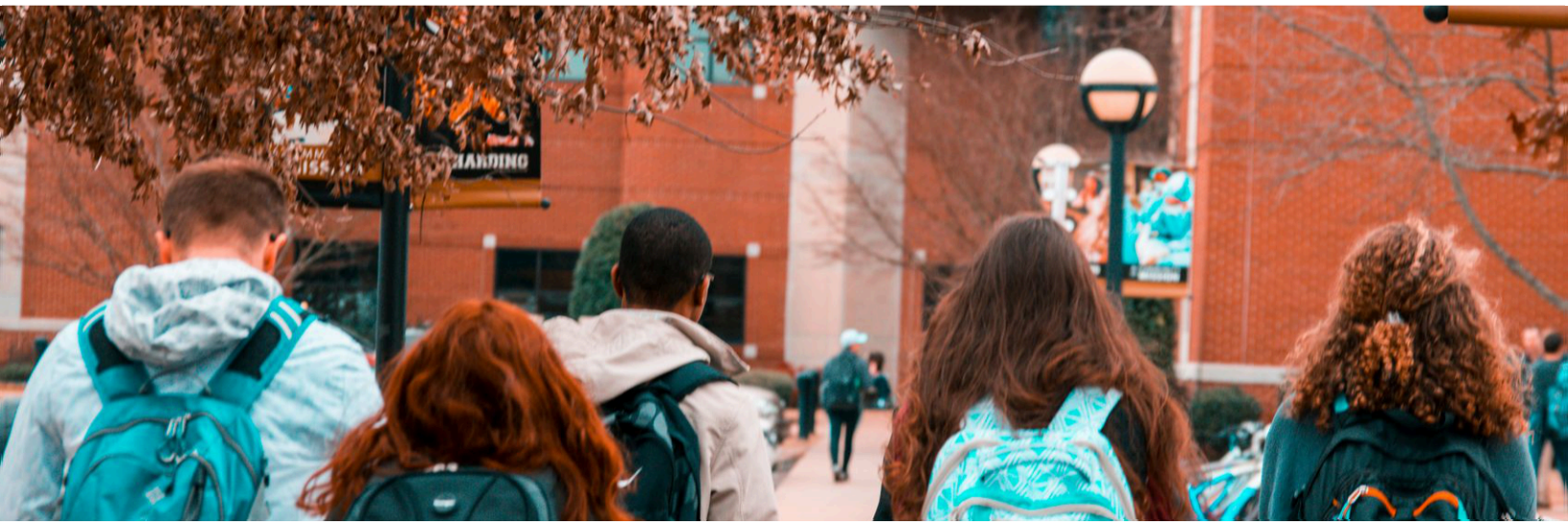
A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Making your campus PDFs accessible.

A plain guide to the federal rules and to planning the work across your campus.

- For leaders who just took on accessibility
- For accessibility leads building the plan



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01 · WHAT THE RULES REQUIRE

WCAG 2.1 AA is the standard to build to.

Two federal rules set dates for accessible web content, and the PDFs you publish online count. Both rules point to WCAG 2.1 Level AA.

COMPLIANCE DATES	2027	2028	2029
ADA Title II US Department of Justice	**April 26, 2027** Public entities serving 50,000 or more people	**April 26, 2028** Smaller entities and special districts	
Section 504 US Department of Health and Human Services	**May 11, 2027** HHS funding recipients with 15 or more employees	**May 10, 2028** Recipients with fewer than 15 employees	

Both sets of dates moved in spring 2026. The WCAG 2.1 AA standard stayed the same.

Who each rule covers

- **ADA Title II** covers state and local government, including public colleges and universities.
- **Section 504** covers institutions that receive HHS funding, such as NIH, CDC or HRSA grants. Private institutions too.
- A public research university can fall under **both rules** at once.



WCAG checks fall under four principles

P
Perceivable
Alt text, captions and contrast

O
Operable
Works by keyboard, with visible focus

U
Understandable
Clear reading order and labels

R
Robust
Works with screen readers and assistive tech

Sources: Federal Register, HHS interim final rule (May 11, 2026); EDUCAUSE Review, "DOJ and HHS Extend Web Accessibility Deadlines to 2027–2028" (June 2026).

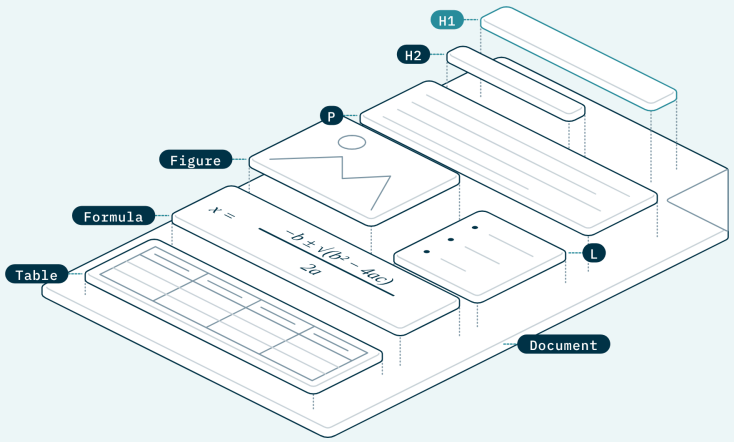
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02 · WHAT MAKES A PDF ACCESSIBLE

Accessible PDFs have structure underneath.

