The Ultimate Guide to Email Accessibility

The tools, tips, and resources you need to send email campaigns for everyone

litmus

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1 Introduction

The world is growing, changing, and aging, and the world's email subscribers are coming along for the ride. More people are accessing the internet and email on a wider variety of devices and types of connections than ever before. And email subscribers themselves are more diverse than at any other point in email's 47-year history.

But what does all of this change mean for email marketers?

Apart from rethinking strategy and tactics, it points to the need for marketers to create more accessible email campaigns that can be used by *anyone*—regardless of their ability. This guide is a deep dive into what accessibility means for email professionals, with tips and best practices for writing, designing, and developing more inclusive email programs.

Creating accessible email is easy with Litmus

Accessibility checks in Litmus Checklist make it easy to test your email against accessibility best practices, identify areas for improvement, and make your emails more accessible to all of your subscribers.

2 Who Is Litmus?

Litmus is passionate about email marketing research, because our mission is to help brands get access to the knowledge and tools they need to send better email. Through our industry-leading blog, Litmus Live conferences, ebooks, and webinars, we discuss best practices and explore trends to help your team stay on the forefront of the industry.

We are also passionate about software that makes creating high-performing email easy. Marketers use åthe Litmus Email Creative Platform alongside their existing email service provider to ensure a consistently great brand experience for every subscriber, work more efficiently, accelerate campaign performance, reduce errors, and stay out of the spam folder.

Email marketing is complex. But through hands-on advice and software you can trust, we enable your team to do their best work—creating innovative, on-brand campaigns that engage and delight audiences. With the Litmus Email Creative Platform, you'll have the tools and insights you need to provide your customers with an incredible email experience—and get the best results in return.
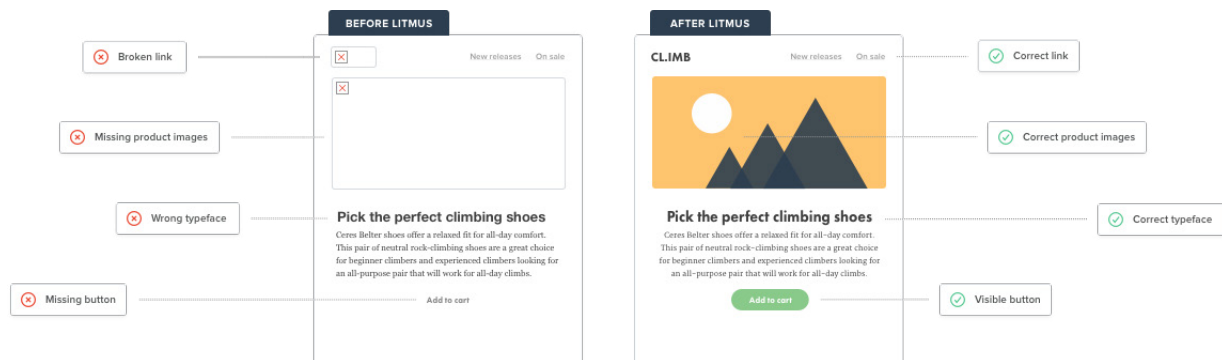
Keep up with the latest in email

Join the hundreds of thousands of email marketing pros who rely on Litmus for expert advice and analysis. Sign up for our emails to get the Litmus newsletter, notifications of new reports and executive summaries, announcements of upcoming webinars and events, and more.

3   # Key Takeaways

Accessibility is more than just improving the experience for a handful of subscribers. It's about improving the experience for *everyone*. And, honestly, it's not that hard to create more accessible email campaigns. Using a few relatively simple guidelines, you can start sending more accessible email campaigns in no time.

1. **Creating accessible emails allows you to reach a wider audience than ever.**

   There are currently around 3 billion email users worldwide. None of those users are the same, with different abilities and disabilities—both permanent and temporary—and access to technology that informs how they experience email. The best way to reach those users is by creating accessible emails that work across all skill levels, abilities, devices, and cultures. Learn why accessibility matters—and the business impact it has—on **page 6.**

2. **Writing and visual design are key components of an accessible email campaign.**

   You don't have to be a coding expert to create more accessible emails. By writing and designing simpler, more subscriber-friendly emails, you can open up your content to a wider audience, all while providing a better, more valuable experience for your subscribers. Understand how you can write and design more inclusive emails on **page 16.**

3. **Any email template can be made more accessible with a handful of coding techniques.**

