



# Accessible Social Media for Public Health

The Public Health Communicators Guide

**PUBLIC HEALTH**   
**COMMUNICATIONS**  
**COLLABORATIVE**

## Contents

Accessible Social Media and Public Health Communications .....	2
Developing Accessible Written Content .....	3
Developing Accessible Visual Content .....	7
Developing Accessible Video and Audio Content .....	10
Community Listening and User Testing .....	12
More Information .....	13



# Accessible Social Media and Public Health Communications

## Why does accessible social media matter for public health communications?

Up to 27% of adults in the United States have some type of disability ([CDC](#)). Disability can affect mobility, cognition, hearing, vision, and levels of independence and self-care. To create inclusive and accessible public health communications, you must consider the ways people with disabilities will interact with your content. It is not possible for people to understand the important health information you are sharing if they cannot access it.

While there are considerations for accessibility for every communication channel, this guide will focus on social media. Use the following information to develop accessible writing, visuals, audio, and video that will connect with all members of your audience.





# Developing Accessible Written Content

## Writing in Plain Language

Plain language supports communication that is clear, accessible, and useful. According to the [Plain Language Action and Information Network](#), using plain language helps your audience:

1. Find what they need.
2. Understand information the first time they hear, see, or read it.
3. Use the information to meet their needs.

Using plain language in your public health communications can help people stay informed and make decisions about their health. Always start with your audience in mind. Even if information can be used by the general public, focusing on a priority audience can help tailor your messaging and increase engagement and understanding. Consider how much your audience already knows about this topic, what questions they have, and how they will access the information.

Once you have a clear sense of your audience and their goals, develop and organize your writing. Use common words and avoid medical jargon. Find ways to make your writing more conversational by using the active voice and using “you” to write in the second person.

BLUF is an acronym that stands for Bottom Line Up Front and means putting your most important information first. With this technique, your audience will receive key messages, even if they don’t reach the end of the material or you are limited to a certain number of characters on social media.

For more information, check out the [Plain Language for Public Health](#) guide.

### ✘ Non-Conversational (uses jargon)

Our Q1 goals led to increased capacity for our community cardiovascular health support group. If you are interested in submitting an application, please detail your interest and contact information.

### ✔ Conversational (uses plain language)

There are 35 spots available for our local heart health support group! If you’re interested in joining, please fill out the form below, and we’ll be in touch.

### ✘ Passive Voice

Taking the time to visit the dentist twice a year for a cleaning is recommended for most people over the age of two years old.

### ✔ Active Voice

Everyone ages 2 and up should get their teeth cleaned at the dentist every 6 months.

### ✘ Third Person

All students are encouraged to wash their hands often to prevent the spread of germs.

### ✔ Second Person

Remember to wash your hands! Washing your hands will keep you and your classmates safe from germs.

Source: [Plain Language for Public Health](#)

## Writing for Screen Readers

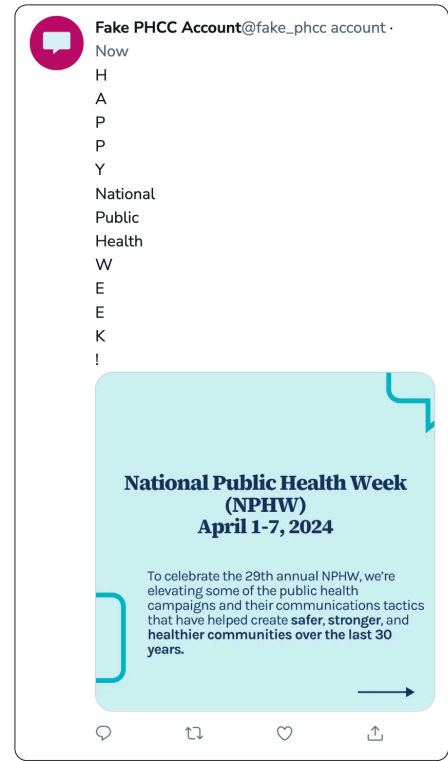
Screen readers are software programs that make digital text accessible for blind or visually impaired users ([American Foundation for the Blind](#)). There are several ways to make your writing more accessible for people who use a screen reader.

