The Email Accessibility Checklist

An accessible email reaches more people, reads better on every device, and holds up when images are blocked. In the US, roughly 1 in 4 adults lives with some form of disability, and many more read email on small screens, in bright sunlight, or with images turned off.

Run through this checklist before every send. Each item is quick to check, and together they cover the issues that most often lock readers out.

Code and structure

- [ ] `lang` attribute set on the `<html>` tag (e.g. `lang="en"`), plus `dir="rtl"` for right-to-left languages
- [ ] `<title>` tag filled in with the email's subject or purpose
- [ ] `role="presentation"` on every layout table, so screen readers don't announce rows and columns
- [ ] Real headings (`<h1>`, `<h2>`, `<h3>`) in a logical order, not styled `<span>` or `<td>` text
- [ ] Body copy wrapped in `<p>` tags rather than loose text with `<br>` breaks
- [ ] Decorative spacers and dividers hidden from screen readers with `aria-hidden="true"`
- [ ] Pre-header text written to be read aloud, with any hidden filler characters marked `aria-hidden="true"`
- [ ] Data tables (if any) use `<th>` with `scope` attributes

Text and typography

- [ ] Body text at least 14px, ideally 16px, especially on mobile
- [ ] Line height around 1.5 for body copy
- [ ] Body copy left-aligned (for left-to-right languages); centering kept to short headlines or any text under 3 lines
- [ ] No justified text, which creates uneven gaps that are hard to track
- [ ] Long passages not set in all caps or italics
- [ ] Important information written as live text, never only inside an image
- [ ] Short paragraphs and plain, scannable language

Color and contrast

- [ ] Normal text meets a contrast ratio of at least 4.5:1 against its background (WCAG AA)
- [ ] Large text (24px+, or 18.66px+ bold) meets at least 3:1
- [ ] Button backgrounds and borders meet 3:1 against the surrounding area
- [ ] Text over background images or gradients checked at its lightest and darkest points
- [ ] Color is never the only signal: links are underlined, and sale prices or errors carry a word or icon too
- [ ] Contrast re-checked in dark mode, where clients may change your colors

Images and alt text

- [ ] Every `<img>` has an `alt` attribute, with no exceptions
- [ ] Decorative images use empty alt text (`alt=""`) so screen readers skip them
- [ ] Meaningful images describe their purpose, not their appearance ("Fall sale: 30% off outerwear", not "banner")
- [ ] Images containing text repeat that text in the alt attribute
- [ ] Alt text skips filler like "image of" or "picture of"
- [ ] Alt text styled (font, color, size) so it still reads well when images are blocked
- [ ] Animated GIFs flash no more than 3 times per second
- [ ] A GIF's key message appears in its first frame, since some Outlook versions show only that frame

Links and buttons

- [ ] Link text makes sense on its own ("Read the shipping policy", not "click here" or "learn more")
- [ ] Links that share the same text go to the same place
- [ ] Buttons are coded in HTML (bulletproof buttons), not built as images
- [ ] Tap targets are at least 44 × 44px with space between neighboring links
- [ ] Inline links are visibly different from body text beyond color alone
- [ ] Footer links (unsubscribe, preferences) are readable, not tiny gray text

Layout and reading order

- [ ] Code order matches visual order, so screen readers read content in the sequence people see it
- [ ] Multi-column sections stack into a single column on mobile in a sensible order
- [ ] Content reflows at 320px wide without horizontal scrolling
- [ ] The email still makes sense when zoomed to 200%
- [ ] The main message and call to action appear near the top
- [ ] Generous white space separates sections

Testing

- [ ] Listened to with a screen reader: VoiceOver (Apple Mail on iPhone or Mac) and NVDA or JAWS (Outlook or webmail on Windows)
- [ ] Viewed with images turned off
- [ ] Viewed in dark mode on at least Apple Mail, Gmail, and Outlook
- [ ] Every text and background color pair run through a contrast checker
- [ ] A plain-text version included and proofread
- [ ] Accessibility checks repeated after every late copy or design change

Want this handled for you?

Inbox Standard builds accessible, dark-mode-ready HTML emails that are tested across major clients before they reach your list. We work directly with brands and white-label for agencies. Get in touch for a quote.