

## Word Document Formatting:

Developing inclusive design processes ensures that information is accessible to a wider audience. Learn how to use tools available in Microsoft Word to format text elements in documents including: Fonts, Headings, Lists and Hyperlinks. Select readable and legible typefaces throughout your documents. Properly formatted bullets and numbered lists enhance readability and navigation. Descriptive words in links provide clear context. Redundant phrases like "click here" should be avoided. Underlining should be exclusive to active hyperlinks for clarity. Consistent heading styles ensure a logical structure within documents. Designate row and/or column headings to control logical navigation of data tables in Word.

Microsoft Office programs such as Word, PowerPoint and Excel all have built-in accessibility features that are available to everyone without add-ons. These include: an Accessibility Checker that identifies structured headings, alt text, accessible lists and tables, and built-in reading tools. The goal is to create documents that are usable by people who rely on screen readers, magnification, speech input, or alternative formats, while also improving clarity and organization for all users.

The Accessibility Checker should be your first stop before sharing any document.

- Headings should follow a logical hierarchy. Heading 1 is typically the document title, Heading 2 for main sections, and Heading 3 for subsections. Avoid skipping levels—for example, jumping from Heading 1 directly to Heading 3. Consistent structure helps everyone understand the organization of the document. This allows flawless screen reader navigation of a document for those that are blind or visually impaired.
- Alternative text allows screen reader users to understand images. Alt text should describe the *meaning or purpose* of the image, not just what it looks like. If the image provides information, it needs alt text. If it's purely decorative, it should be marked as decorative so it's skipped by assistive technology.
- Good alt text is brief but meaningful. Ask yourself: if the image were removed, what information would be missing? Avoid phrases like "image of" or "picture of"—screen readers already announce that it's an image. Focus on what the image communicates, not its visual style.
- Lists must be created using Word's built-in bullet or numbering tools. When lists are created manually using hyphens or numbers, screen readers won't recognize them as lists. Proper lists allow assistive technology to announce the number of items and support easier navigation.

- Tables should be used only for data, never for layout. Always identify a header row so screen readers can associate column headings with the correct data cells. Avoid merged cells and complex layouts, as they can make tables confusing or unreadable for assistive technology users.
- Color should never be the only way information is conveyed. For example, don't say "items in red are required" without another indicator. Good color contrast ensures readability for users with low vision or color blindness, and it also improves readability in different lighting conditions.
- Links should clearly describe where they go. Screen reader users often navigate by jumping from link to link, so vague phrases like "click here" provide no context. Descriptive links also improve usability for mobile users and anyone skimming the document.

Microsoft applications you can do that through Read Aloud or Immersive Reader are excellent tools for testing accessibility and built-into the platform. Both Adobe and the Google platform also offer Read Aloud as well and it works in almost the same way. Listening to your document can help you catch awkward reading order, missing context, or unclear language. These tools are also helpful for users with dyslexia, ADHD, or visual fatigue.

Here is a link to [Best Practice for accessible Word documents](#)

### **PDF Formatting:**

PDFs may all look alike, but accessibility depends on the original source. When possible, begin with an accessible Word document. Remediate issues before saving documents as a PDF. Scanned text must be digitized with OCR (optical character recognition). Confirm the readability and navigation of scanned documents with a screen reader.

Evaluate the Accessibility of the PDFs

- Does the information really need to be saved as a PDF?
- Confirm the text in PDFs can be recognized as digital characters so that screen readers can read text and describe on-screen elements aloud. If readings were scanned from a copier and saved as an image instead of text, the content cannot be read aloud with text-to-speech software.
- Are the original copies clean – no highlighting, comments or underlining?
- Are scanned files flattened images or can you highlight text and search for a keyword?

- Confirm the reading order is presented in the proper sequence if assistive technology is utilized.
- Are the reading order and navigation set correctly?
- Are chapters and headings identifiable?
- Request a digital version or consider alternative material if serious formatting issues exist.

**Review this video on how to [make PDFs with Microsoft Word](#).**