### 1. Avoid Large Text Blocks and Forced Formatting

Breaking up your content into lists or using clearly labeled headers can help guide a user and make text-heavy content more digestible. Long text blocks—as opposed to shorter paragraphs—can make information more difficult to understand. Have one point per paragraph and use short sentences. When organizing your content, use bulleted lists or short descriptive headings for each topic, and avoid “forced formatting.”

Forced formatting manipulates text in a way that looks intentionally formatted but can make the content inaccessible for people who use a screen reader. The post to the right is formatted to appear in one column, which makes the information confusing and inaccessible.

For more information on succinct text, review guidance from the [Web Accessibility Initiative](#).



Using forced formatting makes text inaccessible for screen readers.



### Inclusive Writing: Person-First and Identity-First Language

When communicating about people with disabilities, your choice of language is important. **Person-first language** leads with the individual (e.g., a person who is blind), whereas **identity-first language** leads with a description of the person’s disability (e.g., a blind person). Different people and communities have different language preferences. The National Association of the Deaf, for example, uses identity-first language. If your writing features a person with a disability and you are unsure whether to use person-first or identity-first language, consult members of the community or community associations and advocates.

In all cases, avoid ableist language that devalues people with a disability. Examples include language that:

- Removes all individuality, such as labeling an entire community as “the disabled,” “the blind,” or “the deaf”
- Frames a person with a disability as being a victim of their identity, by saying they “suffer from,” are “stricken by,” or are “afflicted with” a disability
- Refers to people without a disability as “healthy” or “normal”—implying that people with a disability are unhealthy or abnormal

For more examples of affirmative and negative language, visit the [Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion](#).

## 2. Use Hypertext

Hyperlinks are helpful tools to drive your audience to an external website or resource with additional public health information. Creating hypertext—i.e., embedding a hyperlink to turn a series of words into a clickable link, rather than just posting a website address or URL—is not a feature available on most social media platforms. On digital platforms where you can embed a link, it is important to use descriptive links, rather than simply writing “click here.” Adding a more descriptive link, as shown below, gives people who use a screen reader more information about the link destination and makes the writing more accessible. If you are concerned that some members of your audience won’t click a descriptive link, you can also add a shortened URL at the end of your writing.

### ✘ Less Accessible Hypertext

For more information on how to shorten a URL, [click here](#).

### ✔ Descriptive Hypertext

Visit [Sprout Social](#) for more information on how to shorten a URL.

## 3. Use Emojis Sparingly

Emojis are commonly used on social media. When someone using a screen reader encounters an emoji, they will be read an image description of the emoji. Because of this, it is best to use an emoji at the end of a sentence, so the image description won’t interfere with the public health information you are sharing. It also means that excessive emoji use can be distracting. For example, five yellow heart emojis in a row will be read as “yellow heart, yellow heart, yellow heart, yellow heart, yellow heart.” In all instances, adding emojis makes your content longer for people using a screen reader. Consider using emojis in moderation and placing them to complement your text, not compete with it.



Emojis overwhelm the social post.



✔ Emojis used to complement the message of the text.



## 4. Capitalize Correctly

Screen readers rely on proper capitalization (sometimes called camel case or title case) to indicate proper nouns or the start of a new sentence. Using study case, or alternating upper and lower case letters—LiKe ThIs TeXt FoR ExAmPIE—is not accessible to a screen reader. Capitalization is also important for hashtags. Using improper capitalization can make #catsarecute much more confusing to understand than #CatsAreCute.

