

Accessible Documents in Microsoft Word



Introduction

This document will demonstrate how to make some of the common features of a Microsoft Word document accessible. The aim is to demonstrate how these features can be made accessible – or not – and how well they convert into a PDF document.

Use headings correctly

Everyone relies on meaningful headings to navigate the page but they are especially important for some people with access needs. Make sure your headings reflect the page structure.

Structure headings for accessibility

The H1 is the same as the page title. You should have only one H1 on a page.

Each main section of your page should start with an H2 and each sub-section of an H2 with an H3. It is possible to have sub-sub-sections which start with an H4.

With each heading, ask yourself if it's a sub-section of the previous heading. If not, it should be at the same level as (or higher than) the previous section.

Make sure that headings follow the correct "nesting" order and don't skip levels. The structure of the page is the key thing, not the size and style of the text.

Avoid blank lines

One common error in a Word document is to use blank lines to create space between paragraphs instead of using paragraph spacing.

This may create the visual desired visual effect but, unless the blank line is tagged as an artifact it will be read by the screen reader as "blank line".

This is the process of clicking enter more than once to create more space on a document. You should click 'insert' and click 'page break' to move onto a new page within the document rather than entering until you get to a new page.

Colour contrast

People with low vision often find it hard to read text that does not contrast with the background. If your document has a high level of contrast between the text and background, more people can see and use the content.

Add alternate text for images

Avoid unnecessary decoration. Only use images if there's a real user need.



Alternative text

Alternative text, or alt text, is read out by screen readers or displayed if an image does not load or if images have been switched off.

All images, except decorative images, must have alt text that:

- tells people what information the image provides
- describes the content and function of the image
- is specific, meaningful and concise.

Use normal punctuation, like commas and full stops, so the text is easy to read and understand.

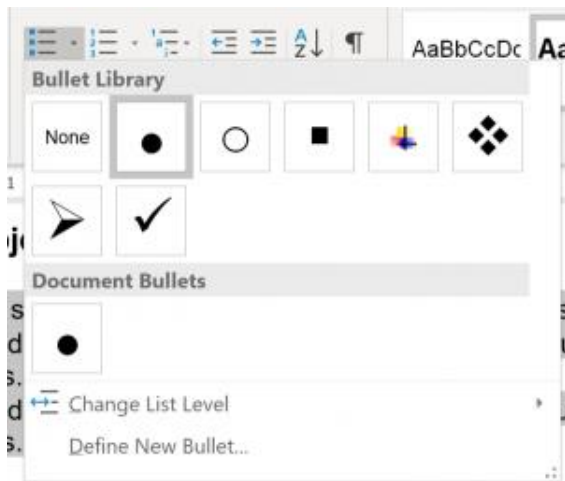
Do not:

- include the name of the photographer or person who created the image
- start with 'Image of', 'Graphic of' or 'Photo of'
- repeat information from the page
- include extra information not in the image

Some images do not need descriptions. If your image is purely decorative, you can mark them as such without needing to write any alt text.

Use lists

Lists should be created using Word's built-in tools for ordered (numbered) and unordered (bulleted) lists. Without using these tools, a list is not *really* a list, which makes the content more difficult for screen reader users to fully understand.



The text introducing the list should end with a colon. If a continuous and standalone sentence, then a full stop should be placed at the end. Each sentence should also start with a capital letter (example below):

This is a list:

- A standalone sentence that explains something of relevance to the reader. It, therefore, needs a full stop to separate from the next bullet.
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- A standalone sentence that explains something of relevance to the reader. It, therefore, needs a full stop to separate from the next bullet.

If the bulleted list doesn't have proper sentences, then there is no need for a full stop or capitalisation at the start of each bullet point (example below):

This shows reasons to use a list:

- short and concise
- key information absorbed quickly
- no need for lengthy sentences

Write meaningful links

Links should describe where they're taking the user.

Where you can, use the same words as the title of the page you're linking to. That way, the user will know what to expect.

You should not use link text such as "click here" or anything that does not make sense when read out of context. Generic links do not make sense out of context or tell users where a link will take them. They also do not work for people using screen readers, who often scan through lists of links to navigate a page.

It's important the links are descriptive, so they make sense in isolation.

If your link takes the user to a page where they can start a task, start your link with a verb. For example, 'send a tax return'.

Try and avoid complex URLs, for example:

<https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20-TECHS/G200.html>

Would be better written as:

[Read more about opening new windows and tabs on W3C](#)

Tables

Tables can be very difficult for screen reader users to understand unless they include markup that explicitly defines the relationships between all the parts (e.g., headers and data cells).

For a simple table with one row of column headers and no nested rows or columns, Word is up to the task. However, more complex tables can only be made accessible within HTML or Adobe PDF (accessible table markup can be added to the PDF using Adobe Acrobat Pro).

When to use tables

Tables should only be used to present data.

Do not use tables for cosmetic changes to layout, for example to present a list because you think it looks better that way.

Consider the alternatives

A table may not always be the best way to present your content.

A simple table can often be replaced with a:

- series of bulleted lists with headings and subheadings
- single bulleted list, using commas to separate the information

Example simple table

Date	Amount
First 6 weeks	£109.80 per week
Next 33 weeks	£109.80 per week
Total estimated pay	£4,282.20

How to make tables accessible

Use headers

- Tables must always have a header row.
- Headers should appear in bold.
- You must capitalise headers.
- Row headings must be in column one.