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Accessible Course Design
(Overview and Best Practices)

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Universal Design for Learning
and Accessible Design

What Is UDL?

- **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**

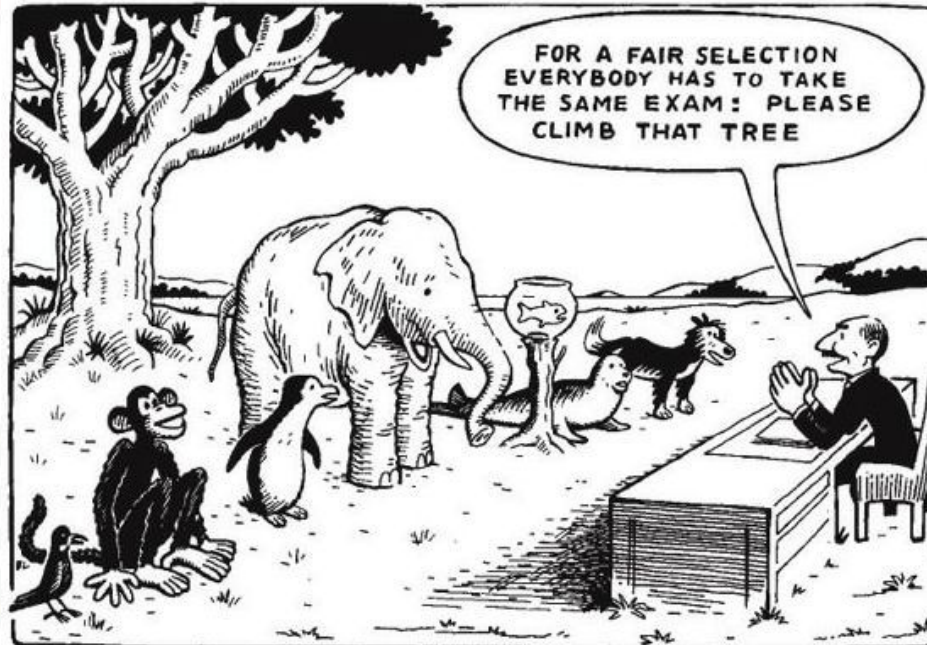
- UDL is a way of designing courses so *all students* can learn, not just a “typical” student.
- It helps instructors plan for student differences from the start instead of reacting later.

