

The Ultimate 2026 Website Launch Checklist

A Comprehensive 50-Point Quality Assurance Guide for Web Development, SEO, Accessibility & Performance

Standard Operating Procedure & QA Sign-Off Document | Empirican Digital

Overview: Launching a modern web application in 2026 requires strict adherence to search engine requirements, accessibility standards (WCAG 2.2 AA), technical performance benchmarks (Core Web Vitals), robust security, and seamless user experience. Use this 50-point QA checklist by Empirican Digital to verify every critical system prior to production DNS migration.

1. TECHNICAL SEO & AI SEARCH OPTIMIZATION (ITEMS 1–10)

Ensuring full crawlability, structured content indexing, and optimization for generative search engines & AI assistants.

Done	#	Checklist Item	Technical Specification & Action Required
☐	01	Robots.txt & Meta Robots CRITICAL	Verify robots.txt permits production crawling while staging is blocked. Ensure no noindex tags exist on live pages. Allow authorized AI search bots (e.g. GPTBot, ClaudeBot, Google-Extended).
☐	02	XML Dynamic Sitemaps	Validate XML sitemap generating automatically at /sitemap.xml. Confirm indexation includes canonical URLs only, excludes paginated/parameterized URLs, and is referenced in robots.txt.
☐	03	Canonical Tag Architecture	Ensure every page features self-referencing <link rel="canonical"> tags. Prevent duplicate content issues across HTTP/HTTPS, www/non-www, and trailing slash variations.
☐	04	Metadata & Open Graph	Unique, compelling Title tags (50–60 chars) and Meta Descriptions (120–155 chars) across all pages. Verify Open Graph (OG) and Twitter Card images, titles, and descriptions for social previews.
☐	05	JSON-LD Structured Data 2026 STANDARD	Implement schema.org markup (Organization, Website, Article, Product, BreadcrumbList, FAQPage). Validate with Schema Markup Validator and Google Rich Results Test without errors.
☐	06	Semantic Heading Structure	Audit strictly single <h1> tag per page representing primary subject. Maintain logical hierarchy (H1 → H2 → H3) without skipping heading levels for visual styling.
☐	07	LLM Content Readiness 2026 STANDARD	Optimize content for generative search engine extraction (SGE/AI Overviews): concise direct answers, clear bulleted summaries, semantic entities, and updated author EEAT signals.
☐	08	404 Error Page & Redirects	Custom 404 page returning proper 404 HTTP header with navigation options. Audit and test 301 redirect map for legacy URLs ensuring zero redirect chains/loops.
☐	09	Internationalization (hreflang)	

Done	#	Checklist Item	Technical Specification & Action Required
			If multi-regional/multilingual, implement correct hreflang annotations in HTML header or sitemap, including valid language/region codes and x-default targets.
☐	10	Search Console & Analytics Integration	Verify verification tags and tracking scripts (Google Search Console, Bing Webmaster Tools, GA4 / server-side analytics) are firing correctly without blocking page render.

2. ACCESSIBILITY & WCAG 2.2 AA COMPLIANCE (ITEMS 11–20)

Ensuring legal compliance and equal accessibility for all users across screen readers, keyboards, and adaptive devices.

