

Is Your Course CLEAR? Ensuring Quality and Accessibility in Online Learning

Making accessibility actionable through the CLEAR Framework

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Today's Focus

01

Legal Foundation

Understand how ADA Title II and WCAG 2.2 shape online course accessibility requirements and institutional responsibilities

03

Course Evaluation

Apply CLEAR principles to evaluate and systematically improve your existing course design and materials

02

CLEAR Framework

Explore the CLEAR Framework as a practical tool for designing inclusive, accessible courses that serve all learners

04

Action Planning

Develop a concrete action plan aligned with Quality Matters Standard 8 and institutional accessibility goals

 **Activity:** Turn to a partner and share what accessibility challenges you've faced in your course or department.

Accessibility Is Essential, Not Optional

Why Accessibility Matters

Accessibility means providing **equal, timely, and effective access** to learning for everyone—regardless of ability, technology, or circumstance. It's not an add-on or accommodation; it's foundational to equitable education.

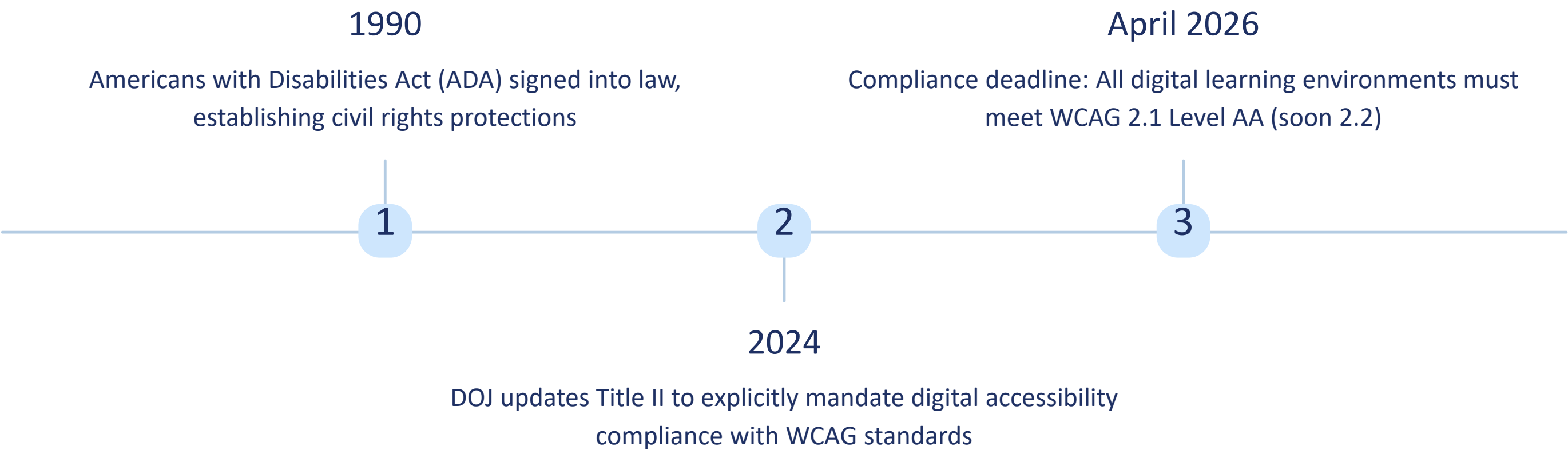
Under ADA Title II, online learning is considered part of "public services," making accessibility a legal requirement, not a choice. When content is inaccessible, we create barriers that limit participation, engagement, and belonging for students who rely on assistive technologies or alternative formats.

"Accessibility is the foundation of equity in digital learning."

ADA Title II and the 2024 Update

The Legal Context

On April 24, 2024, the Department of Justice updated ADA Title II regulations to explicitly include digital accessibility requirements for all public entities, including educational institutions. This landmark update clarifies what has long been implied: digital spaces must be accessible.



