Accessible Social Media

Because accessible posts are better for everyone

# Introduction

Social media can be great for engaging with your members and prospective members, as well as disseminating information about what you’re up to, so it’s important that your content doesn’t exclude or disadvantage people. On top of that, most of these recommendations are just good practice things that make your posts better and help to convey your message.

# Images

## Informational

It’s well-known that posts with images perform better than text-only posts, but when informational content is only provided in an image, some people won’t have access to that information. People with low vision, along with many people with dyslexia, use screen reading technologies that allow them to listen to textual content, but this is only possible when the content is presented as plain text. Images also present issues for people using screen magnification, since the text blurs when the image is scaled up.

The solution is pretty simple: if there is information in an image, include all of that information in the text of the post. Often the best way to do this is to build it organically into the text of the post; this gives really neat and tidy looking posts. Sometimes, the content is a list of details (such as events) that wouldn’t work well as a block of text; for these you can simply paste the text at the bottom of your post. If you want a visual divider between your post text and the plain text of the image, a line with three hyphens (“---”) usually works well.

## Referenced

Sometimes you might post a picture of something that you want to talk about. For these, there are two ways to make them accessible: you can either make the post text descriptive enough to allow people to understand the full context from just the text, or you can add a short image description. It’s best to add these image descriptions at the start of the post so that everyone gets the context that they need to understand the post, and “[Image description: ...]” is a good way to do this.

## Decorative

Some images are purely decorative. For these, you don’t need to describe them in the text of your post, although it’s best practice to add an image description if the social media platform allows it. For example, when you upload a picture to Facebook, you can “edit” it, and then add a description of the image, or you can open the image once it’s posted and add a description there.

# Video

If you’re posting a video, you should add subtitles to it. This enables people who are deaf or hard of hearing to be able to know what’s being said. Having subtitles has the wider benefit of allowing people to watch the video with the sound off, which many people do when scrolling through content on their phones while doing other things.

# Semantic formatting

The way we format text visually conveys meaning about its context; when we read a document such as this one, we immediately understand that the larger, bold text is indicative of a heading. Formatting text in this way allows people to navigate it much more easily. Online, the semantics are also conveyed through HTML tags, which enable screen readers to understand the structure of the content, and allow users to navigate it efficiently.

It’s not always possible to use semantic formatting in your social media posts, but when you can, it will look cleaner, help you convey your message, and make it easier for everyone to read.

# All-caps

Text that’s written in all-caps is harder for everyone to read, and especially so for people with dyslexia. It can also cause issues for people using screen readers, as the software will sometimes interpret them as initialisms and read out each letter individually. Sometimes you may need to use all-caps for emphasis, but try to keep it short (1 or 2 words), and be careful not to over use it.

# Hashtags

Lots of screen reading software will interpret hashtags as a string of characters, meaning that they will read them out letter-by-letter. This obviously makes it much harder for users of screen readers to understand what is being said, and if there are lots of hashtags, it quickly gets really frustrating!

Hashtags can be really useful for discoverability, engagement, and campaigning, so you just need to be careful with how you use them. When you’re using hashtags, it’s best to use #CamelCase (capitalise the first letter of each word); this avoids ambiguity, makes it easier for people to read, and allows most screen reading software to correctly interpret the long string of characters as individual words. It’s also best to avoid putting hashtags in the main body of the text if they are just for discoverability, and instead group those at the end of the post, after all of the other content.

# Emojis

Most screen readers will read out emojis, so it’s best to avoid using lots of emojis in a row, particularly if they are duplicates; having to listen to something like “red heart red heart red heart” isn’t a great experience. You should also avoid using emojis in place of words, since people with low vision may not be able to see what the emoji is, and some users of screen readers may have disabled reading of emojis.