

This was a particularly interesting exercise for me since I spend a lot of time using a wide variety of tools to create and update web pages. I had studied the Bobby Accessibility six years ago when I first created our district website and always try to follow the rules as best I can but I hadn't been through the exercises to validate pages since then. I knew that I had an issue with font sizes that I caused when I recreated my site several years ago and used fix font sizes. It has been bothering me but I couldn't figure out how to fix it (and nobody complained - isn't that often the way our priorities are set?).

So I tried to use several of these validator tools and the beginning of my experiences weren't great. Two of the sites didn't work at all - web page not found. Then I used Cynthia to test my district site and two of our school sites. Each of these has a variety of technology used so I was interested in how they would be evaluated. Cynthia displayed the results in a report that is presented in a table on a web page. I tried to increase the font size to make it easier to read and it didn't work - I thought that was particularly interesting for a site that checks accessibility. The things that the validator highlighted as errors were that an alternate text is not provided for images and that a text-only page equivalent should be provided. I ALWAYS provide alternate text to images (but occasionally I make a mistake) so I checked these carefully - they were background images used to create background color on the page. I never expected that to be a problem and don't know what to do about it. It's typical of these evaluations - common web creation practices kick out as errors and as a webmaster I don't have a clear idea whether it actually presents great difficulty to someone using a web reader or whether the validator just can't distinguish between background images and content images. I scanned through the other factors that the validator checked for, even though I didn't have errors in these areas. They looked for alternatives to multimedia, color coded information providing clear explanations, text links for image maps, tables having row and column headers, flicker free, scripts providing alternatives, forms input, and ways to skip repetitive navigation links - these all made sense to me and I'm always glad to know what to look for and be careful of although not a lot of explanation was provided. The choices of browsers here confused me. The default was Cynthia's (I wondered what that could be) and choices were a variety of Internet Explorer, Netscape, and Opera. No Firefox which is widely used currently, unlike Netscape and Opera (I don't know anyone who uses these anymore).

The next validator I tried was Site Valet. This really appears to be a geek site. I ran my sites through it and came up with errors: Bogus or deprecated markup, Provide text alternative to image, and use CSS to control layout and presentation. I do use CSS to control layout and presentation so I could not figure out why that was flagged. The deprecated markup criticisms are scientific and not very realistic for many webpage creations. They compare your code to the W3C rules and point out every place it doesn't follow the new rules. Most, if not all, of my errors were created by the software packages that I use to create and update websites. It's noble to attempt to create absolutely perfectly coded pages, and I wish that Microsoft and Macromedia did, but I'm not losing any sleep over these errors. I found this site very difficult to use and read. The interface to the page was not clear or explained. There were three graphic buttons with no rollover or alternate text for validate, accessibility, and links and it took me a while to figure out how to use them. I looked at the page code and they were coded within javascript which breaks their basic rule for form interface. The page appearance is not appealing, nothing is lined up and I found it difficult to work with. I was getting discouraged. I almost stopped and wrote my report but decided to try one more.

The third validator I tried was the WebXACT which was the site formerly known as Bobby and the one I used several years ago. It was not only easy to use and navigate but the information was very useful and I learned a lot. This site has gotten even better since I used it before. The best feature was that the guidelines had links and if you clicked on them they opened a new window. That explained the guideline and then had a Rationale section that tells you exactly WHY they are telling you to do what they want you to do. Then it makes sense. The things I learned here that I didn't know before were to:

1. Create link phrases that make sense when read out of context - don't say "click here" which I do sometimes. Some AT can be set to only read the links on the page and if they aren't

meaningful text, the user has to spend a lot of time reading surrounding text.

2. Explicitly associate form controls and their labels with the label element - I didn't know such a label exists but it helps the AT perform and highlight the submit on a form.
3. Use relative sizing and positioning rather than absolute. This relates to my font sizes. Since I've stated absolute font sizes, you can't change them. The explanation was very clear and now I have a good idea how to proceed fixing this problem.
4. Separate links with a character like | or surround with [ ] so screen readers can clearly designate navigation for the user - I had no idea.

I would definitely use and recommend this site to anyone involved in web page work. It is useful not only as a validator but as a learning tool.

I will try to be better at validating my site and learning more about web accessibility. It's just a matter of time and acquiring the knowledge. So much of the W3C stuff is written in geek-speak. I'm a computer professional with 30 years of experience in programming and there's no way I'll spend a lot of time reading those kinds of pages to figure out how to make my sites better for AT. The Introduction to Web Accessibility and Quick Tips and similar pages they've put on the front of the site provided some good information in reasonable terms to educate people how to make pages more accessible but they quickly link to long pages of W3C text written in geek-speak. The WebXACT site does provide good learning materials. I can also encourage all the web tool creators to be more diligent in creating good code so that those of us that use GUI (graphical user interface) tools to create our web pages can rely on the dependability of the code created. I create and update an average of 15-25 web pages per week and there's just no way I have time to ensure they don't have "bogus or deprecated markup" if the software created the code behind the pages. As stated in Miller's article on Web Content, "it's important to work with companies to help them get to a goal of total compliance with maximum accessibility without being overly critical of what they have failed to do... it was frustrating for companies who felt no matter what they were doing, it was never good enough." (Miller, 2006) As a webmaster trying to do the right thing, it's very frustrating to have my websites constantly kick out meaningless errors and not have a clear understanding what I should do to make it right. And as ignorant as many companies and their web creation teams are to making their sites accessible, as pointed out in Accessibility Issue Comes to a Head, "Very often, we let somebody know that their website is inaccessible and they say 'Oh my, we never intended that. Let's fix it right away.'" I do have time to ensure all pages have alternate text for graphics and clear navigation if I know what to do to make them more usable. Usability is always a priority for web creators and usability for those with disabilities is as important to me as usability by the average student, teacher, staff or community member.

Miller, R. (2006) Web Content takes the ACCESS RAMP. EContent. 29 (1) 20-24. Retrieved November 17, 2007 from Academic Search Premier database.

Sliwa, C. (2006) Accessibility Issue Comes To a Head. Computerworld 40 (19) 1, 12, 14-15. Retrieved November 17, 2007 from WilsonWeb database.