✘ Study Case

pUbLiC HeAlTh MaTtErS

✘ All Lower Case

#publichealthmatters

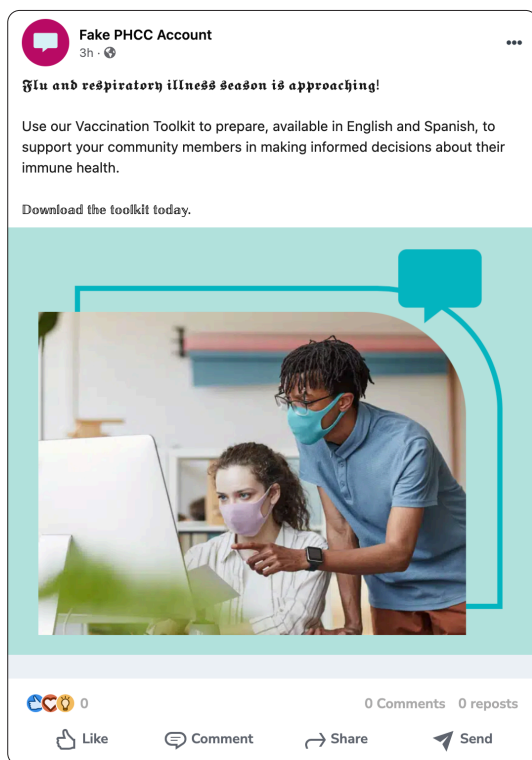
✔ Camel Case/Title Case

#PublicHealthMatters

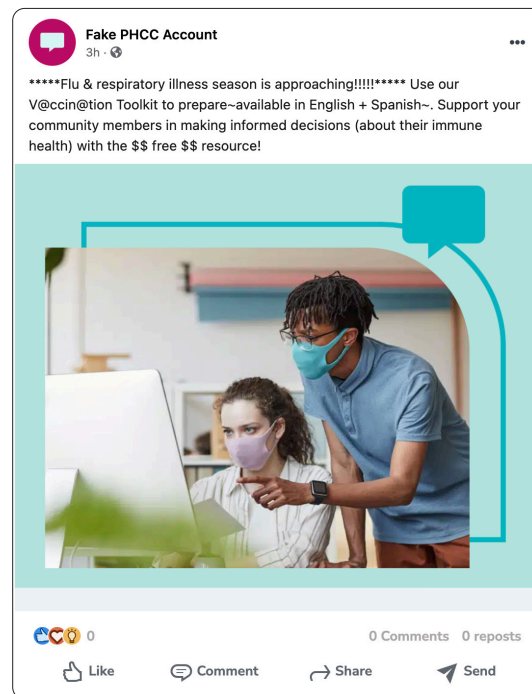
## 5. Avoid “Fancy Fonts” and Special Characters

Some social media platforms allow you to copy and paste unique fonts from external sites to use in your captions. Examples are included below. While these styles add a visual element to standard captions, they may not be readable by all screen readers. As a result, some screen readers will skip the text entirely. When writing captions, stick with the text options provided by the platform and do not copy and paste content from external sites.

“Fancy fonts” are different from special characters. While most screen readers can read special characters, like the dollar sign or percentage sign, avoid using them unless necessary. For more information on accessibility and special characters, review [this list](#) from Eleven Ways.



*This example post uses two “fancy fonts” that are inaccessible for screen readers.*



*While most screen readers can read special characters, you should only use them when necessary and avoid overusing them like in this example post.*



# Developing Accessible Visual Content

Social media channels are often highly visual, and it is important that your visual content is accessible to your audience. Use the following considerations to help you develop accessible visual content.

## Alt Text and Image Descriptions

Alt text and image descriptions are critical to accessibility, especially for those using a screen reader or other assistive technology. Alt text is typically a short text that is added to an image tag within a digital platform and can range from 100–250 characters. An image description is just that—descriptive. Image descriptions are typically longer than alt text and are often located in the body of your social media post.

Writing an image description can be like storytelling and will vary across content creators. When writing image descriptions, focus on accuracy over length and consider things like: *What are the most significant elements of your visual to include? How can your image description complement your written content? Are you choosing words and phrases that paint an accurate and engaging picture for your audience?* Remember that a user can't click a hashtag or hyperlink in an image description, and these elements should instead be included in the body of your social post.



**Alt Text:** Two young people wearing face coverings take a walk.

**Image Description:** Two young people in casual attire take a walk outside on a cleared path bordered by trees and low bushes. In the background is a building with steps leading to three entrances. The person on the left has long brown hair, a light skin tone, and has their arms crossed around a black folder. They wear a white face covering, light blue jacket, a black shirt, and light jeans with holes in the knees. The person on the right has short braided hair, a dark skin tone, and carries a white folder with their right arm. They wear a white face covering, light plaid coat over a white zip-up sweatshirt, and dark blue jeans.