   Developing an accessible email doesn't require fancy coding techniques. Using simple, well-established principles and basic HTML, you can create email campaigns that can be accessed from a variety of devices and assistive technologies. Learn how to make your code more accessible on **page 24.**
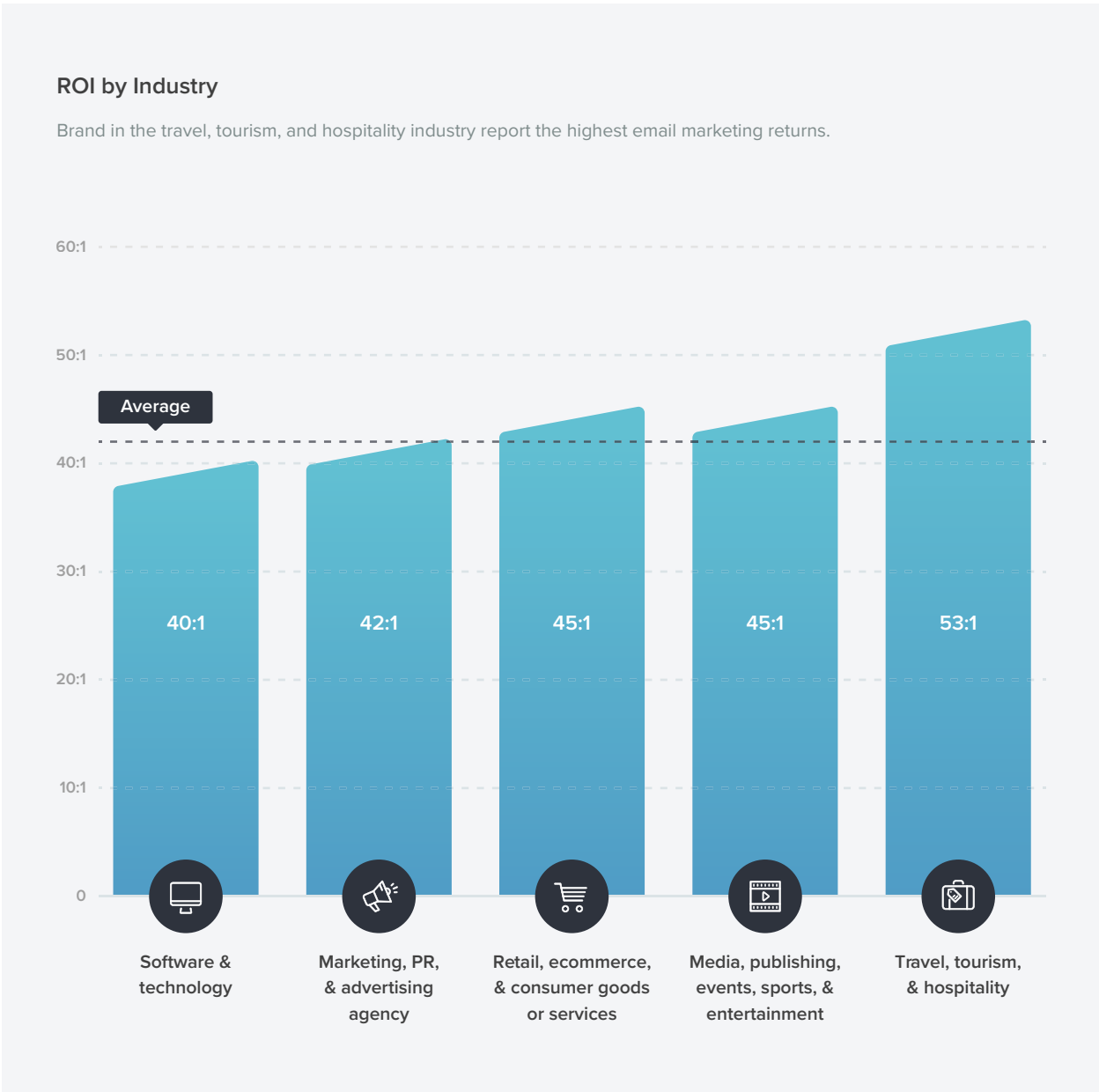
4   Why does accessibility matter?

Whether it's permanent blindness or a broken arm, we are all only temporarily able-bodied. Different levels of access to technology and reliable data connections means not all email experiences are created equal. Making your emails accessible means making them better for *everyone*.

Email is a massive technology. Despite frequent claims of its death, email continues to be one of the most widely used communication channels in the world. According to one study by The Radicati Group, there will be nearly 3 billion email users worldwide by the end of 2019. People are spending more time reading email, too. Our recent State of Email Engagement Report showed that subscribers are spending an average of 13.4 seconds in an email, up from 11.1 seconds in 2017.

That widespread usage means email is extraordinarily valuable for marketers. Our own research has shown that email's return on investment averages $42 for every dollar spent in 2019. That's up from $38 in 2018, and has steadily increased year over year. It's one of those stats that's discussed ad infinitum in the industry.

ROI by Industry

Brand in the travel, tourism, and hospitality industry report the highest email marketing returns.

40:1	42:1	45:1	45:1	53:1
Software & technology	Marketing, PR, & advertising agency	Retail, ecommerce, & consumer goods or services	Media, publishing, events, sports, & entertainment	Travel, tourism, & hospitality

Average

60:1
50:1
40:1
30:1
20:1
10:1
0

Disabilities impact a large share of the world's population

What's less discussed are the challenges many subscribers have accessing the typical email campaign. There is a large and growing population living with various disabilities—both permanent and temporary— that make using email and interacting with companies difficult.

- [The World Health Organization estimates](#) **there are around 1.3 billion people with visual impairments**, 36 million of which are considered blind.

- [Color blindness](#) **affects approximately every 1 in 12 men (8%)** and 1 in 200 women (0.5%).

- **An estimated** [15% of people have dyslexia](#)**.** That means over 30 million adults in the United States and about 6 million adults in the United Kingdom have trouble reading.

- [Cognitive disabilities affect 4.8% of people](#) in the United States.

- [The world's population is aging](#), with the older population—that's people aged 60 or over— growing faster than all younger age groups. The number of older persons is projected to be 1.4 billion in 2030.

- **Situational disabilities**—like a broken arm or occupied hands—also contribute to people's ability to use email.

But it's not just about the abilities of the human body. Likewise, a large portion of the world has limited access to data connections and the latest devices, creating additional challenges. Even in affluent countries, slow data connections and older devices can cause poor experiences for people that need to rely on the internet and email.

Accessibility is how we address all of these challenges.

ac·ces·si·bil·i·ty
/əkˌsesəˈbilədē/

The easiest way to define accessibility is the quality of being easily used or understood. In the context of email, we define accessibility as:

When an email's content is available to—and its functionality can be operated by—anyone, regardless of ability.

