Creating accessible Word documents

This article offers guidance on ways to create Microsoft Word documents to make them more accessible to users with disabilities. Because many files are often viewed electronically, governments and industries around the world are implementing policies that require electronic and information technology to be accessible to people with disabilities. For example, the amended Section 508 of the United States Rehabilitation Act of 1973 requires Federal agencies to make all of their electronic and information technology accessible.

TIP   Starting with Microsoft Office 2010 a new tool for Word, Excel, and PowerPoint called the Accessibility Checker is available that you can use to check your Word documents for any issues that might make it challenging for a user with a disability. To learn more, see Accessibility Checker.

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Add alternative text to images and objects

Alternative text, also known as alt text or Alt Text, appears when you move your pointer over a picture or object. Alt text helps people who use screen readers to understand the content of images in your document. For many readers, this is the only information they have about the images and objects in your document. Alt text should be included for any of the following objects in your document:

‣ Pictures

‣ Clip Art

‣ Charts

‣ Tables

‣ Shapes (that don't contain text and are not in groups)

‣ SmartArt graphics

‣ Groups (all objects in this list, with the exception of shapes, should also have alt text when in groups)

‣ Embedded objects

‣ Ink

‣ Video and audio files

Add alt text by doing the following:

1. Right click the image or object, and then click Format.

NOTE   For tables, click Table Properties.

2. Click Alt Text.

3. Enter a description of the image or object into the Title and Description text boxes.

TIP   Use clear, but concise descriptions. For example, "a red Ferrari" tells the reader more about the image than "a car."

4. Click Close.

To learn more, see Add alternative text to a shape, picture, chart, table, SmartArt graphic, or other object or Appropriate use of alternative text.

Specify column header rows in tables

In addition to adding alt text that describes the table, having clear column headings can help provide context and assist navigation of the table's contents.

To specify a header row in a table, do the following:

1. Click anywhere in the table.

2. On the Table Tools Design tab, in the Table Style Options group, select the Header Row check box.

3. Add your header information.

Learn more in Word 2010: Tables.

Use styles in long documents

Heading and paragraph styles, as well as tables of contents when necessary, make it easier for all readers of your document to follow it more easily. In longer documents, these elements can add structure for users who are using a screen reader, or who rely on the visual cue of section headings to navigate as they read.

> NOTE   Using the Navigation Pane in Word lets you browse the document by headings. To learn more, see Navigate your document.

To apply heading styles to your document, do the following:

1. Select the text you want to make into a heading.

2. On the Home tab, in the Styles group, select the appropriate level heading style from the Quick Styles gallery.

You can also create your own heading and paragraph styles. To learn more about this, see Add a heading or Create a Custom Style Set.

Use short titles in headings

When you use headings in a document, be sure to keep them short (fewer than 20 words). In general, headings should be, at most, one line long. This makes it easier for readers to quickly navigate the document, either by scanning it, or by using the Navigation pane.

Ensure all heading styles are in the correct order

By using heading levels in a logical order, for example Heading 4 is a child of Heading 3, not Heading 2, assists users in navigating the document and finding information.

Change a heading style by doing the following:

1. Select the heading that you want to change.

2. On the Home tab, in the Styles group, choose the correct heading style.

To add a heading line, do the following:

1. Insert a line of text where you want the new heading.

2. On the Home tab, in the Styles group, choose the correct heading style.

You can view and update your document's organization by clicking on the View tab and, in the Show group, select the Navigation Pane check box. To help longer documents maintain clear navigation, make sure you have at least one heading about every two pages, and that your headings are in the correct order (Heading 2 under Heading 1, etc.).

Watch a Training video: Use the Navigation Pane to search and move around in your document.

Watch a Demo Video: Using the Navigation Pane in Word 2010

Use hyperlink text that is meaningful

Hyperlink text should provide a clear description of the link destination, rather than only providing the URL.

