

Creating Accessible OER:

What Makes Content
Accessible?



AC Deger | Centre for Accessibility
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UBC Point Grey Campus is on traditional, ancestral, unceded Musqueam Territory.

Photo: Musqueam Post, s̓ʔi:łqəy̓ qəqən (double-headed serpent post), on the UBCV Campus

Photo by UBC Brand and Marketing





CTLT

The 6R's of Indigenous OER: Re-imagining OER to Honour Indigenous Knowledge and Sovereignty

March 10, 2022

Kayla Lar-Son

▶ ⏪ 🔊 0:00 / 1:01:25



<https://youtu.be/Lwciwt-gXoQ>

We hope you will leave this session with:

- An introduction to why accessibility is important for learners and the OER community
- Considerations for designing accessible and open educational resources
- Knowledge about where to find support and resources for creating accessible and open content.



Opening Question:

Where are you from? What knowledge about “accessibility” do you bring with you, and what would you like to learn?

Open Educational Resources

Open Educational Resources (OER) are defined as “teaching, learning, and research resources that are free of cost and access barriers, and which also carry legal permission for open use..”

Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (n.d). *Open Education*. SPARC.
Retrieved from: <https://sparcopen.org/open-education/>



Using OER is a great strategy to improve access to education!

- **Financially:**

- Online versions are free to students (and instructors).
- No access code is needed. There is no expiration date.
- Can use, copy, or distribute those resources amongst an unlimited number of people.

- **Accessibility of the resources themselves:**

- OER that is not accessible to all learners is not truly open
- The open copyright license also makes it permissible for all users to change the format of the material as well.
- You can often download and save offline versions in multiple formats

- **Customizability:**

- The open copyright license makes it easy for instructors to provide meaningful, contextualized resources that fit their courses
- Can edit to be inclusive of the diversity of backgrounds and experiences of students

Affordability of Course Resources is a Barrier to Learning

According to the [2025 AMS Academic Experiences Survey](#) (n=2,134):

- **77%** of students indicated they had bought a textbook or other course resource and didn't use it, or rarely used it.
- **29%** of undergraduates in the last year frequently or often went without textbooks or other course resources due to cost
- **25%** of students expressed financial hardship related to the costs of textbooks and course materials
- **46%** of students expressed concerns that they might not be able to return to UBC in the future due to financial reasons



Other Access Problems?

- **Access to the materials can expire!**
- Textbooks are often not well **aligned or contextualized** with the course
- Materials on library reserves often **cannot be used by multiple people** at the same time
- Textbook materials may not be **accessible** for all students
- Others?

What Else Affects Accessibility?

- Day-to-day life
- Digital literacy
- Access to technology
- Structure of information
- Presentation of information
- The accessibility of the content itself



-adapted from Josie Gray (2019). [How to Create Inclusive and Accessible OER](#), BCcampus.ca

UBC Centre for Accessibility

- Serves registered UBC students with documented conditions
- Students, instructors, advisors and staff work together
- Accommodations are determined on an individual basis and can change
- Accommodations are non-optional

Examples: extended time/private space for exams, note-taking assistance, alternate format materials, mobility training, captioning or ASL interpretation, reserved seating, adaptive furniture and technology, permission to record lectures, accessible classroom assignments, priority housing/parking access

UBC Centre for Workplace Accessibility

- UBC has accessibility resources and support for staff and faculty, too!
- Confidential and consent-based (they are very nice folks)
- Call or email: 604 822 8139 or workplace.accessibility@ubc.ca

Services include ErgoAccess demos, accessibility consultations, disability literacy resources, accessibility information, initiatives and workshops, as well as accommodations (including funding and accessible parking support) for staff and faculty with disabilities or medical conditions

<https://hr.ubc.ca/health-and-wellbeing/workplace-accessibility/centre-workplace-accessibility>

Accommodations and Accessibility

- Accommodations often address accessibility concerns, but **accommodations are legally-mandated and specific to each registered student**; accessibility is a broader design philosophy
- Users who can benefit from accessible design don't necessarily have accommodations (or identify as "needing" accommodations)
- Accommodations can be difficult to access; designing for accessibility helps us get around those limits of access, time, and cost

Why Accessible Design Is For Everyone

- Accommodates adaptive technologies (hardware, software, accessories)
- Accommodates a variety of devices
- Accommodates as many learners as possible
- Accommodates those who don't necessarily identify as "disabled," as well as students who don't have formal diagnoses or documentation
- Accommodates revisions, updates, and other changes!