- **The Big Idea**

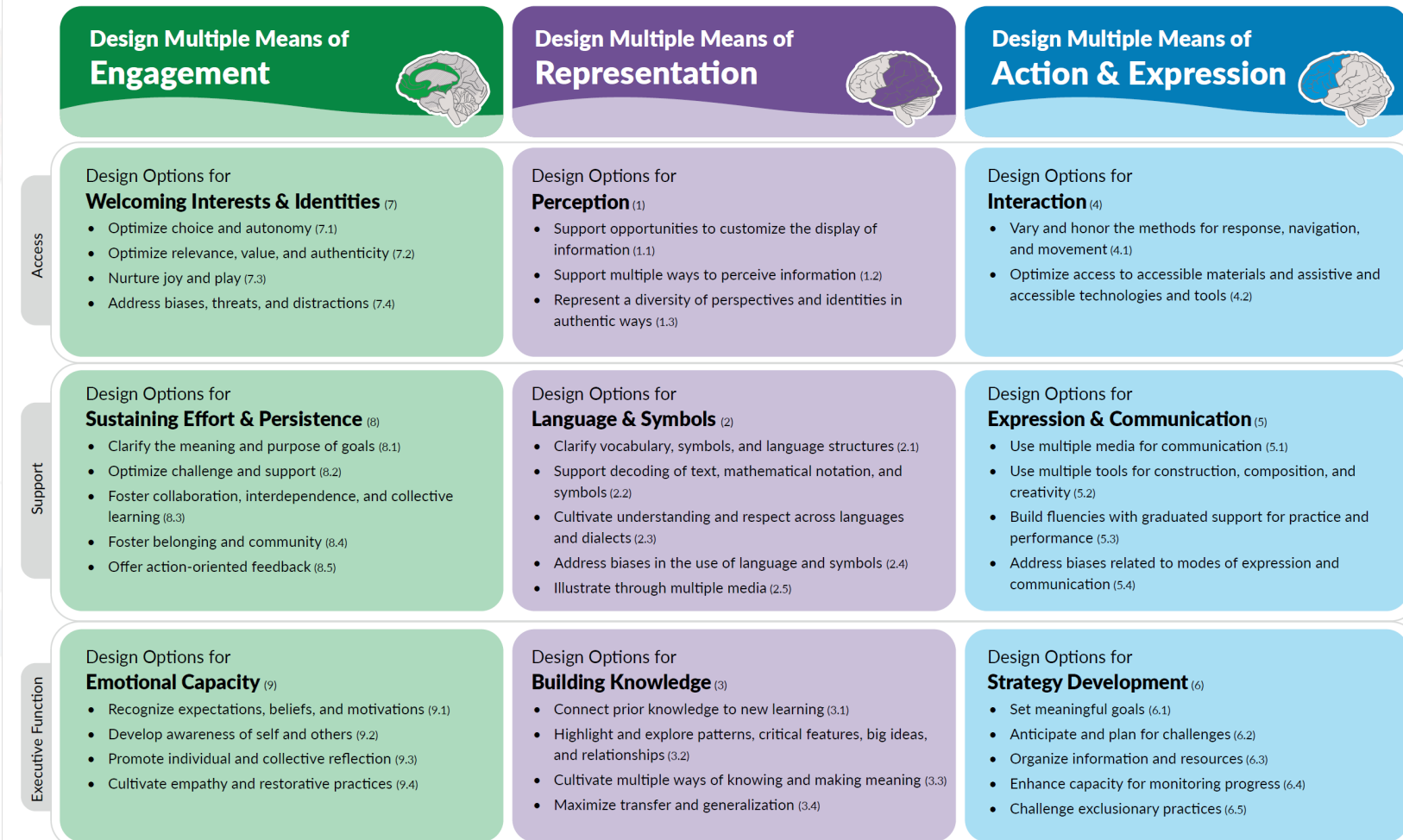
- Instead of fixing barriers mid-semester, UDL reduces them before they happen.
- UDL makes courses easier to navigate, clearer to understand, and more welcoming for all learners.
- “The goal of UDL is learner agency that is purposeful & reflective, resourceful & authentic, strategic & action-oriented.” - [CAST](#)

Why UDL Matters

- UDL supports first-gen students, multilingual learners, students with disabilities, busy adult learners, and anyone navigating challenges.
- A well-designed course works better for all students — and reduces workload for instructors later.



Universal Design for Learning Guidelines



Principle 1: Multiple Means of Engagement

Engagement asks, “How do I help students **want** to learn this?”

- Engagement is about **motivation**, **relevance**, and **investment**. Students connect with material differently:
 - Some love discussion; others prefer reflection.
 - Some are motivated by real-world examples; others by creative problem-solving.
 - Some thrive with collaboration; others learn best individually.
- UDL encourages giving students different paths to become interested and stay invested in the learning.

Principle 2: Multiple Means of Representation

Representation asks, “Can students **access and understand** the material, no matter how they learn best?”

- Representation is about **how content is presented**. Students don’t all absorb information the same way, so offering more than one format helps everyone:
 - Provide visuals *and* text.
 - Use charts, diagrams, summaries, and examples.
 - Include captions, transcripts, or simplified explanations when appropriate. This ensures students can choose the version of the material that works best for them.

Principle 3: Multiple Means of Action & Expression

Action/Expression asks, “Can students show mastery in more than one way?”

- Action & Expression is about **how students demonstrate learning**. One single assessment format rarely captures everyone’s strengths. When possible, UDL recommends giving options:
 - A paper *or* a presentation
 - A recorded explanation *or* a written one
 - A diagram, model, short essay, or other medium
- Flexibility helps students show mastery without being limited by one mode of expression.

Variability Is Normal

- In any classroom, students differ in:
 - Language background
 - Reading speed
 - Attention needs
 - Tech comfort
 - Prior knowledge
 - Work schedules and responsibilities
- These differences aren't outliers!
- UDL starts with the assumption that diversity is the norm, so courses need to be flexible enough to serve many types of learners.

