Accessibility FAQs

1. Can I give students with disabilities a different activity or excuse them from completing the assignment?

In most cases, no. Students with disabilities are given accommodations to be able to complete the same activities and assignments as their classmates. Excusing them from an assignment/activity takes away the opportunity for them to meet the same learning objectives and have the same learning experience.

1. How can I make my course exciting and creative, but also accessible?

Accessibility and creativity/excitement are not mutually exclusive. Accessible design is anything but boring! I think people tend to focus on disability in terms of what people can’t do instead of how they can do it (which is much more exciting and requires thinking about possibilities, rather than focusing on restrictions). Access and accessibility require creative problem solving and flexibility. Think of it this way: stairs – not accessible, boring, and painful after a while. Elevators – accessible, cool, sometimes made of fancy glass, and never tiring (unless you get stuck in one). A building with a fabulous staircase – equipped with the perfect banister to slide down should you desire – framed around a glass elevator – even better.

Just remember: stop focusing on what people can’t do, start focusing on the different and creative ways they can do it.

1. Should I refrain from showing videos if I have a deaf student in my class?

No! Videos are beneficial for all students, and accessibility does not involve lowering the quality of your class or instructional materials. In fact, making your materials accessible improves the quality of your course for everyone. Don’t simply remove videos if you have a deaf or hard of hearing student. Caption the video! This will help people who can’t hear, non-native English speakers, people who aren’t familiar with the vocabulary in the video, and people watching the video in noisy or public spaces.

1. Am I required by law to make my content accessible?

Yes. Check out: [Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973](https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html); [Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 and Amendments Act (ADAA) of 2008](https://www.ada.gov/2010_regs.htm); [Washington State Core Services RCW 28B.10.910-916](https://apps.leg.wa.gov/Rcw/default.aspx?cite=28B.10.910); [SBCTC Accessible Technology Policy 3.20.30B](https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/policies-rules/policy-manual/chapter-3.aspx); [Washington State OCIO Policy 188 – Accessibility](https://ocio.wa.gov/policy/accessibility).

1. I don’t create my course content but get it from a publisher. Who’s responsible for accessibility in this case?

You are. While we would hope publishers would make accessible content, if they don’t, liability falls on you (and/or your institution) for selecting and requiring accessible content. This is why it’s so important to ask about accessibility and compatibility with assistive technology prior to selecting a textbook and/or instructional technology. Another thing to consider when using publisher content is that it can be difficult or impossible to edit or fix the materials. In some cases, you may be able to make changes to improve accessibility, but in others you may not.

1. Why am I just now hearing about this?

Those of us promoting accessibility and working in disability support arenas are wondering the same thing. The reality is that education has moved online relatively recently, and lawsuits are starting to come down on schools for having inaccessible websites and using inaccessible course materials. As these lawsuits grow and become more high profile, these requirements are starting to get more and more attention. It’s been a long time coming, my friends.

1. I’m not tech savvy. How am I supposed to know how to make my stuff accessible?

Luckily, the skills it takes to make content accessible are pretty basic, and I bet you already have those skills. Most of the work it takes to make content accessible includes the ability to highlight text, click icons, change settings, etc. If you’ve created a Microsoft Word document, or designed an online class, I guarantee you already have these skills in your tool box!

If you need some guidance in making a document accessible, or want to have a document checked for accessibility, email [ADAC\_Support@whatcom.edu](mailto:ADAC_Support@whatcom.edu)

1. Does accessibility violate my academic freedom?

Well, let’s think of it this way: You probably wouldn’t use “academic freedom” to justify withholding course materials from students of color, women, or students of a certain faith. This is the same.

1. I’ve never had a student with a disability enroll in my class. Why should I worry about this?

Not every student with a disability discloses that they have a disability. So, chances are you have had students with disabilities in your class – you just didn’t know. Also, people with disabilities are allowed to enroll in your class and program just as any other student is. As assistive technology and instructional technology progresses, more and more is possible. You don’t want your course materials to be the obstacle that keeps a promising student from attaining their academic goals.

1. Students with disabilities don’t/can’t work in my field. Why should I have to make my content accessible for them?

As mentioned in the response above, people with disabilities are in every field. Disabilities are so diverse that there’s no way to make a blanket statement about people with x, y, or z disability not being able to do a, b, or c. As technology improves, doors open, and what once may have seemed impossible or unlikely isn’t anymore. Keep an open mind and speak with the student about their academic and professional goals – you may be surprised by what you learn.

1. I don’t put course materials online. Do I still need to worry about online accessibility?

If you aren’t converting your print materials to Braille or audio formats, then yes, you still need to learn about accessibility. Many students with disabilities need materials in a digital format in order to use them with assistive technologies. Even if you print all course materials for your students, some may prefer/request digital copies. Therefore, the original typed document needs to be formatted in an accessible manner.

1. What role does ADS (Access & Disability Services) play in all of this – can they help me make my course materials accessible?

In some cases, ADS and/or eLearning may be able to help you convert documents and caption videos, as well as teach you how to do it yourself. Let the ADS and eLearning office know that you are working on making your courses accessible; feel free to ask questions, and invite them to the table if you are shopping around for new course materials or technology – they will be helpful in identifying what questions to ask publishers/vendors. These folks can assist:

* + [Kerri Holferty](mailto:kholferty@whatcom.edu), Director ADS
  + [Todd Waters](mailto:twaters@whatcom.edu), Instructional Designer
  + [Tye Durbin](mailto:tdurbin@whatcom.edu), Canvas Admin

1. Why am I not being paid to do this work?

The ways in which we teach evolve and change over time. This is one of the shifts in expectations. It’s unlikely that people were paid to learn how to use computers to replace typewriters. And most of us were not paid extra to move our classes from Angel to Canvas. (We’re also not paid extra to refrain from discriminating against people of color, certain religions, genders, sexuality, etc. — why would we demand payment for not discriminating against people with disabilities?)

1. If I receive an accommodation notice, how much time do I have to make my content accessible?

The important thing to remember here is that the student with a disability should be given the same access to the material as other students. If you wait to make content accessible to them, then they don’t have as much time with the material to review, study, or engage in related conversations. Some instructors may suggest pushing back deadlines, but the student still needs to complete the term on the same date as everyone else – so pushing back due dates simply creates more work for them towards the end of the term. You probably pace your course and space the assignments out for a reason. The student should be able to experience the same pacing as everyone else.