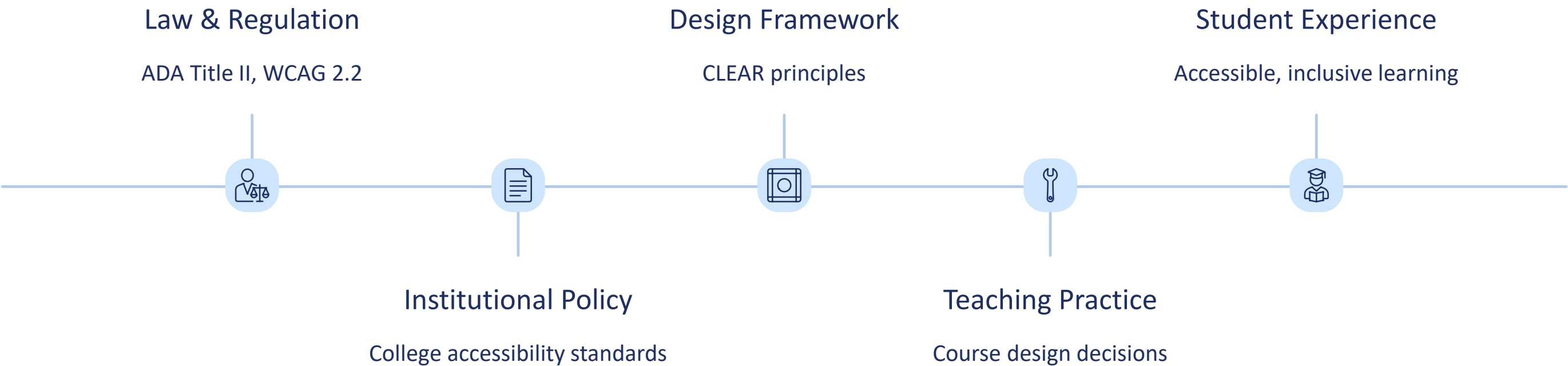
The regulations require compliance with **WCAG 2.1 Level AA** standards, with WCAG 2.2 expected to become the benchmark. This applies comprehensively to all web content, mobile applications, and digital learning environments.

From Compliance to Classroom Impact

Connecting Policy to Practice

Legal mandates and technical standards tell us *what* is required, but they don't always show us *how* to implement accessibility in our daily work. That's where practical frameworks become essential.

Montgomery College's Universal Design Center (UDC) created the CLEAR Framework specifically to bridge this gap—translating complex regulations into actionable design principles that faculty and instructional designers can immediately apply.



