

Writing Accessible Documents

When writing any documentation, it is important to ensure that it is accessible to **all** users.

Microsoft Word is currently the most common word processor on the market so the *.doc* and *.docx* format have become the de facto format for text documents. Word is also used to create files that end up in PDF and HTML format.

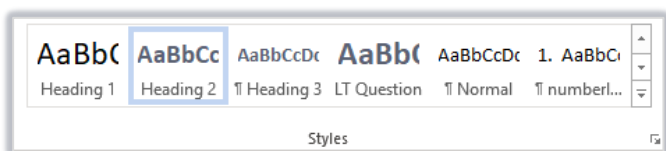
This user guide covers several things you can do to make content created in Word more accessible.

Accessible Formatting

The use of styles and other built-in formatting such as numbered lists is one of the most important steps in making documents accessible. They provide a logical reading order that serves as a navigation guide for people using assistive technologies. Screen Reader software uses styles to identify headings within a document so the reader can jump from heading to heading when navigating the text.

To apply a style

- Make sure your cursor is inside the paragraph you want to apply a style to.
- Click the style you require, e.g. Heading 2, from the **Styles** gallery on the **Home** tab to apply the style.



For more information on using styles in Word, see our [guides in Toolkit](#).

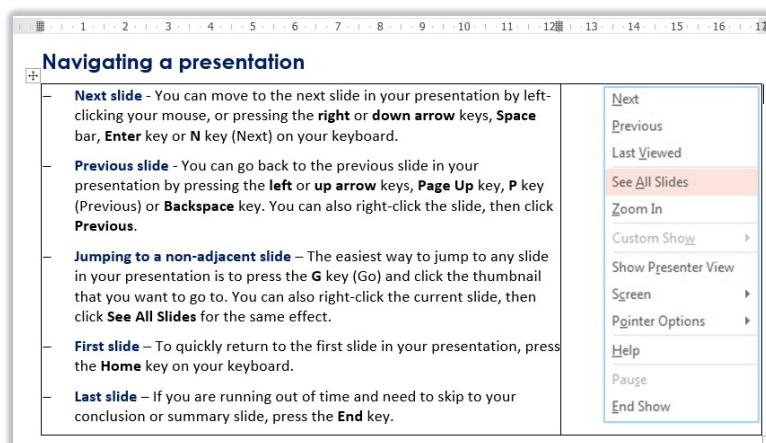
Tables

The use of tables in Word documents is often unavoidable as it's the best way to display certain types of tabular information (see page 2 for information on creating accessible tables). However, you should avoid using tables to control the layout of your document.

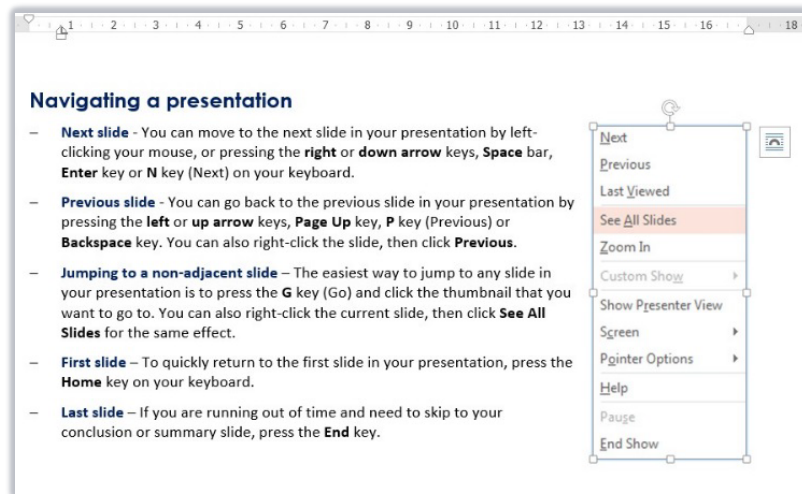
Inaccessible tables

The image below illustrates how the author has used an invisible table to control the layout of the text (the table cell on the left) and the associated image (the table cell on the right).

A screen reader will find this difficult to navigate as it won't know where to start reading and may confuse the table cell order.



As we can see in the corrected example shown below, the table was unnecessary clutter and the same visual effect was achieved by simply inserting the image onto the page and using Word's image formatting options to align the image to the right of the text.