Accessibility Comes First in UDL

- If you are designing with UDL in mind, accessibility will become second nature.
- If documents aren't readable, videos lack captions, or navigation is confusing, students are blocked before they begin.
- Accessibility ensures the foundation for UDL is solid so **every student** can participate meaningfully from day one.

UDL and Accessible Design Reduces Accommodations Later

- When a course is flexible and accessible from the start, fewer students require individual accommodations.
 - Less scrambling mid-semester
 - Less retrofitting of inaccessible materials
 - A smoother experience for instructors
 - More independence and confidence for students
- UDL and accessible design don't replace accommodations, but they greatly reduce the need for one-off fixes.

How UDL Connects to Accessibility Standards

UDL and accessibility aren't separate ideas. They reinforce each other. WCAG's POUR principles describe what accessible content must be:

- **Perceivable** — students can see/hear the content
- **Operable** — students can navigate and interact with it
- **Understandable** — students can follow instructions and layout
- **Robust** — content works across technologies and assistive tools

UDL and POUR work together to ensure all students can learn effectively.

- UDL - **instructional structure**
- POUR - **technical structure**

POUR Overview for Course Design

- **Perceivable (P)**

- Structure, headings, contrast
- Alt text/captions/audio descriptions

- **Operable (O)**

- Keyboard access
- Avoiding drag-and-drop
- Clear navigation pathways
- Avoiding unexpected new tabs/windows

POUR Overview for Course Design (continued)

- **Understandable (U)**

- Predictable patterns
- Clear instructions
- Consistent naming
- Transparent link behavior

- **Robust (R)**

- Assistive technology (AT) compatibility
- Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT)-informed tool selection
- Avoiding inaccessible LTIs/plugins

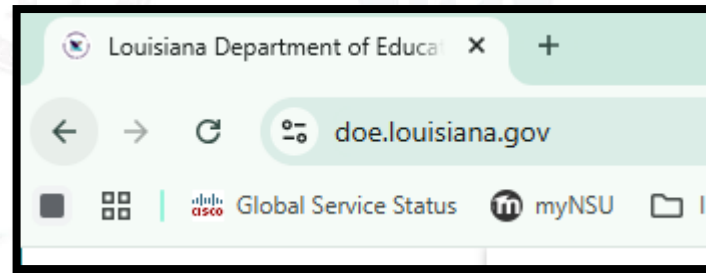
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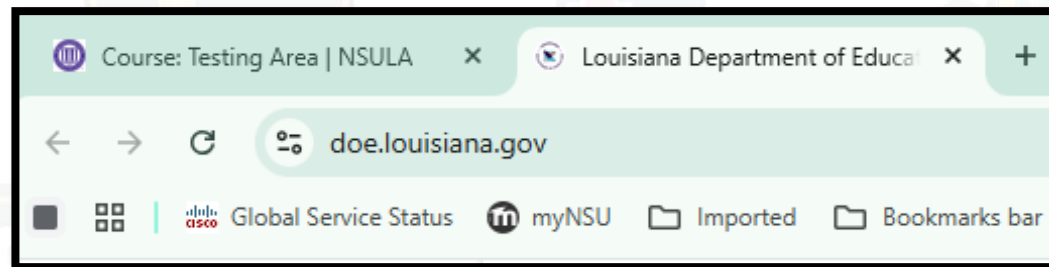
Accessible Link Behavior in the LMS
(Overview and Best Practices)

Choices for link behavior in LMS

- **Open in same window (Open)** – user will have to use “Back” to get back to course



- **Open in new window (or tab)** - user can close the new tab and not lose their place within the course



Advice

- Has been: Open in a new window or tab to avoid closing/losing the LMS window
- MOST accessible: Open in the same tab or window
- If opening in a new window, label (open in new window)

**** Be CONSISTENT** – Still the number one design rule

WCAG 3.2

- *Make web pages appear and operate in predictable ways*
- Suddenly moving to a new window can be disorienting for screen reader users

When “open in new window” is best option

- Student needs to reference the information on the site to complete something open in the LMS

Moodle (Link on Page)

