

# Website Accessibility in 2026

(Yes, WCAG 2.2 Changes the Game)

Is your house made of sticks, bricks, or straw?

We all grew up hearing the story of the three little pigs and their very determined wolf. When it comes to accessibility compliance, straw won't cut it anymore. Sticks might hold up for a little while. But if you want your website to withstand scrutiny—from users, regulators, search engines, and plaintiffs' attorneys—you need bricks. And in 2026, those bricks need to meet **WCAG 2.2** standards.

Let's break this down in a way that actually makes sense.

## Accessibility, Explained Like a Human

When we talk about website accessibility, we're talking about making sure everyone can use your site—regardless of ability. That includes people who use screen readers, navigate by keyboard instead of a mouse, have low vision or color blindness, use voice input, or rely on other assistive technologies.

Accessibility means your website's structure, content, and functionality are built so assistive technology can interpret them correctly and present them clearly. It's not about installing a flashy "accessibility widget" and calling it a day. It's about building the house correctly from the foundation up so that every user can move through it confidently.

## ADA + Websites: Where Things Stand Now

The **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** was signed into law in 1990—long before websites were part of everyday public life. The ADA is divided into three titles:

- Title I covers discrimination of employers against employees. This does not apply to web projects in the scope of this document.
- Title II covers the public sector, specifically state and local governments and other public entities such as libraries and schools.
- Title III covers the private sector, specifically public accommodations and commercial facilities. For our purposes, there is no practical difference between Title II and Title III other than the entities to which it applies.

The ADA never explicitly mentions websites. However, courts and the Department of Justice have consistently interpreted it to apply to digital experiences. Over the past decade, that interpretation has only strengthened.

In 2024, the Department of Justice finalized a rule requiring state and local governments (Title II entities) to meet **WCAG 2.1 Level AA**, with compliance deadlines rolling out through 2026–2027. While the regulation references WCAG 2.1, the current global gold standard is now **WCAG 2.2**, released in Octo-

ber 2023. If you're building a new site today, designing to 2.2 is simply the smarter, more future-ready approach.

## So... What Is WCAG?

The **Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)** are developed by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), the organization widely considered the authority on how the web should function. WCAG is built around four foundational principles: content must be Perceivable, Operable, Understandable, and Robust. (We call this POUR. It's easier to remember than it sounds.)

WCAG includes three levels of compliance:

- **Level A** - Basic accessibility
- **Level AA** - The practical, enforceable standard
- **Level AAA** - Extremely strict and rarely required

Level AA is what courts, regulators, and most public institutions expect. And now, we're talking about **WCAG 2.2 Level AA** as the target.

## What Changed in WCAG 2.2?

WCAG 2.2 builds on 2.1 rather than replacing it. The updates focus heavily on keyboard navigation, focus visibility, cognitive accessibility, and mobile usability—areas where real-world usability gaps were still showing up.

### Stronger Focus Indicators (2.4.11)

When someone navigates your site using a keyboard, they must be able to clearly see where they are at all times. That means focus states need strong contrast, sufficient thickness, and clear visual distinction. Subtle outlines that blend into the design are no longer acceptable. If your designer removed default focus styles because they "looked ugly," WCAG 2.2 says it's time to bring them back—just do it in a thoughtful, branded way.

### No More Tiny Tap Targets (2.5.8)

Interactive elements must now meet minimum size requirements to ensure they're usable on touch devices and for people with motor impairments. Tiny pagination links crammed together or small icon-only buttons can create real barriers. WCAG 2.2 addresses this directly by requiring sufficient target size and spacing so users aren't forced into pixel-perfect precision.

### No More Tiny Tap Targets (2.5.8)

If an element receives keyboard focus, it cannot be obscured by sticky headers, pushed offscreen, or hidden behind overlays. Keyboard users must always know exactly where they are, and the page must not shift unexpectedly in a way that disorients them.

### Accessible Authentication (3.3.8)

Cognitive accessibility gets a boost in 2.2. If your login requires solving a puzzle, remembering obscure

information, or completing complex visual challenges, you must provide an accessible alternative. Authentication can't rely solely on memory tests or cognitive tasks that create unnecessary barriers.

### **Consistent Help (3.2.6)**

If your site provides help options—such as chat support, contact information, or FAQs—they need to appear in consistent locations across pages. This reduces cognitive load and helps users build familiarity with your interface.

## **The Fundamentals Still Matter**

WCAG 2.2 didn't eliminate the core requirements. You still need proper alt text for images, captions for videos, sufficient color contrast (at least 4.5:1 for most text), semantic heading structure, properly labeled forms, keyboard operability, and skip-to-content links. These aren't optional enhancements—they're foundational building blocks.

Accessibility isn't about checking boxes. It's about building structure correctly so the experience works naturally across devices and assistive technologies.

## **Section 508: Where It Fits Today**

Section 508 applies specifically to federal agencies and federal procurement. It was refreshed in 2018 to align with WCAG 2.0 Level AA. While the regulation itself hasn't yet updated to 2.2, most federal and state organizations are designing to WCAG 2.1 or 2.2 Level AA in practice.

If you work in government, higher education, K-12, or public infrastructure, accessibility is not a "nice to have." It's a legal and ethical requirement.

## **Enforcement in 2026**

For public entities, enforcement typically involves the U.S. Department of Justice or the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. For private organizations, enforcement largely comes through civil lawsuits and demand letters.

Accessibility lawsuits continue to be filed in high volume each year, and most of them rely heavily on automated scanning tools to identify potential violations. That's important context when thinking about how compliance is evaluated.

## **The Problem with Automated Scanners**

Automated accessibility tools are useful—but they're incomplete. They often detect only a fraction of real-world issues and can generate both false positives (flagging non-issues) and false negatives (missing real barriers).

Most automated tools identify roughly 20–40% of accessibility issues at best. True accessibility evaluation still requires manual keyboard testing, screen reader testing, and human judgment. If someone claims your site is "100% compliant" because a scan came back clean, that should raise eyebrows.

False positives: issues detected that are not actually issues

False negatives: real accessibility issues that are not detected

## How Accessibility Complaints Typically Get Resolved

When complaints arise, resolutions often follow a predictable pattern. Organizations agree to adopt WCAG 2.1 or 2.2 Level AA standards, conduct a full accessibility audit, correct identified issues within a defined timeline, and implement ongoing monitoring processes.

In other words, they agree to build with bricks moving forward—even if the original structure wasn't quite there yet.

## How Accessibility Complaints Typically Get Resolved

It's easy to view accessibility purely as a legal obligation. But it's also about serving more people, improving SEO, strengthening usability, and future-proofing your digital presence. Many accessibility improvements—clear focus states, better contrast, cleaner markup—benefit every user, not just those using assistive technology.

WCAG 2.2 doesn't make the web harder to design. It makes it more thoughtful.

So take a look at your site. If it relies on hover-only interactions, has invisible focus states, uses low-contrast text, or includes tiny mobile tap targets, you might still be living in a straw house. The good news is that accessibility isn't magic—it's structure, testing, intention, and iteration. And once you build it correctly, everything works better for everyone.