



Accessibility Frequently Asked Questions

Is SMARTHINKING “ADA Compliant”?

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act provides the first federal regulations for Internet content. Section 508 was published in December 2000, and went into effect in June 2001. While section 508 was expected to only apply to federal government Web sites, many public colleges and universities are requiring compliance. SMARTHINKING is working to bring our platform into compliance with industry standards for accessibility, the World Wide Web Consortium’s Web Accessibility Initiative Standards (W3C WAIS), and the newly released Section 508 guidelines. While it is still unclear exactly what “ADA or 508 Compliance” entails, SMARTHINKING is committed to making sure that everyone can take advantage of our services and welcomes comments and suggestions for improving our service in this regard.

What accessibility features are available in the SMARTHINKING platform?

The SMARTHINKING online tutoring platform consists of a general Web site for account administration and archiving of tutoring sessions, a form-based Online Writing Lab, online study resources, and synchronous and asynchronous tutoring via a whiteboard system. In summer 2001, SMARTHINKING released an updated version of its online tutoring platform.

Accessibility enhancements for this version included the following items:

- All system images have alt tags.
- Framesets were eliminated.
- Data tables were optimized for use with screen readers by adding attributes to associate column headings with table content.
- Data input fields are identified with alt tags.
- Tab order was set to ensure that forms function in a logical fashion.
- URL links were set up with tab functions, enabling alt key navigation.

What about SMARTHINKING’s Whiteboard?

While most other features of the SMARTHINKING site are 508 compliant, SMARTHINKING’s whiteboard, which is used for synchronous and asynchronous tutoring, is not currently readable by commonly used screen readers. SMARTHINKING has been investigating how to provide accessibility features for our whiteboard technology and will do what is necessary to offer a compliant synchronous tutoring platform as soon as possible. Since the whiteboard is a major feature of our online tutoring services, we will also be communicating with vendors of screen reading software to ensure that newer versions are capable of reading Flash-based whiteboards.

How do Screen Readers (such as JAWS) work with SMARTHINKING?

Current versions of JAWS for Windows work with many of the advanced HTML features that SMARTHINKING uses. Newer versions of Jaws support frames, forms, JavaScript alert boxes, graphics (via alt tags), and multi-columned tables. Versions of JAWS 3.5 and up are optimized to take advantage of newer accessibility features in IE 5.5. (More information about Jaws for Windows can be found at <http://www.hj.com>)



What are the options for visually impaired students in need of real-time tutoring?

Visually impaired students can avail themselves to SMARTHINKING's general Web site, study resources and online writing lab using screen readers, however, using any of the services that involve use of the whiteboard (e.g. real-time tutoring) may prove to be difficult. According to Doug Wakefield, an officer at the Access Board (the agency that monitors 508 compliance), it is up to the contracting agency (i.e. the school) to determine whether or not "equal information" can be provided in lieu of the service that is inaccessible, thereby making their tutoring services "compliant". For institutions that do not have "equal", in-person or phone-based tutoring programs for visually impaired students, SMARTHINKING can work in the interim with the institution to accommodate these students.

What are SMARTHINKING's long term plans for enhancing the accessibility of our products?

In addition to developing a sensible solution for our whiteboard accessibility issues, SMARTHINKING is continuing to research and evaluate additional assistive technology optimization, including alternate interfaces and user-level accessibility customization. We are committed to building our software in line with the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Accessibility Initiative Standards (W3C WAIS).