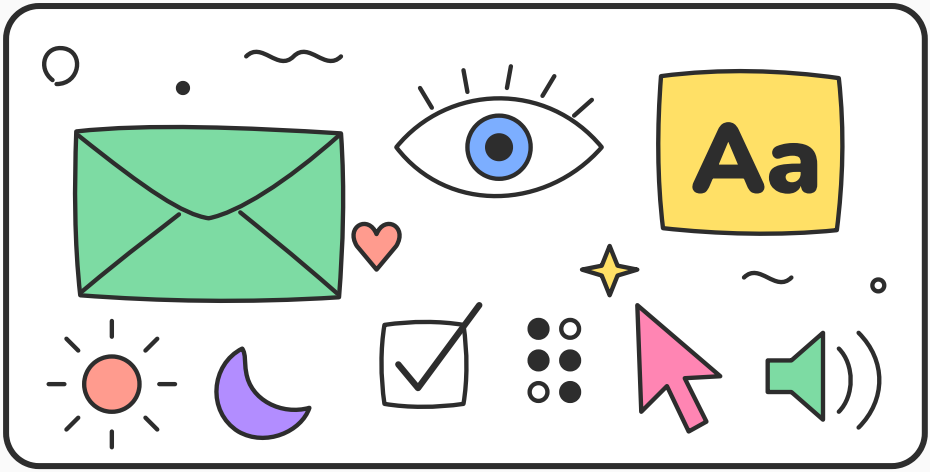
Lessons in email

FIELD GUIDE



The Email Accessibility Field Guide

Design and coding email for all

Aa	Aa	Aa	Aa
21:1	7:1	4.5:1	3:1

by Jay Oram

WCAG · EAA · ADA

01 · WHY IT MATTERS

The business & legal case

It's about who actually reads your email — and, increasingly, the law.

1.3bn
people with a significant disability (WHO)

376,348
emails in EMC's 2026 report

99.8%
failure rate

WCAG 2.2 · the standard
The W3C guidelines all laws refer to. Ensure your emails meet WCAG 2.2 AA and you've met all the legal requirements. There's a bit more to making your emails truly accessible for all...

European Accessibility Act · EU
Since 28 June 2025 any consumer service — and the emails that deliver them, including from non-EU brands, sending to recipients in the EU.

Americans with Disabilities Act · US
Title III states WCAG AA for private companies. Title II states WCAG 2.1 AA for state and local government: 26 April 2027 (50k+ population) or 26 April 2028 (smaller).

Equality Act 2010 · UK
Service providers must make reasonable adjustments. Public sector bodies are monitored against WCAG 2.2 AA.

Beyond compliance

- **Reach a larger audience:** 1 in 5 have some form of disability in the UK
- **Machine readable:** AI summaries & assistive tech all parse the same code.
- **Safe to send:** live text and simple layouts survive dark mode, images being blocked & email client rendering.

02 · STRUCTURE

Semantic HTML vs. email code

Tables still hold email together (for now). The job is to stop assistive tech mistaking layout for data.

JOB	ON THE WEB	IN EMAIL
Layout	CSS grid / flexbox	`role="none"` or `role="presentation"` on every layout table
Language	`<html lang>`	`lang` + `dir` on `<html>` and on a wrapper `<div>`
Calls to action	`<button>`	An `<a>` with padding and live text — never an image

Base template essentials

```
<html lang="en" dir="ltr">
<head>
  <title>Order on its way</title>
</head>
<body>
<div role="article" aria-roledescription="email"
  aria-label="Order on its way" lang="en" dir="ltr">
  <table role="none" width="100%">…</table>
</div>
```

- Webmail often strips `<html>` and `<body>`, so the wrapper carries `lang`, `dir` and a label into the inbox.
- `role="..."` isn't inherited — every nested table needs its own.
- Use semantic HTML elements first, `<p>` for paragraphs, `<h*>` for headings and `<a>` for links. Using HTML5 elements such as `<details>` / `<summary>` brings preset accessible attributes to interactivity.

03 · COLOUR

Colour & contrast

Contrast is maths, not taste. Check every text and background pair — in light and dark mode.

Aa	Aa	Aa	Aa
#595959	#767676	#949494	#FFE066
7:1	**4.5:1**	**3:1**	**1.3:1**
AAA, all text	AA, all text	Large text only	Fails everything

All samples on white #FFFFFF. Pastels like our lemon are for fills, never text.

1.4.3 AA **Contrast (minimum).** 4.5:1 for body text; 3:1 for large text — > 24px, or > 18.66px if bold.

1.4.6 AAA **Contrast (enhanced).** 7:1 and 4.5:1. Worth aiming for in long reads and small print.

1.4.11 AA **Non-text contrast.** 3:1 for button edges, form fields, icons and focus outlines.

1.4.1 A **Use of colour.** Colour can never be the only way information is shown.

Use of colour, in practice

- Underline links in body copy — colour alone won't do.
- Write prices out: “Now £20, was £30”. Red text and a strikethrough aren't enough.
- Images of text still need 4.5:1 — check them with a colour picker.
- Grey footer copy is the classic failure. `#767676` is the lightest grey that passes on white.
- Error and success states need an icon or words, not just red and green.

