



Minnesota State Accessibility Guidelines

Date: November, 2013

These guidelines are for the 2013-10-03 edition of the standard, and are informative and not normative.

Timeline

- September 1, 2010: new or substantially upgraded information systems, tools and content must be accessible; existing systems, tools, and content may remain unchanged.
- April 29, 2011: new version of the standard issued.
- October 3, 2013: updated version of the standard issued.

Scope of the Standard

The standard applies to all information technology acquired or developed for the State of Minnesota executive branch including:

- Websites, including electronic documents, video and multi-media
- Content created in electronic format, including emails, text documents, spreadsheets and presentations
- Software applications, including internal and public-facing applications
- IT products that accessibility standards apply to, including telecommunication, multimedia, and individual desktop and laptop computers.

Impact

The Minnesota Accessibility Standard impacts every aspect of State operations involving information technology, from creating electronic documents to procuring new technology and services. If you are involved in any of the following activities, the standard impacts what you do and how you do it:

- Procurement
- Document creation
- Video production
- Website design/development/testing
- Quality assurance
- Product development
- Project management
- Event planning

For example, project managers need to know where accessibility requirements apply within a project, and allow for the appropriate time and budget to incorporate it into design, development, and testing. If you're writing a document, start with a template that has accessibility built in. If your agency or department does not provide such a template, contact the [MN.IT Communications team](#) for sample templates. In nearly all instances, accounting for accessibility up front results in greater efficiency, lower costs, and a better product.

How to apply the standard

“Accessibility” is difficult to define because the end goal is ensuring any individual, regardless of disability, is able to perform all necessary functions and obtain any needed information. So while checklists are important for developers, testers, and content creators, both automated and manual testing remain necessary to ensure the final product is accessible.

The Office of Accessibility continues to update incorporating accessibility into statewide processes such as procurement. Agencies need to review their policies and procedures to ensure they support accessibility best practices. Individuals and departments need to focus on content, websites and applications they create. In general, if it is recorded, it needs to be accessible.

The standard uses the word “procured,” as well as the word “acquired,” the intention being to include all acquisitions – including those for which no payment is required. Also, in the case where a system has been purchased but not installed by the effective date, serious thought should be considered to making that system as accessible as possible as the whole point is to stop installing new, non-accessible systems.

The VPAT (voluntary product assessment template) documents we require current and prospective vendors to complete provide a good summary of the Standard’s elements.

- [Section 508 VPAT](#) (Word)
- [WCAG 2.0 VPAT](#) (Word)

Check the [procurement overview](#) page on the MN.IT accessibility website for more information on VPATs and how to use them.

Exceptions

The goal is to change our processes and tools so accessibility is built into everything we do. However, this may not always be possible or necessary. A reasonable “rule of thumb” is something does not have to be accessible if:

- It is transient (i.e., not recorded), and
- The group of people the content is distributed to is small enough that you know no member needs the accessibility.

Some examples that might meet this rule include:

- Notes for your use
- Unrecorded audio, video, or web conference among several people

In this case, “several people” might be ten or less. With a larger group you cannot be certain about accessibility needs. Of course, if you have information that at least one person involved needs accessibility – even if the group only involves two people – you must provide the accessibility or accommodation needed. Additionally, if you post a recorded conference, then it must be accessible.

Note if an in-person meeting of any number of people does not involve information technology, it is not covered by the standard.¹

¹ It is still covered under other law and you may have to provide accommodation.

Policies

Some agencies or departments may have to institute culture change in order to effectively adopt and implement the standard. Policies can be useful tools for instilling such change. The value of policies is that they are often accompanied by specific practices/processes. Here are some examples:

- **Accessibility policy:** An agency-wide policy statement that includes an issue resolution process and contact information. Such a policy also helps address potential issues that may arise from the recent legislation concerning the accessibility of [public documents](#) and [continuing education](#) materials.
- **Webcast/webinar policy:** Whenever an agency provides a webcast or webinar, whether internal or external, the policy helps direct the providers to determine how to ensure accessibility services are provided as needed.
- **Procurement policy:** MN.IT and the Minnesota Department of Administration (ADM) use Accessibility in its procurement practices. However, agencies may want to consider a policy to ensure that accessibility be factored into early requirements and design, as well as smaller procurements that do not go through MN.IT or ADM processes.