Laws and legislation

Multiple governments and legislative acts have defined and redefined accessibility over the years. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (or ADA) helped create more accessible public and private facilities in the United States. In the UK, the Equality Act of 2010 laid similar groundwork. As technology has taken over the world, guidelines like Section 508 and the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) have been adopted to ensure that accessibility practices are implemented on the web, too. For a lot of industries—like healthcare, higher education, government, and finance—adhering to these laws and guidelines is critical.

Reaching more people helps drive business results

But email strategy, design, and development shouldn't be driven solely by laws. By building accessibility into our emails, we open our campaigns up to a large population of subscribers who wouldn't otherwise be able to access them. Beyond being a good, ethical thing to do, building accessible emails can help drive business success.

The ROD Group estimates that the world's disabled population controls over $1 trillion in annual disposable income. If you don't optimize your campaigns to make your emails accessible to everyone, you're leaving money on the table with every send.

It's no longer acceptable to build inaccessible email campaigns. We have the tools, resources, and technology to make emails available to people that rely on assistive technology or those contending with limited access to technology and data. And, for those of us lucky enough to be only temporarily able-bodied, a focus on accessibility can improve our user experience as well.

> *Optimizing for accessibility doesn't just mean making your emails accessible to people with disabilities— it improves the email experience for **everyone**.*
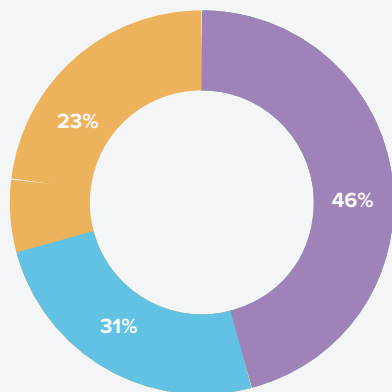
5

The Current State of Email Accessibility

When it comes to email accessibility, there's a disconnect between intention and action. 77% of brands say accessibility is a priority— but only 8% rigidly follow accessibility best practices. There's a misconception that optimizing your emails for accessibility is hard. The truth is, small changes can make a big impact in making your emails more inclusive.

Whether their motivation is ethical, legal, or financial, the majority of brands understand the importance of email accessibility. 77% of brands say that making their emails more accessible is a priority; 46% even claim it's a high priority for their team.

But while the vast majority of brands claim that email accessibility is a priority, many struggle putting accessibility best practices into action. Only 8% say they follow best practices for email accessibility in all of their campaigns. 30% say they don't optimize for accessibility yet.

77% of Brands Say Email Accessibility is a Priority

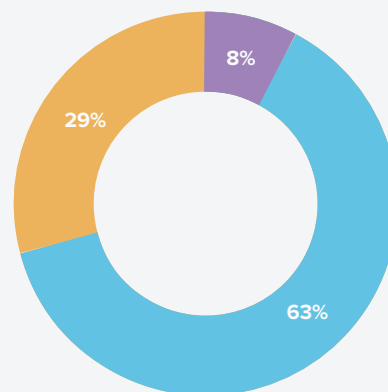How much of a priority is email accessibility at your brand?

46%
31%
23%

- ● High priority
- ● Low priority
- ● Not a priority

Survey of 414 email professionals on the Litmus Blog between September 10, 2018, and October 19, 2018.

Only 8% of Brands Rigidly Follow Best Practices for Email Accessibility

Do you optimize your emails for accessibility?

8%
29%
63%

- ● Yes, we follow accessibility best practices for all our emails.
- ● Somewhat. We follow some best practices but there's room for improvement.
- ● No, we currently don't optimize our emails for accessibility.

Survey of 310 email professionals on the Litmus Blog between April 12, 2019, and May 6, 2019.

The numbers show that when it comes to email accessibility, there's a disconnect between intention and action. Getting started with making your emails more accessible can feel like an impossible task, and many marketers aren't sure where to start.

The truth is, implementing key best practices isn't all that hard. With the right tools, you can identify areas for improvement and make small changes to your emails that have a big impact and make your emails better for everyone. This report gives you the tools, tips, and advice you need.

Test your email accessibility today

Accessibility checks in Litmus Checklist make it easy to test your email against accessibility best practices, identify areas for improvement, and make your emails more accessible to all of your subscribers.

6   What are assistive technologies?

Assistive technologies enable disabled people to use different devices, the internet, and email—allowing them to experience a fuller, richer life. More recently, assistive technologies have jumped into the mainstream with the help of voice assistant-enabled devices.

Everyone needs help with something. For a lot of us, that help comes in the form of assistive technologies, or technology designed to improve the functional capabilities of a person. A common example is eyeglasses. While some use glasses as fashion accessories, millions of people around the world rely on glasses to live better lives.

Online, assistive technologies come in a few varieties. One of the most common and important assistive technologies is the screen reader. Screen reader software translates the interface and content seen on screen into audio, allowing low-vision and blind users to use modern devices.

Common Screen Readers

There are a variety of first- and third-party screen reader applications in use today. Most operating systems have screen reader software built-in, but a large number of people rely on additional tools to access content online and via email. Some of the more popular screen readers include:

JAWS from Freedom Scientific

NVDA from NV Access

Window-Eyes from GW Micro, Inc.

VoiceOver on Apple devices

Narrator on Windows devices

TalkBack on Android devices

Screen readers are an extremely useful assistive technology and are increasingly important for email developers to understand.

For non-blind but low-vision users, zoom settings are often used to increase the size of text and other visual elements on a screen. Likewise, dark and high contrast modes in many operating systems are enabled to improve the contrast and clarity of content.