A PDF can look perfect and still be unreadable to a screen reader. What counts is the tag structure under the page.



Every element tagged, so screen readers follow the page.

Why PDFs take the most work

Web pages
Free scanners and developer skills already exist.

Office files
Built-in checkers. Train your authors.

Published PDFs
Most were made without tags, and there's no free built-in fix.

Seven things to check in every PDF

1. **Reading order**
   Screen readers follow the tag order, which can differ from the page. Columns and scans break it most.
2. **Headings**
   Real H1, H2 and H3 tags in order. Big bold text isn't a heading.
3. **Alt text**
   Each meaningful image says what it shows and why it matters.
4. **Tables**
   Header cells tagged as headers. No merged cells used for layout.
5. **Color contrast**
   4.5:1 for body text, 3:1 for large text. Check links too.
6. **Language**
   Set in the file's properties, so screen readers use the right voice.
7. **Math and science**
   Equations as MathML or clear alt text. An equation saved as a picture can't be read aloud.

Tip: after fixing a file, listen to it with a free screen reader such as NonVisual Desktop Access (NVDA) or VoiceOver.

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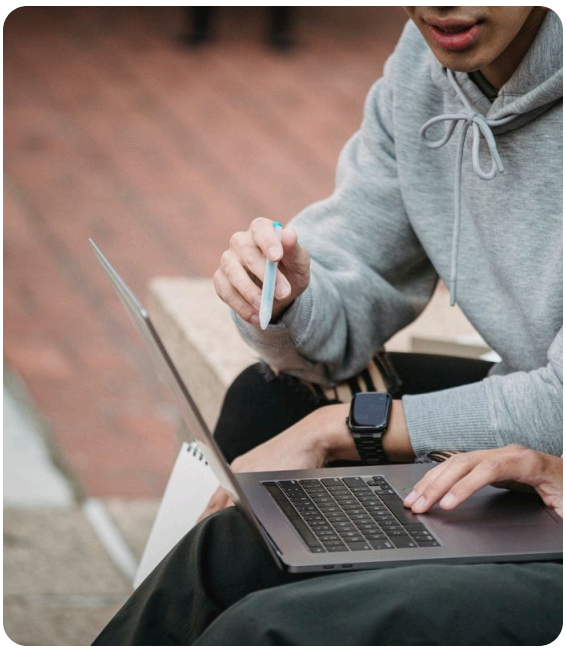
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03 · FIXING A PDF BY HAND

Ten steps in Adobe Acrobat Pro.

Use this for one-off fixes and final checks. It works well for a few files and gets slow across a whole document library.

1. **Run the accessibility check**
   All tools, then Prepare for accessibility.
2. **Set the title and language**
   In the file's document properties.
3. **Add tags**
   Auto-tag as a starting point, then review.
4. **Review the tag tree**
   Confirm headings, paragraphs and lists.
5. **Fix the reading order**
   Re-sequence columns, sidebars and notes.
6. **Add alt text**
   Describe meaningful images. Mark decorative ones.
7. **Set table headers**
   Tag header cells and set their scope.
8. **Run the check again**
   Clear every remaining flag.
9. **Verify with a second tool**
   Free checkers such as PAC or veraPDF.
10. **Listen to it**
    NonVisual Desktop Access (NVDA) on Windows, or VoiceOver on Mac.



What software does well, and where people decide

SOFTWARE HANDLES	PEOPLE DECIDE
• Tags and reading order	• Alt text on teaching images
• Headings, lists and table structure	• Math and science content
• Contrast and metadata checks	• Final approval of each file

Across thousands of files, most campuses use software for the repetitive tagging and keep people on review.

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04 · THE HARDEST DOCUMENTS

Five kinds of PDFs need extra care.

Let software do the first pass on every file. Then send these five kinds to a person before they go back out.



Scans with no source file

Run OCR first, then check the text it produces. Common in course reserves and library archives.

Tables with merged cells

Spanning headers are really several tables in one. Common in course schedules and degree maps.

Multi-column layouts

Sidebars, pull quotes and footnotes scramble the reading order. Common in journals and proceedings.

Math and science

Equations need MathML or careful alt text. Many tools skip them, so check these by hand.

Images that teach

Alt text should say why the image matters in the course. That takes someone who knows the material.

WHAT SOFTWARE WRITES

"Diagram of a twist drill."

WHAT A REVIEWER ADDS

"Twist drill with the shank, body and point labeled. These are the three parts on the exam."

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05 · WHERE TO START

Start with what students need to act on.

You don't have to fix every file at once. Sort your published PDFs into five tiers and work from the top down.

1. **Forms students fill out**
   Financial aid, admissions and enrollment. Anything a student needs to take part.
2. **Course content in use now**
   Start with high-enrollment, required and gateway courses.
3. **Public institutional documents**
   Website files, the catalog and policies.
4. **Internal staff content**
   HR and training materials. Other disability laws still apply.
5. **Archived content**
   Files no one uses may fall under the rule's archive exception. Ask your counsel.



