

Screen Reader Testing Guide

A practical, no-fear guide to testing your own course with a screen reader, from your first NVDA install to knowing exactly what you're listening for.

Reading time

Sections

Skill level

~25 min

9

No experience needed

Why screen reader testing matters

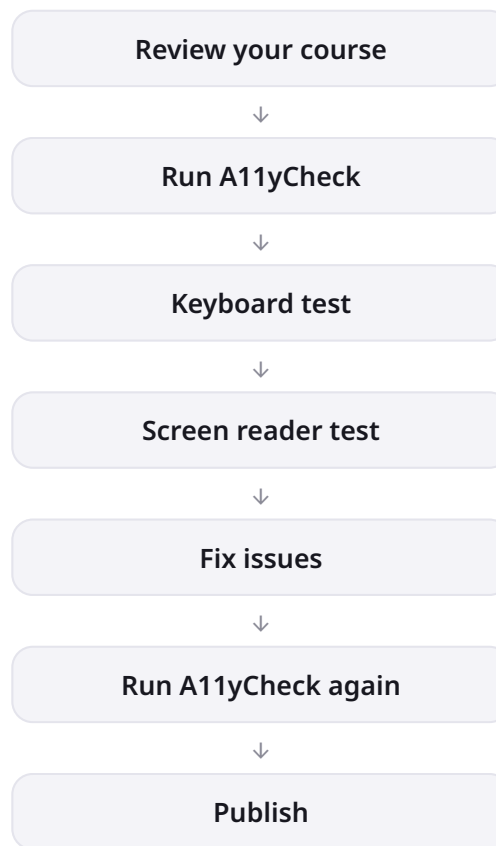
You already ran an A11yCheck scan. You already tabbed through your course with a keyboard. Isn't that enough? Not quite. Each method catches a different kind of problem, and none of them replaces the other two.

What each testing method catches, and what it misses

METHOD	WHAT IT CATCHES	WHAT IT MISSES
Automated scanning	Missing alt text, low contrast, missing captions, broken structure, hundreds of technical checks in minutes	Whether the experience actually makes sense when a real person listens to it
Keyboard testing	Whether every button and control can be reached and operated without a mouse	Whether what you hear along the way is clear, in order, and makes sense
Screen reader testing	Whether the course actually makes sense out loud, in order, the way a blind learner experiences it	Nothing else covers this, which is exactly why it is worth 20 minutes of your time

This guide teaches the third one. Not because it matters more than the other two, but because it is the one people skip, and the one that catches what nothing else can.

Testing works best as a repeatable process, not a one-time task. Come back to this loop every time you publish a new version.



Set up NVDA in five minutes

Everything you need to run your first screen reader test. Nothing more.

NVDA is a free screen reader for Windows, and the most common starting point for a first test, it is what most reviewers reach for and what this guide is built around.

1. Go to nvaccess.org and download NVDA. It is free.
2. Run the installer and accept the defaults.
3. NVDA starts automatically and begins talking, that is normal, not a bug.
4. Check two settings before you start: speech rate (slow it down if it is too fast to follow at first) and "beep for capital letters" (turn it off, it gets tiring fast).

That is it. You do not need to explore the rest of NVDA's settings to do a basic review.

Test your first course

Six steps, using only four keys. NVDA's modifier key is Insert by default, that is what "Insert+" means below.

The only commands you need for a basic review

KEY	WHAT IT DOES
Tab / Shift+Tab	Move to the next or previous interactive element
Insert+Down Arrow	Start reading continuously from where you are ("Say All")
H	Jump to the next heading
Ctrl	Stop NVDA from talking

1. Open your course or page. Press Insert+Down Arrow and just listen for a minute, do not touch anything yet.
2. Press Ctrl to stop it, then press Tab repeatedly to move through the course the way a keyboard-only learner would.
3. Every few controls, press Insert+Down Arrow again to hear the surrounding content read in full, not just the control itself.
4. Press H to jump between headings only, and check whether the headings alone describe the course's structure.
5. Keep going until you have covered the whole course, not just the first slide.
6. Note anything that sounded confusing, wrong, or silent. You will compare it against the next two sections.

What you should hear

What good sounds like, for the five things that come up in almost every course.

Headings and structure. Pressing H should move you cleanly through the course's real structure.

✗ BROKEN

Press H: nothing happens, no headings anywhere on the page

A listener cannot jump to sections or build a mental map of the course.

✓ WORKING

Press H: "Welcome and Overview, heading level 1"... "Practice Scenario, heading level 2"

Clear, level-appropriate headings let a listener skip straight to what they need.

