Considering Accessibility when Procuring Licensed Digital Resources

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# Introduction

Public libraries need to consider accessibility[[1]](#footnote-1) when procuring licensed digital resources (including ebooks, audiobooks, magazines, newspapers, learning platforms and more). Prioritizing accessibility considerations from the beginning of the procurement process, results in licensed digital resources that are accessible to everyone.

Procurement, at its most basic, is the process of purchasing goods and services, and all libraries have a part to play in this activity. The procurement process for licensed digital resources in public libraries is complex, and locally variable. It is often a multi-stage process involving different organizations and stakeholders and is dependent on many factors, including library size, library budget and whether a library participates in consortial buying.

This guide recommends accessibility considerations to include in the procurement process of accessible licensed digital resources in general, as well as some particular considerations for accessible digital books. This resource is intended to inform existing processes that an individual library or a consortial library organization has in place by recommending best practices on accessibility with regards to procuring licensed digital resources. While this guide is intended for a Canadian public library audience, the principles outlined may apply to other library types as well as other countries.

# Why is Accessibility Important in the Procurement Process for Licensed Digital Resources?

As a library or a consortial library organization who procures directly, it is important to highlight and prioritize accessibility in the procurement process. Provincial legislation, though variable across Canada, overall provides an incentive, and sometimes requirement, to ensure that accessibility is a part of the procurement process. In addition, including accessibility is an important part of an organization’s overall diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies. The more awareness that libraries and consortial library organizations with purchasing power can bring to accessibility, the better chance there is that vendors will make the necessary changes required to ensure an equitable experience for all.

Even if the library is not directly involved in the procurement process (and instead relies on a consortial library organization or regional system that procures licensed digital resources on their behalf), the library is still integral to the purchasing process. It is important to get involved with the decision makers on the procurement of licensed digital resources and ask questions about how they evaluate accessibility of digital resources and help if they haven’t thought about it. The more awareness the better it is for everyone.

In addition, understanding the accessible requirements at the procurement stage helps all library staff understand accessibility in general and makes library staff better positioned to help users with accessibility needs, including which digital resources have specific accessibility elements. For example, one platform might have excellent text magnification and enhancement tools, so it might be recommended to someone who prefers to modify the font size or colour. Thinking about the accessibility of digital resources, whether a library procures the licensed digital resource directly or not, demonstrates a library’s commitment to accessibility.

# What is an Accessible Licensed Digital Resource?

Licensed digital resources in public libraries can include magazine and newspapers databases, streaming video and audio, ebook and audiobook platforms, learning and language resources, and more. Accessibility of a licensed digital resource includes both the platform and the content.

For the platform to be accessible, the full search and discovery experience must be available to a user regardless of device or software that the person is using to access. This can include things such as ensuring buttons are labelled, the resource is navigable with a screen reader or other assistive technology[[2]](#footnote-2), and accessibility elements of the resource are clearly explained. This also includes the ability to search, filter on, and display accessibility metadata of the content itself.

It is also important that the content itself is accessible. The content might be an article, a video, or a book, in multiple formats, such as EPUB, pdf, audio/video or html. Accessible elements can include things such as headings for navigation and image descriptions. Download options can also be critical for an accessible experience as this allows a user to access the material on a device or app of their own choice that best meets their individual needs.

Most digital resources in libraries are licensed and supplied by a third-party provider and it is these resources that are the focus of this guide, however accessibility considerations also apply to digital resources that are freely available (e.g. Project Gutenberg) or to digital resources that have been locally created by the library itself (e.g. local history database).

# What is an Accessible Digital Book?

Digital books refer to ebooks and audiobooks in a digital format whether it be EPUB, mp3, DAISY, pdf, word, braille, or another file format that represents a full book. In public libraries, digital books that are open to everyone are often only available on licensed vendor platforms such as Overdrive. Digital books are not necessarily accessible, and it is important to understand what makes a digital book accessible.

Accessible digital books can be accessed, navigated, and consumed by everyone. This includes persons with disabilities and those who use assistive technologies (like screen readers and screen magnification software) to read. For example, an e-book without described images is not accessible for persons who use screen readers as it excludes them from the complete reading experience. Just because an item is in a digital format does not mean it is accessible to readers with print disabilities using assistive technologies. For more information, check out the [NNELS Understanding Accessibility Features](https://nnels.ca/understanding-accessibility-features) and [CELA’s Accessible Formats](https://celalibrary.ca/help/accessible-formats#:~:text=CELA%20also%20offers%20braille%20titles,Unified%20English%20Braille%20(UEB).) pages.