Accessible Content

The standard consists of two well-established frameworks: [WCAG 2.0](#) and [Section 508](#). WCAG 2.0 is an international standard for web content and interface accessibility under the authority of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). The [WCAG website](#) provides a great deal of detail on the guidelines, including branches that spell out what each guideline means and how to meet each aspect of the guidelines.

Section 508 spells out the federal requirements for accessibility. It is relatively broad, encompassing all electronic and information technology (EIT) from servers to kiosks to web interfaces. It is undergoing a “refresh,” expected to be effective by early 2014. At this point, in addition to other changes, it will map to WCAG 2.0 when referencing websites and applications. (When the refresh occurs, the Minnesota Accessibility Standard will automatically refresh as well.)

For all the detail that make up the Minnesota Accessibility Standard, there is no single prescriptive pathway to accessibility. Every device, application, interface, and document presents different requirements and challenges.

Information is a key product of government, and that information is often presented in a document, whether on a web page or some type of electronic document. Regardless of document type, it is much easier and cost effective to create it using accessibility principles and best practices than to remediate after the fact. You are encouraged to visit the [Electronic Documents](#) section of the MN.IT website for training and other resources.

Web Pages

How does accessibility affect web page design? Not as much as you might think: just about all of the elements that make for best practices in web page design contribute to making the page more accessible. These practices include:

- Separating content from markup
- Use of styles and style sheets to structure the page layout
- Use of descriptive labels on links²

² *I.e.*, using “...the [User Manual](#) ...” (preferred) instead of “...click [here](#) for the User Manual...” (bad)

One of the key practices is to integrate content into the flow of the page. This means that clicking on a link to a page brings up the desired content and not a blank placeholder for an on-web document such as a PDF.

Responsive Design

Consider using responsive design principles when designing your web presence. A related approach is “mobile-first design.” Both concepts focus on the increasing use of mobile devices as the primary means of accessing electronic information. Whether via tablet, smartphone, home laptop or work desktop, the user must have a consistent, useful, and accessible experience.

Linking to documents

There are times when it is appropriate to include other documents on a page. One good use is providing additional assets. For example, a page might discuss combining several images into a final composite, so it may make sense to link to the higher-resolution images in an archive.. Since the user will already be leaving the web environment to follow the example, having the assets outside of the web flow does not create a problem.

When you do need to include outside assets, you should try to use:

- open standards, then
- industry standards (when there are no applicable industry standards), and only then
- vendor proprietary standards (when there are no applicable open or industry standards).

Open standards include:

- Plain text files
- Comma-separated files (CSV) for spreadsheet-type data
- Portable document format (PDF) for layouts
- PNG, JPEG, and GIF for images
- MP3 and AAC for audio
- H.323 for video
- ZIP for archives

This is by no means a complete list of all open standards; it is just to help you get oriented.

Linking to Third-Party Sites

In the case where the State contracts with an outside party for custom content (for example, a page provided for State employee access), that custom content falls under this standard and this applicability should be referenced in any new or revised contracts. When a State site points to an external site not provided by contract to the State (such as a software developer’s help page) as a resource, that site is not subject to the Standard. However, it may be covered under other law such as the ADA.

There’s a gray area here. Consider the case where the State has a contract with a distributor who simply puts a “State of Minnesota” logo or label on an existing website that delivers another product or service (e.g., for ordering parts). There’s a contract, but it’s for the product or service behind the web site and the web site is really a means to an end. Yet, we don’t want to force the provider to redo their whole web site (as it would be a new site for us). On the other hand, if the web site is for a product or service needed by all state employees, it would be important to have that site accessible to all employees. The best way to handle cases like these is through the exception process.

The Link Mark

When a state site is pointing to an external resource for which there is no contractual or editorial relationship with the State, we recommend indicating this through a specific link mark (an open-square-with-arrow-pointing-up-and-right symbol that is commonly used for this function). An example (from Wikipedia) is:



The exact style and color is not specified as part of these guidelines.

For more information on IT accessibility and related resources, visit the [Office of Accessibility](#) home page.