For more information on developing image descriptions, check out [these tips](#) from Accessible Social. For more information about developing alt text by platform, check out [these tips](#) from Perkins School for the Blind or use the following guides from [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), [X](#), [Pinterest](#), and [Facebook](#).

## Designing with Accessibility in Mind

[Section 508](#) within the General Services Administration and [U.S. Web Design System](#) outline legal requirements for accessible text and formatting online for federal agencies. The following chart from the Section 508 website provides an overview of accessible design practices for color contrast and beyond.

### U.S. Web Design System: Criteria Overview

**1.4.1 Use of Color:** Color must not be the only means of conveying information. If color signifies meaning, incorporate additional visual cues like a symbol or text to convey the information.

**1.4.3 Contrast:** Text and images of text must have a contrast ratio of at least 4.5:1. Large text, such as 16 pt bold, and icons need a 3:1 ratio between foreground and background colors. This contrast requirement applies to text over a gradient or background image. An author might put a dark rectangle behind light text, or use black text with a thin white outline effect.

**1.4.4. Resize Text:** The reader must be able to resize text to at least to 200 percent without loss of content or functionality. Web browsers and word processors include this feature by default, but document authors can interfere with this functionality.

**1.4.5 Images of Text:** Whenever possible, use actual text and not images or pictures of text. This gives the reader control over the presentation of text. Images of text also degrade and become jagged when high levels of screen magnification are used.

**1.4.10 Reflow (WCAG 2.1 AA):** Readers using assistive technology for magnification are essentially using a window half the typical size. Content should reflow and not require horizontal scrolling when read using a small, resized window.

**1.4.12 Text Spacing (WCAG 2.1 AA):** Content should not be lost if a reader uses assistive technology to make minor adjustments to paragraph, line, word, or letter spacing.

Source: [Section508.gov](#)

## Choosing Fonts for Your Designs

Neither the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines nor Section 508 require a specific font or font size for digital platforms. However, both elements can impact the accessibility of your social media content. Serif fonts—or fonts with flourishes on the tip of each letter—decrease legibility of text, especially in a digital format. Choose a sans serif font, like Arial or Helvetica, and a font size of 11 or 12 point, to ensure your audience can more easily read your content. Read more about font choices at [Section508.gov](#).

### FONT EXAMPLES

Aa

SERIF  
FONT

Aa

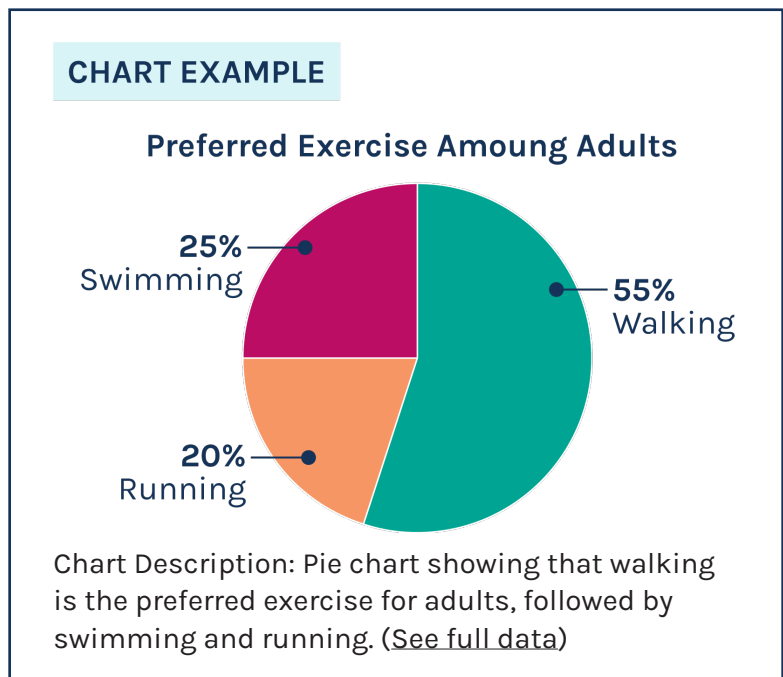
SANS SERIF  
FONT



## Designing Charts and Graphs

While charts and graphs can be important assets for sharing information about public health, if they are inaccessible, they can add to confusion or misinformation. Consider the following tips for creating accessible charts and graphs on social media.