Some low-vision users also employ hardware screen enlargers that help magnify content on screen without the use of software. For users with limited mobility and other physical disabilities, pointing devices are used to enable better interactions with computers and mobile devices.

Screen reader software isn't exclusive to people with disabilities. The recent proliferation of voice assistant software—like Amazon Alexa, Apple's Siri, and Google Assistant—mean that assistive technologies have effectively gone mainstream. According to industry tracker Voicebot.ai, smart speaker users rose to 66.4 million in the U.S. alone in 2018, a 40% increase from 2017. And research firm Juniper predicts that voice assistants will be used by 275 million people by 2023.

More people than ever are using voice assistants to get news, do their shopping, and, yes, even check and reply to their emails. By creating more accessible emails, we empower subscribers to interact with our content how they want, creating trust in the process.

What do your emails sound like?

Hear how your emails sound when read out loud by screen readers with Litmus' new accessibility tools in Litmus Checklist.

7 Creating More Accessible Email

There are a number of ways to create more accessible email campaigns, whether it's through copy, design, or the code behind every email. In this section, we'll look at the best ways to create better email experiences for everyone.

There's a lot that goes into the typical email marketing campaign. From content planning to copywriting, mockups to markup, and approvals to final send, all of these touchpoints create opportunities for making more accessible emails.

It's not only the code behind emails that affects accessibility—although that is important. A lot of the time, revisiting copy and the visual design of an email can greatly improve the experience for subscribers. Cognitive abilities, the average attention span, and physical disabilities all work together to inform the kinds of decisions we need to make when crafting our emails.

While we'll take a look at each part of the typical email campaign—copy, design, and code—it's important to understand how all three combine to help improve the lives of our subscribers.

Copywriting: Write copy everyone can understand

One of the easiest ways to improve the accessibility of your campaign is to revisit its copy. Ensuring your copy is readable and easy to understand goes a long way in making your campaigns more accessible— and a few easy tricks can help make it happen.

Keep your copy concise

Although it's tempting to cram as much copy and content in an email as possible, there are a number of reasons why shorter, more concise copy is desirable.

According to Litmus research, the average attention span in email is just 13.4 seconds. In a talk from Litmus Live 2018, speaker Tom Tate looked at what that means for email copywriters. If the average adult reader can read between 250 and 300 words per minute, then *the ideal length of copy in an email is just 50 words.*

But it's not just attention spans, either. Many people suffer from cognitive disabilities that make reading difficult, especially with longer texts. Everything from traumatic brain injuries and dementia to dyslexia and ADHD can affect a person's ability to read. The W3 Working Group, which governs the WCAG guidelines mentioned previously, says that reading difficulties exist in all walks of life and levels of education.

They go so far as to spell it out:

> *"There are people with disabilities, including reading disabilities, even among highly educated users with specialized knowledge of the subject matter. It may be possible to accommodate these users by making the text more readable."*

WCAG Guidelines,
W3 Working Group

Use shorter sentences

Long, complex sentences can make your email copy more difficult to read. Short sentences are easier to understand, allowing your audience to focus on the content rather than spending energy on unpacking complicated sentence structures. Whenever possible, split longer sentences into two.

Limit your use of jargon and difficult words

What's true for sentences is true for individual words, too: Shorter is better. Longer words are harder to absorb and require more concentration from your readers. If you can, replace complex words with simpler, shorter synonyms.

Readability testing made easy:
The Flesch Reading Ease test

Readability tests are an easy tool to find out how easy it will be for someone to read your text. The Flesch Reading Ease test is the most popular one. It's based on the average length of sentences and words in your document and ranks copy on a scale from 0 to 100. The higher the number, the easier it is to read your email copy. A score of 60-70 is considered plain English that's easily understood by 13- to 15-year-old students. That's the score you should aim for with most marketing copy.

Readable.io's free tool lets you test your readability score for free and shows where you can improve. Plus, tools like Grammarly or Yoast offer readability scoring too.

Localize your content for global audiences

For marketers sending to global audiences, you should also focus on translating that copy into local languages instead of relying on operating system or browser translation. There are coding techniques we'll look at that can help, but using a respected translation service and going beyond translation by localizing copy using culturally appropriate language and content is a good idea.
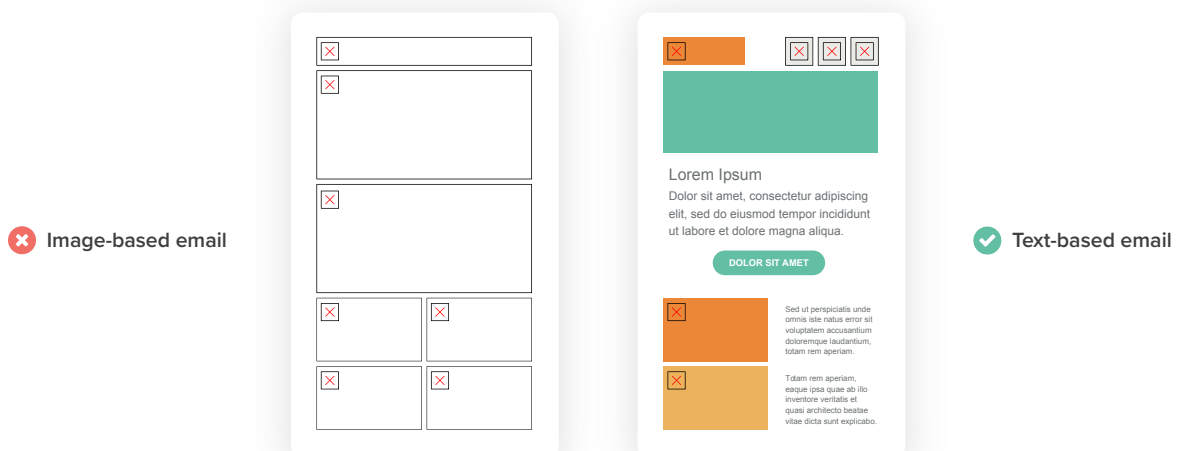
Design: Designing with accessibility in mind

Once you have your content written, it's time to design your email. Visual design is more than mere decoration. It's an important tool for creating accessible emails. Here are the best ways to ensure your campaigns are designed with everyone in mind, regardless of ability.

