
WordPress accessibility hardening checklist

A focused checklist for tightening accessibility on a live WordPress site – theme settings, content authoring, forms, and the most common plugin pitfalls. Designed for the developer or site owner walking through a site one section at a time.

Each item is mapped to the WCAG 2.1 / 2.2 success criterion it satisfies. Where a fix lives in a specific area of WordPress (Customizer, block editor, plugin settings), that's noted.

Why this exists

Most accessibility gaps on a WordPress site aren't bugs in the theme. They come from content authored without a heading hierarchy, decorative images without alt text, form plugins with broken label associations, and a handful of patterns in the block editor that are easy to miss. This checklist walks through those areas in the order you'd encounter them, with the specific WCAG criterion behind each item so a reviewer can trace a fix back to the standard.

This is a hardening checklist for sites already in production – it assumes the site exists and works. For new builds, accessibility considerations belong in the theme selection and design system from the start.

Section 1 — Theme and site setup

These are the foundational checks that affect every page on the site.

- Skip link present and visible on focus.** A "Skip to main content" link is the first focusable element and becomes visible when focused. *WCAG 2.4.1 Where: theme `header.php` or via plugin. Test by pressing Tab on a fresh page load.*
- Semantic landmarks in place.** `<header>`, `<nav>`, `<main>`, `<aside>`, `<footer>` are used appropriately. The main content area is wrapped in `<main id="main">`. *WCAG 1.3.1, 2.4.1*
- Focus visible on all interactive elements.** Links, buttons, form fields, and custom controls show a clear focus indicator when navigated by keyboard. The default browser outline is not removed without a replacement. *WCAG 2.4.7*
- Color contrast meets 4.5:1 for body text and 3:1 for large text.** Run a contrast check against the brand palette. Pay special attention to link colors against body backgrounds. *WCAG 1.4.3*

- Non-text contrast meets 3:1.** Form field borders, button outlines, focus indicators, and icon-only buttons have at least 3:1 contrast against their adjacent colors. *WCAG 1.4.11*
 - <html lang> set to the site's primary language.** Usually `en` or `en-US` for English. Confirm by viewing source. *WCAG 3.1.1*
 - Page titles unique and descriptive.** Each route has a `<title>` that describes the page, not just the site name. Most SEO plugins handle this – verify a few routes manually. *WCAG 2.4.2*
 - Tab order preserves meaning.** Tab through a representative page. Focus moves in an order that matches the visual layout. *WCAG 2.4.3*
 - Reflow at 320px without horizontal scroll.** Resize the browser window to 320px wide. Content reflows; no horizontal scrolling except in essential cases (data tables, maps). *WCAG 1.4.10*
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Section 2 — Content authoring in the block editor

These items are the responsibility of whoever writes content. Most of these can be enforced in editor training or a simple in-editor checklist for content authors.

- Heading order is sequential.** Each page has one `<h1>`. Subheadings descend (H2 → H3 → H4) without skipping levels. The block editor's "Document overview" panel shows the outline – use it. *WCAG 1.3.1, 2.4.6*
- Alt text on all informative images.** Images that convey content have descriptive alt text. Decorative images have empty alt (`alt=""`). The block editor's Image block has an Alt text field – populate it. *WCAG 1.1.1*
- Link text describes the destination.** "Click here" and "Read more" are replaced with descriptive text ("Read the 2025 audit report"). Link text makes sense out of context. *WCAG 2.4.4*
- Tables have captions and headers.** Data tables use the Table block with a caption. Header cells use `<th>` (the block editor's "Header section" toggle handles this). *WCAG 1.3.1*
- Lists are real list elements.** Bulleted and numbered content uses List blocks, not paragraphs with bullet glyphs. *WCAG 1.3.1*
- Quotes use the Quote block.** Pull quotes and blockquotes use the appropriate block, not styled paragraphs. *WCAG 1.3.1*

Embedded video has captions or a transcript. Videos embedded from YouTube, Vimeo, or self-hosted have either captions or a linked transcript. *WCAG 1.2.2, 1.2.5*

Decorative icons are hidden from assistive tech. Icons used purely for decoration have `aria-hidden="true"` or empty `alt`. *WCAG 1.3.1*

Section 3 — Forms and navigation

Most accessibility complaints from real users involve forms or navigation. Get these right.