- **Don't rely only on color:** Color can help you show differences across data but should not be your only communications tool. Consider using shapes, patterns, or icons to reinforce the information you are presenting.
- **Add clear and communicative labels:** Plain language is important when sharing visual information, too. Be sure your charts and graphs are clearly labeled to complement any visual data.
- **Present information in multiple formats:** Even when content is accessible, not everyone processes information in the same way. When possible, consider presenting charts and graphs in multiple formats, including written descriptions of the data.
- **Stick to the basics for text descriptions:** Data visualizations are often complex. Resist the urge to write lengthy alt text or image descriptions to capture every single data point. Instead, include the most important information like the type of chart, type of data, one key takeaway, and a link to the raw data.



The above example chart uses clear labels and colors to illustrate the slices of the pie chart, and includes a short description with the main takeaway as well as a link to the data.

## Getting to Know Your Audience

Why is it important to design with accessibility in mind? Here are a few reasons:

- Color insensitivity affects about 4.5% of the population—including 0.5% of adult women and 8% of adult men ([USWDS](#))—and can make it difficult for a person to distinguish between different color hues.
- Approximately 6 million Americans have vision loss and 1 million are blind ([CDC](#)) and may use assistive technology to access digital content.
- In 2024, approximately 96% of the top 1 million website home pages had some form of accessibility failure ([WebAIM](#)).





# Developing Accessible Video and Audio Content

Some social media platforms favor video and audio, and it is important to make this content accessible. Similar to visuals, complementing video and audio content with written content—in the form of captions, video descriptions, and transcripts—will allow more members of your audience to engage with the content.

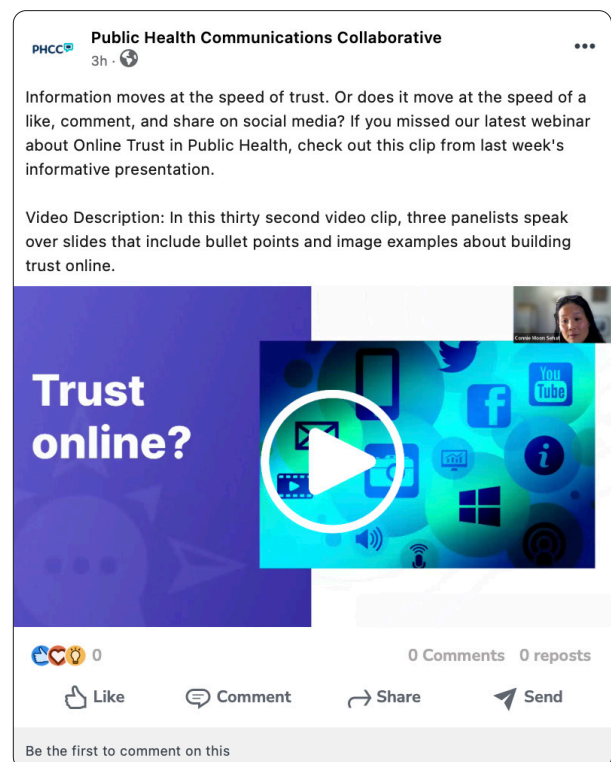
## Captioning

Social media captions have gained popularity, especially as people watch videos on the go or in loud places. There are two ways to caption your audio and video content: closed or open captions. Closed captions can be turned on or off by the viewer and open captions are permanently embedded into the content. Closed captioning is a best practice, when possible. In addition to turning closed captions on and off, in some instances the viewer can resize the font and move the captions to a different location on the screen. Instructions for uploading closed captions to social media will vary by platform, but common file formats include VTT, SRT, or TTML. Both free and paid tools are available to help you generate these files and you should always review for accuracy before uploading.

When you have the option to choose your caption font, keep it simple. Choose a sans serif option in a readable size and font weight. Avoid options that may distract from or compete with the visuals, like all-caps typing or colored fonts and backgrounds. Be sure your caption placement will not cover or overlap critical visuals on the screen. Read more about caption best practices from the [Web Accessibility Initiative](#) and [National Technical Institute for the Deaf](#).

