ACCESSIBILITY IN ONLINE LEARNING – FACULTY TOOLS & STRATEGIES FOR COMMON CHALLENGES

Susan E. Gould, Department Head, Department of Financial Operations Professions

According to the CDC (2025), over 70 million US adults (over 1 in 4) have a disability. In the online learning environment, numerous challenges can impact a student's ability to participate, including visual or hearing difficulties, cognitive differences, and physical conditions. For these students, the online environment presents unique challenges and obstacles that can be overcome using assistive technology and a well-constructed online classroom. It is important for faculty to be aware of common accessibility challenges in online learning and ensure their online classroom is fully accessible so all students can fully participate.

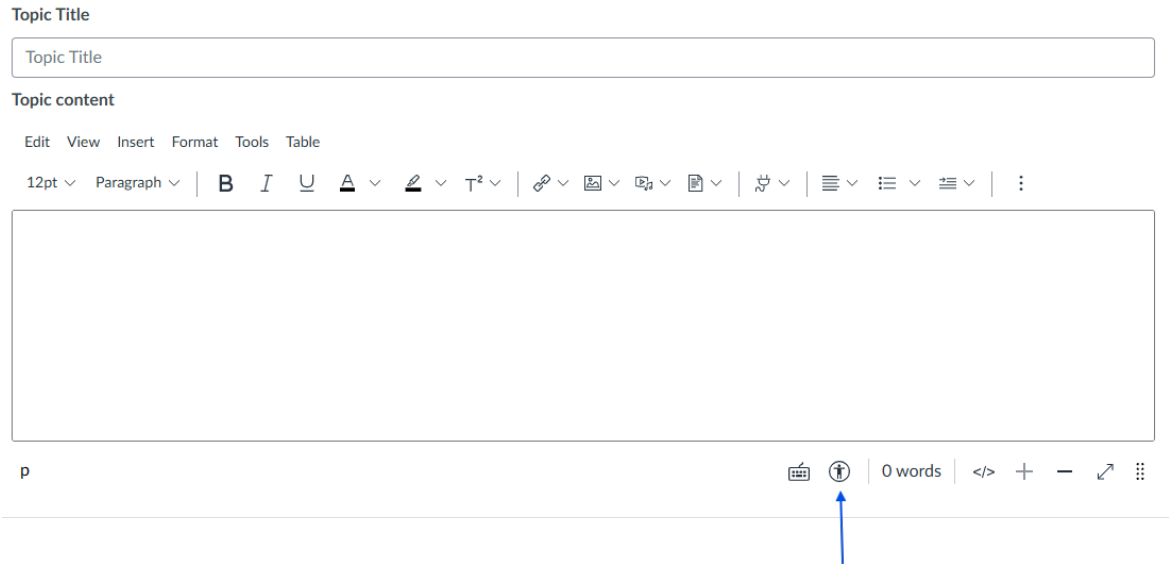
Many strategies and tools exist to help faculty ensure their content is fully accessible. This article will explain the built-in tools faculty can use to ensure accessibility and will highlight common online accessibility problems with strategies to solve those problems.

Canvas Accessibility Checker

The most valuable tool to enhance online accessibility is the built-in Canvas Accessibility Checker. In Announcements or Discussion Posts, in the rich content editor, the Accessibility Checker is an icon located beneath the text box, resembling a person in a circle. Figure 1 below identifies the Accessibility Checker icon in Canvas, which is located next to the word count. Once you have composed your announcement or discussion reply, but before you post it, you can click on the Accessibility Checker icon, and Canvas will check your work for accessibility issues. For each issue identified, Canvas will highlight the issue and provide guidance on how to resolve it. Once all issues are fixed, you can post the content. Instructure provides a clear explanation of this feature on its community site, under "How do I use the Accessibility Checker in the Rich Content Editor?"