Platforms and Accessibility

- How open is your platform? Do users need a log-in or VPN?
- Format choices: can users print, read offline, access via mobile device?
- Media choices: incorporating video, audio, images, external links?
- Input choices: radio buttons, page navigation, embedded quizzes, collab...
- Layout choices: text boxes, notes, frames/embedded documents

Simplifying layout can improve user experiences whether or not your users are relying on accessibility technologies. Reduced cognitive burden, reduced technological friction, reduced frustration = better user experiences

Making Content Accessible

Accessible content is great for your students, but it also helps make your teaching life easier! Accessible content is durable, flexible, and functional.

- **Durable:** “future-proofed,” not tied to a specific platform or service
- **Flexible:** update from term to term or as course requirements change; easy to modify, reorganize, edit, repurpose, and share.
- **Functional:** no points of friction; pleasant for students and TAs to use

Check out CTLT’s [Accessibility 101](#) site to get started!

Text-Based Content

- While PDFs are technically “open” and technically “accessible,” there are other (potentially more user-friendly) options!
- Consider PressBooks, Wiki, EPUB, HTML
- If it absolutely, positively has to be a PDF: make it accessible!
- Limit use of text boxes and tables where possible; simplified list formatting and bullet points can help
- Use headings and tags, keep your style consistent, make good font and layout choices

Font Type, Size, and Colour

- Allowing users to choose, or at least change, is ideal
- 14pt font is a good “floor,” avoid going below 12pt if you can
- Check your contrast levels – not too low, but not too high!
- **DON'T** rely solely on colour or *formatting* to convey meaning
- Minimize distraction to maximize readability – sometimes “boring” is better

“Dyslexia-friendly” fonts are available, along with many attractive and thoughtfully-designed accessible typefaces for print or web, but choosing widely-available fonts can help ensure a consistent user experience.

“What is the most accessible font?” It depends...

- Good “all purpose” choices include Verdana, Helvetica, Arial
- Roboto is open-source, works for print and web
- Fonts like [Open Dyslexic](#) and [Tiresias](#) are not as widely installed; browsers will go to “default,” which may affect layout
- One user’s “accessible” can be another user’s “distracting,” and vice versa; many prefer sans-serif for readability, but some find serifs useful.

Does your content use special characters or symbols? Make sure they’re supported! (And make sure they’re formatted for accessibility!)

Accessible Open Source Images

It's tempting to “save time” by using screenshots or re-using saved images, but image quality can degrade. Your images might not be zoomable, printable, or even readily interpretable...

- Vector graphics are accessible and durable – can ultimately save you both time and frustration
- You may be able to request a Adobe Creative Cloud license through your department (though your TAs and students may not have access)
- Free/open source options: GIMP, LibreOffice Draw, Vecteezy, Inkscape
- Check your rights and permissions!

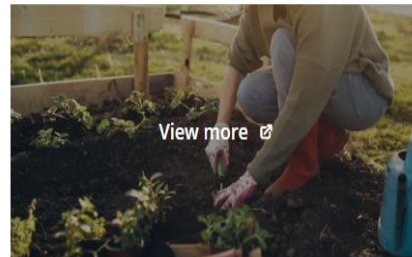
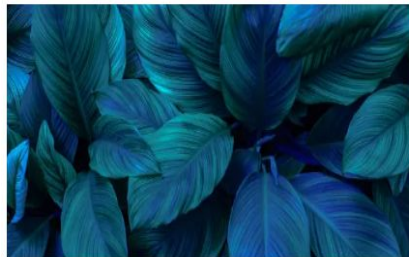
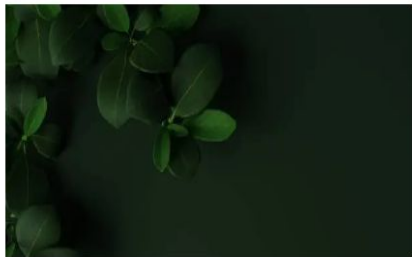
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“Decorative” or “Load-Bearing”?

