

Link Checkers and Basic Accessibility Testers for Websites

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Introduction

Ensuring website optimization and ease of use are goals of any developer. This holds especially true for organizations disseminating a lot of information to a variety of users from different backgrounds and with different ability levels. Broken links or missing alt text can be frustrating for some people with accessibility challenges. These also detract from the user experience. To mitigate these website errors or accidental exclusions, developers and even laymen can use various online resources to check the efficiency and ease of use of websites.

This report reviews some of these resources, giving broad information on services offered and how these tools can also be used as a basic accessibility test. Topics include:

- Programs for website testing
- Locations to download / use each program
- Recommendations

Program Specific Details

- ***ScreamingFrog SEO Spider:*** This program offers the most holistic approach to website management found in this report. It is designed explicitly for site optimization, going into page level elements such as heading tags and meta data.¹ Since the group behind the program offers free and paid versions, the application is much cleaner and robust than most competitors. The free version does come with a few constraints worth mentioning, like a limited number of URLs checked for broken links (500), versus other programs that have no URL limitations for their free versions. The free version:
 - Crawls 500 linked URLs per webpage
 - Looks for errors & website redirects
 - Analyzes page titles & meta data

- Reviews meta robots & directives
- Audits “hreflang” attributes; which specifies the language (English, Spanish, etc.) of a specific document
- Finds duplicate pages
- Generates XML sitemaps

All program specifications for the paid version can be found at:

<https://www.screamingfrog.co.uk/seo-spider/pricing/>. At only €149.00 per year (about \$177), it might be worth the purchase for someone looking to create many websites or maintain a high traffic / large site.

- **Xenu’s Link Sleuth:** This program is useful to both casual and experienced users. The link sleuth has an easy to read and understand user interface that is displayed within the desktop application or can be displayed within a web browser for easy navigation to links. Although there are some great advantages to this program, there are also some pain points. For example, in my experience, sometimes the program gets confused with complex links. During testing, the site gave back errors that turned out to be good links. Xenu’s alternative text search is not quite as robust as other programs, like ScreamingFrog, but does offer identification of missing alt text.

Overall, this program identifies:

- Broken links
- Duplicate titles
- Largest images / pages (to help with load time)
- Least linked-in pages
- Pages with most out links
- Deepest-buried pages
- Images that lack alternative text²

As a quick note, do not let the poorly designed website and strange logo keep you from trying out this product. The product has been tested and is safe to download.

- **Google’s Webmaster Tool:** Google’s version of a website sniffer. This tool requires the user to be the owner of the site searching, therefore it might not be applicable for many users. This service could not be tested because of this constraint. If the user is the owner of the site checking, Google Webmaster Tool does offer some unique features designed to create user friendly and clean websites.
- **Broken Link Checker:** This web application is the most basic approach available to find broken URLs on websites. Only displaying broken links for a specific website, it does not give a holistic approach to website management. Where it lacks in sophistication, it makes up in quick and efficient testing. Although the site gives back broken links, because of its unsophisticated nature, it sometimes gets confused; displaying links that are not actually broken or seem to be broken because the site combined two valid links. After a quick examination, the user should be able to tease out good and bad data.

Table 1. Basic overview of features.

Product	Intended User	OS	URL Check	URL Check Limit	Alt Text Check	Location	Price
Xenu's Link Sleuth	Layman & Expert	Windows	x	None	x	Desktop App	Free
ScreamingFrog SEO Spider	Layman & Expert	Mac & Windows	x	500 (free); unlimited (paid)	x	Desktop App	Free & Paid Versions
Google Webmaster Tools	Layman & Expert	All	x	None	Unknown	Web App	Free
Broken Link Checker	Layman	All	x	None		Web App	Free

Program Links

Table 2. Program URL location for download / use.

Product	URL
Xenu's Link Sleuth	http://home.snafu.de/tilman/xenulink.html
ScreamingFrog SEO Spider	https://www.screamingfrog.co.uk/seo-spider/
Google Webmaster Tools	https://www.google.com/webmasters/#?modal_active=none
Broken Link Checker	http://www.brokenlinkcheck.com/

Recommendation

Recommendation depends on what the user is specifically trying to get out of the program. Before picking a tool and using it as the only method to check websites, users should test multiple programs to see what fits best with their needs. For 'quick and dirty' broken URL checking, Broken Link Checker might be applicable. For more holistic testing and identification of areas that need work, ScreamingFrog SEO Spider or Xenu's Link Sleuth are probably the best options. Because ScreamingFrog and Xenu are both desktop applications, the operating system might offer some additional constraints because Xenu

is only available for Windows. Google Webmaster Tools offers another avenue for website testing if the tester is an owner of the site. It is recommended that developers and site administrators use multiple tools to check websites because this will ensure nothing slips through the cracks.

These tools should not be the only ones used to test for accessibility, as they are not designed specifically for accessibility, but can offer important information to developers about use and some missing accessibility features. This report is not an endorsement of these programs and services, but instead is intended as a starting point for website developers or program administrators to begin learning more about site optimization tools and checkers.

References

1. Fox, Ben (2013, November 6). 5 Tools To Check For Broken Links on Your WordPress Site. WP University. Retrieved May 31, 2017, from <http://www.wpuniversity.com/blog/5-tools-find-broken-links>.
2. Smarty, Ann (2008, October 20). 7 Things You Can Do With Xenu Link Sleuth. Search Engine Journal. Retrieved May 31, 2017, from <https://www.searchenginejournal.com/7-things-you-can-do-with-xenu-link-sleuth/7870/>.

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