

Creating Accessible Documents- The Basics

Webinar Handout – May 19, 2026

Creating a quality document involves more than typing the right words. If we want information to reach the widest range of people, then the content must be accessible. Creating accessible documents is important for more than people with visual impairments, it impacts people from all walks of life. People with physical limitations, learning disabilities and even people without disabilities benefit from accessible content. Prioritizing accessibility is essential not only for individuals, but also for businesses and society.

Accessibility

Accessibility is the practice of making information, activities, and environments usable and meaningful for as many people as possible. It means ensuring everyone, including people with disabilities, can receive, understand, and act upon information and services as easily as everyone else.

Plain Language

- [Digital.gov: Plain Language Guide Series](https://digital.gov/guides/plain-language), <https://digital.gov/guides/plain-language>

Reading Level

There are reading level check apps available through Google search. Microsoft Word has a built-in Readability statistics tool which must be enabled to use.

- Review > Editor > Insights > Flesch reading ease
- Review > Editor > Insights > Flesch-Kincaid grade level

Visual Presentation

Font Style and Size

- Choose simple fonts that are easier to read.
- Accessible fonts such as Arial, Veranda, or Tahoma.
- For printed documents, 12-point font is the preferred standard, not below a 10-point font.
- For large print, use 18-point font or larger.

Color Contrast

Everybody sees color differently. Make sure your colors contrast to make sure people can read your information. You can use the grey-scale option to view document to preview how it will look when printed in black and white.

- Word: File > Print... > Select Black & White, then Open in Preview
- Google docs: Tools/spelling and grammar check/ use grey-scale option



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Color Conveying Meaning

Do not use color as the only way to convey meaning. This impacts those with visual impairments including colorblindness. For example, a data entry box should not use colored text as the only way to indicate required content. The image on the left with red font is not accessible. The image on the left with the word 'required' is accessible.

The image shows two versions of a 'Personal Info' form side-by-side. Both forms have a title 'Personal Info' in a box at the top. The left form has the word 'Required' in red at the top left. Below it are four input fields: 'Full Name', 'ID Number', 'Email', and 'Phone'. The labels 'ID Number', 'Email', and 'Phone' are also in red. A 'Submit' button is at the bottom. The right form has the same layout, but the labels 'ID Number (required)' and 'Email (required)' are in black, indicating that the requirement is conveyed by text rather than color.

Headings

Headings help us navigate documents. A common mistake is to indicate a heading by making it bold. Changing the font style creates a visual structure but does not provide navigation structure for assistive technology users.

- Screen reader example: [How a Screen Reader Works, Tufts University](https://tinyurl.com/4s2tesmn), <https://tinyurl.com/4s2tesmn>.

Structure your content with headings. It is important to not skip heading levels.

- Heading 1 – Page title or main content heading
- Heading 2 – Major section heading
- Heading 3 – Sub-section of Heading 2
- Heading 4 – Sub-section of Heading 3
- And so on, ending with Heading 6

In Microsoft Word, you can add a Heading under the “Home” toolbar, ‘Styles’ section. Highlight the text you want to make a heading and select the style from the toolbar.

To modify the heading style (change its color, size, font, etc.), right click on the style in the toolbar and make the necessary adjustments. You can select that the modifications be applied to the entire document. This will change the text using that style throughout the document.

In Google Docs, you can add a Heading from the main toolbar, select the text and look for the Styles dropdown menu.

Built-in Tools

Use the built-in tools to format your document. Repeated use of tab or return creates dead air for screen readers and there is no indication the document continues.

- Increase the space between paragraphs by expanding the 'Paragraph' tools under the 'Home' menu and adding space before or after the paragraph.
- To start a new page, use the 'Page Break' option under the 'Insert' menu.

Hyperlinks

Long or uninformative hyperlinks can create problems for all users. Edit hyperlinks to state where the link will take the end user.

- Highlight the text that will act as the hyperlink.
- Select link/hyperlink option under the 'Insert' menu.
- Paste the URL

A screen reader will read this as, 'You are on a link, (reads text), you are on a link.' Never use non-descriptive text such as 'Click Here'. A variety of websites are available to help you create shortened hyperlinks such as Tiny URL, Bit.ly, or Ow.ly.

Alt-Text for Images and Graphics

Alt-text provides a non-visual means of representing the content or function of the image. All images in your document need to have alt text or marked as decorative. Do not rely on auto-generated alt text, be sure review for accuracy. Avoid redundancy when writing alt text; do not provide information that is in the surrounding text. A helpful question to ask yourself when writing alt text is 'What is a sighted person getting out of this image?'

When a screen reader encounters an image, it says 'You are on an image, (reads the alt-text describing the image), you are on an image.' The description should be concise and relevant to the function of the image. Every detail of the image does not need to be described.

- [Example screen reader and Alt-Text video](https://tinyurl.com/2r36wvs2): <https://tinyurl.com/2r36wvs2>

Creating alt-text

- Right click on the image
- Select View Alt-Text
- Add alt text or mark as decorative.

Accessibility Checker

Most of Microsoft's tools have a built-in accessibility checker. Be advised: no accessibility checker is perfect, and you should always review your content in addition to using one.

To use the Accessibility Checker:

- Under the 'Review' menu, select 'Check Accessibility'
- The Accessibility Assistant side panel will open and guide you through identified issues.

Saving Accessibility Features

To preserve the accessibility features when sharing documents, when possible choose:

- Export to a PDF, not Save As

If you are unsure about accessibility of a PDF document, it is best to start with the original Word or Google Doc (or export to this type of file). Use the Accessibility Checker and make edits in Word, when possible.

Resources

Microsoft:

- [Accessibility Training Essentials](https://tinyurl.com/4vzydusb), <https://tinyurl.com/4vzydusb>
- [Accessibility Fundamentals](https://tinyurl.com/4c2vz7kc), <https://tinyurl.com/4c2vz7kc>

Maine CITE Webinars:

Archived webinars are available on the [Maine CITE Training webpage](http://www.mainecite.org/training), www.mainecite.org/training.

- Creating Accessible Documents – The Basics (Part 1)
- Creating Accessible Digital Content and Presentations (Part 2)
- Creating Accessible Online Content (Part 3)



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