Create link

×

Text to display

Louisiana Department of Education

Enter a URL

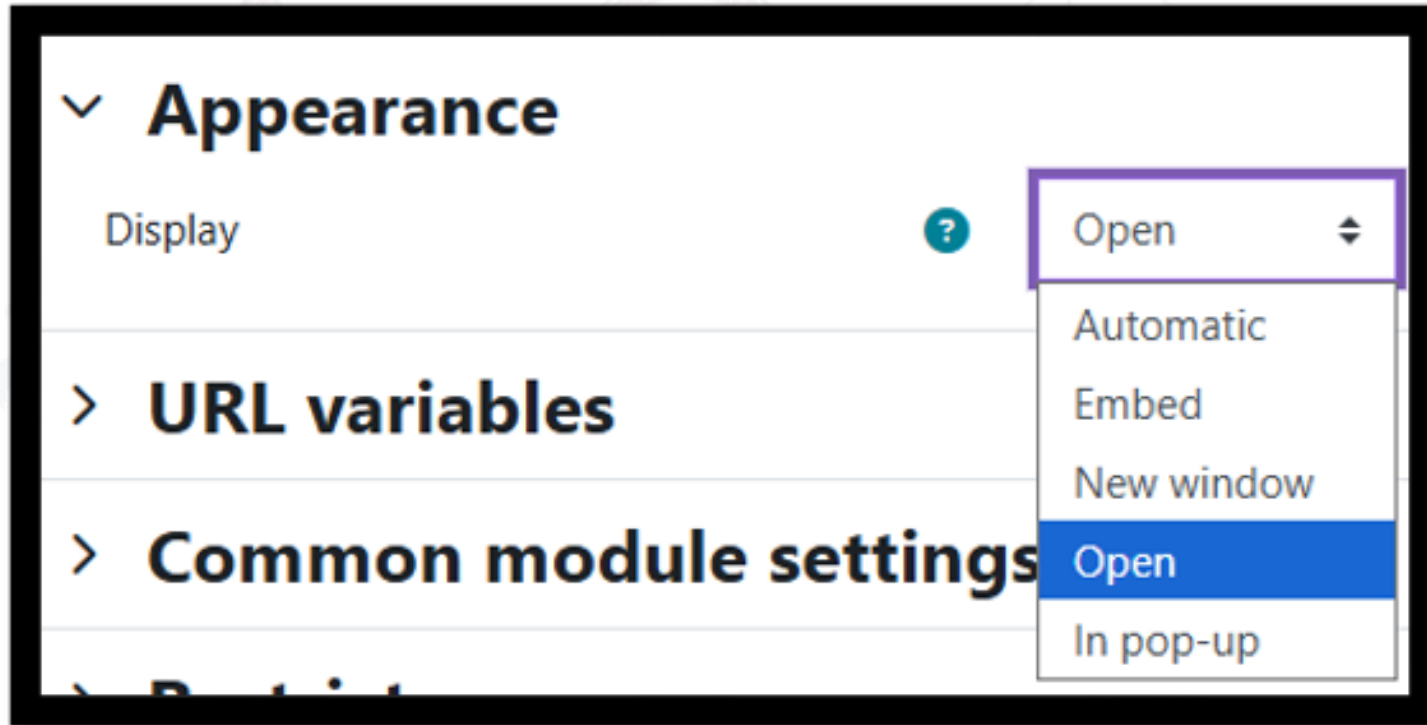
https://doe.louisiana.gov/

Browse repositories...

☐ Open in new window

Create link

Moodle (URL Resource)



Automatic opens the link text on another page; requires a second click

Embed only works for certain media links (but does keep the student in the same window)

In pop-up – not recommended; possibly most disorienting option

URL resource that opens in new window

▼ General

Name

! ?






siana Department of Education (opens in New Window)

External URL

!

https://doe.louisiana.gov/

Description

↵ A ▼ B I     

☐ Display description on course page ?

▼ Appearance

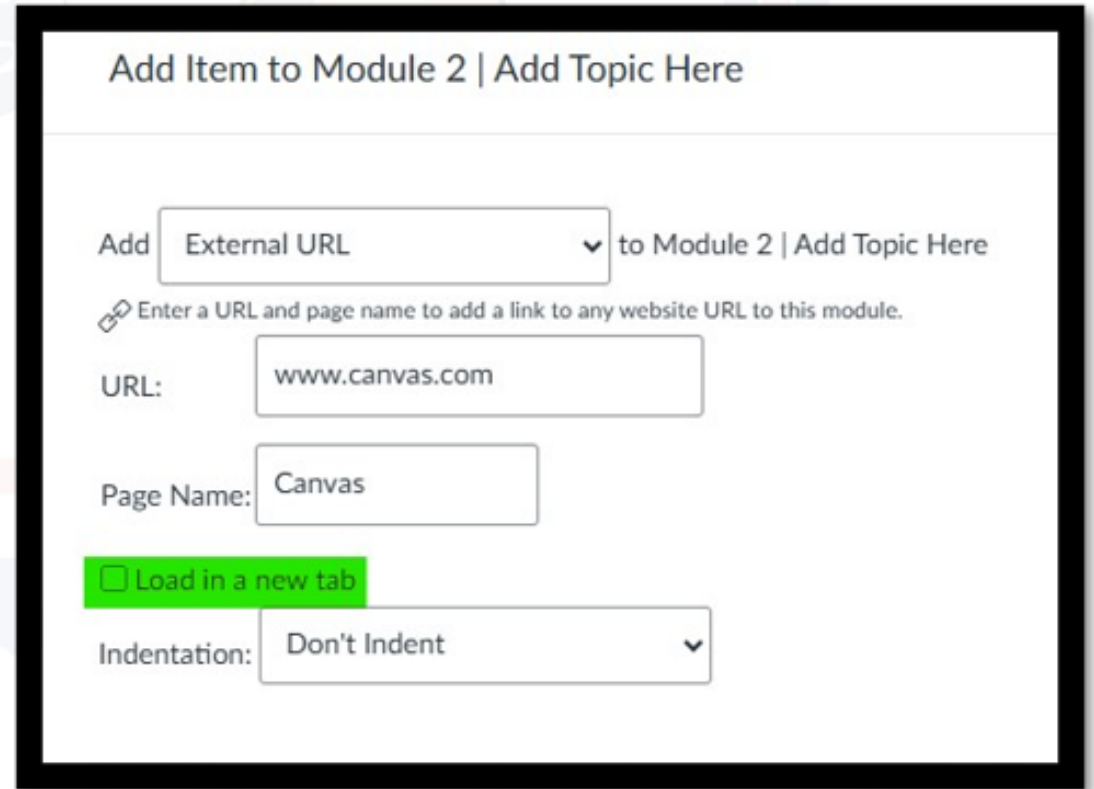
Display

?

New window ⇅

Canvas link

- When adding an external link to Canvas, do not choose to 'Load in a new tab' unless you have a specific reason.
- Canvas defaults to not loading in new tab. Some links may not open in the Canvas tab. Be sure to check.



Add Item to Module 2 | Add Topic Here

Add External URL to Module 2 | Add Topic Here

Enter a URL and page name to add a link to any website URL to this module.

URL:

Page Name:

☐ Load in a new tab

Indentation: Don't Indent

Summary

- MOST accessible choice – open in same window or tab for most items
- If you choose Open in New Tab or Window, be sure to add (Opens in new window) to link text – to warn users of the upcoming change
- Whatever you choose to do, the best design advice is to be as consistent as possible within your course.

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Choosing Accessible Applications
(Overview and Best Practices)

General Information

- ALL applications used in a course need to meet compliance standards (WCAG 2.1 AA)
- When choosing NEW applications to include in courses
 - Each university will have procedures
 - Some may have approved/unapproved software lists
 - Some may have repositories of compliance information collected
 - Not all applications go through formal purchase process

Evaluation Steps

- Look for information on the vendor site – accessibility statement is a good start. (tip: Google “vendor name accessibility”)
- Find or request the Accessibility Conformance Report/VPAT (some vendors place on-site, and some give an email address to request).
- Read and evaluate; conduct tests when possible.
- Institutions should include accessibility assurance in vendor contracts. This will usually be a purchasing department or IT function.
- Pass information on to IT support for assistance with the final decision.

Definitions

- **WCAG:** Web Content Accessibility Guidelines
 - **Accessibility Statement:** A public document that describes an organization's commitment to making its digital content, products, and services accessible to people with disabilities.
 - **VPAT:** Voluntary Product Accessibility Template; describes what standards are met and planned remediation
 - **ACR:** Accessibility Conformance Report (often also referred to as VPAT)
- ** VPAT is the blank, standardized template; ACR is the completed, filled-in document that results from filling out the VPAT.