AT THE SAME TIME

Make new PDFs accessible from day one.

- Give authors accessible Word and slide templates
- Check each file before it's posted
- Put the expectation in campus policy

Every file made right the first time is one less to fix later.

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06 · PLANNING PEOPLE AND BUDGET

Most campuses combine people and software.

No single team can hand-fix every published PDF. Each path below helps, and each one has a limit.

Your accessibility office

Strength: deep expertise. Sets the standard for campus.

Limit: a small team can't hand-fix thousands of files.

Faculty and authors

Strength: they know their content best.

Limit: most need more training, tools and time.

Student workers

Strength: lower cost, and they build useful skills.

Limit: needs training, supervision and quality checks.

AI remediation with human review

Strength: handles repetitive tagging across large batches.

Limit: people still review alt text, STEM and each final file.

What faculty say they need

81%
need more information on Title II's WCAG 2.1 requirement

36%
said they weren't aware of the requirements at all

11%
say they have the right tools and training

Source: Anthology 2025 Faculty Survey of 2,508 US instructors, published May 15, 2025.

What to put in the budget

1. A count of your published PDFs and pages, by tier
2. Remediation for the files you already have
3. Staff time to review and approve files
4. Training and templates for authors
5. Checking tools and ongoing spot checks
6. New files added each term



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07 · CHOOSING TOOLS

Match the tool to the job.

Most campuses use more than one kind of tool. Here's what each kind is good for and what to watch.

Kind of tool	Good for	Watch for
Desktop PDF editors	One-off fixes, edge cases and final review	Works one file at a time
LMS accessibility checkers	Showing instructors what to fix, plus alternate formats	They flag issues but leave the source file as is
Outsourced remediation	Expert hands on complex files	Cost grows with every page you send
Bulk AI remediation	Tagging large batches of published PDFs	Make sure a person reviews and approves each file

Questions to ask any vendor

- [ ] Can we see your current accessibility conformance report (VPAT)?
- [ ] Which standard do you check results against: WCAG 2.1 AA, PDF/UA or both?
- [ ] Who reviews each file before it goes back out?
- [ ] How do you handle scans, merged tables and math?
- [ ] Where are our files processed and stored?
- [ ] Can fixed files go straight back to our LMS or website?



Before you buy: a faster PDF editor makes each file quicker, yet your team still fixes them one at a time. If you have thousands of files to fix, look for a tool that works in batches.

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08 · WHAT'S DIFFERENT ON CAMPUS

Four things to plan for in higher ed.

Files inside your LMS

An accessible LMS doesn't make the PDFs inside it accessible. Fix files where they live so courses don't break.

Faculty

Treat accessibility as part of teaching quality. Share templates and add a check to course design review.

Vendor content

Content a vendor delivers for you is still yours to answer for. Ask every vendor for a current conformance report.

Library and open resources

Course reserves are heavy with scans. Ask publishers for accessible versions before you scan.

Accommodation and accessibility aren't the same. Content should be accessible before a student asks. Waiting for accommodation requests to fix files is a known risk.

GLOSSARY

ACR: Accessibility Conformance Report. A completed VPAT.

ADA Title II: The part of the ADA that covers state and local government.

Alt text: A written description of an image, read aloud by screen readers.

Assistive technology: Software or hardware people with disabilities use, like screen readers.

MathML: A standard way to mark up equations so they can be read aloud.

NVDA (NonVisual Desktop Access): A free screen reader for Windows.

OCR: Optical character recognition, which turns a scan into text. Also the Office for Civil Rights.

PAC: PDF Accessibility Checker, a free tool for Windows.

PDF/UA: ISO 14289, the accessibility standard written for PDFs.

Reading order: The order a screen reader reads content, set by the tags.

Section 504: Part of the Rehabilitation Act covering recipients of federal funds.

Tag tree: The hidden structure that tells assistive tech what each element is.

veraPDF: A free, open-source PDF/UA checker.

WCAG 2.1 AA: Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, the standard both federal rules use.



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09 · WHERE CAMPUSMIND FITS

Accessible PDFs, a batch at a time.

The CampusMind Accessibility Agent tags your published PDFs in batches. Your team reviews and approves every file.

HOW IT WORKS

1. **Pick your PDFs** — From your LMS, SharePoint or a batch upload
2. **AI tags each file** — Reading order, headings, lists and tables
3. **Your team reviews** — Approve each file and fix edge cases
4. **Send it back** — The accessible PDF returns to where it lives

About 1 min per file, one at a time

No cap on batch size

Every file approved by your team



Two levels, one review step

LEVEL 1

Preserve Layout

Tags reading order, headings, lists and tables. The visual design stays as it is.

LEVEL 2

Full Accessibility Reconstruction

Rebuilds the whole file, including handwritten notes, scans and messy layouts.

- **Works with your LMS** and SharePoint
- **Built with accessibility practitioners** who have disabilities

This guide is educational content. For legal advice, talk with your general counsel about your institution's obligations.

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