Use real text

A lot of companies use all-image emails, designing them in programs like Photoshop, and dump them into a basic HTML template. Although this allows for a high level of visual customization, favoring real text in HTML has a number of benefits when it comes to accessibility.

Many email clients disable images for security reasons. When this happens, even those without disabilities can't read your email. Perhaps more importantly, even when images are enabled, assistive technologies can't take full advantage of your content. Screen readers can only access the underlying code of an email, not the text in an image, and screen enlargers and zoom settings often result in blurry, unreadable emails.

Image-based email

Lorem Ipsum
Dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua.

DOLOR SIT AMET

Sed ut perspiciatis unde omnis iste natus error sit voluptatem accusantium doloremque laudantium, totam rem aperiam.

Totam rem aperiam, eaque ipsa quae ab illo inventore veritatis et quasi architecto beatae vitae dicta sunt explicabo.

Text-based email

The majority of your copy should be included in your email as live text inside of HTML elements. In the coding section, we'll look at how to properly do that, as well as how to make images more accessible, too.

Create a strong hierarchy

Both cognitive and situational disabilities (like being in a hurry or being distracted) make it hard for people to read and understand long, uniform blocks of text. Hierarchy—or creating visual differences that reinforce importance—helps those users quickly consume content in email.

By using text size, color, and placement, you can create emails that are easily scanned and read. Try creating bold, high-contrast headlines above smaller portions of copy, and allow for enough whitespace between sections to avoid content bleeding together.
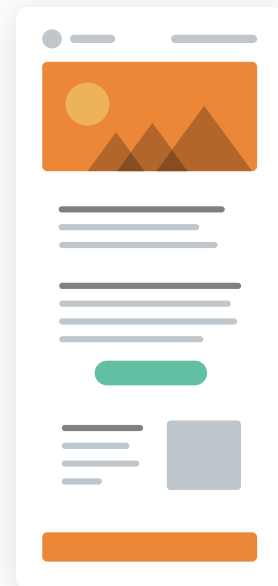
Strong visual hierarchy
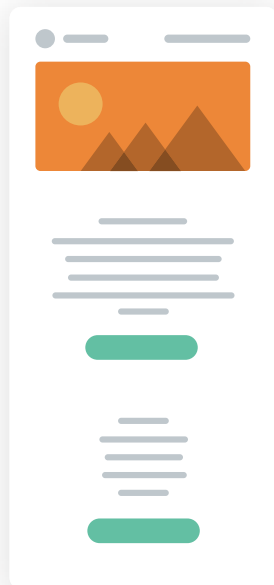
Long sections of center-justified text

Left-justify your email copy

Using both real text and hierarchy can aid readability, but there are subtler ways to improve the readability of your emails, too. One way is by using left-justified text for longer sections of copy.

Reading relies on visual cues to make sense of where we are on a page or screen. One of the most important cues is the start of a new line, which acts as an anchor for our eyes when jumping around an email. It's helpful to keep that anchor in the same place for every new line in longer bits of copy, but many designers prefer the visual symmetry provided by centered text. Using left-justified text is one of the best ways to keep copy readable.

> *The #1 simple trick that has a big impact on email accessibility: If you have any copy that's longer than two lines, left-align that copy.*

Justified text, which adjusts the spacing between words to keep uniform lines of text, creates those anchors, but comes with other problems. When using fully justified text, rivers of white are often introduced which create hurdles for people with cognitive disabilities.
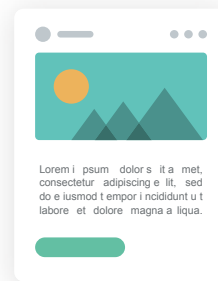

❌ Fully justified text

Use a minimum font size of 14px

You should ensure that your text is large enough for people to easily read, regardless of what size screen they are using. Some mobile devices, like iPhones, will automatically enlarge text that is less than 14px in size. Keeping copy at least that big—preferably even larger—can help create better reading experiences.

Optimize your line spacing

Ensuring that there is enough space between lines of text, but not too much space, is a great way to improve readability. When lines of copy are too close together, it's hard to tell them apart. Conversely, when they are too far apart, it's hard to know where to look for the next line as they all look like short, individual paragraphs. The World Wide Web Consortium even has clear guidelines around proper line spacing, suggesting 1.5 to 2 is preferred to single spacing.
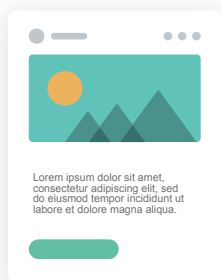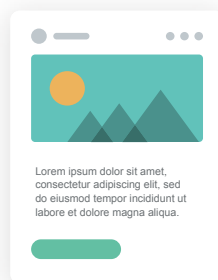
❌ Too close   ✅ Just right   ❌ Too far apart
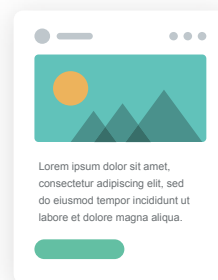
Keep contrast high

Contrast is the difference between two elements in an email. Most often, it's the difference between the color of copy and the background on which it sits. Too low of contrast and people with low-vision can have an extraordinarily hard time reading an email.