Images and alt text. A meaningful image should be described, not just noticed.

✗ BROKEN

"Graphic. Graphic. Button."

No idea what the image shows or why it matters.

✓ WORKING

"Bar chart showing a 20% increase in customer satisfaction."

The image's meaning comes through without seeing it.

Links and buttons. Each one should make sense heard on its own, out of context.

✗ BROKEN

"Click here. Click here. Learn more. Click here."

Every link sounds the same, none of them mean anything out of context.

✓ WORKING

"Download the guide." "Start a free scan." "View pricing."

Each link makes sense entirely on its own.

Forms. Every field should say what it is asking for, not just that it exists.

✗ BROKEN

"Edit. Edit. Edit. Button."

No idea what to type into any of these fields.

✓ WORKING

"Your name, edit text." "Email address, edit text." "Submit form, button."

Every field says exactly what it is asking for.

Reading order. Information should arrive in the order you actually need it.

✗ BROKEN

"Continue button"... "Welcome to the course"... "Read the instructions below"

Hearing the button before knowing what it is for is disorienting.

✓ WORKING

"Welcome to the course"... "Read the instructions below"... "Continue button"

Information arrives in the order you actually need it.

Common accessibility problems

The same handful of red flags show up in almost every course. Here is what to listen for.

- **"Graphic" or "image" with nothing else.** Missing alt text, the screen reader has nothing to announce.
- **The same phrase repeated for every link.** "Click here" or "Learn more" used everywhere, meaningless out of context.
- **A wall of unlabeled buttons.** "Button. Button. Button." with no indication of what any of them do.
- **Silence where you expect something.** An interactive element that announces nothing at all when it gets focus.
- **Headings that do not exist.** Pressing H does nothing, or jumps to something that is not actually a heading.

Common testing mistakes

Problems in how you test are just as common as problems in the course itself.

- **Testing with your eyes open.** It is tempting to glance at the screen to confirm what you heard. Close your eyes, or turn off the monitor, for at least part of your pass, that is the only way to know if the audio alone makes sense.
- **Stopping at the first problem.** One missing alt text does not mean the rest of the course is fine. Finish the pass.
- **Skipping forms and interactive elements.** These are usually where the real problems hide.
- **Testing once and never again.** A course that passed a screen reader test can break the next time someone edits it. Retest after changes, not just before the first publish.

What A11yCheck can and cannot verify

An honest answer, not a sales pitch.

A11yCheck's automated scan is very good at catching structural and technical issues, missing alt text, low contrast, missing captions, unreachable controls, and dozens of other checks, consistently, in minutes, across an entire course.

What it cannot do is judge whether content actually makes sense. It can tell you alt text exists. It cannot tell you whether that alt text is any good, whether "image" or a genuinely descriptive sentence was typed into the field. It can tell you headings exist. It cannot tell you whether they describe the content well. That judgment is exactly what this guide just taught you to make.

How A11yCheck's NVDA transcript feature complements manual testing

The same kind of listening you just practiced, run automatically.

Every A11yCheck scan includes a screen reader announcement preview for each slide, an ordered list of exactly what NVDA would announce moving through your course. It is the same listening you just practiced in this guide, run automatically, for every slide, every time you scan.

Use it two ways. Before you test manually, skim it to know roughly what to expect. After you test manually, compare it against what you actually heard, if something surprised you during your manual pass, the transcript is often where you will spot why.

It does not replace listening yourself. It is a faster way to sanity-check an entire course before or after you do.

You're ready if you can...

You do not need to be an expert. If you can do the following, you are ready to run a real screen reader review.

- Complete a basic NVDA review of a course from start to finish
- Recognize common screen reader announcements, both good and broken ones
- Identify confusing reading order by ear
- Verify images have meaningful alt text, not just alt text
- Understand when manual testing is still required, even after a clean scan
- Know how A11yCheck's NVDA transcript feature complements manual testing

That is it. That is the whole skill.

What's next

You do not need to memorize every command in this guide. Keep it open the first few times you test, most people stop needing it after two or three courses.

Pair this with the Keyboard Navigation Cheat Sheet and the Storyline or Rise Accessibility Quick Checklist for a complete manual review, then run a free A11yCheck scan to catch what is easy to miss by eye or by ear.

Ready to check your work?

Run a free accessibility and course quality scan with A11yCheck. It takes about five minutes and catches what a manual pass can miss.

Run a free scan →



a11ycheck-dev.com