## Audio and Written Descriptions of Video Content

In addition to captioning, consider adding audio and written descriptions to your video content. Audio descriptions—or audio tracks overlaid on top of an existing video—are available on some streaming services but not many social media platforms. If you'd like to add an audio description to your social media video, upload two versions of the content, one of which includes an audio narration as part of the video. Treat written descriptions of video similar to creating image descriptions. This narrative text can live in the body of your social media caption and provide a detailed description of the video content.



## Transcripts

Transcripts can also be a written complement to video or audio content, and there are several different types of transcripts you can use. Verbatim transcripts copy text word for word. Many AI tools use verbatim translation, and benefit from a human editor to ensure the content is correct. You could also opt for a clean transcript that removes certain elements, including filler words like “um,” repeated words, or other background noises. Finally, edited transcripts are an even “cleaner” version of the clean transcript and are edited similarly to a script for grammar and clarity.

There are both paid and free services to support developing your captions, descriptions, and transcripts. Always start by exploring what accessibility features your chosen social media platform offers and then determine where you might need to fill gaps.

## Creating Videos in American Sign Language

For many Deaf people, American Sign Language (ASL) is their first language. While captions and transcripts increase accessibility, developing content in ASL can create a deeper connection for viewers and is especially important for communicating critical public health information. As with all [culturally driven communications](#), you should prioritize the preferences, experiences, and perspectives of your target audience throughout the content development process. For more information on how to create videos in ASL, check out [these tips](#) from The Minnesota Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind & Hard of Hearing.

## The Difference Between Transcripts and Captions

While captions and transcripts are both accessibility tools, they have specific use cases.

worked on that is a little bit [less data heavy](#), but it struck a tricky balance for this was created to educate family-based [child care](#) providers about environmental contaminants. Families that are bringing children into their homes to do daycare. They may not know about different environmental contaminants. Some environmental contaminants are regulated as being part of the license provider. Some are not. We wanted to bring [all of this together](#) for them and one resource to provide the bare minimum they needed to know [in order](#) to take action to protect their children and to get their [license](#). We ended up with this house that showed them where they might be looking for these different environmental contaminants. The table that [names like](#) contaminants and just a little bit of background information. The key is doing a lot of work here. It is color-coded to indicate if the environmental contaminant is present or something you should avoid introducing. The icons help the user understand if this is something that is [regulated](#), if it is health effects. If there is [another](#) stuff they might need to take. Again, the call to action. Then, the last piece that I wanted to cover was considering accessibility and I mentioned this last fit I will say accessibility is one of the first things you should consider when developing data visualization. It should impact the design. Important to consider mobile device friendly translation capabilities screen reader friendly. [Include image descriptions](#). Especially when doing data analysis with color-coded keeping [colorblind audience and mind](#). I'll end with a personal anecdote talks we use the same app and where a smartwatch bid as a beta version. We went for a run the other day and were comparing arcade in such [steps per minute](#). His is on top of mine is on bottom. When I looked at my screen there is more information he cannot to the difference between red and green and orange on his data visualization. This is a very innocuous example. It doesn't [really](#) impact our lives. So that is everything that I had today. I will pass it back over to Jessica. Thank you [Fred](#).


>>JESSICA MALATY RIVERA: Thank you so much Peter and Caroline we've got some incredible questions in the chapters we will be able to get all of them today. We do have a good amount of time I hope we can get to a lot of them. We'll use these questions to create follow-up resources and information that will address what the audience wants to know most. I will tell you I have been fully caking out over this presentation from both of you. I loved all the things you shared as many enthusiastic [participants](#) in the chat have conveyed

### Transcription

The process of transcription turns audio into text. The result is often a long-form document that can be shared separately from the video or audio.

### Consider Accessibility

- Mobile devices
- Translation
- Screen readers
- Image descriptions
- Color-blind friendly



with color coding, keeping our colorblind audience in mind.

### Captioning

The process of captioning turns audio into text and synchronizes the text to an image or video. The result are captions that appear on screen for the user to read in real time.