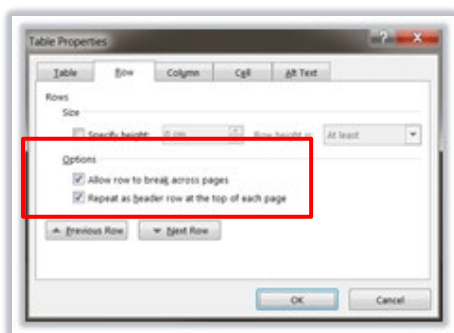


Accessible tables

If you genuinely need to use a table to present tabular data in your document, you will need to format it correctly.

After you have created your table and populated it with data, you must identify a 'Header Row' to allow the heading text to be distinguishable from the data area of the table. Identifying a 'Header Row' is also important if the table spans more than one page.

- Select the first row of the table.
- **Right-click** the row and select **Table Properties** from the context menu.
- Under the **Row** tab, ensure the **Allow row to break across pages** and **Repeat as header row** checkboxes are ticked.



To help anyone who uses assistive technologies to understand tables:

- Always try to construct simple tables.
- Use only one Header Row.
- Don't merge or split cells
- Try to avoid leaving cells blank.

Accessible Hyperlinks

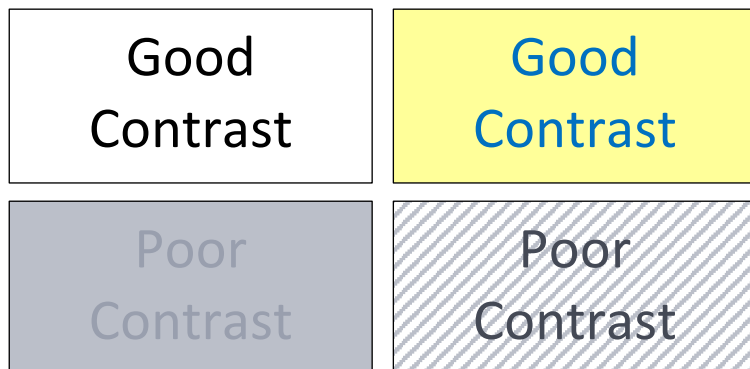
Hyperlink text should provide a clear description of the link destination.

When navigating a document, a person who uses assistive technology can skip from hyperlink to hyperlink. Since this method of navigation does not include any of the surrounding text, the hyperlink text alone

needs to provide sufficient meaning. For example, www.abdn.ac.uk/toolkit/ is not a clear description, just a URL. Instead, we should write [Visit Toolkit online](#) and apply the URL using the address box in the Insert Hyperlink dialog.

Contrast

Make sure that your documents contain a good contrast between the colour of the text and the colour of the page background. People who have a visual impairment or a learning difficulty such as dyslexia may struggle to read text without a good contrast. It is also best to avoid using patterns as backgrounds.



Headers and Footers

Avoid placing important information in the Header or Footer areas of your document as some screen readers will not read out the information in these areas.

If a piece of information is important, make sure you include it in the main body of the document.

Accessible Images

You must provide alternative text known as **Alt text** for images because users with visual impairments, low bandwidth or text-only monitors will not be able to view an image in your document. See page 5 for details of how to add Alt text.

There are different classes of images used within documents and each requires a slightly different approach to Alt text:

- Decoration/Eye Candy
- Supplemental/Interesting
- Critical for understanding

Decoration or Eye Candy

These have no purpose other than to make a document look more attractive. If you insert Alt text for these images, it creates auditory clutter for people who are using a screen reader.

For example, the image below is purely decorative and lends nothing of value to this user guide. The correct approach for images of this type is to **mark the image as decorative**. See page 4 of this guide for details of how to do this.



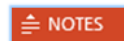
Supplemental or Interesting

These images are used to add something extra to what is being said in the text. In such cases, you decide whether Alt text would provide the user with meaningful, additional information, or if a description is not required.

In the example below, the author of a user guide has included an image of the **Notes** button but has decided to mark it as decorative, as the accompanying text explains *where* the button is and *how* it works. The image is supplementary, for a visual user, and so a description is not necessary.