In addition, in Canada, there has been considerable work done in the Canadian independent publishing industry on encouraging publishers to create born-accessible content. This work is critical to understanding whether the digital book itself may or may not be accessible. Publishers in Canada can now be certified by the [Global Certified Accessible (GCA)](https://www.eboundcanada.org/our-services/benetech/) program through eBOUND, which certifies the publisher’s workflow to ensure accessible EPUBS are produced. Publishers are primarily focusing on their new titles, but the accessibility work may include previously published titles as well; some publishers and publishing organizations have done accessibility remediation projects on backlist titles. For more information on the work that is happening in the Canadian publishing landscape, eBOUND Canada hosts the [Accessible Publishing Learning Network.](https://apln.ca/) Accessible Digital Books in Libraries serving People with Perceptual Disabilities

In Canada, the accessible digital book collections of NNELS (National Network for Equitable Library Service), CELA (Centre for Equitable Library Access), and Service québécois du livre adapté (SQLA) all provide accessible ebooks, audiobooks, and braille books specifically for people with perceptual disabilities, as defined in the Copyright Act of Canada. These services are essential and are offered alongside the born-accessible commercial digital books available on the non-specialized digital book platforms such as Overdrive.

# Procurement of Accessible Licensed Digital Resources

Libraries procure licensed digital resources in many ways, depending on their size, location, and chosen methods. For example, larger libraries or regional library systems may license a digital resource directly from vendors. In comparison, smaller and/or rural libraries may be a part of a consortial library organization that licenses a digital resource (with input) on behalf of multiple libraries or library systems. Sometimes procurement decisions for licensed digital resources are made at the provincial/territorial level. Regardless of the process, accessibility needs to be considered in the selection, the licensing contract, and in the ongoing maintenance and support of the licensed digital resource.

## The Main Procurement Players in Licensing Digital Resources

**Individual libraries:** Individual libraries procure directly from vendors, which most often happens in large urban and regional libraries who have the purchasing power to work directly with vendors. Smaller individual libraries may procure specific digital resources for their community outside of consortial licensing; these tend to be less common or more locally specific resources.

**Consortial or regional library organizations: Consortial or regional library organizations do collective purchasing on behalf of a group of libraries. This can be a** consortia library organization (or consortial) or a regional or provincial library system. This procurement approach brings together a group of individual libraries to share resources and reduce costs in procuring licensed digital resources. In Canada, there are many ways this happens. Consortial licensing for public libraries can be done by non-profit organizations such as the BC Libraries Cooperative or the Multitype Library Board in Saskatchewan. Sometimes procurement is done directly at the provincial or territorial level such as the Public Library Services Branch of Alberta. In other cases, the decision making is done at regional system level. The commonality is that there is collective body that will do the procuring and licensing on behalf of a group of individual libraries.

**Vendors:** Libraries and consortial library organizations procure digital resources from commercial vendors like OverDrive, EBSCO, Gale, Hoopla, etc. These vendors provide both a platform and content. Because the content is not available except through the platform, both elements must be accessible, or users will face barriers. For this reason, both the platform and the content itself must be evaluated for accessibility.

## Procurement Process

Libraries and library consortial evaluate and select a digital resource in a variety of different ways. More formal processes could include a Request for Information (RFI), Request for Quotations (RFQ) or Request for Proposals (RFP) that vendors bid on to supply the library/library consortium with digital content. These set out the needs and requirements of the digital resource and the vendor must respond to these requirements. Other less formal processes may include an evaluation by a cross-library or consortial committee or individual staff within a library. Whether the approach is a formal request or a less formal process using a checklist or evaluation matrix, accessibility should be a core aspect at this stage. Accessibility considerations can include:

* Ask the vendor for their accessibility statement and an in return share the library’s or organization’s accessibility statement.
  + Example: “Accessibility is a priority for Library X. As such, Library X strives to acquire a digital resource that has sufficient accessibility elements to enable users with disabilities to access the available content”.
* Request a statement on [WCAG](https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/) (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) compliance or other statement on accessibility specific to the resource.
* Clearly set out accessibility requirements to the vendor at the request stage. Examples:
  + Requirement: Alt-Text
    - The digital resource must allow users to access information that images convey. (Images should have alt-text, for example)
  + Requirement: Access to all controls
    - The digital resource must allow access to all controls with a keyboard, headtracking, voice control, or switch device (e.g., have access to all controls and be able to move to them in a logical manner).
  + Requirement: Interact with all elements
    - The digital resource must enable users to identify and interact with all elements (e.g., input field, buttons, checkboxes, links etc.). All these elements should have text labels.
* Include accessibility requirements for any staff/administrator interface to the digital resource so that library staff with disabilities will face fewer barriers in their work.
* Ask the vendor for testing access to the digital resource so the library can do their own accessibility testing. Ideally, experts with lived experience of a disability should perform the testing with appropriate compensation.
* Ask the vendor to do their own accessibility audit/testing of the digital resource and provide a report and explanation of their process.
* Ask the vendor for their accessibility roadmap.

For further information, please refer to:

* [Accessibility Considerations for E-Resources Procurement in Libraries](https://accessiblelibraries.ca/resources/procurement-in-libraries/)
* [Checklist: Evaluating the Accessibility of e-Resources](https://accessiblelibraries.ca/resources/checklist-evaluating-the-accessibility-of-e-resources/)
* [Checklist: Evaluating Vendor’s Accessibility](https://accessiblelibraries.ca/resources/checklist-evaluating-vendors-accessibility/)
* [Questions for Vendors: Company Accessibility Policies](https://accessiblelibraries.ca/resources/questions-for-vendors-company-accessibility-policies/)
* [Questions for Vendors: Procuring Accessible e-Resources Platforms](https://accessiblelibraries.ca/resources/questions-for-vendors-procuring-accessible-e-resource-platforms/)

Sometimes, accessibility requirements cannot be totally met, but by laying out this information in the initial evaluation and selection process, the library (or library consortium) is raising awareness with the vendor and signaling to them that accessibility is a key consideration in the process.

For libraries belonging to a consortium that has an opt-in policy (individual libraries decide if they want to license a particular consortial licensed digital resource), the consortium can share out accessibility information about the digital resource when asking individual libraries whether they would like to opt-in to the resource or not. If that information is not shared, individual libraries can (and should) ask their consortium to include accessibility information. This helps raise awareness at both the individual library level and the consortial level of the importance of accessibility.

Finally, ensure that all documentation that has been created about the procurement process, including that which is sent to vendors, is accessible itself. Please refer to [Making Accessible Documents](https://accessiblelibraries.ca/resources/checklist-creating-accessible-documents/) for more information.

## Building Accessibility into the Licensing Contract

Once a digital resource has been decided upon, it is important to build accessibility into the contract or license. It is a good idea to use the vendor’s responses to the accessibility requirements as part of the contract. The language should be specific and should refer to individual elements as laid out in the selection process. If a certain component is not available, write into the contract when it will be available with a particular timeline.

* Examples:
  + If the vendor says that an accessible element is on their roadmap, build that into the contract. For instance, if the vendor says that accessibility metadata will be included in all title records and will be searchable and filterable by Q3 of 2025, include that specification and timeline in the contract.
  + If the vendor says that all images have alt-text, include alt text on all images by Q1 of 2026 as part of the contract.

In addition, consider adding to the contract a clear process for how to report issues with accessibility of the resource including a timeline for resolving them.

## Ongoing Testing and Maintenance of the Digital Resource

Once a license or contract is signed, keep in mind that follow-up to the vendor may be required if accessibility elements break. Sometimes a vendor will add a new component and will forget to incorporate accessibility. It is good practice to do ongoing testing of all the current licensed digital resources and report any problems to the vendor.

It is a good idea to set a framework for gathering information about the accessibility of licensed digital resources after implementation. A library can offer an accessibility feedback form for their users or consider hiring people with lived experience of a disability to do ongoing or yearly testing for the library. Other excellent resources to consult are NNELS’ (National Network for Equitable Library Service) accessibility evaluations of key licensed digital resources - [Reading App Reports – AccessiblEPUBlishing.ca](https://www.accessiblepublishing.ca/reading-app-reports/)

# Accessible Digital Book Purchasing on Vendor Platforms

Many digital resources offer a pre-defined collection of content so there is no ongoing selection of content once the resource is licensed. However, some ebook and audiobook platforms, such as Overdrive and Cloud Library, require ongoing individual title selection and purchase. This is either done at the individual library level or at a consortial level. If individual book purchasing is possible, the library or consortium can establish purchasing guidelines that either require or prioritize individual titles in ebooks or audiobook format that are accessible.