# Community Listening and User Testing

Once your content is drafted using these best practices, it is important to test the content and source feedback on accessibility.

## Sourcing Input and Feedback

Even when your content is created with accessibility and inclusivity in mind, it is helpful to source input and feedback from others. As you start to implement best practices, consider hiring people with disabilities. You can also work with an accessibility consultant, people with lived experience of a disability, or other local accessibility experts to ensure your content is shaping up as planned. Consider key milestones in your content creation process for when you should source input, such as during the brainstorming phase, after completing a first draft, or before the content is final. Feedback is an incredibly valuable tool, but it may be more difficult to implement the further along you are in production. Working with experts early and often will strengthen your communications in the long run.

## Testing User Experience

Although you might draft social media content on a computer, many people access social platforms via a mobile device. Consider ways a smaller device screen will impact content readability and user experience. Before making your content public, test mobile user experience firsthand by setting up private social media accounts and posting content that is only visible to certain followers who are part of your user testing process. To simulate a screen reader, many mobile phones have text-to-speech functions, or you can use a text-to-speech platform online. You can also work with a screen reader user to test content in advance. Did you know different screen readers show or describe emojis differently? Use [Emojipedia](#) to see common ways an emoji is described by a screen reader and how the visual appears across different platforms.



*Grinning face with smiling eyes for Apple Users*



*Grinning face with smiling eyes for Google Users*



*Grinning face with smiling eyes for Samsung Users*

Thank you for reading The Public Health Communicators Guide to Accessible Social Media. This guide was developed in spring 2024 by the Public Health Communications Collaborative in partnership with Disability Policy Consortium.

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## More Information

### Resources

- [Accessible Social](#)
- [Cooper Hewitt Guidelines for Image Description](#)
- [The Diagram Center](#)
- [Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion](#)
- [Perkins School for the Blind](#)
- [Section 508 Compliance](#) | U.S. General Services Administration
- [The Plain Language Action and Information Network \(PLAIN\)](#)
- [Web Accessibility Initiative](#)

### Articles

- [Disability Language Guidance](#) | NACCHO
- [English to American Sign Language \(ASL\) Video Production Checklist](#) | Minnesota Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind & Hard of Hearing
- [How Screen Readers Read Special Characters](#) | Eleven Ways
- [How to Add Alt Text by Platform](#) | Perkins School for the Blind
- [Writing Alt Text for Data Visualization](#) | Amy Cesal
- [Writing Respectfully: Person-First and Identity-First Language](#) | National Institutes of Health



## About PHCC

The [Public Health Communications Collaborative](#) (PHCC) is a learning and information hub for professionals who communicate about public health. We create resources that are aligned with local, state and federal guidance but emphasize accessibility, equity and plain language. Our practical resources and training tools are directly informed by public health communicators on the front lines of their communities and designed to address the evolving needs of public health communicators. We develop answers to tough public health questions, misinformation alerts, shareable graphics, social messaging, plain language resources, and other communication tools. Through communication tools and learning opportunities, we help health professionals ensure everyone has what they need to make informed decisions about their health.

Our work is collaborative with expertise shared by selected communications partners and representatives from leading public health organizations, including the CDC Foundation, the de Beaumont Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and Trust for America's Health.



## About Disability Policy Consortium

[Disability Policy Consortium's](#) (DPC) credo is "About Us, By Us:" the belief that when decisions are made about people with disabilities, people with disabilities must play a lead role in making them. Its mission is to ensure the voice of people with disabilities is heard on key issues, to support the health of the community through participatory research and expert policy analysis, and to empower grassroots disability leaders to transform their communities. DPC was founded in 1996 when 240 individuals, representing a variety of disability identity groups and organizations, came together to resist a proposal that would have radically reshaped Massachusetts' disability-focused state agencies without the consent of the people served by these agencies. DPC's innovative and diligent efforts defeated that proposal. From then on, DPC resolved to continue its fight for disability rights. Today, DPC remains the only organization of its kind in the United States: run by and for people with disabilities, while engaging in systems transformation at every level: from grassroots community organizing; to direct patient mediation services; to leading-edge policy research collaborations; to education, training, and technical assistance; to state- and national-scale public policy analysis.