Fortunately, there are well-established guidelines for proper contrast. The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines clearly define how they determine appropriate contrast. The main rule is to make elements *distinguishable*. In their words:

> *"Make it easier for users to see and hear content including separating foreground from background."*

There are a variety of ways to do this, including using color, font weight, and font size. Regardless of which method you use, make sure your elements contrast enough with other elements to ensure your emails are accessible. Accessibility group WebAIM even has a free contrast checker online that can help identify any contrast issues before your subscribers do.

Increase usability

When it comes to actually interacting with emails, you should ensure that all links and buttons—anything considered a touch target—are usable.

When it comes to text links, this means making those links distinguishable from the surrounding text. There is a reason the default for a link is underlined blue text. When overriding that styling, you should do so sparingly. Underlines, especially, are helpful for denoting links in an email. There are approximately 300 million colorblind people in the world, so relying solely on color for link styling puts them in a difficult position.

For calls-to-action and buttons, keep them large enough to be tapped by even the biggest, shakiest thumbs or pointing devices. And make sure there is ample whitespace around those targets so there aren't accidental link taps and avoidable frustration for users.

For both text links and buttons, including a hover state is another great way to create a better, more accessible user experience. Targeting links in your CSS and using the :hover pseudo selector allows you to apply different properties when a user hovers over those links. This can provide a clear indicator that a piece of content can be clicked and is an often overlooked enhancement in email design. Anthony from UX Movement sums it up nicely in his article, *Why Your Links Need a Hover Effect*:

> *"Whether your users are colorblind or not, everyone should be able to spot and target links with ease. Adding a hover effect to your links is a simple and effective way to meet their needs. Links and text shouldn't just look different. For the best user experience, they should also behave differently.*

Anthony T,
UX Movement

Keep your email layout simple

The layout of your email itself can affect accessibility.

Complex, multi-column layouts can lead to sensory overload for users. The more complex a layout, the easier it is to get lost in an email, so simpler layouts are often preferred. Single column layouts are especially effective at creating accessible campaigns—they streamline content and help reinforce hierarchy, aiding scannability in the process.
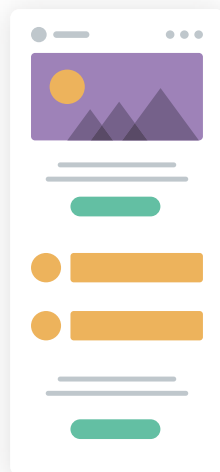
Single column layout   Multi-column layout
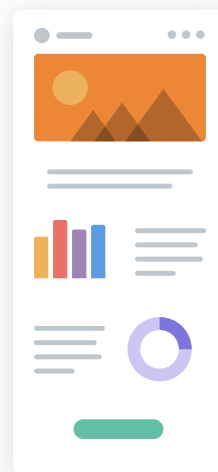
Single column layouts are also generally easier to adjust across different screen sizes. As more of the world comes online, more people are using smaller mobile devices to access the internet and email. Regardless of which technique you're using, keeping your emails responsive across different devices is a great way to improve the subscriber experience.

Test your email in 90+ email clients

See how your email works across multiple desktop, web, and mobile apps and devices with Litmus Email Previews.

Code: How to make your email code more accessible

While copywriting and visual design are important, improving the code behind your email campaigns is one of the most powerful ways to create more accessible emails, especially for subscribers relying on assistive technology like screen reader software.

Screen readers work by looking at the underlying code of an interface—or in our case, an email—and translating it into audio that reads the interface out to the user. Optimizing our code is the best way to make sure what is read out loud is actually usable.

Use accessible tables

Most email templates are built using HTML tables. HTML tables are still the most reliable way to structure emails and have them display properly across the 90+ email clients in popular use. However, HTML tables are actually meant to be used for tabular data, not layouts.

The default for most screen readers is to read each individual table, table row, and table cell out loud to the user. For emails that often rely on multiple nested tables, this means that subscribers have to wade through a lot of markup garbage to get to the actual content. We can easily disable this behavior by including an attribute on each table in our email's HTML.

```
<table role="presentation" border="0" cellpadding="0" cellspacing="0"></table>
```

By including the role attribute with the value "presentation," we effectively remove the table from the screen reader's model and prevent it from being read aloud. The screen reader then skips to the content within, allowing the subscriber to focus on the content instead of manually skipping through useless layout markup.

It should be noted that there are other ARIA roles that could be used instead of presentation. Presentation is set to be deprecated in future versions of the ARIA spec, with the "none" role replacing it. However, support for none is currently limited, so it's up to you to decide which role works for your specific audience. If you're using tables to create bulletproof buttons, you may want to include the button role to provide additional context for users that need it. Just like with alternative text on images, though, you shouldn't leave roles off of tables, as that will result in screen readers reading each individual table, table row, and table cell to the user.

What do your emails sound like?

Hear how your emails sound when read out loud by screen readers with Litmus' new accessibility tools in Litmus Checklist.

Use semantic HTML

Just like the table element means something specific to a screen reader, other HTML elements provide additional context around content. This context, or semantic meaning, helps users navigate and consume content more easily.

When coding your emails, you should strive to use proper semantic structure in your HTML document by utilizing HTML elements for their intended purpose.

For example, take a typical product announcement email. It contains a headline, product image, description of a product, customer quote, and call-to-action. Although it's tempting to mark all of that up using table cells, divs, or spans, there are better HTML elements to use.