## Accessibility Metadata for Books

Accessibility metadata is most often seen with ebooks, but it applies to audiobooks as well. Accessibility metadata is important for both the end-user when searching for books and for library staff when selecting books for purchase. Accessibility metadata on the end-user interface allows users to independently search for and select materials that work best for their reading needs. For library staff, accessibility metadata is necessary to make purchasing decisions of digital books based on accessibility. Ideally, the purchasing interface (e.g. Overdrive Marketplace) should offer the ability to search, filter and display accessibility metadata so library staff can meaningfully use this information at the time of selection and purchase of books. For example, the metadata can indicate if an ebook has header navigation or if the text can be adjusted (zoomed in); both examples will help library staff procure accessible options for their users. There has been some movement on displaying accessibility metadata for digital books on the Cantook or Prêtnumérique platform from DeMarque. Overdrive has also been making efforts but has not done the development needed to fully incorporate this component. As this is a constantly evolving piece, libraries and library consortial are encouraged to ask and advocate for accessibility metadata from their digital books vendor. For more information, check out the [Accessibility Metadata for Library Staff](https://accessiblelibraries.ca/resources/accessibility-metadata-for-library-staff/).

## Digital Rights Management and Accessibility

Another aspect related to ebook platforms that can pose accessibility barriers is being locked into the particular vendor platform such as Overdrive/Libby, Cloud Library, or Hoopla. Many readers who rely on assistive technology require the ability to download the book and read on a device or app of their choice because they need specific accessibility tools and components that only that app or device can offer. The possibility to read the book in the reader’s app of choice is another piece to always ask and advocate for with the vendor. Though it may not be possible because of digital rights management (DRM), it is important to highlight the accessibility concerns of this approach. New methods of digital rights management such as Readium’s Licensed Content Protection ([LCP](https://www.edrlab.org/readium-lcp/overview/)), offer more flexibility in this area, and may be worth highlighting to a vendor as an alternative solution that allows for more accessible downloads by allowing export to a reading app of choice.

# Constraints and Advocacy

There are several constraints that can limit a library or library consortium in their ability to ensure accessibility in licensed digital resources. However, there are also key things a library or library consortial can do to advocate for and raise awareness of accessibility.

## Constraints Libraries Encounter

There are several constraints in ensuring accessibility in the procurement process of licensed digital resources, which differ across library location, size, and the methods they use to licensing digital resources. The constraints include:

* Libraries and library consortial may face barriers to changing existing frameworks to support accessible digital resources. Staff at libraries and library consortial organizations may need to convince their own internal management to update organizational policies to prioritize acquiring accessible platforms and content. These processes may take time, but awareness and advocacy are key.
* Vendors may not have an accessible platform and/or content, but because of limited choices for a particular type of resource, libraries may not be able to reject a resource on accessibility considerations alone. The limited number of vendors narrows choices and a library's ability to make demands of the vendors. It is still important however to continue to advocate for accessibility on an ongoing basis, even if the decision is made to license an inaccessible or partially inaccessible digital resource.
* If the platform allows for the ability to purchase individual digital books, it may not be clear which titles are accessible. Accessibility metadata can help library staff select and purchase books based on accessibility criteria. It is important to advocate with the vendor to let them know that the ability to search, filter and display accessibility metadata is a key piece for both users and staff for finding accessible content.
* In the existing landscape, there are some key big players in the vendor market (e.g. Overdrive) and it can be difficult to convince these vendors of the importance of accessibility. The more libraries and library consortial work together to advocate with large vendors, the better chance of success there will be to ensure an equitable experience for all.
* It can be difficult to determine whether platforms and/or content are accessible on an ongoing basis. Unless a library regularly tests the accessibility of their digital resources or they have a well-used user feedback form, it is difficult to know what the accessibility barriers are for users. Time and available resources are a constraint in this area. Libraries are encouraged to collaborate and share information in this regard and to make use of resources such as [Reading App Reports – AccessiblePublishing.ca](https://www.accessiblepublishing.ca/reading-app-reports/). Libraries are also encouraged to hire experts with lived experience to do ongoing testing.

## Advocate with Vendors to Ensure Accessibility

Larger libraries and consortial may evaluate digital resources and negotiate a licensing agreement directly with vendors and therefore have more influence on being able to advocate with vendors directly with regards to accessibility. It is most effective if consortial and large libraries work together and present a consistent message.