Figure 1

Canvas Accessibility Checker



Microsoft Accessibility assistant

Word, Excel, and PowerPoint have built-in accessibility checkers. In all three applications, you can use the Check Accessibility feature from the Review tab. The accessibility assistant identifies accessibility issues and provides suggestions to fix the issues. Microsoft provides guidance on how to check accessibility in its application support under Check accessibility while you work in Office apps.

URLs

One common problem in online environments is the widespread use of URLs to provide resources. However, screen readers have a specific method of identifying online content. For a URL, the screen reader will state the URL letter by letter, which is both ineffective and inefficient - not to mention, frustratingly boring. Instead, faculty should provide wording that describes the resource and includes a hyperlink to the resource. The screen reader announces that a link is available and reads the descriptive words to the student, which is much more effective.

Images

Images are another popular feature in online classrooms as they can impart important information. Images that convey information should have alternative text (alt text) so students using assistive technology do not miss important information. The alt text should convey the image information in a short sentence or phrase. Images can also be designated "decorative only" to remove the necessity of alt text.

Tables

Many faculty create and use tables to provide information in the online environment. Once again, screen readers have specific ways of reading tables, so tables require a specific format to properly

represent the information to students using assistive technology. Tables should include headers and avoid using merged cells.

Color

Whether it is in an announcement, a discussion post, or grading feedback, faculty often use color to draw attention to specific words or points. However, for accessibility purposes, color alone should not be used. Screen readers do not announce text color as a point of emphasis. Color can be used in conjunction with other font formats, such as bold, italic, or underlined content.

In addition, color contrast is important so that text is distinguishable to everyone, including those with color blindness or low vision. There are technical guidelines for acceptable color contrast ratios, or you can simply use high-contrast colors. Microsoft Office applications allow you to choose from high contrast colors. Additionally, accessibility checkers in Canvas and Microsoft Office applications will identify low contrast colors and provide a recommended alternative.

Table 1

Accessible Formats of Common Online Features

Feature	Accessible Format	Reason
URLs	Use descriptive words with a hyperlink. **Example**: Best Practices for an Accessible Online Classroom	Screen readers read the descriptive words and announce that a hyperlink is present, rather than reading the URL letter by letter.
Images	Include alternative text to convey important information in the image.	Students may miss out on important information if there is no alternative text. Screen readers will read the name of the image file unless alternative text is provided.
Tables	Tables should include accurate headers and avoid using merged cells.	Assistive technology may not accurately convey the table information without these components.
Color	Use high-contrast colors and only use color in conjunction with another font	Low-contrast colors can be difficult to read for individuals with color blindness or vision

	feature, such as bold, italic, or underline, for emphasis. **Example:** Use color in combination with other font features, such as **bold**, *italic*, or underline.	impairment. Color alone, with no other feature, is not identified by screen readers for emphasis.

Faculty have numerous responsibilities and limited time. Fortunately, the Canvas Accessibility Checker and Microsoft Accessibility Assistant provide effective tools to quickly and accurately ensure online content is accessible. Faculty can also focus on addressing these four common accessibility problems in online environments, thereby greatly enhancing their online classroom experience for the benefit of all students. When over 1 in 4 adults have disabilities, many UAGC students are likely to be in this population (CDC, 2025). With awareness and efficient use of technology tools, UAGC faculty can provide a learning experience that is accessible to all.

References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2025, April 4). *Disability impacts all of us infographic*. https://www.cdc.gov/disability-and-health/articles-documents/disability-impacts-all-of-us-infographic.html

Instructure. (n.d.). *How do I use the Accessibility Checker in the Rich Content Editor?* https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Canvas-Basics-Guide/How-do-I-use-the-Accessibility-Checker-in-the-Rich-Content/ta-p/618238

Microsoft. (n.d.). *Check accessibility while you work in Office apps*. https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/check-accessibility-while-you-work-in-office-apps-ae9e8ea7-1f22-41af-ad04-cc2919daebae#bkmk_fixwin