Accessibility checklist for Microsoft Word documents

Microsoft Word has many features that help people with different abilities to read and access documents. Word also has an Accessibility Checker to identify elements in your documents that might cause problems for people with disabilities.

Here is a list of things you should consider when writing documents to make sure that they are accessible to everyone:

- Using heading styles will provide structure to your document that can improve accessibility. As well as providing consistent formatting throughout your document, screen reading software will announce the heading level information to the reader, enabling them to understand the format of the document better. Screen reading software can also use heading styles for navigation by presenting the reader with a list of headings and enabling them to skip directly to a specific section in the document.
- You can modify the heading styles (as well as any other styles you use) to suit your preferred fonts, sizes, spacing, etc.

Apply built-in heading styles

1. Select the heading text.
2. On the Home tab, in the Styles group, select a heading style, for example, Heading 1 or Heading 2.

While there is no definitive correct font choice for accessibility, it is generally recommended that a sans serif font, such as Arial or Calibri is used for document text.

It is recommended that a font size of 12pt or larger is used for the main text.

Avoid using all capital letters and excessive italics or underlines, as these can make information more difficult to read for some people.

While it is generally easier for everyone to read short blocks of text, many people with specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, can find large blocks of text to be extremely difficult to read. Some people may see text as ‘moving’ or see ‘rivers’ forming on the page from the spaces between words. Using short paragraphs with space between them breaks up the text and can reduce such visual distortions.

Try to keep paragraphs reasonably short and include space between them. Paragraph spacing should be done using ‘space after’ paragraph formatting and not by inserting additional blank lines.

Also, use a page break rather than multiple blank lines after your text when you want to start a new page in your document.

If your document has a high level of contrast between text and background, people with visual impairments will find it easier to read.

If background/watermark images are used, make sure they don't reduce the clarity of the text.
A table of contents will provide easy navigation for people with visual impairments or reading difficulties. Using heading styles for section headings enables Word to automatically create a table of contents. Each item in the table of contents acts like a hyperlink, enabling the reader to jump directly to the desired section rather than having to search through the document.

Visual content includes pictures, SmartArt graphics, shapes, groups, charts, embedded objects, ink, and videos.

Alt text provides a description that will be read out by assistive technology to help people with visual impairments understand what’s important in images and other visuals.

If your image is purely decorative, you can mark it as such by typing two quotation marks "" as the alt text.

Avoid using text in images as the sole method of conveying important information. If you must use an image with text in it, repeat that text in the document or in the alt text.

Add alt text to images (Office 2016)

Add alt text to images, such as pictures and screenshots, so that screen readers can read the text to describe the image to users who can’t see the image.

1. Right-click an image.
2. Select Format Picture > Layout & Properties.
3. Select Alt Text.
4. Type a description and a title.

You can use colour to represent or enforce information, but make sure that the meaning is not reliant on colour alone. People who are blind, have low vision, or are colourblind may struggle to understand information that is represented solely by colour. For example, using green text for positive responses and red text for negative responses in a document would be unsuitable for someone with red/green colourblindness.

Including short hyperlinks in your documents such as www.lancaster.ac.uk/iss does not cause an accessibility issue. However, longer hyperlinks containing strings of numbers or reference codes are difficult to understand and remember, especially when using assistive technology such as a screen reader. Embedding hyperlinks into the text of the document makes the document flow better and provides clear information about where the hyperlink leads to.

Screen reading software can extract a list of links from a document. Links such as "click here" do not provide any information about their destination when taken out of the document content. Use descriptive hyperlink text, such as "More information can be found on the Information Systems Services website" to convey clear and accurate information about the destination.
Add hyperlink text

1. Select the text to which you want to add the hyperlink, and then right-click.
2. Select Hyperlink from the menu.
3. The Insert Hyperlink dialogue box will appear.
4. The text you selected displays in the Text to display field.
5. In the Address field, enter the destination address for the hyperlink.

Screen reader applications keep track of their location in a table by counting table cells. If a table is nested within another table or if a cell is merged or split, the screen reader loses count and can’t provide helpful information about the table after that point. Blank cells in a table could also mislead someone using a screen reader into thinking that there is nothing more in the table.

Screen readers also use header information to identify rows and columns.

Tables should only be used for data and tabular information; not for page formatting.

While most people at the University use or have access to Microsoft Office, not everyone does. PDF is a more generic format for document distribution. Any accessibility features used in your Word documents will be retained when you export the document to PDF.

Before finalising your document, run the Accessibility Checker to make sure your Microsoft Office content is easy for people of all abilities to read and edit.

The Accessibility Checker will list any accessibility issues in your document. These will be listed as errors or warnings. Errors must be fixed to ensure that your document is accessible. Warnings are potential hazards that may need manually checking (such as the reading order of a table with merged cells) or require a judgement call (such as a hyperlink that isn’t embedded in the text).

Run an accessibility check

1. Click File, then Info.
2. Click the Check for Issues button.
3. In the Check for Issues drop-down menu, select Check Accessibility.
4. The Accessibility Checker task pane appears next to your content and shows the inspection results.