The CLEAR Framework for Accessible Design

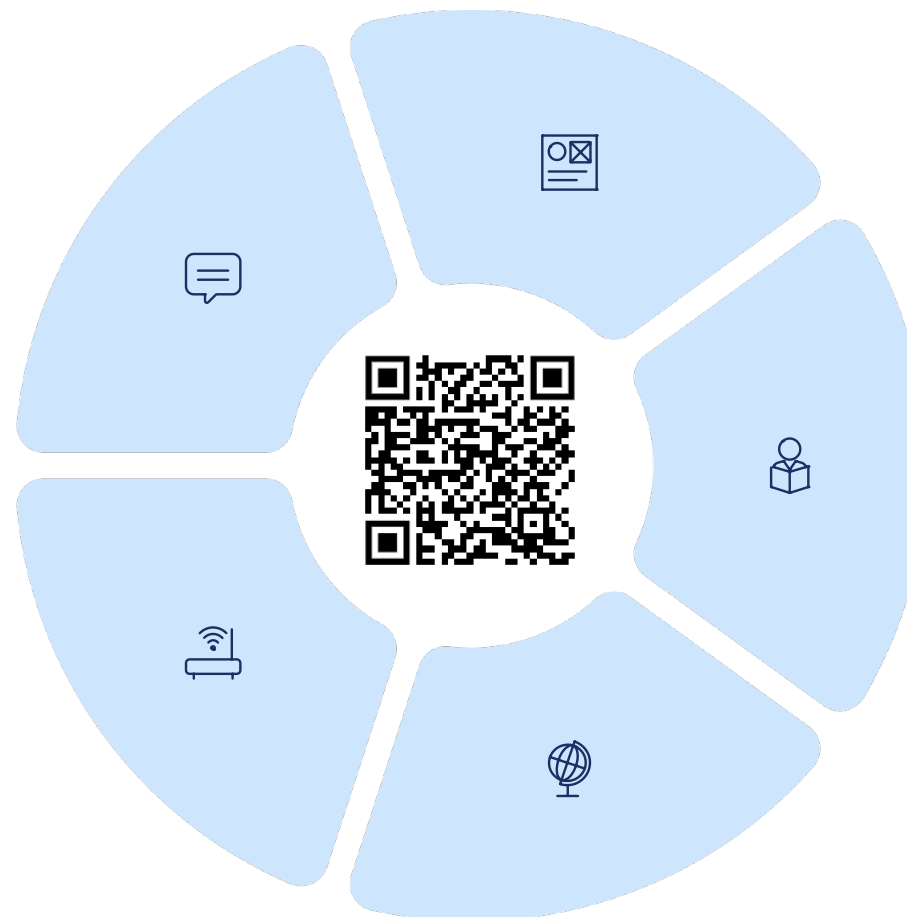
CLEAR is a practical, memorable framework that makes accessibility actionable. Each letter represents a key design principle that, when applied consistently, creates courses that work for all learners.

Caption Everything

Provide captions and transcripts for all audio and video content

Responsive Design

Ensure content adapts seamlessly across all devices and screen sizes



Logical Layout

Organize content with consistent structure and intuitive navigation

Easy to Read

Use plain language, readable fonts, and strong color contrast

Alt Text for Images

Describe images meaningfully for screen reader users

📌 **Reflection Prompt:** As we walk through each element, think about your course—where are your strengths? Where might barriers exist?

C: Caption Everything

Why Captions Matter

Captions and transcripts aren't just for students with hearing disabilities—they benefit *all learners*. Students watching videos in noisy environments, non-native English speakers, and anyone who processes information better through reading all gain from captions.

Auto-captioning tools like Zoom, YuJa, and YouTube can save time, but they require careful review for accuracy. Technical terms, names, and discipline-specific vocabulary often need correction.

Your Caption Checklist:

- All videos have **accurate, synchronized captions**
- Audio-only files include **complete transcripts**
- Non-speech audio (music, sound effects) is **described in captions**
- Live sessions include **real-time captioning** or post-session transcripts

📋 **Mini-Activity:** We'll watch a 30-second clip twice—once with captions, once without. What did you miss the second time?

L: Logical Layout

Structure That Supports Learning

A logical layout isn't just aesthetically pleasing—it's essential for accessibility. Screen reader users navigate by structure, not visual appearance. When we organize content thoughtfully, we create predictable patterns that reduce cognitive load for all students.

Consistent Module Structure

Organize content in weekly or thematic modules that follow the same pattern throughout your course

Clear Heading Hierarchy

Use headings (H1, H2, H3) systematically to create a logical outline that assistive technology can navigate

Intuitive Navigation

Keep critical materials accessible within two clicks; avoid deeply nested folders or unclear menu structures

Predictable Patterns

Place similar content types (readings, assignments, discussions) in the same location across modules

📋 **Activity Prompt:** Open your LMS mentally—does your navigation reflect your teaching flow? Would a new student find what they need quickly?

E: Easy to Read

Readability Principles

Easy-to-read content reduces barriers for students with learning disabilities, visual impairments, or cognitive differences—and makes content clearer for everyone.

Use **plain language** whenever possible. This doesn't mean "dumbing down" content; it means communicating complex ideas clearly. Choose accessible fonts like Arial, Verdana, or Calibri at minimum 12pt size.

