



**The Myths about Web Accessibility
(WSI MY WEB GUIDE) in Dubai / UAE clarifies it for you**

Web Accessibility, ensuring that all websites are equally accessible to all Internet users despite any physical or technological disadvantages, is becoming a global initiative. Many countries have introduced legislature that mandates Web Accessibility, and many more are expected to follow suit. With this great push towards accessible websites, untruths surrounding the subject may deter companies from making their own sites accessible. This article is intended to dispel some of these myths, and show that making all websites accessible is not such a daunting task.

Myth #1: Accessible pages must be written in HTML 2.0

False. Authors can use HTML 2.0, HTML 3.0, HTML 3.2, HTML 4.0, and proprietary extensions and still maintain accessibility. The key is to use features so that they *degrade gracefully* in non-supporting browsers, and to avoid dependence on poorly supported features. In some cases, such as HTML tables, this can require some extra work and thought, but most new features in HTML 4.0 were designed with an eye on backwards compatibility.

Style sheets are an excellent example of a feature that degrades gracefully. The proper use of style sheets can significantly enhance the presentation of a site while not deterring from the site's accessibility at all in non-supporting browsers.

Myth #2: Accessible pages must cater to the lowest common denominator

False. On the Web, there is no lowest common denominator, since new features can often be used safely, even in non-supporting browsers. In fact, this myth is simply a generalized version of Myth #1.

Myth #3: Accessible pages have to be dull, text-only, archaic relics from the Ice Age

False. Colors, fonts, and margins can easily be specified in a Web page through style sheets, allowing those who want to see the style to do so, and those who prefer--or *require*--their own styles to still access the content.

Video, sound, images, and Java applets can all have alternative content provided to those who are unable or unwilling to experience these features. Authors can show off the Web's multimedia nature without sacrificing the accessibility of their pages. An accessible site can be as visually pleasing as a non-accessible one, if the Web developer is conscious of the requirements.



Myth #4: Everyone on the Web uses Internet Explorer, so I don't need to worry about other browsers

False. Internet Explorer is currently the most popular browser on the Web, but there are a significant number of non-IE users. (If your logs don't show this, it may be because your site is inaccessible to other browsers.) Even if we were to ignore the existence of other browsers, the ability of IE users to disable background images and colors, text and link colors, Java, JavaScript, cookies, dynamic fonts, and style sheets requires pages that are not dependent on these features. As well, even IE users can change their window size, font size, and font face, thus giving them the ability to drastically affect the way a page looks.

Designing for a specific browser is a huge mistake. Pages "designed for" the popular browser of the day often only look good with certain versions of that browser, and only if the user leaves all preferences at their defaults. When the next version of the browser comes out, many authors who "designed for" the previous version must scramble to fix newly-found errors in their code.

Myth #5: My target audience uses a certain browser with a certain configuration, so I should design for that

False. On the Web, you don't know what browser and configuration your "target audience" is using. You simply don't know whether a Lynx user is a homeless person browsing at the public library or a business executive browsing from her laptop in a hotel room. There is no relationship between an individual's preferred browser and his or her product tastes.

Even if you were able to determine that your target audience used a certain browser, the chances are slim that they would use that version of that browser *exclusively* and *indefinitely* in the future. Changes in the browser market can happen very quickly; designing a browser-independent site is a simple way to avoid getting burned by the market, ensuring that your site will still be accessible in the future.

Myth #6: It takes too much time and money to write accessible pages

False. Accessibility comes *built-in* with HTML; it takes time and money to throw that accessibility away. While it may be costly to convert a poorly-authored site into an accessible site, there is virtually no extra cost to authoring an accessible site from scratch.

There can be small costs associated with providing alternate content (such as for Java applets), but, in general, accessible pages will *pay for themselves* through more satisfied users. As well, accessible pages will often be *easier* and *cheaper* to maintain, since they will usually feature valid, structure-based HTML, perhaps linked to an external style sheet that handles the presentation. Editing the "tag salad" common in poorly-accessible pages is truly a chore, increasing long-term costs of maintenance.



Myth #7: The Web is a graphical medium, so I shouldn't worry about text-only users or the blind

False. The Web is indeed a graphical medium, but it's also a textual and aural medium. Graphical pages can also be accessible textually and aurally, allowing all users to access information from any browsing environment. This means that you can access your favorite sites from your desktop at home, your palmtop at the beach, and your speech browser in the car. It also means that visually-impaired users do not have to be shut out from the Information Age.

As well, search engines are effectively blind. Surveys continually show that most users find pages through search engines, so the accessibility of pages to blind users like AltaVista and Infoseek is vital to a site's success.

Common estimates indicate that approximately 30% of all Web users do not load images. With a lack of bandwidth and per-minute telephone charges that are common in some areas of the world, many users have decided that decorative images aren't worth their valuable time. Pushing away these users is an unnecessary action that, from a business point of view, can only result in lost customers.

Myth #8: People should view a Web site the way the designer intended

False. People cannot view a website the way the designer intended, unless the designer intended for the site to be viewed differently. With all the different browsers, window sizes, fonts, font sizes, resolutions, color depths, and other user preferences on the Web, it is simply impossible to have a document look the same to all users.

People should view websites the way *they* wish to view them. Some people may wish to view pages using the author's style sheet, but others may *require* their own presentation to be able to access the content. An author's choices are to design a site that a minority of Web users will be able to see as "intended," or to design a site that *all* will be able to access, with some seeing the author's suggested presentation.

The bottom line is that websites should be designed with users in mind. Internet users are as diverse as the sites available to them, and should have access to the sites they wish to view in the way they wish to view them.

WSI, the world's leading provider of Internet Solutions to small and medium sized businesses the world over, has over 1500 local offices in 87 countries are well-positioned to inform companies about how Web accessibility can benefit businesses. (**WSI My Web Guide**) in Dubai can help dispel the myths of Web accessibility, and can provide leading-edge technologies to business owners.

For more information on the subject on how to implement Web Accessibility for your e-Business, Contact (**WSI My Web Guide**) in Dubai and in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) at www.wsimywebguide.com or email: info@wsimywebguide.com. All content rights are reserved to WSI.