VPAT/ACR

General setup

- List of the WCAG (or other) standards
- Levels of achievement of each
 - Supports
 - Partially Supports
 - Does Not Support
 - Not Applicable

Look for:

- Who completed the report?
- What technologies were used to test?
- What standards are not supported?
- Is there a timeline for remediation to meet those standards?
- How would unmet standards impact a user?

Example (Pearson VitalSource Bookshelf)

VitalSource Bookshelf (Online) Accessibility Conformance Report

International edition, based on VPAT® version 2.4Rev*

Name of product/version:	VitalSource Bookshelf Online
Report date:	3 January 2024
Product description:	Website
Contact information:	accessibility@vitalsource.com
Notes:	
Evaluation methods used:	<p>This conformance report is based on the results of an accessibility audit conducted by TPGi on a representative sample of pages/components across selected user journeys, for the purpose of assessing conformance to accessibility guidelines.</p> <p>The W3C Website Accessibility Conformance Evaluation Methodology (WCAG-EM) was followed for conducting the accessibility audit. The testing included manual accessibility testing, automated accessibility tools, and testing with assistive technology across multiple platforms and browsers.</p> <p>The following applications were used as part of the audit to identify potential accessibility issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Desktop browsers: Google Chrome (macOS, Windows), Safari (macOS)• Assistive technologies and settings: JAWS (Windows), NVDA (Windows), VoiceOver (macOS)• Accessibility testing tools: ARC Toolkit, Colour Contrast Analyser, DevTools Accessibility Panel, misc specialist accessibility bookmarklets
Applicable standards/guidelines:	<p>This report covers the degree of conformance for the following accessibility standards/guidelines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 Level A and AA• Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 Level A and AA• Revised Section 508 standards published January 18, 2017 and corrected January 22, 2018• EN 301 549 Accessibility requirements for ICT products and services - V3.1.1 (2019-11) and EN 301 549 Accessibility requirements for ICT products and services - V3.2.1 (2021-03)



Example Conformance Standards (Pearson VitalSource Bookshelf)

Criteria	Conformance level	Remarks and explanations
<p><u>1.1.1 Non-text Content</u> (Level A)</p> <p>Also applies to:</p> <p>EN 301 549 Criteria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 9.1.1.1 (Web)• 10.1.1.1 (Non-web document)• 11.1.1.1.1 (Open Functionality Software)• 11.1.1.1.2 (Closed Functionality Software)• 11.8.2 (Authoring Tool)• 12.1.2 (Product Docs)• 12.2.4 (Support Docs) <p>Revised Section 508</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 501 (Web)(Software)• 504.2 (Authoring Tool)• 602.3 (Support Docs)	Partially supports	<p>Non-text content that is presented to the user has a text alternative that serves the equivalent purpose, with just one exception an incorrect alt text for a corporate logo (on sign on pages).</p> <p>Note that book content is out of scope – individual publishers are responsible for the content that they provide</p>
<p><u>1.2.1 Audio-only and Video-only (Prerecorded)</u> (Level A)</p> <p>Also applies to:</p> <p>EN 301 549 Criteria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 9.1.2.1 (Web)• 10.1.2.1 (Non-web document)	Not applicable	The application contains no audio-only or video-only content.

Red Flags in a VPAT or ACR

- Inaccurate or unclear description of product
- Everything says “Supports” with no detail
- Report does not seem to accurately represent product features
- Tool hasn’t been tested with screen readers
- No mention of keyboard navigation
- Report is more than a year old, or not dated
- No timeline for updating features that do not meet standards
- Possible: Report done internally

Green Flags in a VPAT or ACR

- Report completed by external reviewer
- Recent
- Not all “Supports” without adequate description
- Timelines provided for remediation where necessary

If some standards are not met

If a product does not meet standards sufficiently (and you still need/want to use it):

- Develop a timeline for updates
- Update the contract to reflect expectations
- Have an alternative in place for meeting needs of users

Summary

- Work with IT/purchasing at your school to make decisions about adoption of new applications
- You can acquire vendor documentation
- Understand the basics of evaluating accessibility documentation
- If possible, do some testing prior to purchase/adoption