Readability Checklist:

- Sans-serif fonts (Arial, Verdana) at **12pt or larger**
- **Strong contrast** between text and background (minimum 4.5:1 ratio)
- Short paragraphs and **white space** to break up text
- **Plain language** free of unnecessary jargon
- Bulleted or numbered lists instead of long blocks of text

A: Alt Text for Images

Making Visual Content Accessible

Alt text (alternative text) provides a text description of images for screen reader users. It's one of the most fundamental accessibility requirements, yet it's often overlooked or done poorly.

Effective alt text is **concise but descriptive**—it conveys the meaning and purpose of the image, not every visual detail. For complex images like charts or diagrams, provide both brief alt text and a full text explanation nearby.

Informative Images


Describe what's important: "Bar chart showing 30% increase in enrollment from 2020 to 2024"

Decorative Images

Mark as decorative (empty alt attribute) so screen readers skip them: photos used purely for visual interest

Complex Graphics

Provide both alt text and a longer description: "See detailed data table below chart for complete enrollment figures"

 **Mini-Activity:** Look at an image in your course materials. How would you write alt text for it? What information is essential to understanding your lesson?

R: Responsive Design

Access on Any Device

Today's students access courses from smartphones, tablets, laptops, and desktops—sometimes all in the same day. Responsive design ensures your content adapts gracefully to any screen size or device type.

Avoid fixed-width layouts that force horizontal scrolling on mobile devices. Test your content across different browsers and devices to identify issues before students encounter them.

Responsive Design Checklist:


- Layout **adjusts automatically** to screen size (no horizontal scrolling)
- Images and media **scale appropriately** without pixelation or overflow
- Text remains **readable** without zooming on mobile devices
- Navigation menus are **touch-friendly** and accessible on small screens
- Videos and embedded content **function properly** across devices
- PDFs are **accessible** or alternatives provided for mobile users

How CLEAR Is Your Course?

CLEAR Self-Assessment Activity

Now it's time to evaluate your own course using the CLEAR framework. This self-assessment helps you identify strengths and prioritize improvements.

CLEAR Element	What to Assess	Your Rating (1-5)
Caption Everything	All videos captioned; audio has transcripts	
Logical Layout	Consistent structure; clear navigation; proper headings	
Easy to Read	Readable fonts; strong contrast; plain language	
Alt Text for Images	All images have descriptive alt text; decorative images marked	
Responsive Design	Content works on all devices; no horizontal scrolling	

 **Reflection:** Which area scored lowest? Circle one element you'll focus on improving today. What's one concrete action you can take this week?

Applying CLEAR in Practice

Case Study Activity

Let's apply CLEAR to a real-world scenario. Working in pairs or small groups, you'll diagnose accessibility issues and recommend solutions.

The Scenario:

Dr. Johnson's online history course includes 15 lecture videos (uncaptioned), weekly readings in image-based PDF scans, and a course site with inconsistent navigation where module names change each week. Students frequently report difficulty finding assignments, and several have complained about being unable to access videos on mobile devices.

01

Identify Issues

Which CLEAR principles are being violated?
List specific accessibility barriers students face.

02

Propose Solutions

For each issue, suggest two specific, actionable fixes Dr. Johnson could implement.

03

Prioritize Actions

Which improvements would have the greatest impact on student access? What should Dr. Johnson tackle first?

Time allocated: 5 minutes for group work, 5 minutes for share-out and discussion. Be ready to share your top recommendations!

Aligning CLEAR with Quality Matters Standard 8

CLEAR and QM Standard 8

The CLEAR Framework isn't just about compliance—it directly supports Quality Matters (QM) Standard 8, which focuses on accessibility and usability. When you apply CLEAR principles, you're simultaneously meeting QM expectations and WCAG 2.2 guidelines.

