archived items and also for documents that are on your website. So as long as you don't update these PDFs that are on your website after your compliance deadline, then they should be grandfathered in, however, and I feel like this is a big however, if people are using those documents all the time, I feel like they should be ADA compliant. Now I know I'm not the government, so you don't have to listen to me, but if you're, if your general public is using a PDF all the time and it's not ADA compliant, then, I mean, why isn't it right? Like, just make it right. I'm not saying that you have to go back and retrofit everything. I'm saying that you can go through your Google Analytics reports on your website. It actually natively tracks PDF downloads as page views. You just have to enable it to see it, and it's not hard to do. It's just a click or two. And then you can look at what people actually download on your website regularly, and you can fix those PDFs so that way they're compliant. And you can just leave the others alone. And you are, however, required under law to provide them with an accessible document if they ask for one. So there you go. You don't have to freak out. However, I do feel like now

that you're armed with all this knowledge, you should start making accessible documents, because you'll thank yourself later. And after your deadline, you will have to have compliant PDFs right moving forward, they're only rather grandfathered in if they were already existing, and creating a compliant PDF only takes a few more minutes, once you learn the process. I promise the process is not rocket science. It's just different from what you're used to. And yeah, I know you can figure it out. I know you can. So the workflow that I use when I'm creating these documents is, first, you have to learn how to create the document in your source application, so Word or Google Docs, and make sure that you understand the rules. And I just went over them earlier, so hopefully they make sense to you. And you can also go over them in either one of the videos that I created as supplemental resources to this podcast. You can also go over to the blog post that accompanies this podcast, where I've outlined them as well. They just don't have a video that goes with them. Then you have to learn how to export with your correct accessibility settings, and it's different in each of the programs. And then, especially at first, I really feel like you should be running an automated checker to catch your obvious problems. I mean, you're not gonna get massively blown up because you have one like flagged error in your accessibility report, but for the most part, you really do want to make these documents easy for people to use. Then you would go forth and you would do your manual review for logic and usability right, and you fix any issues back in your mother document, if you can. So you're going to go back into Microsoft Word or back into Google Docs, you fix any issues that you see, and then you re export. And then you can run it through the test again, because everybody loves that their boxes are checked, right? And they love green boxes. And then you can pat yourself on the back for being a great human being, yeah. And you can, just like, check panic about your existing PDF library off the to do list because, because you don't have to, because it's going to be okay, and moving forward, you're going to do it right. The great thing about accessibility is when you're forced to organize your content logically and write descriptive headings and explain your images, your documents are clearer for everyone, not just for people with disabilities. They're better organized, they're easier to navigate, they're more informative, and they're more likely to get found by search engines. So it's just, it's a great it's a great practice. I feel like it's like, somebody's finally putting rules on this stuff. And I kind of like it. I like to, I like to work within rules. Of course, I also like to break them. But that's, that's besides the point, right? Okay, so once you learn the workflow, creating the accessible PDFs is just going to become second nature, and it's just, it's, it's. It's just like learning how to parallel park like it's terrifying at first, and then it's something that you can do with thinking at first, and then without thinking as you move forward. And I know that I already mentioned them like three times. But seriously, if you are going to make these accessible PDFs through Microsoft Word or Google Docs, there's videos, step by step instructions and screenshots out on our blog. Go use them. It will make it so much easier for you that I figure all this stuff out. Because everybody in my company has to do it. I create the resources that educate them, and now I'm giving them to you. So just start with your next PDF. Make it an adventure. Don't go back and retrofit your entire library, because that's a lot of work, and I promise you that future you will thank present you for not waiting until this becomes a complete emergency right before the deadline. So thank you so much for hanging out with me today. I know this is like such an exciting topic, but I hope that it solves some problems for you, and it gives you some tools that way you can go forth and make some awesome and incredibly inclusive PDFs. If you enjoyed this episode, or if you learned a thing or two, then make sure to subscribe, because next time, oh my goodness, I think we're gonna talk about tricks to fix and stop website spam. Yeah, that's also just super I mean, doesn't that just make you want to listen? Yeah, I bet it does. Okay. Well, thank you so much for hanging out with me today, and until next time, go forth and market with purpose.