

Accessible Document Example

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Overview

Many online documents are created using a Microsoft application such Word, Excel, or PowerPoint. Many PDFs start as one of these formats before being converted. Microsoft has strengthened the accessibility tools within their Office 365 applications. They are very good in Microsoft Word, making it much easier to create accessible documents.

The basic principles for web accessibility also apply to documents. These are outlined below along with document-specific notes.

The August 2025 version of this document includes brand color changes.

Accessibility Checker

Word includes a tool for checking accessibility in your document. It will indicate if there are any issues as well as the kind of issue it is. Access the tool through the Word menu: **Tools > Check Accessibility**. It will open in the side panel for you to use. Keep it running and visible while you work.

Title

The document should begin with its title and needs to be formatted using the **Heading 1** style. This should be the only H1 in the document. Also make sure that you copy the title to the **Title** field of the document properties. Search engines will display this title, and it will help users find the document.

Styles

Leverage the power of styles to ensure that your document will be appropriately tagged when exported to a PDF.

- Customize the built-in **Heading 1** through **Heading 6** styles for the headers.
- Customize the built-in **Normal** style for standard paragraphs.
- Customize the built-in **Hyperlink** and **FollowedHyperlink** styles if needed.
- Customize the built-in **Header** and **Footer** styles for Header and Footer elements.
- Customize the built-in **TOC 1** through **TOC 6** styles if a Table of Contents is created.
- Do not use empty paragraphs for spacing. Add margin before and after to your styles to space out the content.
- Use character styles for applying accessible colors consistently to elements.
- Create a style to customize the look of table header rows.

Access the Styles panel through the Word menu **Format > Style** or by activating the **Styles Pane** via the **Ribbon** menu. Each will allow you to modify all the attributes of any style. The Styles Pane makes it easy to apply a style to a content element as you work.

Semantic Structure (Heading 2)

The content of the document should follow a clear structure, utilizing the formatting options for their respective purpose. Headings are the primary way to define the structure of the document. The tags associated with these elements inform the screen reader of content type so that the content can be read back to the user appropriately (e.g. heading, paragraph, list, image, table).

Headings (Heading 3)

Use the Heading styles 2 through 6 to define the structure (outline) of your content. The heading styles can be modified as needed. Using the heading styles will also make it easy for you to quickly generate a Table of Contents at the beginning of the document. Heading styles are used throughout this document. Additional heading levels are illustrated below:

Heading 4

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua.

Heading 5

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua.

HEADING 6

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua.

Paragraphs

Paragraphs are the basic content blocks of your document. Avoid using empty paragraphs wherever possible. The heading and paragraph styles used in this document (i.e., the “style sheet”) were adjusted to include space before and after to separate the elements.

Lists

Use the list styles based on their purpose. Use the number or letter style when the order of the listed items is essential to the meaning (like the steps to a process or recipe). When the order is not important and the items are “unordered” (like a shopping list), use the bullet style.

Development Process

1. Selection and definition
2. Design
3. Build
4. Deploy
5. Maintain

Favorite Colors

- Royal Blue
- Yellow
- Azure

Color

Follow the WCAG guidelines for color contrast between foreground and background colors. The accessibility tool in MS Word will help identify and correct any issues. Green and orange are challenging colors to make accessible. If necessary, use accessible colors such as hex red (#c51f2e) or hex blue (#004c97) or gray (#636466) for accessible text

colors. These are included as character styles in this documents stylesheet. Other possible text colors include [purple \(#645faa\)](#), [green \(#008340\)](#), and [blue medium \(#1079bf\)](#).

Since blue is often used for a link color, limit its use.

Links

The text used for hyperlinks should always be descriptive, giving the reader a clear idea of what to expect when following the link. You should never use “click here” or “read more” for hyperlinks. See [Digital Accessibility](#) on MyUTSW.

Images

Images that contain text must include that text as ALT text. Please note that there is a 140-character limit for ALT text that is read back via screen readers.



(1-2 detailed sentences recommended)

UT Southwestern Policy Handbook

☐ Mark as decorative

Closeup of orange rose images that are decorative and don't really contribute to the meaning of the content can be marked as “decorative” by selecting the checkbox.



(1-2 detailed sentences recommended)

Content marked as decorative will not expose a description to screen readers.

☒ Mark as decorative

Note: To make sure a good reading order is maintained, images should be placed inline. Using the advanced positioning functions will separate the image from its text context.

Table of Contents

Including a table of contents is a great feature for documents of some length. When heading styles are used consistently, a TOC can be generated easily. This document

includes a generated TOC at the beginning. It is contained within a continuous section that allows for a two-column format without using a table.

Tables

Tables should be limited to situations in which you need to present data by rows and columns; they should not be used layout purposes. When a table is included, it should include a header row that defines the data in the columns. Avoid using complex tables with merged cells and multiple headers. The reading order of a table is critical to understanding the data, and complex tables are next to impossible to understand for those using assistive technology.

When the document contains multiple tables, a caption for each is recommended.

Use the ALT Text option in Table Properties to provide a title to the table for use by assistive technology.

Table 1 Example

Apple Type	Created	Taste
Gala	1930s	Sweet and easy eating
Granny Smith	1860s	Incredibly tart, high acid, and subtle sweetness
Honeycrisp	1960s	Juicy, sweet, and crunchy

Creating PDFs

To maintain the meta data and accessibility elements that were defined when building a Microsoft Word document, you must use the Save As function to create a PDF. Using a Print to PDF function will strip away the accessibility elements, and tables may lose their left-to-right reading order.

Adobe Acrobat Tools

If the final format of your document is a PDF, Adobe Acrobat provides tools to further test and improve the accessibility of your document. However, it is recommended that any needed tweaks be made in the original document and a new PDF generated.

Other Resources

- [Microsoft Office Accessibility Checker](#)

- [Microsoft Office: Create Accessible PDFs](#)
- [Microsoft Word Accessibility \(WebAIM\)](#)
- [PDF Accessibility \(WebAIM\)](#)
- [PowerPoint Accessibility \(WebAIM\)](#)
- [Section508.gov: Create Accessible Documents](#)
- [UTSA Document Accessibility](#)
- [UTSW Digital Accessibility](#)