BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

Email Accessibility Compliance Guide

For anyone who sends mass or broadcast emails on behalf of Ball State University | Effective date: April 24, 2026

Section 1: Purpose and Scope

This guide applies to broadcast and mass emails sent on behalf of Ball State University to audiences where you do not know the full makeup of your recipients. This includes department newsletters, event announcements, enrollment communications, alumni outreach, campus-wide notifications, and any other email sent to a distribution list, listserv, or audience segment.

This guide does not apply to individual, one-to-one emails between colleagues or with a specific known recipient. However, the principles here will improve any email you send.

Why Email Accessibility Matters

When you send an email to hundreds or thousands of people, you are statistically certain to have recipients who are blind, have low vision, are color-blind, have cognitive or learning disabilities, or use assistive technology to read their email. Roughly 15% of the global population has some form of disability. In a list of 1,000 recipients, that is 150 people whose ability to read your message depends on how you built it.

HTML emails are rendered by email clients (Outlook, Gmail, Apple Mail, mobile apps), which function as user agents—the same role a web browser plays for a website. Screen readers interact with email content the same way they interact with web content: they read the HTML structure, look for alt text on images, follow heading hierarchies, and announce link destinations. If your email is not built accessibly, assistive technology cannot make sense of it, and your message does not reach the people who need it.

> **This Is Not Just About Compliance**
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> An inaccessible email is a failed communication. If a prospective student who is blind receives an enrollment email that is a single image with no alt text, they receive nothing—a blank message. If an employee with low vision receives a newsletter with light gray text on white, they cannot read it. These are not edge cases. They are communication failures that happen silently every day, because the sender never sees the problem.

Section 2: How Assistive Technology Reads an Email

Understanding what happens when a screen reader encounters your email will change how you think about email design. Here is the experience:

- **The subject line is the first thing announced.** Before the email is even opened, the screen reader reads the subject line aloud. A vague subject line ("Update" or "Newsletter #47") gives the recipient no way to decide if the email is relevant. A clear subject line ("Spring 2026 course registration opens March 1") tells them exactly what the email contains.

- **The email body is read top to bottom, in code order.** A screen reader does not see your visual layout. It reads the HTML source code in sequence. If your email is laid out with tables for visual

positioning, the screen reader reads the table cells in code order—which may not match the visual order. A two-column layout can become an incomprehensible zigzag of interleaved content.

- **Images are either described or skipped.** When the screen reader hits an image, it looks for alt text. If alt text exists, it reads it aloud. If not, it either skips the image entirely or reads the image filename ("header_march_v3_FINAL.png"). If your email is primarily images, the screen reader user receives a nearly empty message.

- **Links are often navigated as a list.** Many screen reader users pull up a list of all links in an email to navigate quickly. If every link says "Click here" or "Learn more," that list is useless—ten identical items with no indication of where they lead. Descriptive link text ("View the spring event calendar," "Register for the career fair") makes this navigation method work.

- **Headings provide structure.** Screen reader users jump between headings to scan an email quickly, just as sighted users scan visually for section headers. If your headings are just bold text (visually styled but not coded as headings), the screen reader does not recognize them as headings and the user has no way to scan or navigate the email's structure.

Section 3: The Image-Heavy Email Problem

The single most damaging practice in university email communications is sending emails that are composed primarily—or entirely—of images. This is extremely common in designed marketing emails, event announcements, and newsletters.

Why Image-Only Emails Fail

- **Screen readers cannot read images.** An email that is one large image file (or multiple image slices) with no live text is completely silent to a screen reader. The recipient hears nothing—or hears a filename. The email might as well be blank.

- **Many email clients block images by default.** Outlook, Gmail, and other clients often block images until the user clicks "Display images." When images are blocked, an image-only email shows empty boxes. The recipient sees nothing, regardless of disability status. This is not an accessibility edge case—it is a mainstream email delivery problem.

- **Images cannot reflow on small screens.** A designed image with text baked in does not resize gracefully on a phone screen. The text becomes tiny and unreadable. Live HTML text, by contrast, reflows to fit any screen width.

- **Text in images is not searchable.** Recipients cannot search their inbox for text that only exists inside an image. If someone is trying to find "the email about the career fair date," they will not find it if that information is in an image.