04 · DARK MODE

Planning for dark mode

Dark mode is an accessibility setting for many readers.
Design for it — don't fight it. (Yes you 👀)

No change

Aa Aa

Colours stay as coded; some clients apply your own dark-mode CSS.

Partial invert

Aa Aa

Light areas are darkened; dark areas are left alone.

Full invert

Aa Aa

Everything flips — even colours you'd already made dark.

Common issues

- Dark logo PNGs vanish in dark mode — add an outline or a background color.
- A text colour set with no background colour can end up dark on dark. Always set both.
- Colours that pass in light can fail in dark, check in both.

Techniques

```
@media (prefers-color-scheme: dark) {
  :root { color-scheme: light dark; }
  .dm-text { color: #F0F0F0 !important; }
  .logo-light { display: none !important; }
}

/* Outlook.com & Outlook apps */
[data-ogsc] .dm-text { color: #F0F0F0 !important; }
[data-ogsb] .logo-light { display: none !important; }
```

Gmail has recently started supporting:
`<meta name="color-scheme" content="light only"`
Which allows you to force light mode, use only if dark mode is inaccessible.

05 · TYPE & MEDIA

Typography, images & motion

Readable type and calm motion help everyone.

Typography

- **Size:** 16px body on mobile; nothing below 14px. Line height 1.5
- **Alignment:** left-align body copy over 3 lines in length. Centred and justified paragraphs break reading rhythm, especially for dyslexic readers.
- **Capitals:** type in sentence case and style with `text-transform: uppercase` — some screen readers spell out words typed in caps.
- **Typefaces:** choose clear letterforms where I, l and 1 differ, and set a fallback stack.
- **Reflow:** one column at 320px wide, readable at 200% zoom. No fixed heights on text.

Images & animation

- **Under 5 seconds:** email can't offer a pause button, so stop GIFs looping or keep them short (WCAG 2.2.2).
- **No flashing:** never more than three flashes a second (WCAG 2.3.1).
- **First frame counts:** classic Outlook on Windows only shows the first frame — put the message there.
- **CSS animation:** Alter or turn off animation with `prefers-reduced-motion`, or place all animation inside `prefers-reduced-motion: no-preference`
- **Animation:** Always ask if the animation is vital or just a distraction, is it adding value to your email?

Respect reduced motion where it's supported

```
@media (prefers-reduced-motion: reduce) {
  .anim   { display: none !important; }
  .static { display: block !important; }
}
```

06 · ALT TEXT

Alt text that actually helps

Read by assistive technology. Shown when images are blocked.

Four questions, in order

1 · Is it decorative?
Use `alt` — empty, never missing, or the file name gets read out.

2 · Does it contain text?
Repeat the text, word for word.

3 · Is it a link?
Describe where it goes or what it does.

4 · Context is key
Don't just describe , explain the context of 'why' that image.

IMAGE	WEAK	BETTER
Hero reading “Winter sale — 30% off”	banner	Winter sale: 30% off everything until Sunday
Linked product photo	IMG_4021.jpg	Navy waterproof jacket — view product
Linked logo	logo	[Brand] home
Divider or spacer	divider line	`alt`

- Skip “image of” — screen readers already announce an image.
- Keep it short: some clients cut long alt text off when images are blocked.
- If the live text beside it says the same thing, use `alt` to avoid repetition.

Style it for images-off. Put `font-family`, `font-size` and `color` inline on the `<img>`, and set a background colour on its cell so the alt text keeps 4.5:1.

07 · INTERACTIVE

Interactive email & a11y

Interactivity can make email easier to use — or lock people out. It all depends on how it's built.

CSS checkbox & radio

`:checked` and labels drive tabs, accordions, galleries and quizzes. Strongest in WebKit clients such as Apple Mail.

Hover & focus states

Rollover images and button feedback. Pair every `:hover` with `:focus` so keyboard users get it too.

HTML5 Elements

Use `<details>` and `<summary>` for accordions — clients that don't support these show fallbacks.

Forms & live content

Polls, ratings, RSVPs and countdowns. Support varies widely; the fallback is a clear link.

Where it helps accessibility

- **Less to wade through:** accordions shorten long emails and reduce cognitive load — if the key information is visible by default.
- **Reader in control:** tabs let people pick the content that matters to them.
- **Fewer steps:** rating or replying in the inbox saves a trip to a website that may be harder to use.

Progressive enhancement

Build the static, accessible email first. Interactivity is a layer on top — never the only way to get the message or complete the task.

08 · INTERACTIVE

Pitfalls & fixes

Most interactive email hides form controls. How you hide them decides who can use it.

