Ten tips for accessible documents

Top tips on creating Office documents that everyone can read.

Have you ever realized that not everyone receiving your documents can read and understand them as well as you think? It's sadly true that most of us don't consider people with disabilities when creating documents. The following tips can help you create Office documents that cater to your whole audience, not just a portion of it.

Can you see what I see?

Just as there are a number of different types of vision disability, there are also a number of things that you can do to make your documents accessible to everyone. Here are some of the basics:

1. Don't rely on color

Remember those eye tests at school, the ones with the colored dots with the number in the center? Remember how some people saw numbers different from the ones you saw? That's the Ishihara Color Test, and people really do see different numbers on the same cards.

People who are color blind will see things differently. Therefore, to make sure everyone can read and understand your documents, never rely on color alone to transmit information. Not relying on color doesn't mean you can't use it; it just means that if you do use color, make sure the document, including any images, still makes sense even if you couldn't see the colors. For example, if you have an image of a red triangle, make sure the triangle is clearly labeled Red Triangle.

2. Don't use pale blue text

Here's useful piece of trivia for your next party: As eyes age, the first color that people notice a degradation in sight with is pale blue. This happens because the cones in your retinas that detect color start to lose some of their sensitivity with age, and there's not a lot you can do about it. Therefore, as a document creator, you should do the decent thing: remember those of us with older eyeballs and don't use pale blue text on a white background.

3. Use ALT text

ALT (alternative) text is the little block of text that pops up when you point your cursor at an image on a Web page or in an Office document. To someone who is blind or partially-sighted and using a screen reader, ALT text is what describes the image for them so they too can experience it. ALT text has a limited number of characters, so make sure you use the most apt and informative text you can to describe any images in your documents.

Applying alt text to a shape, picture, chart, table, SmartArt graphic, or other object is a simple way to make your document more accessible.

Think about TAB order

4. Don't get stuck in "TAB hell"

Many of you will have no idea what TAB hell is, so here's a quick rundown. Imagine looking a Web page you've never been to before. It's a blank page other than a title:

1. After reading the title, the page changes...
2. and now you can see a box with a picture in it...
3. then the page changes again and you can read the navigation links at the bottom of the page...
4. it changes yet again and you can see an advertisement...
5. one more change and finally you can read the main text of the page.

This is exactly what someone who is using a screen reader experiences. The TAB key is used to navigate the page and they might have to press the TAB key several times to get to the section of the page they're really interested in. The example above would only need five TAB key presses; on a really busy page, there could be many more.

There are a few tips for creating web pages and documents that don't result in TAB hell.

Never overlook the obvious: When you create a document or Web page, think about the TAB order. This applies to documents other than Web pages: PowerPoint Slides are infamous for having the text and images stacked on them in the wrong order for screen readers. (Though, to be fair to the PowerPoint team, they've made huge efforts in recent version to fix those issues.)

If in doubt, try it for yourself: Open your document, put the mouse to one side and press TAB to see where the focus goes. If you're using PowerPoint, you can change your tab order by using the Selection Pane to adjust your items up and down.

Mind your table manners

Tables can be extraordinarily useful, clarifying and bringing the text to life. But done improperly, they can serve to confuse things. Make sure when you do use tables, you pay heed to some guidelines.

5. Avoid using tables for layout

An easy way to create nicely laid out documents is to use tables with invisible borders. If you choose this route, however, you're consigning your screen reader consumers to TAB hell, as they'll have to navigate the table using the TAB key. Therefore, find other ways to lay out your documents attractively without using a table.

If you must use a table for layout, remember that screen readers and Braille displays read tables row-by-row across the columns. The TAB order also goes through the table in this way. So make sure that your table structure makes sense when reading from left to right, row-by-row.
6. Use tables only when necessary

Consider the following simple table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ATTRIBUTE</th>
<th>CAT</th>
<th>MONKEY</th>
<th>SNAKE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fur</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A screen reader will, in most cases, read out the information in this table as: attribute, cat, monkey, snake, fur, yes, yes, no, legs, 4, 2, 0.

This is not very helpful at all. It would be much better to list the information.

- Cat: fur, four legs
- Monkey: fur, two legs
- Snake: no fur, no legs

7. Use HTML tags appropriately

While we're talking tables, let's talk about how you label the cells in a table on a Web page correctly for a screen reader. What?! Yes, there are HTML tags that label the cells in a table as a header <TH> or a data <TD> cell. The data is presented by the screen reader or Braille display with the header information and data in context. In HTML, you can also include a table summary in the <table> tag that explains the purpose of the table.

Sound advice

Just as everyone doesn't see the same way, the same is true of hearing.

8. Don't rely on sound

If you use sound in a document, whether it's a short beep or a long audio clip, always make sure that the same information is captured in the document, accessible even if you can't hear it. If you use a beep to draw the reader's attention to something and the beep is not heard, you might as well not have bothered in the first place.

Be clear, be brief

There are other disabilities that can prevent people from understanding the full meaning of your documents. People with cognitive, neurological, and developmental disabilities will all benefit if you keep the language simple in your documents.

9. Use short sentences

Many people can get lost in long sentences with complicated grammar, to the extent that your meaning is lost. Short sentences are a must. If the content lends itself to a bulleted list, present it that way. A bulleted list is a very simple way of enforcing short sentences.

10. Be judicious with your word choice

There's no denying that many of us enjoy showing off a long word, myself definitely included. As a form of one-upmanship it can't be beaten. But if you're trying to help people understand your documents, ignore the temptation to impress with your vocabulary — stick to simple, clear words that won't have your readers reaching for the dictionary.

Learn more

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