Six Tips for Creating More Accessible Word Documents

#1 Headings

If used properly, headings provide meaningful information about the structure of a document. Heading levels should begin with Heading 1 and decline in an orderly and hierarchical sequence. Choose the appropriate heading level based on its hierarchy and then modify the formatting to suit your design needs if necessary. Popular screen readers will automatically announce headings and heading levels in a Word document. Headings will be preserved if your Word document is later converted to PDF.

#2 Lists

Lists should be created using Word's built-in list styles. Otherwise, lists will not be identified properly by screen readers. Bullets should be used for unordered lists where the order of items in the list is not important (Example: A list of ingredients). Numbering should be used for ordered lists containing sequential items (Example: Step-by-step directions in a recipe). Lists will be retained if your Word document is later converted to PDF.

#3 Alternative Text for Images

Be sure to create meaningful, contextual, and concise alternative text (i.e., alt text) descriptions for all important images in your document. Nonessential images should be marked as decorative. Alt text descriptions should convey the same meaning that the image itself conveys to visual readers. Alt text descriptions will be retained if your Word document is later converted to PDF.

#4 Tables

Simple data tables can be an appropriate means for displaying information in a Word document. Tables should never be used for layout purposes. Avoid nested tables, merged or split cells, and empty rows, columns, or cells. Be sure to choose a table style with sufficient color contrast. Repeat the header row at the top of each page and prevent rows from breaking across pages. Following specific guidelines related to Word's Bookmark feature will cause some popular screen readers to announce column and/or row titles when navigating in the table. Identifying the header row and first column will produce a more accessible table if the Word document is later converted to PDF.

#5 Use Meaningful Hyperlink Text

Hyperlinks (i.e., links) in your document should have meaningful text that provides an indication of the purpose and destination of the links. Using plain language instead of just the URL will allow screen reader users to list links and identify them out of context. The color of links should be distinguishable from other non-link text in the presentation, but color alone should never be used as the only means of conveying information. Links are usually preserved if a Word file is converted to PDF.

#6 Proofing Language

Text written in a language other than the default editing language will need to be marked appropriately. This will ensure that the relevant dictionary is used when spell checking your document. Also, popular screen readers will automatically switch to the appropriate supported language voice when text marked as a different language is encountered. Text written in English should be marked as English so that it is understandable to a screen reader user. The marked proofing language will be retained if the Word file is later converted to PDF.

Accessibility Checker

The Accessibility Checker, which is available in Microsoft Word, Excel, Outlook, and PowerPoint, will identify some, but not all, accessibility issues in your document. Inspection results are categorized as errors, warnings, or tips. Some examples of potential issues that the Accessibility Checker may identify in your document include missing alt text, images or objects that are not in-line with text, merged or split cells in a table, and hard to read text contrast.

Want to Learn More?

This document includes a sampling and brief overview of six important accessibility considerations. The Carroll Center for the Blind offers comprehensive document accessibility trainings for Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. A detailed electronic handout containing instructions for incorporating accessibility features of these Microsoft Office applications is provided. Presentations also include a demonstration of using a screen reader to interact with accessible and inaccessible files to further illustrate the impact of document accessibility.

Contact Information

The Carroll Center for the Blind
Accessibility Services Department
Bruce Howell, Accessibility Services Manager
(617) 969-6200 ext. 210
Bruce.Howell@Carroll.org

https://carroll.org/businesses/accessibility-services/