PITFALL	FIX
`display:none` on inputs Removes them from the accessibility tree.	Hide visually (below), keep the input focusable and tied to a `<label for>`.
No visible focus Keyboard users lose their place (WCAG 2.4.7).	Style the focused input's label with a 3:1 outline.
State isn't announced A “tab” is read as “checkbox, unchecked”.	Write labels that describe the action. ARIA is often stripped — don't depend on it.
Content locked behind a click Fallback clients never see it.	Show essential content by default; enhance on top.
Auto-advancing carousels No pause control possible (2.2.2).	Let readers advance it; honour reduced motion.

Hide the input, not its accessibility

```
.hidden { display: inline-block !important; opacity: 0;
  width: 0;height: 0; margin: 0; margin: 0 0 0 -9999px;
  float: left; position: absolute; -webkit-appearance: none; }
.hidden:focus ~ .interaction { outline:3px solid #2D2D2D; }
```

Tap targets: 24×24px minimum (WCAG 2.5.8); aim for 44×44px.
AMP: components bring keyboard and ARIA support, but labels, contrast and a working HTML part are still yours.

09 · QA

Per-email QA checklist

Run it before every send. Automate what you can, the rest take seconds.

CODE & STRUCTURE

- [ ] `lang` and `dir` on `<html>` and the wrapper
- [ ] `<title>` matches the subject line
- [ ] `role="none"` on every layout table
- [ ] One `<h1>`, headings in order, real lists, semantic HTML used throughout

CONTENT

- [ ] Subject and preheader make sense on their own
- [ ] Links say where they go — no “click here”
- [ ] Plain language, short paragraphs, left-aligned

IMAGES & MOTION

- [ ] Every `<img>` has alt; decorative ones `alt`
- [ ] Text in images repeated in alt or live text
- [ ] Animation under 5 seconds; nothing flashing

COLOUR & DARK MODE

- [ ] Text 4.5:1; large text and buttons 3:1
- [ ] Links identifiable without colour
- [ ] Checked in dark mode: no-change, partial and full invert

TEST

- [ ] Images off: still makes sense, alt text styled
- [ ] Screen reader pass (VoiceOver, NVDA)
- [ ] Keyboard tab-through in webmail;
- [ ] 200% zoom and 320px wide
- [ ] Automated checker run; plain-text part reviewed

10 · AUDIT

Design system & template audit

Fix it once in the system and every send inherits it. Score each line Pass, Partial or Fail.

CHECK	PASS	PART	FAIL
DESIGN TOKENS			
Approved text/background pairs, with ratios	☐	☐	☐
Dark mode palette defined and tested	☐	☐	☐
Minimum sizes: 16px body, 14px small print	☐	☐	☐
COMPONENTS			
Logo: light and dark versions, alt text set	☐	☐	☐
Buttons: live text, 44px tall, 3:1 edge	☐	☐	☐
Footer: readable legal copy, underlined links	☐	☐	☐
Social icons named; decorative images `alt`	☐	☐	☐
BASE TEMPLATE & EDITOR			
`lang`, `dir`, title, wrapper, roles built in	☐	☐	☐
Editor fields require alt text and heading levels	☐	☐	☐
Colour pickers limited to passing pairs	☐	☐	☐
GOVERNANCE			
Accessibility criteria in every brief	☐	☐	☐
Copywriters trained on alt and link text	☐	☐	☐
A way for readers to report a problem	☐	☐	☐

Prioritise fixes by reach: the template behind most sends comes first.

11 · RESOURCES

Free resources & next steps

Bookmark these, then pick one next step.

Email Markup Consortium `emailmarkup.org`
The annual email accessibility report, plus a database of what each client supports.

Can I email `caniemail.com`
HTML and CSS support, client by client.

WCAG 2.2 quick reference `w3.org/WAI/WCAG22/quickref`
Every success criterion, filterable by level, with techniques.

Contrast Checker `lessonsinemail.com/tools/color-contrast-checker`
Check any text and background pair in seconds.

Good Email Code `goodemailcode.com`
Mark Robbins' accessible base template and code patterns.

ActionRocket `actionrocket.co`
Articles on email design and code, accessibility audits and training

What to look for in a resource

- A recent date — client behaviour, especially dark mode, changes fast.
- Testing in real email clients and with screen readers, not just a browser.
- Code with support notes and a fallback.
- Input from disabled people who use the tech every day.

Your next steps

1. Run the page 9 checklist on your next send.
2. Fix the base template once: `lang`, wrapper, roles.
3. Spend ten minutes with VoiceOver or NVDA on a recent campaign.
4. Audit your three most-used templates with page 10.

NOTES

Notes

Templates to fix, tests to run, people to tell.

NOTES

Notes

Ideas for your next campaign.

A pocket guide to designing and coding email that everyone can read — from contrast and dark mode to alt text, interactive email and QA.

GET THE DIGITAL EDITION

Scan for the free download and more resources

tinyurl.com/a11y-field-guide

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