- Headlines should use heading elements, which include **h1**, **h2**, **h3**, **h4**, **h5**, and **h6** in HTML. The **h1** element is reserved for the most important headline or title of a document, with each subsequent heading decreasing in importance.

- Other copy, like product descriptions, should be marked up using either a **p** (paragraph) tag or a span. Multiple lines call for a paragraph, whereas standalone lines are usually spans of text.

- Customer quotes can use the **blockquote** element to provide additional context. Additionally, you can use the **cite** element to denote the source of the quote.

- The **button** element, while semantically useful, isn't well-supported across email clients. Therefore, using an anchor tag (**a**) with the role="button" is preferred for CTAs that are styled like buttons.

Mozilla currently lists 154 HTML elements, 31 of which are deprecated and probably shouldn't be used. That means there's all kinds of semantic value we can add to our campaigns to make them more accessible for subscribers.

Build on an accessible foundation

Want to build accessible emails but don't know where to start? Use our pre-built, heavily-tested starter templates to build beautiful emails for everyone.

Always include alternative text for images

Earlier, we discussed how all-image emails create problems for users. Still, images are often required in email campaigns. How can we ensure that images in our emails are still accessible?

The best way is to include alternative text—or alt text—with your images. Alternative text is a textual equivalent for your images that describes them to subscribers who use assistive technology or have images turned off. It provides critical missing context for users who would otherwise be left in the dark.

Alternative text is easy to include. All that's needed is the addition of the alt attribute to the img tag in your HTML.

```html
<img alt="Save up to 50 percent during the summer sales event."
src="example.jpg" width="600" border="0">
```

When a screen reader encounters that image, it will read the alternative text out loud. As a bonus, when images are disabled in most email clients, that alternative text will still be displayed. You can even add inline CSS to the image to style alternative text.

```html
<img alt="Save up to 50 percent during the summer sales event."
src="example.jpg" width="600" border="0" style="color: #006fee; font-family:
sans-serif; font-size: 32px; font-weight: bold; line-height: 48px;">
```

Images are used for multiple things in email. However, not all images require the same type of alternative text. Generally speaking, images can be categorized as informative, active, or decorative.

- **Informative** images provide additional information to subscribers that is in addition to any other copy surrounding them.

- **Active** images prompt a subscriber to take some action—they are additional calls-to-action in an email.

- **Decorative** images are there solely for visual design and don't impart any additional information to subscribers.

While it can be tempting to apply descriptive alt text to each type, that can actively work against the goal of making an email accessible. For example, providing descriptions for decorative images adds unnecessary information to the document when read aloud by screen readers, resulting in frustration and, potentially, confusion for subscribers. The following guidelines will help you keep your images and emails more accessible and usable.

1. Alt text for informative images should describe the information in that image and repeat the text in the image if there is any. Avoid repeating information if the surrounding copy states the same thing as the image.

2. Alt text for active images should describe the result of the intended action. Think of them like buttons or text links.

3. Include an empty alt attribute (e.g. alt="") for decorative images. Failing to do so will result in most screen readers reading the entire image source URL, creating a confusing and frustrating experience for users.

4. Avoid calling attention to the fact that it is an image. Don't use language like, "This is a picture of..." or "Here's an image of..." This doesn't add any value to the subscriber and only serves as a reminder that they can't see your images.

5. Don't use alt text as a prompt for users to download or enable images, as not all users will have this ability or benefit from it.

6. When in doubt, read your alternative text out loud along with the rest of the surrounding content. If it sounds natural to you and provides the intended value, it's good alt text.

Hear Your Email with Litmus

Hear exactly what your email sounds like to subscribers using screen readers. Try the latest accessibility tools in Litmus Checklist today.

Specify a language attribute

As email marketers continue to send to a global audience, it's important to look at one final coding technique to create more accessible emails: the HTML language attribute.

The language—or lang—attribute specifies what language a piece of content is. It is usually set at a global level on the HTML tag:

```html
<html lang="en">
```

However, it can also be applied directly to other elements. This is helpful when mixing different languages in a single email. For example, while the global language of an email is set to English (en), the email could include a message for Spanish speakers. In this case, the lang attribute can be set on the paragraph of Spanish, like so:

```html
<p lang="es">¿Hablas español? ¡Nosotros también!</p>
```

In both cases, the language attribute has one major benefit: It tells any assistive technology which language profile to use for content. When a screen reader encounters the language attribute, it will switch the language profile to match, which results in the use of correct pronunciation and accents, allowing for a much better overall experience for subscribers. You wouldn't want your email written in French to be pronounced in American English, would you?

It's important to note that the language attribute doesn't translate content for you. You can't wrap English in a French language tag and expect a screen reader to start speaking French. If you need to translate and localize content in an email, you need to do that as part of your content development process. However, once translated, the lang attribute ensures that the localized content sounds natural to native speakers.

8 Getting Buy-In for Accessibility

While there are altruistic reasons why you should embrace accessibility in email, many stakeholders won't be swayed by good intentions. Making the business case for accessibility—and showing a process for implementing accessibility best practices—can be the best way to get stakeholders and teammates onboard.

As we've seen in earlier sections, email is an extremely valuable channel. Email marketers average a return on investment of 42:1, far higher than other marketing channels. And more people than ever are spending significant amounts of time in email, including a disabled population that controls over $1 trillion in annual disposable income.

Ignoring accessibility not only creates frustrating user experiences, but excludes you from creating long-lasting and valuable relationships with an important population of people. And, when you include voice assistant users, you're leaving even more money on the table.