Many small and medium-sized libraries in Canada rely on provincial and territorial consortial licensing and therefore may not be directly involved in the procurement process. However, these libraries can provide input about the digital resources they wish to acquire to a library consortium or library system (or whoever is doing the evaluation and negotiation on the libraries behalf). Whatever the size, all libraries have a role to play in ensuring that accessibility is key part of the evaluation process of digital resources.

It is true that sometimes there are only a few vendors they can satisfy a particular content need (e.g. ebooks, language learning resources etc.), thus requiring libraries to accept resources even if not all accessibility requirements are met. Even in this case, it is still important for libraries and library consortial to provide an accessibility checklist to the vendor and to continue to advocate with the vendor to prioritize accessibility.

# Conclusion

Accessibility is an essential part of the procurement process for licensed digital resources. This guide is intended to help library or library consortial prioritize accessibility in their procurement process to ensure that digital licensed resources, including both platform and content, are accessible and equitable for all.

Visit [accessiblelibraries.ca](http://accessiblelibraries.ca) for resources about procuring accessible licensed digital resources.

# Helpful Resources

Accessible Libraries. (2023, October 17). Creating and editing accessibility metadata MARC tags for library staff. AccessibleLibraries.ca. <https://accessiblelibraries.ca/resources/accessibility-metadata-for-library-staff/>

Accessible Libraries (2023, January 31). Accessibility Considerations for E-Resources Procurement in Libraries. AccessibleLibraries.ca. <https://accessiblelibraries.ca/resources/procurement-in-libraries/>

Accessible Libraries (2023, January 31). Checklist: Creating Accessible Documents. AccessibleLibraries.ca. <https://accessiblelibraries.ca/resources/checklist-creating-accessible-documents/>

Accessible Libraries (2023a, January 31). Checklist: Evaluating the Accessibility of e-Resources. AccessibleLibraries.ca. <https://accessiblelibraries.ca/resources/checklist-evaluating-the-accessibility-of-e-resources/>

Accessible Libraries. (2023, January 31). Checklist: Evaluating Vendor’s Accessibility. AccessibleLibraries.ca. <https://accessiblelibraries.ca/resources/checklist-evaluating-vendors-accessibility/>

Accessible Libraries (2023, January 31). Questions for Vendors: Company Accessibility Policies. AccessibleLibraries.ca. <https://accessiblelibraries.ca/resources/questions-for-vendors-company-accessibility-policies/>

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Accessible Publishing (2024). Reading App Reports. AccessiblEPUBlishing.ca. [https://www.accessiblEPUBlishing.ca/reading-app-reports/](https://www.accessiblepublishing.ca/reading-app-reports/)

Accessible Publishing Learning Network (2023, September 14). Accessible Publishing Learning Network. <https://apln.ca/>

Benetech. (2023, December 19). Certified Publishers. Born Accessible. <https://bornaccessible.benetech.org/certified-publishers/>

Centre for Equitable Library Service. (2023). Accessible Formats. celalibrary.ca. <https://celalibrary.ca/help/accessible-formats>

EDRLab (2023). Readium LCP. <https://www.edrlab.org/readium-lcp/>

National Network for Equitable Library Service (2021, June 16). Understanding Accessibility Features. National Network for Equitable Library Service (NNELS). <https://nnels.ca/understanding-accessibility-features>

Public Library Services Department (PLSB), Alberta Government, & Accessible Libraries. (2024, March 13). Accessible Procurement Webinar. AccessibleLibraries.ca. https://accessiblelibraries.ca/resources/accessible-procurement-webinar/

Public Library Services Department (PLSB), Alberta Government, & Accessible Libraries (2024, October 19). Accessible Procurement Webinar Slides. AccessibleLibraries.ca. <https://accessiblelibraries.ca/resources/accessible-procurement-slides/>

WC3 Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) (2024). WCAG 2 Overview. <https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/>

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1. Accessibility refers to the design of products, devices, services, or environments which enable all people to participate fully in society without barriers. It can be broken up into physical (spaces and buildings) and digital (websites and digital content) accessibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Assistive technology refers to the products, equipment, and systems that enhance reading, learning, working, and daily living for persons with disabilities. This includes screen readers, refreshable braille displays, screen magnification and enhancement software, and more. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)