To add a hyperlink to your document, do the following:

1. Place your cursor where you want the hyperlink.

2. On the Insert tab, in the Links group, click Hyperlink to open the hyperlink dialog box.

3. In the Text to display box, type in the name or phrase that will briefly describe the link destination.

4. In the Address box, type the link URL.

5. Click OK.

To change the text of a hyperlink, do the following:

1. Select the link and then, on the Insert tab in the Links group, click Hyperlink to open the Hyperlink dialog box.

2. In the Text to display box, make any necessary changes to the text.

3. Click OK.

Additionally, you can include ScreenTip text that appears when your cursor hovers over a hyperlink, and can be used in a similar way to alt text. To add ScreenTip text, do the following:

1. Place your cursor in the hyperlink you want to add ScreenTip text to.

2. On the Insert tab, in the Links group, click Hyperlink to open the hyperlink dialog box.

3. Click ScreenTip

4. Type in your text in the ScreenTip text box.

5. Click OK.

Use simple table structure

By not using nested tables, or merged or split cells inside of tables, you can make the data predictable and easy to

navigate. For example: When you are designing a form, the entire document is often based on a heavily formatted table, which makes it very difficult for users to navigate it with a screen reader, and requires them to piece together the content of each cell, read to them in an unpredictable order, to get an idea of the form's content.

To test and simplify the table structure, do the following:

1. Select the first cell of the table.

2. Press the Tab key repeatedly to make sure that the focus moves across the row and then down to the first cell of the next row.

3. If you need to merge or split cells to simplify the table, on the Table Tools Layout tab, in the Merge group, click Merge Cells or Split Cells as appropriate.

Learn more in Word 2010: Tables.

Avoid using blank cells for formatting

Using blank cells to format your table could mislead someone using a screen reader that there is nothing more in the table. You can fix this by deleting unnecessary blank cells or, if your table is used specifically to layout content within your document, you can clear all table styles by doing the following:

1. Select the entire table.

2. On the Table Tools Design tab, in the Table Styles group, click the arrow next to the style gallery to expand the gallery of table styles.

3. On the menu below the gallery, click Clear.

Learn more in Word 2010: Tables.

Structure layout tables for easy navigation

If you use a layout table (table with Table Normal style), check the reading order to be sure that it makes sense (for English: left to right, top to bottom).

Verify the table reading order by tabbing through the cells to check that the information is presented in a logical order.

Learn more in Word 2010: Tables.

Avoid using repeated blank characters

Extra spaces, tabs and empty paragraphs may be perceived as blanks by people using screen readers. After hearing "blank" several times, those users may think that they have reached the end of the information. Instead, use formatting, indenting, and styles to create whitespace.

To use formatting to add whitespace around a paragraph, do the following:

1. Remove any existing whitespace around the paragraph.

2. Select the text, then right-click and choose Paragraph.

3. Select values for Indentation and Spacing to create whitespace.

Avoid using floating objects

Objects that are not in line with text are challenging to navigate, and they may be inaccessible to users with vision impairment. Setting text-wrapping around objects to Top and Bottom or In Line With Text makes it easier for people with screen readers to follow the structure of your document.

To change the text-wrapping around objects, do the following:

1. Select the object, and right-click.

2. Choose Wrap Text, and then select either In Line With Text or Top and Bottom from the list.

Avoid image watermarks

Images used as watermarks may not be understood by people with vision or cognitive disabilities. If you must use a watermark, make sure that the information it contains is also included elsewhere in your document.

Include closed captions for any audio

If you use additional audio components in a document, ensure that the content is available in alternative formats for users with disabilities, such as closed captions, transcripts or alt text.

Learn more

‣ Accessibility Checker

‣ Accessibility Checker Rules

‣ Accessibility checker Group Policy settings

‣ Add alternative text to a shape, picture, chart, table, SmartArt graphic, or other object

‣ Add a heading

‣ Video: Apply styles in Word 2010

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