Adding speaker notes

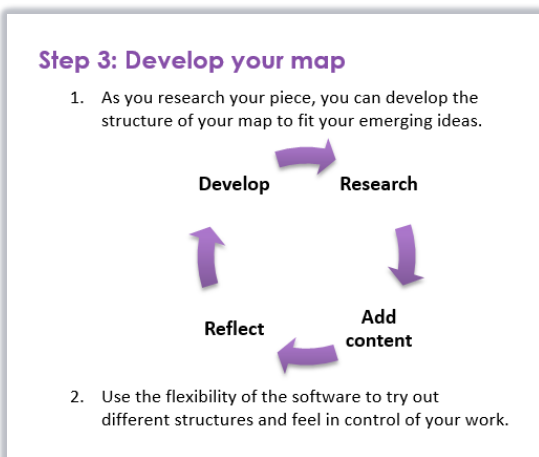
1. Type notes or reminders about each slide in the Notes pane – you can print these.
2. If you can't see the Notes pane, click **Notes** on the status bar (bottom of screen).



Critical for understanding

These are images that should *always* have a detailed description. Examples of such images include (but are not limited to) charts, diagrams, specific screenshots, or a visual representation of a concept. See page 5 for details of how to add Alt text.

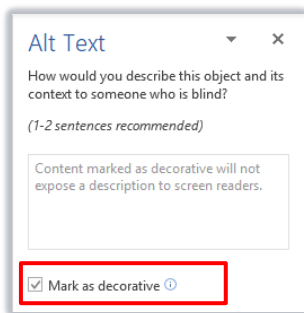
The example below shows a diagram explaining the process of developing a mind map. The accompanying text does not explain the illustration's purpose, so the 'alt' text must explain this through the description.



Alt text = “Image shows process for developing mind-map – cyclical diagram which shows arrows moving from ‘Develop’ to ‘Research’ to ‘Add content’ to ‘Reflect’ and back to ‘Develop’.”

To mark an image as decorative

- **Right-click** the image and select **Edit Alt Text...** from the shortcut menu to display the **Alt Text** pane.
- Select the **Mark as decorative** checkbox.



To add alt-text

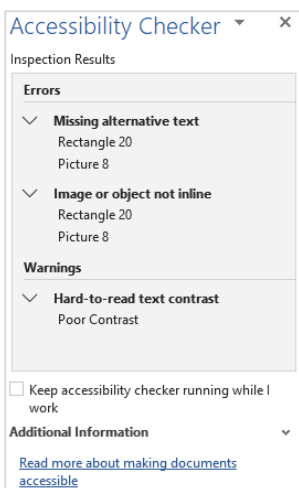
- **Right-click** the item in the document and choose **Edit Alt Text...** from the shortcut menu.
- The Alt Text pane opens where you can type a short description of the item.
Note: Word can sometimes suggest a description for an item. Click **Generate a description for me** in the Alt Text pane when the item is selected. If Word can identify the image, it will suggest an Alt text description.

Accessibility Checker

Microsoft Word includes an accessibility checker which you should use to check your document for potential issues with accessibility. There are two categories of results:

- **Errors** - issues that prevent readers with a disability from accessing the content.
- **Warnings** - issues that make it difficult for readers with a disability to access the content.

You'll find the checker under **Review > Check Accessibility** or in the **Backstage view (File > Check for Issues > Check Accessibility)**. The Accessibility Checker pane opens at the right of the window and lists any potential issues.



- Click an item in the list to select it.
- At the bottom of the pane you will see more information about the issue and guidance on fixing the problem.

Additional Information ▾

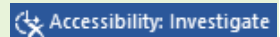
Why Fix?
Alternative text for images and other objects is very important for people who can't see the screen. Screen readers read alternative text aloud, so it's the only information many have about the image. Good alternative text helps them understand the image.

Steps To Fix:

1. Right-click the object, then select Edit Alt Text.
2. If the object is meaningful, type a description of it in the text box on the Alt



Add the Accessibility Checker to the status bar. It will alert you to potential issues as you create the document. **Right-click** the status bar and choose **Accessibility Checker** or click the checkbox in the Accessibility Checker pane **Keep accessibility checker running while I work**. Clicking the icon on the status bar opens the Accessibility Checker pane.



Further Help and Support

Now you know how to write an accessible document, why not check out our companion guide [Making Scans Accessible](#).

If you require further assistance with creating accessible documents or have questions about accessibility, please email the [Assistive Technology Team](#) or contact the IT Service desk <https://myit.abdn.ac.uk>.

[Accessibility information on Toolkit](#)