What to Do Instead

The standard guidance is to maintain a ratio of no more than 40% images and at least 60% live text in any email. Your main message—the information you are trying to communicate—should always be in live HTML text, not in images. Images should supplement the text, not replace it.

- **Use images for visual interest, not for information delivery.** A hero image of campus at the top of your email is fine. A photo of an event speaker is fine. What is not fine is putting the event name, date, time, location, and registration link inside that image instead of in the text below it.

- **If an image contains text, repeat that text in the email body.** If your header banner says "Spring Career Fair | March 12 | Worthen Arena," that same information must appear in the live text of the email.

- Every image must have alt text. See Section 4.

> **The Test**
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> Disable images in your email client (most email platforms have a preview mode for this). Read the email with images off. If the message still makes sense and all critical information is available, your email is structured correctly. If the email is blank or missing essential details, it needs to be restructured.

Section 4: Alt Text for Images in Email

Every image in a broadcast email must have an alt attribute in the HTML. The rules for writing alt text in email are the same as for the web and social media. (For detailed guidance on what to write, see the **Alt Text Guidelines**, a companion document to this guide.)

Key Points for Email-Specific Alt Text

- **In your email platform:** Most email marketing tools (Mailchimp, Constant Contact, Emma, Salesforce Marketing Cloud, HubSpot, etc.) provide an alt text field when you insert an image. Find it and fill it out for every image.

- **For header/banner images that contain text:** The alt text must include all the text shown in the image. If the banner says "Homecoming 2026 | October 10 | All Are Welcome," the alt text is: "Homecoming 2026. October 10. All Are Welcome."

- **For decorative images:** Set the alt attribute to empty (alt="") so screen readers skip them. A decorative divider line, a colored spacer, or a background pattern should not be announced.

- **For linked images (images that serve as buttons or links):** The alt text should describe the destination or action, not the image appearance. A red button image linking to a registration page should have alt text like "Register for the spring career fair"—not "red button."

- **For logos:** Use the organization name as the alt text. "Ball State University" is sufficient. Do not describe the visual design of the logo.

> **Image Blocking Reinforces Alt Text Importance**
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> When images are blocked by the email client (which is the default in many corporate and institutional Outlook environments), the alt text is displayed in place of the image. Good alt text serves double duty: it helps screen reader users AND it provides information to anyone whose email client blocks images. This makes alt text in email arguably more important than alt text on a web page.

Section 5: Email Structure and Layout

Use a Single-Column Layout

Single-column layouts are the most reliable for accessibility. They read in a predictable top-to-bottom order regardless of the email client, device, or assistive technology. Multi-column layouts using tables can

produce unpredictable reading order, and side-by-side content may be read in the wrong sequence by screen readers.

If you must use a multi-column layout, test it with a screen reader or in your email platform's accessibility preview to confirm the reading order is logical.

Use Real Headings

If your email has sections, use HTML heading tags (<h1>, <h2>, <h3>) to label them—not just bold or large text. Most email platforms allow you to select heading levels from a formatting toolbar when editing text. Using actual heading tags allows screen reader users to jump between sections.

- Use one H1 for the email's main topic.
- Use H2 for major sections within the email.
- Do not skip heading levels (e.g., jumping from H1 to H3).

Use Semantic HTML for Lists

If your email includes a list of items (event agenda, steps in a process, features of a program), use actual HTML list tags (<ul> or <ol> with <li> items)—not just lines of text preceded by dash characters. Most email editors have a button for bulleted and numbered lists that generates proper HTML. Screen readers announce "list of 5 items" so the user knows the structure before hearing the content.

Set the Language

The HTML of your email should include a language attribute (lang="en" for English). This tells screen readers which language the content is in so they pronounce words correctly. Most email platforms set this automatically in their templates, but if you are building custom HTML, verify that the <html> tag includes the lang attribute.

Section 6: Links and Calls to Action

Write Descriptive Link Text

Screen reader users often navigate an email by pulling up a list of all links. If every link says "Click here" or "Learn more," the list is meaningless. Link text must describe where the link goes or what action it performs.

Bad Link Text	Good Link Text
Click here	Register for the spring career fair
Learn more	View the full Homecoming 2026 schedule
Read more	Read President Mearns' message on the strategic plan
https://bsu.edu/events/career-fair-2026	Register for the spring career fair

Button Design

If your email uses buttons (styled CTAs), build them with live HTML text on a colored background—not as images of buttons. An image-based button requires alt text and breaks when images are blocked. An HTML button with live text works everywhere.

- The button text should describe the action: "Register Now," "View the Calendar," "Apply for Scholarships."
- The button must have a minimum target size of 44×44 pixels to be tappable on mobile devices (WCAG 2.5.5 best practice).
- The button text and button background must meet 4.5:1 contrast (or 3:1 if the text is large). The button boundary must have 3:1 contrast against the surrounding email background (WCAG 1.4.11).

Link to PDFs and Attachments

If your email links to a PDF or includes an attachment, label it clearly: "Download the 2026 course catalog (PDF, 2.4 MB)." This tells the recipient what format they are getting and how large the file is. If the linked PDF is posted on bsu.edu, that PDF must also be accessible (see the **PDF Accessibility Remediation Guide**).

Section 7: Color and Contrast in Email

The same WCAG color contrast requirements that apply to web content and social media graphics apply to email. (For comprehensive guidance, see the **Color Use & Contrast Guidelines**, a companion document to this guide.)

Key Points for Email

- **Body text:** 4.5:1 contrast against the background. This applies to every section of the email—header area, body area, footer area. Each section may have a different background color; check the text contrast against each one.
- **Large text:** 18pt+ or 14pt+ bold; 3:1 contrast.
- **Buttons and icons:** 3:1 contrast for the component boundary against its surrounding background.
- **Do not use color alone to convey information.** If you highlight a deadline in red, also label it with text like "DEADLINE:" or use a calendar icon.
- **Dark mode:** Many email clients now render emails in dark mode, which inverts or modifies colors. If your email platform supports dark mode preview, check that your color combinations still meet contrast requirements when inverted. Some email clients override your colors entirely in dark mode—using live HTML text rather than text in images gives you better results, because the email client can adjust live text colors but cannot adjust text baked into images.

Section 8: Typography and Readability

What is best practice?

- **Minimum font size:** Use at least 16px (equivalent to 12 pt) for body text and 18–20px (equivalent to 13.5-15 pt) for headings. Small text is hard to read on mobile screens and for people with low vision.

- **Font choice:** Use sans-serif fonts (Arial, Calibri, Verdana, Helvetica) for body text. These are more legible on screens than serif or decorative fonts, and they render consistently across email clients.

- **Line spacing:** Set line height to at least 1.5 times the font size. Crowded text is harder to read for everyone, especially people with dyslexia or cognitive disabilities.

- **Text alignment:** Left-align body text. Do not justify text (align to both left and right margins)—justified text creates uneven word spacing that produces "rivers" of white space, making it harder to read for people with dyslexia and cognitive disabilities. Center-alignment is acceptable for short headings but not for paragraphs.

- **Paragraph length**: Keep paragraphs short. Long blocks of text are difficult for many readers, especially those with cognitive or attention-related disabilities. Break content into scannable sections with headings.

- **ALL CAPS**: Avoid using all capital letters for more than a few words. All-caps text is harder to read because it eliminates the visual word shapes that readers use to recognize words quickly. Screen readers may also interpret all-caps text as an acronym and spell it out letter by letter.

- **Emojis:** Do not use them. Screen reader listeners aren't able to interpret your meaning when using an emjoi is being used as a descriptor. There are many interpretations for emojis and the nuance or intention can not be inferred by all technology.

Absolutely Required by WCAG 2.1 Level AA

The recommendations above are strong accessibility practices that reduce barriers and complaints. The following items, while quite technical in nature, are specifically mandated by WCAG 2.1 Level AA as they relate to typography and readability:

- **Text must be resizable to 200% without loss of content or functionality (WCAG 1.4.4, Level AA).** Your email must remain readable and functional when a user zooms or increases text size. This means using responsive design and avoiding fixed-width layouts that break when text is enlarged.

- **Content must not break when users override text spacing (WCAG 1.4.12, Level AA).** If a user applies custom line height (1.5x), paragraph spacing (2x font size), letter spacing (0.12x), or word spacing (0.16x), your email must not lose content or functionality. This means avoiding fixed-height containers that clip text when spacing increases.

- **Content must reflow without horizontal scrolling at 320px width (WCAG 1.4.10, Level AA).** Your email must be readable on a phone screen without requiring the user to scroll left and right. This is a responsive design requirement—your email layout must adapt to narrow viewports.

- **Use real text instead of images of text (WCAG 1.4.5, Level AA).** If the same visual presentation can be achieved with live HTML text, you must use text rather than an image of text.

This directly prohibits the practice of sending emails that are entirely composed of designed image files containing text.

- **Color contrast must meet minimum ratios (WCAG 1.4.3, Level AA).** All text must have at least 4.5:1 contrast against its background; large text (18pt or 14pt bold) requires at least 3:1. This is covered in detail in Section 7 of this guide and in the Color Use & Contrast Guidelines.

Section 9: Subject Lines and Preheader Text

The subject line is the first piece of your email that every recipient encounters—sighted or not. For screen reader users, it is also the primary tool for deciding whether to open the email. For all users, it is the way they find the email later when searching their inbox.

- **Be specific and descriptive.** "Update" and "Newsletter" tell the recipient nothing. "Spring 2026 course registration opens March 1" tells them exactly what the email contains and why it matters.

- **Front-load the important information.** Mobile email clients truncate subject lines. Put the most important words first: "March 1: Spring registration opens" rather than "A note from the Registrar about spring 2026 course registration, which opens March 1."

- **Keep it under 50 characters when possible.** This ensures the full subject line is visible on most devices and email clients.

- **Preheader text matters too.** The preheader (the preview text shown after the subject line in most email clients) should reinforce or expand on the subject. Do not leave it as the default ("View this email in your browser"). Write a one-sentence summary of the email's content.

Section 10: Provide a Plain Text Version

Every HTML email should have a plain text version included as a multipart MIME alternative. This ensures that recipients whose email clients do not render HTML—or who prefer plain text for readability—can still access your message.

Most email marketing platforms (Mailchimp, Constant Contact, Emma, HubSpot) automatically generate a plain text version from your HTML content. Review the auto-generated version before sending—it may need editing to ensure the content reads logically without formatting, images, and layout.

The plain text version should include:

- All the substantive text content from the HTML version.

- Full URLs for any links (since plain text cannot use hyperlinked text).

- Clear section breaks (blank lines or divider characters) to separate sections.

- No alt text descriptions (these only apply to the HTML version, since the plain text version has no images).

Section 11: Animated Content, GIFs and Video

Animated GIFs are common in marketing emails. They are permissible under WCAG, but with constraints:

- **No flashing more than three times per second.** Flashing content can trigger seizures in people with photosensitive epilepsy. This is WCAG 2.3.1 and is a Level A requirement—the most fundamental level.

- **Animations should stop after five seconds or provide a mechanism to pause.** Since most email clients do not provide a pause button for GIFs, the practical solution is to keep GIF animations short—under five seconds of looping, or design them to play once and stop on the final frame.

- **The first frame of the GIF should be meaningful.** Some email clients (notably Outlook desktop) do not play animated GIFs at all—they display only the first frame. Design your GIF so that the first frame conveys the key message on its own.

- **GIFs need alt text.** An animated GIF is still an image. It needs an alt attribute describing its content, just like any other image.

- **Video.** Ensure you have fully reviewed the University's **Video and Podcast Accessibility and Compliance Guide** to ensure any embedded video in your email is fully accessible.

Animated Email Headers

Animated headers are a common special case. Because the header is typically the first and most prominent element in your email, the stakes for getting it right are higher than for a decorative GIF embedded in the body.

- **The first frame must be the complete, finished header.** Outlook desktop—the dominant email client in institutional environments—does not play animated GIFs. It displays only the first frame as a static image. If your animated header builds up to the final message over several frames (text flying in, elements assembling, a reveal effect), Outlook users see only the incomplete first frame. Design the animation so that frame one is the fully readable header with all text, branding, and information visible. The animation should enhance that static header, not construct it.

- **Do not cycle different pieces of information across frames.** If your animated header rotates through a date on frame 3, a location on frame 7, and a registration link on frame 12, anyone whose client displays only the first frame—or who looks away during the animation—misses that information. All informational content must be present in the first frame and repeated in the live HTML text of the email body below the header.

- **Alt text should describe the header's message, not the animation.** Write "Ball State Homecoming 2026. October 10. All are welcome."—not "Animated banner with flying confetti and text."

Section 12: Testing Before You Send

Accessibility testing should be part of your email review process—alongside proofreading, link checking, and design review.

Quick Tests Anyone Can Do

- **Disable images:** Preview your email with images turned off. Can you still understand the full message? Is all critical information available as text?

- **Read the link text out of context:** Read only the link text in your email, ignoring the surrounding sentences. Does each link make sense on its own? Could you tell where each link goes?

- **Check your headings:** Are the section titles coded as actual headings (H1, H2, H3), or are they just bold text? Your email editor's formatting toolbar will tell you.

- **Check contrast:** Run your text/background color combinations through the WebAIM Contrast Checker (webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker). Pay special attention to text in the footer area, which is often low contrast.

- **View on mobile:** Send a test email and open it on a phone. Is the text readable? Do buttons and links have enough tap space? Does the content reflow to a single column?

Advanced Testing

- **Use your email platform's accessibility checker:** Some platforms (Mailchimp, Litmus, Email on Acid) have built-in accessibility checks or previews. Use them.

- **Test with a screen reader:** If possible, open your test email in a screen reader (NVDA is free for Windows; VoiceOver is built into macOS and iOS). Listen to how the email is read. This is the most revealing test you can do—it shows you exactly what a screen reader user will experience.

- **Check dark mode:** If your email platform supports dark mode preview, check that your colors and images render correctly.

Section 13: Pre-Send Checklist

Complete this checklist before sending any broadcast email.

✓	Check
□	The subject line is specific and descriptive—not generic ("Update") or vague ("Newsletter #47").
□	The email's main message is delivered in live HTML text, not exclusively in images.
□	Every image has meaningful alt text (or is marked decorative with an empty alt attribute).
□	Any text that appears inside an image is also available in the live text of the email.
□	Headings are coded as HTML heading tags (H1, H2, H3)—not just bold or large text.
□	Link text is descriptive and makes sense out of context (no "click here" or "learn more").
□	Buttons are built with live HTML text, not as images. Button text describes the action.
□	Body text is at least 16px (equivalent to 12 pt) and uses a sans-serif font. Line height is at least 1.5x the font size.
□	All text meets minimum color contrast: 4.5:1 for body text, 3:1 for large text.
□	Color is not the only means of conveying information (error states, deadlines, required items also use text or icons).
□	Body text is left-aligned. No justified text. All-caps is limited to short labels only.
□	Animated GIFs do not flash more than 3 times per second and are under 5 seconds of looping. The first frame is meaningful on its own.

☐	A plain text version is included and has been reviewed for readability.
☐	The email has been previewed with images disabled. All critical information is still visible.
☐	Links to PDFs or attachments clearly state the format and file size.
☐	The email has been previewed on a mobile device at actual size.

Section 14: Compliance Authority

Accessibility compliance is the responsibility of any individual creating content for use on behalf of Ball State University.

HTML broadcast emails sent by Ball State University constitute digital communications subject to the university's obligations under Title II of the ADA. While the ADA Title II final rule (28 CFR Part 35, Subpart H) specifically addresses web content and mobile apps, the ADA's broader requirements for effective communication—codified at 28 CFR 35.160—apply to all communications, including email. Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, which applies to Ball State as a recipient of federal funding, explicitly covers electronic communications including email.

WCAG 2.1 Level AA is the technical standard that informs the accessibility requirements in this guide. Applying WCAG principles to email ensures that Ball State's broadcast communications are accessible to all recipients, meet the university's legal obligations, and align with the standards applied across the university's web content, social media, and document production.

For related guidance, see the **Alt Text Guidelines**, the **Color Use & Contrast Guidelines**, the **PDF Accessibility Remediation Guide** (for linked or attached PDFs), and the **Social Media Accessibility Compliance Guide**.

Questions about this guide or its requirements should be directed to Greg Fallon, Associate Vice President of University Communications and Digital Strategy, in Marketing and Communications, gmfallon@bsu.edu, 765-285-0048.