Why you should embrace accessibility

When it comes down to it, there are clear reasons every business should start building accessible email campaigns:

1. Email is ranked as one of the most valuable marketing channels.

2. The disabled population controls significant disposable income.

3. The number of non-disabled users interacting with emails via voice is growing.

4. Industries like healthcare, government, higher education, and finance are subject to accessibility legislation.

5. 77% of brands are making accessibility a priority. If you don't, you're falling behind.

It's no longer an option to ignore accessibility. If you do, you're effectively ignoring a huge user base and the business they control.

Steps for securing buy-in

Making the case for investing in accessibility can be difficult depending on your team structure and goals. Having a clear plan in place and knowing what resources you need to execute that plan are key to getting the buy-in needed to improve your emails for users. Here are our tips for getting your team onboard with accessibility in email.

1. **Present your case:** Use the stats and research in this book to provide evidence for why your team should focus on accessibility.

2. **Audit your emails:** Review your own email campaigns to identify opportunities for improvements.

3. **Plan out improvements:** Based on your audit, document which campaigns need improvements, who will make those changes, how long those updates will take, and how those updates will improve a user's experience.

4. **Gather your tools:** Figure out what tools you need to make those updates. For building and testing emails, Litmus Builder combined with the new accessibility checks in Litmus Checklist will allow you to quickly create accessible emails and ensure they're working as intended. A variety of third-party tools and browser extensions are also available to help with the development process.

5. **Get additional resources:** Not everyone has the resources to improve accessibility on their own. If needed, work with third-party accessibility consultants or email developers, or reach out directly to your ESP to see if they can help improve the accessibility of their email templates and tools.

Keep in mind that accessibility is a spectrum, not a single solution. Although we should strive to implement as many techniques as possible to improve the accessibility of an email campaign, that can be unrealistic for a lot of teams.

Making even small improvements like adding ARIA roles to tables or left-aligning text can have massive benefits for users. You don't have to put every technique in this guide to work, but you should try to do whatever you can to create better emails for all of your subscribers, regardless of their abilities.

9 Wrapping up

Between copywriting, design, and code, there's a lot that goes into creating accessible email campaigns. Without prior experience, that work can be daunting. When you look at the potential impact—both on a subscriber's experience and your company's bottom line—it's clear that this work is worth doing.

> *An investment in accessibility is an investment in improving people's lives and your business as a result.*

And, with Litmus' new accessibility tools in Litmus Checklist, ensuring accessibility has never been easier. Get valuable insights into your email's structure, language settings, image accessibility, readability, and even hear how your email sounds to screen reader users.

Get started today with a free 7-day trial of Litmus and join over 600,000 email professionals who rely on Litmus to send better, more accessible email campaigns, faster.

About the Author

Jason Rodriguez is the Community Evangelist at Litmus. He is the author of three books on email marketing, design, and development and frequently speaks at industry events. At Litmus, he helps customers and the email community send better, more effective email campaigns.

About the Designer

Andrea Smith is a freelance designer and artist in Bluffton, SC with a passion for good software, travel, and rescue pups. With nearly 15 years of professional design and digital marketing experience, Andrea is an award-winning creative professional, recognized for strengths in strategic thinking and design thought leadership.

litmus

Expand your reach with Litmus Accessibility Checks

Maximize the impact of every email with content that is accessible to all subscribers.

▾ **To review**

▾ Your email is missing a "meta content-type" attribute.

> Specifying the content type is important for screen readers as it allows them to accurately identify special characters. If you're not sure which content type to use, we recommend inserting UTF in the <head></head> section of your emailby adding this code:
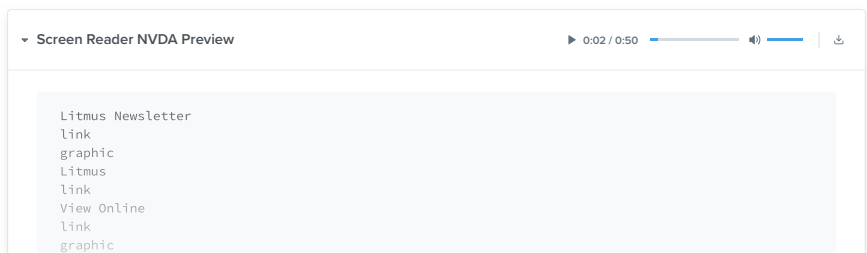
```
<meta http-equiv="Content-Type"  content="text/html charset=UTF-8" />
```

▾ **Passed Audits**

✓ **Heading Hierarchy**: Your email headings are well structured. This will help screen readers easily navigate your content.

✓ **Left Justification** Check: Your email has no instances of justified or centered text! This is easier to read.

✓ **Language Type** Check: Your email is tagged with the language of [Insert Dynamic Content].

✓ **Table Roles** Check: Your email's table roles are all set to "presentation". This is easier for screen readers to navigate.

Align your brand with truly inclusive practices.

- Instantly ensure subscribers of all abilities can interpret your message and connect with your brand.

- Get an automatic, comprehensive view of accessibility test results right inside Litmus Checklist, without extra steps.

- Check important HTML tags and text alignment required to create a great email experience for subscribers with visual or cognitive impairments.

- Receive guided advice on how to resolve accessibility issues before you send.

Screen Reader NVDA Preview   ▶ 0:02 / 0:50   🔊 ▬▬ | ⬇

```
Litmus Newsletter
link
graphic
Litmus
link
View Online
link
graphic
```

Only with Litmus! Listen to how visually impaired subscribers will hear your email.

- Preview an audio recording of how a screen reader will relay your email content.

- View a transcript of your audio file to pinpoint any areas that need adjustment.

- Check important HTML elements like table roles, content type, ALT-text, and language tags that affect how your email is transcribed.

- Review the heading hierarchy to ensure screen readers can efficiently navigate your email.