- Even memes can be “load-bearing”
- If critical content/meaning is conveyed by an image, provide description
- As with text, don’t rely on colour, size, or positionality to convey meaning
- Fun is important, but legibility is more important
- Some students may still require specialized formatting for certain types of content. CfA is here to support you and your students in those cases.

Check out our accessibility drop-in sessions for one-on-one/small-group support!



Alt Text versus Image Description

If your image doesn't contain critical content, a brief alt text description is a good choice – but do ensure that any text in the image is conveyed. Purely decorative images should be marked as such, so they can be “skipped” by screen readers.

If students are being asked to interpret or identify key aspects of the image, consider how to best convey those key aspects in text form. Detailed captions might work well for some layouts; incorporating detailed references to the image directly in the body of your text might work better for your flow in other cases. (Using alt text for image identification and improved navigation is still a great idea!)

Standard Caption versus Detailed Caption

Figure 3.3: A field test conducted in 1942 to show the ability of phosphate to encourage plant growth. Phosphate deficiency reduces plant production. Source: Tennessee Valley Authority



Figure 3.3: A photo shows the results of a field test conducted in 1942 on the role of phosphate in plant growth. Rows of plants grow in a field divided in half; signs indicate the experiment's two groups.

The sign on the left reads "Starved by lack of plant food." Crops on this side of the field are stunted or dead. The sign on the right reads "Nourished on phosphate and lime." These crops are healthy and show vigorous growth.

Source: the Tennessee Valley Authority

Video and Audio Accessibility

- Captions are welcomed by many users. When possible, allow users to toggle on/off. AI-generated captions can be timesavers, but humans still must proofread and edit as needed.
- Avoid the “point and wave” technique when referencing visual content – read out text, describe key images/movements/scenes
- Provide transcripts for audio content where possible; identify speakers and include non-verbal audio where relevant; consider time-stamps

Knowing your audience can help – but when in doubt, most folks love captions.

What About AI?

- Potentially a great time/cost/labour saver, particularly when working with large numbers of images or long-form video and audio
- Quality can be hit or miss, even when using the same tool for the same content on two different occasions
- Do your due diligence: **always** read the EULA, TOS, and privacy/data policies – and **re-check them regularly** for any updates/changes
- Consider [running models locally](#) for more control over your content
- Some content requires extra care and handling for safety and legal compliance; make sure you stay up-to-date with [UBC's guidelines for GenAI use](#)

Accessibility Checkers

- [Accessibility evaluation tools](#) are available, but have their limits.
- Content creation apps (Microsoft Office, Adobe, Canva) and content sharing platforms like Canvas often have built-in checkers – these are a great place to start.
- Tools like [WAVE](#) can help you check the accessibility of web-based content.
- Automated checkers don't necessarily interact with content the way humans would, so they may miss errors or incorrectly flag accessible content.
- Whether built-in or third-party, paid or free, automated checkers can only **help** identify potential accessibility issues; **human review is still needed.**

Connect With Us

- Email-based or Zoom-based one-on-one support
- [Accessibility Workshop Drop-ins!](#)
 - November 6, 2025
 - November 19, 2025
 - January 13, 2026
 - January 27, 2026
 - February 10, 2026
 - February 24, 2026

Check out our upcoming sessions on the UBC CTLT Events page:

<https://events.ctlt.ubc.ca/event-category/open-education/>



Thank You!

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