QM 8.0 Category	CLEAR Connection	Example Implementation
8.1: Navigation & Design	L – Logical Layout	Consistent module structure with predictable navigation patterns
8.2: Accessibility Standards	C, A, E	Captioned videos, descriptive alt text, readable fonts and contrast
8.3: Usability on Devices	R – Responsive Design	Content adapts to mobile, tablet, and desktop without loss of functionality
8.4: Assistive Technology	C, A	Accurate captions, descriptive alt text, proper heading structure for screen readers

By operationalizing CLEAR in your course design, you're building accessibility into your practice—not treating it as a separate checklist to complete.

Your CLEAR Action Plan

Making It Actionable

Knowledge without action doesn't create change. Let's transform today's learning into concrete steps you can take immediately. Your action plan should be *specific, realistic, and measurable*.

1

Choose Your Focus Area

Select one CLEAR element where your course needs the most improvement. Don't try to fix everything at once.

2

Define Specific Action

What exactly will you do? Be concrete: "Add captions to Module 3 videos" not "improve accessibility."

3

Set a Timeline

When will you complete this action? Next week? Before next semester? Set a realistic deadline.

4

Identify Support Needed

What tools, resources, or assistance do you need? Who can help? What barriers might you face?

☐ **Your Commitment:** Write down one specific action you will take in your course within the next week. Consider: What's the impact on students? What do you need to make it happen?

Support for Accessibility at Montgomery College

Institutional Support and Next Steps

You don't have to navigate accessibility alone. Montgomery College provides extensive resources, training, and technical support to help faculty create accessible, inclusive courses.



Universal Design Center (UDC)

Technical assistance, accessibility reviews, document remediation, and one-on-one consultations for course design



Captioning Services

Support for video captioning, transcription services, and guidance on using auto-captioning tools effectively



UDL Integration

Resources for integrating Universal Design for Learning principles with accessibility best practices



CTL Workshops

Regular training sessions on accessible course design, CLEAR framework implementation, and Universal Design for Learning



Document Remediation

Assistance converting inaccessible PDFs, PowerPoints, and documents into accessible formats with proper structure



Accessibility Testing

Training on accessibility checking tools, screen reader testing, and course accessibility audits

SAVE THE DATE

Fall 2025 Inclusion by Design Summit

November 7, 2025



**CREATING
SPACES
WHERE
EVERYONE
THRIVES**



Free and Open to **Everyone!**

Accessibility Builds Belonging

From Access to Inclusion

Accessibility is the gateway to belonging. When we design courses that work for everyone, we send a powerful message: *You are valued here. Your participation matters. This learning space is for you.*

Belonging emerges when all learners can engage fully, independently, and with dignity. It's not just about removing barriers—it's about creating environments where every student can thrive.

"CLEAR is not just compliance—it's care in design."

Every accessibility choice we make is an act of inclusion. When we caption videos, write alt text, or structure our content logically, we're saying: Your learning experience matters.

What We've Learned Today

Key Takeaways

CLEAR Makes It Actionable


The CLEAR Framework transforms complex accessibility requirements into practical, memorable design principles you can apply immediately

Law Defines Why, CLEAR Defines How

ADA Title II and WCAG 2.2 establish legal requirements; CLEAR shows you exactly how to meet them in your daily course design work

Small Decisions, Big Impact

Every design choice—from captions to color contrast—creates equity or barriers. Your decisions directly affect student success and belonging

 **Final Reflection:** Write one word on a sticky note that describes what you'll do differently after this session. Share it with the person next to you.

Your Turn – Questions, Reflections, and Insights

Questions and Discussion

This is your opportunity to dig deeper, share challenges, and learn from each other's experiences. Let's explore:

- What questions do you have about implementing CLEAR in your specific discipline or course?
- What institutional challenges or barriers do you anticipate? How might we address them together?
- What accessibility wins have you experienced? Share your success stories!
- What additional support or resources would help you make your courses more accessible?

Remember: we're building a community of practice around accessibility. Your questions help everyone learn, and your insights might solve problems others are facing.

Thank You!

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Let's continue the conversation about creating accessible, inclusive
learning experiences. Reach out for support, collaboration, or just
to share your accessibility journey.

Resources:

