



Book Review

Review of *The Digital Accessibility Handbook for Libraries*

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ABSTRACT

Review of Spina, C. & Oling, R. A. (2025). *The digital accessibility handbook for libraries*. Chicago: ALA Editions in collaboration with Core.

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Starting in April 2026, libraries and other public entities across the United States will be required to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Title II requirements to make all publicly available online and digital content accessible. Many library staff are struggling to know how to get started with bringing their websites, online resources, and other electronic tools up to code. *The Digital Accessibility Handbook for Libraries*, written by Carli Spina and Rebecca Albrecht Oling, presents a guide for libraries on how to approach accessibility and what considerations to make to be compliant with the legislation. The book was written as a guide for starting and improving libraries' accessibility work, particularly in academic and larger public libraries.

While most libraries are currently working on accessibility to meet the standards set by legal mandates, the book brings up important points of why it's important to think about accessibility from the very beginning, and what to consider when making decisions about purchasing resources, arranging physical spaces, and designing online materials for your library. Accessibility not only focuses on disability, but also on the ability of library users, whether it's reading comprehension or the device used to access library content.

Carli Spina is an associate professor and head of research and instructional services at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) and has scholarly experience with universal design and accessibility (p. 263). Rebecca Albrecht Oling is the director of digital accessibility at Purchase College, part of the State University of New York (SUNY) system (p. 263). Together, the authors work within SUNY to compile best practices for accessibility in the libraries, as well as co-leading the team to implement the Electronic Implementation Accessibility Policy (p. 263).

The Digital Accessibility Handbook for Libraries contains a preface and fourteen chapters. Each chapter opens with a few real-life library scenarios that apply to the theme of the chapter and gives the reader a sense of how accessibility plays a role in daily library operations. Every chapter also ends with interviews and some tips with experts in the field (including librarians, attorneys, and UX designers), who are credited as contributors at the end of the book. For example, Jingjing Wu is a Web Librarian at Texas Tech University Libraries, offers tips on using artificial intelligence (AI) as a supplemental tool for improving accessibility (p. 193-196).

Chapter 1 provides an overview of definitions of disability, the social and legal history of disability, various types of disability and their varying accessibility needs. It gives the reader context on why accessibility work matters and how societal views may affect this work. Throughout the book, accessibility is framed not merely as legal compliance but as a core service principle aimed at maximizing equitable access. They also let the reader know that since there are differing opinions on whether to use "identity-first" such as "deaf person" or "person-first" such as "individual who is deaf," the terms are used interchangeably, usually based on the preference of the specific person if it is known (p. 11).

Chapter 2 explores hardware, software, and physical spaces within the libraries. The authors discuss assistive technology that widens access to library collections (p. 23) as well as software with built-in features such as screen readers. They recommend working with IT (information technology) to ensure that the assistive technology is usable, continually updated, and compatible with other technologies (p. 24). The collaboration between libraries and IT also extends to physical spaces, such as computer labs and other workstations.

Chapters 3 through 5 form the core of the book's digital accessibility guidance, covering web standards, user-centered website design, and accessible file formats. Particularly useful is the authors' attention to often-overlooked formats such as spreadsheets, mathematical equations, and sheet music discussed in Chapter 5. Chapter 3 covers the principles of web accessibility. The chapter clearly introduces key standards such as WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines), offering an accessible entry point for librarians with limited technical background. Some considerations for web accessibility outlined by the authors include color contrast, font type and size, and the wording of content (reducing the use of jargon or defining it if it must be used). Chapter 4 continues the web accessibility discussion looking at the library website. The authors recommend that readers get feedback from library users to understand the library community needs and identify where there might be gaps in access. The chapter goes into more detail about actionable ways a library can make its website more accessible, in addition to the tips provided in Chapter 3. In Chapter 5, the authors focus on the accessibility of files and digital media, which includes audio, video, text, and images. The chapter also discusses specific file types that may often get overlooked in accessibility work, such as ePUB for ebooks, spreadsheets, mathematical equations, and sheet music. The authors talk about the challenges of each type of file or media and how a library may make them more accessible.

Chapter 6 touches on library communications and promotional materials, particularly for library events. The authors provide helpful tips on how to make social media posts more accessible, for example to reduce the use of emojis in social media posts because screen readers may not be able to interpret them in its intended use (p. 117). The chapter also lays out accessibility tips for emails, newsletters, online events, and signage (both physical and digital).

The scope of Chapter 7 is in manual and automatic accessibility testing. It also introduces the reader to VPATs (Voluntary Product Accessibility Testing), which is a quick reference to how accessible a product from a vendor may be. Although "voluntary" is in the acronym, more and more libraries are requiring them for accessibility review of products for purchasing decisions. The authors advise the reader to consider this information with caution, as it may not be entirely accurate, but acts as a base for accessibility testing and decision making (p. 137). For libraries feeling overwhelmed by the process, the authors also recommend reaching out to larger library systems or consortia for support (p. 138). The chapter closes with some

suggested free testing automatic testing tools that can give some starting points for improvement (p. 143-144).

Chapters 8 through 10 cover new technologies used in libraries. The authors discuss emerging technologies in Chapter 8. Libraries are often quick to adopt new technologies for their collections and services. Like online services, these technologies also need to meet accessibility requirements, and the authors remind the reader that they should build accessibility into workflows from the start, along with other technologies discussed in the book. Chapter 9 covers extended reality (XR), which includes virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR) (p. 161). The authors define what each of these technologies are, how they can be used in libraries, and what their accessibility challenges can be, such as making physical movements to use some of the features (p. 168). Chapter 10 features the rapid expansion of AI and how it applies to libraries and accessibility. The chapter explains what AI is and how it differs from “virtual assistants” such as Siri and Alexa (p. 180-181). It also outlines the potential risks and benefits of using AI, and how it can be utilized (but not replace human intervention) in accessibility work. While AI is currently a divisive topic in librarianship, the balanced presentation of benefits and risks strengthens the chapter’s credibility.

The authors dedicate Chapter 11 to best practices with vendor relationships. Libraries have little control over the accessibility of third-party products like databases. As in other workflows discussed in the book, incorporating accessibility from the very beginning is essential when working with external vendors. Knowing from the beginning about how accessible a resource is can help with purchasing decisions and become part of the licensing process, such as reviewing VPATs. Keeping an open dialogue with the vendor and communicating issues is also crucial to the accessibility process.

Chapter 12 talks about the rise in disability due to an aging population of Baby Boomers and the effects of long COVID (p. 215-216). It also discusses how the library profession is evolving, yet the authors mention how MLIS programs are not keeping up with changes in preparing for accessibility in the field (p. 221). The chapter also looks at the need to update hiring practices to make them more accessible, for example “providing interview questions ahead of time” and accommodations such as a sign language interpreter (p. 224), as well as best practices for wording job postings.

Chapter 13 outlines how libraries can integrate accessibility into their workflows while on a tight budget. Some steps the authors suggest are looking into free resources and what accessibility features may currently be available on technology and resources the libraries already have, as well as researching new technologies before investing time and money. The chapter also talks about professional development and potential collaboration opportunities, as well as making the case for dedicated funding to improve and maintain accessibility.

The final chapter, Chapter 14, wraps up the book by summarizing the changing landscape of libraries. It also restates how overwhelming the task of bringing libraries up to accessibility standards can be but even making small changes can make a big difference.

The book's strength is the recurring theme of making library content as easily accessible to everyone as possible and meeting needs to the best of the library's ability, which should be how libraries meet their users where they are. The authors go in-depth about several aspects of accessibility that libraries should consider to not only become compliant with the new laws, but also to expand on points of accessibility for all its services. Accessibility, according to the authors, should not only extend to individuals with disabilities, but also for other accessibility purposes, like making websites usable on a mobile device, the reading and language comprehension level of a patron, or watching a video in a shared space and cannot have the volume on. Another strength is using examples at the start of the chapters and bringing in contributors at the end of the chapters to bring in real-life applications of the concepts. Additionally, the authors provide actionable items that can make easy changes towards improving accessibility, such as suggesting free accessibility tools and minor tweaks to social media posts and website layouts.

One area of concern is the book's target audience. The book would work better for libraries with a larger staff with a dedicated technology department or for employees that can execute decisions at the local level. While the book makes mention of public libraries, the suggestions throughout the book skew towards academic libraries, which is the background of both authors. For example, smaller public libraries, especially in rural areas, may not have in-house staff dedicated to back-end library work such as web design, negotiating licenses with vendors, or making decisions for electronic resources, which may be outsourced to a central library system or consortia. This may also be the case at smaller academic libraries but oftentimes their staff may include someone who handles these tasks on a smaller scale. While New York-based collaborations provide concrete examples, libraries outside the state may need to translate these models to align with local governance structures and legal frameworks.

The book heavily uses acronyms and abbreviations; however, the authors mitigate this by writing out what each one stands for when it is first introduced to the reader. Some examples include VPATs and organizations that lay out best practices like WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines). They also provide a glossary at the end of the book for quick reference, as well as including both the acronyms and abbreviations along with the full name in the index. As someone who works in an area of librarianship that uses many abbreviations, the quick guide in the back of the book is especially helpful.

Overall, *The Digital Accessibility Handbook for Libraries* is a strong foundational text for libraries beginning or formalizing accessibility efforts. It will be especially valuable for academic libraries and larger public libraries with dedicated technology or digital services staff.

Smaller libraries or those operating within centralized systems may find some recommendations aspirational rather than immediately actionable but will still benefit from the book's framework, terminology, and emphasis on incremental improvement.

References

Spina, C. & Albrecht Oling, R. (2025). *The digital accessibility handbook for libraries*. ALA Editions in collaboration with Core.