Done	#	Checklist Item	Technical Specification & Action Required
☐	11	WCAG 2.2 AA Automated Scan	Run axe DevTools, Lighthouse Accessibility, or Wave. Resolve 100% of critical and serious automated accessibility violations before release.
☐	12	Keyboard Navigation & Focus	Test full site navigation using Tab, Shift+Tab, Enter, and Space. Ensure visible focus indicators on all interactive elements (minimum 3:1 contrast ratio).
☐	13	Screen Reader Compatibility	Test primary user flows with VoiceOver, NVDA, or JAWS. Confirm dynamic content changes, modal dialogs, and navigation menus are properly announced via ARIA live regions/attributes.
☐	14	Color Contrast Ratios	Verify body text meets minimum 4.5:1 contrast against background; large text (18pt+/14pt+ bold) meets 3:1. UI components and graphics must hit 3:1 contrast minimum.
☐	15	Image Alt Text Audit	Provide descriptive, context-aware alt attributes for informative images. Mark decorative images with empty alt="" or aria-hidden="true".
☐	16	Form Accessible Labels & Errors	Explicitly link <label> elements to inputs via for/id. Ensure form validation errors are announced to screen readers and flagged with aria-invalid="true".
☐	17	Target Size & Spacing 2026 STANDARD	Enforce WCAG 2.2 Target Size minimums: all interactive touch/pointer targets must be at least 24x24 CSS pixels or have adequate surrounding spacing.
☐	18	Skip to Content Link	Implement an accessible "Skip to Main Content" link as the first focusable element on the page to allow keyboard users to bypass repetitive navigation.
☐	19	Text Resizing & Reflow	Ensure site zoom up to 200% without loss of content or functionality, and reflow without requiring horizontal scrolling at 320px screen width.
☐	20	Accessible Media Controls	Provide captions (CC) / transcripts for audio and video assets. Ensure media players do not autoplay sound and can be completely controlled via keyboard.

3. PERFORMANCE & CORE WEB VITALS (ITEMS 21–28)

Optimizing page load speed, responsiveness, and visual stability to pass modern search performance thresholds.

Done	#	Checklist Item	Technical Specification & Action Required
☐	21	INP (Interaction to Next Paint) CRITICAL	Ensure INP is under 200ms. Minimize long tasks in main thread JS, break up heavy event handlers, and defer non-essential computations.
☐	22	LCP (Largest Contentful Paint)	Ensure LCP loads under 2.5s. Preload LCP hero images, utilize fetch priority (fetchpriority="high"), and optimize server response time (TTFB < 0.8s).
☐	23	CLS (Cumulative Layout Shift)	Keep CLS score below 0.1. Define explicit width and height on all images/videos, reserve layout space for ads/embeds, and avoid dynamic top content insertion.
☐	24	AVIF/WebP Image Optimization	Convert images to modern formats (AVIF primary, WebP fallback). Implement srcset and sizes for responsive asset serving. Lazy-load non-critical offscreen images.
☐	25	CSS & JS Bundle Minification	Bundle, tree-shake, and minify all CSS and JS assets. Implement code splitting to deliver page-specific chunks and eliminate unused CSS/JS.
☐	26	Font Loading Optimization	Use font-display: swap or optional to prevent FOIT (Flash of Unseen Text). Subset custom fonts, self-host critical fonts, and preload key web font files.
☐	27	Edge Caching & CDN Delivery	Deploy site behind Cloudflare, Fastly, or AWS CloudFront. Configure caching headers (Cache-Control), enable Brotli compression, and leverage edge compute where applicable.
☐	28	Third-Party Script Audit	Audit all analytics, marketing tags, and chat widgets. Load non-critical scripts asynchronously (async/defer) or manage via server-side tag management.

4. SECURITY, PRIVACY & DATA COMPLIANCE (ITEMS 29–36)

Protecting user data, establishing bulletproof server security headers, and adhering to global privacy regulations.

Done	#	Checklist Item	Technical Specification & Action Required
☐	29	SSL/TLS Configuration CRITICAL	Enforce HTTPS across all routes with modern TLS 1.3 encryption. Verify auto-renewal of SSL certificates and redirect all HTTP requests to HTTPS.
☐	30	Content Security Policy (CSP)	Implement robust CSP HTTP header to prevent XSS and code injection attacks. Strict control over allowed sources for scripts, styles, objects, and frames.
☐	31	HTTP Security Headers	Configure essential security headers: HSTS (Strict-Transport-Security), X-Frame-Options, X-Content-Type-Options: nosniff, and Referrer-Policy. Verify on SecurityHeaders.com.
☐	32	Cookie Consent & CMP 2026 STANDARD	Integrate GDPR/CCPA-compliant Consent Management Platform (e.g. OneTrust). Ensure non-essential cookies (marketing/analytics) are blocked prior to explicit user consent.

Done	#	Checklist Item	Technical Specification & Action Required
☐	33	Privacy Policy & Terms Pages	Publish updated, legally reviewed Privacy Policy, Terms of Service, Cookie Policy, and Accessibility Statement linked clearly in global site footer.
☐	34	Form Spam Protection	Protect input forms with privacy-focused CAPTCHA (e.g., Turnstile, reCAPTCHA v3) or honeypot fields to eliminate automated submission spam without degrading UX.
☐	35	Database & API Sanitization	Ensure all user inputs are sanitized and parameterized to prevent SQL injection, XSS, and command injection. Audit REST/GraphQL API authorization scopes.
☐	36	Disaster Recovery & Backups	Establish automated daily database and media backups with off-site storage. Document and execute a roll-back and disaster recovery test prior to go-live.

5. CROSS-BROWSER, RESPONSIVE UX & FUNCTIONALITY (ITEMS 37–44)

Rigorous cross-platform validation across diverse device viewports, operating systems, and user interactions.

Done	#	Checklist Item	Technical Specification & Action Required
☐	37	Responsive Breakpoint Testing	Test UI layouts across key breakpoints: Mobile (375px, 414px), Tablet (768px, 1024px), Desktop (1440px, 1920px+), and foldable/dual-screen viewports.
☐	38	Cross-Browser Testing	Verify rendering and full interactive functionality on Chrome, Safari, Firefox, Edge, and mobile Safari/Chrome (iOS/Android). Eliminate WebKit/Blink styling bugs.
☐	39	Form Submission End-to-End	Submit all lead generation, contact, and checkout forms. Confirm auto-responders deliver, CRM data pipelines capture leads, and success/confirmation states load.
☐	40	Broken Link Crawl	Run automated crawler (Screaming Frog, Sitebulb) across internal and external links. Resolve 100% of broken links (404s), orphan pages, and anchor reference errors.
☐	41	Dark Mode & System Preferences	If supporting dark mode, test prefers-color-scheme queries. Ensure contrast ratios remain compliant and images adapt dynamically where needed.
☐	42	Favicon & App Icons	Provide vector favicon.svg, fallback favicon.ico, 180x180 apple-touch-icon.png, and valid Web Application Manifest (site.webmanifest).
☐	43	Typography & Readability	Audit font sizes, line heights, and paragraph lengths across all screens. Prevent orphan/widow words in key marketing headlines. Check copy proofreading.
☐	44	Print Stylesheet Setup	Include basic print CSS (@media print) to hide navigation/footers and format core content cleanly for printing or PDF export.

6. POST-LAUNCH, MONITORING & OPERATIONS (ITEMS 45–50)

DNS migration protocols, operational monitoring, automated error tracking, and post-go-live verification.

Done	#	Checklist Item	Technical Specification & Action Required
☐	45	DNS & TTL Migration Strategy CRITICAL	Lower DNS TTL values to 300 seconds 48 hours before launch. Document A/AAAA records, CNAMEs, and MX/TXT records to ensure zero email/downtime disruption during cutover.
☐	46	Error Tracking (Sentry/Bugsnag)	Verify frontend and backend application error logging tools are configured in production mode. Filter expected noise and configure alert routing (Slack/PagerDuty).
☐	47	Uptime & Health Monitoring	Set up external synthetic uptime monitoring (UptimeRobot, Better Stack, Pingdom) with 1-minute interval checks across key user journeys and API endpoints.
☐	48	Transactional Email Delivery	Test transactional mail flows (SendGrid, Postmark, AWS SES). Verify SPF, DKIM, and DMARC DNS records pass validation to guarantee inbox deliverability.
☐	49	Staging Environment De-indexing	Confirm staging/development environments remain strictly password protected (HTTP Basic Auth) or restricted via IP whitelist to prevent accidental indexing.
☐	50	Post-Launch Indexing Request	Immediately following DNS propagation, submit the live XML sitemap in Google Search Console / Bing Webmaster Tools and trigger URL inspection indexing requests.

Empirican Digital - Quality Assurance Sign-Off

By signing below, the lead engineering, QA, and project management stakeholders confirm that all 50 quality assurance checklist items have been audited, validated, and signed off prior to production DNS migration.

Lead Developer Signature:

Date: _____

QA Lead Signature:

Date: _____

Project Manager Signature:

Date: _____