Every form field has a visible label. Placeholder text doesn't count. The label is associated with the input via `<label for>` or wrapping. *WCAG 1.3.1, 3.3.2*

Required fields are marked in text, not color alone. "(required)" or an asterisk with a key, not just red. *WCAG 1.4.1, 3.3.2*

Error messages are specific and tied to fields. When validation fails, the error message identifies the field and describes the problem ("Email address is required" not "Error"). The field has `aria-describedby` pointing to the error. *WCAG 3.3.1, 3.3.3*

Autocomplete attributes set on common fields. `autocomplete="name"`, `email`, `tel`, etc. for fields that match the standard list. *WCAG 1.3.5*

Mobile menu is keyboard-accessible. Open the mobile menu using only the keyboard. Focus moves into the menu. Esc closes it. Focus returns to the trigger button. *WCAG 2.1.1, 2.4.3*

Search input has a visible label or accessible name. A magnifying-glass icon alone isn't enough – the input needs `<label>`, `aria-label`, or `aria-labelledby`. *WCAG 2.5.3, 4.1.2*

Dropdown navigation is keyboard-accessible. Hover-only dropdowns must also open on focus and keyboard interaction (Enter or Space, arrow keys). *WCAG 2.1.1*

No keyboard trap in modals or overlays. Tabbing out of a modal moves focus back into the modal, not beyond it. Esc closes the modal and returns focus to the trigger. *WCAG 2.1.2*

Section 4 — Plugin review

The five plugin categories most likely to introduce accessibility regressions. Audit anything you have installed in these categories.

- Form plugins.** Gravity Forms, WPForms, Formidable, Contact Form 7. Check label-input associations, error messages, required field markers, focus management on submit. Some popular themes apply CSS that breaks these defaults.
- Page builders.** Elementor, Divi, Beaver Builder, WPBakery. Page builders frequently introduce divs styled to look like headings or buttons without the semantic markup. Audit a page built with each builder you use.
- Slider and carousel plugins.** Sliders are a frequent accessibility offender – auto-rotating without pause control, no keyboard navigation, no alt text on slide images. If you can replace a slider with static content, do.
- Cookie consent banners.** Many third-party banners fail focus management – opening the banner doesn't move focus to it, or closing it doesn't return focus. Verify keyboard operability.
- Accessibility "overlay" plugins.** Plugins that promise to "make your site accessible" via a widget (UserWay, accessiBe, AudioEye) do not produce conformance and have been the subject of multiple lawsuits. Remove them and do the underlying work.

Section 5 — Pre-launch and ongoing

The final pass before a launch or release, plus what to keep doing.

- Automated scan passes.** Run axe DevTools, WAVE, or Lighthouse Accessibility against representative pages. Triage failures, fix or document each.
- Keyboard-only walkthrough.** Unplug the mouse. Complete the primary user flows (read content, submit the contact form, navigate to a specific page) using only the keyboard.
- Screen-reader spot check.** Open the homepage in VoiceOver (Mac), NVDA (Windows), or TalkBack (Android). Listen to the first 30 seconds. Headings make sense, link text makes sense, images announce alt text.
- 200% zoom works.** Zoom the browser to 200%. Content reflows; nothing is cut off or unreachable.

Forced colors mode. Open the site with Windows High Contrast mode or `forced-colors: active`. Borders, focus indicators, and essential UI remain visible.

Accessibility statement linked. The site has an accessibility statement page linked from the footer, naming the standard targeted and the date of the most recent review. (See WCAG 21566.)

Appendix — useful WordPress plugins

These plugins help with accessibility work without making conformance claims for you:

WP Accessibility — adds skip links, fixes title attributes, removes `target="_blank"` by default. Free.

Yoast SEO — handles `<title>` and meta correctly; useful for criterion 2.4.2.

axe DevTools (browser extension) — automated scan tool. Free for the basic version.

WAVE (browser extension) — visual accessibility checker. Free.

Prepared by Nessim Works. Items map to W3C Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1 / 2.2 Level A and AA. WordPress-specific guidance reflects the block editor (Gutenberg) as of WordPress 6.x.
