

Thunderbird Study: Search Bar

Scope of Study

This accessibility study was conducted between September 2025 - January 2026.

The purpose of this study is to observe both pros and flaws in Thunderbird's accessibility features for its users, including but not limited to the following when using the Global Search Bar:

- **Navigational Focus**
- **Keyboard Navigation**
- **Screen Reader**
- **Voice Control**
 - ****Voice control analysis is currently *on hold***

Additionally, I included observations I had when opening and responding to emails after using the global search bar as this was my next expected behavior of a user.

A comparison to other a11y-focused platforms (such as Gmail and Outlook) was completed to observe established patterns of accessibility users have come to expect.

It is important to note that users are as diverse as the systems they use to navigate computers; many use a combination of these accessibility features to use Thunderbird, so an inability to operate something **without** the use of a mouse is a critical flaw.

Flaws / Areas of Improvement

Additional Findings

Summary:

During testing of Thunderbird's settings and appearance workflows, I observed usability challenges with light/dark mode and font adjustments. Locating and toggling themes was confusing, requiring multiple navigation attempts to locate and find the correct settings. Font size changes were not immediately apparent when viewing emails, and highlighted states lacked sufficient contrast for users with color vision deficiency. Enhancing discoverability of keyboard shortcuts and offering a centralized panel for them could improve accessibility for all users. Additional improvements, such as skip-to-content functionality and more visible focus indicators, would further support keyboard and assistive technology navigation.

Additional Areas of Improvement (*macOS*)

Difficulty locating light/dark mode toggle; settings path was unclear and required external search

- Light/dark controls were not discoverable within Appearance or General settings, and search terms (“dark,” “light”) surfaced unrelated or misleading results (themes/Spotlight)
 - **User Impact:** Users may struggle to configure display preferences without external guidance, reducing usability and discoverability of core personalization features. Clearer settings organization or explicit light/dark controls could improve workflow efficiency.
 - **Environment:** macOS Tahoe 26.2 | Thunderbird 146.0.1 | MacBook Air built-in keyboard
 - **Priority:** MID

Font size adjustment succeeded in settings but visual change was not perceptible within message views (see Images 2f–2g in full study)

- Font size setting updates did not reflect noticeable differences in rendered message content during normal navigation, only becoming apparent via search context
 - **User Impact:** Users may believe changes are ineffective, reducing confidence in settings functionality and accessibility customization. If rendering differences are expected only in specific contexts, clearer feedback would improve usability.
 - **Environment:** macOS Tahoe 26.2 | Thunderbird 146.0.1 | MacBook Air built-in keyboard
 - **Priority:** MID

Additional Areas of Improvement (*macOS*)

Centralized keyboard shortcuts panel is not easily discoverable or accessible; shortcuts unavailable within application settings

- Keyboard controls could not be accessed via macOS settings or Thunderbird interface despite full keyboard accessibility settings being enabled
 - **User Impact:** Users must rely on external documentation to discover shortcuts, reducing discoverability and usability. A centralized shortcuts panel within settings would improve accessibility and workflow efficiency for non-power users.
 - **Environment:** macOS Tahoe 26.2 | Thunderbird 146.0.1 | MacBook Air built-in keyboard
 - **Priority:** **LOW**

Highlighted/focus states may lack sufficient visual contrast; accessibility for color-dependent users could be improved

- Focus indicators rely on default color treatments (blue in light mode, orange in dark mode), which may be difficult to perceive for color-blind users
 - **User Impact:** Users with color vision differences may struggle to identify active elements, reducing navigational clarity and accessibility. Offering customizable or higher-contrast focus indicators could improve usability.
 - **Environment:** macOS Tahoe 26.2 | Thunderbird 146.0.1 | MacBook Air built-in keyboard
 - **Priority:** **LOW**

Skip to main content option is unavailable; navigation requires traversing interface controls (see Image 12a in full study)

- Thunderbird does not provide a “skip to main content” shortcut or link comparable to patterns used in applications like Outlook
 - **User Impact:** Keyboard and screen reader users must navigate through interface controls before reaching primary content, increasing interaction cost and reducing navigational efficiency. A skip-to-content option would improve accessibility and workflow speed for non-mouse users.
 - **Environment:** macOS Tahoe 26.2 | Thunderbird 146.0.1 | MacBook Air built-in keyboard
 - **Priority:** **LOW**