"How can I ensure my documentation is accessible?"

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. Because it is so common, the .doc and .docx format has become the de facto format for text documents. Word is often used to create files that end up in PDF and HTML. This resource will cover several things that you can do to make content created in Word more accessible.

Accessibility Checker

Microsoft Word 2013 includes an accessibility checker under ‘Info’ in the ‘File’ menu. After writing any documentation you should run the checker, and fix any issues stated in the report.

Usually the main issue will be missing alternative text on pictures, tables, groups and graphs. Simply click on the error to highlight the image it refers to, and right-click on the image to get the ‘Format Picture’ option.

You can then fill in the alternative text for a screen reader to understand. Below you can see the alt text being included for our image on the right.
Accessible Images

As users with visual impairments, low bandwidth and text only monitors will not be able to view an image in your document you must provide alternative text called the ‘alt’ attribute. There are different classes of images used within documents and each require a slightly different approach to writing the ‘alt’ attribute

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

Decoration or eye candy images are simply there to make the document look more attractive, but if you describe these images in the ‘alt’ attribute it just creates auditory clutter for people who are using a screen reader.

For example in the image on the right you can see that the ‘alt’ text is a duplicate of the text that’s next to the image. If you’re using a screen reader you will have to listen to the same text twice.

The correct approach is to use a blank ‘alt’ attribute: alt=""

Supplemental or interesting images are there to add something extra to what is being said in the text. In this case you can decide whether the ‘alt’ attribute should be more meaningful and provide the user with the additional information they would receive if they could view the image, or if an explanation is not required.

In the example below an image of the “Notes” button has been included, and the author has decided to enter a blank ‘alt’ attribute as the text explains where the button is and how it works. The screenshot is just supplemental for a visual user and a description of it is not necessary.

Images that are critical to understanding should always have a detailed description. Examples of this can include, but are not limited to, charts, diagrams, specific screenshots or a visual representation of a concept.

The example to the right shows a diagram explaining the process of developing a mind map. The accompanying text does not explain the illustration so the ‘alt’ attribute must explain through the description.

alt = “Image shows process for developing map – cyclical diagram which shows arrows moving from ‘Develop’ to ‘Research’ to ‘Add content’ to ‘Reflect’ and back to ‘Develop’.”
Accessible Tables

Using tables in Word documents is unavoidable in some cases, as this is the best way to display certain types of information (see page 4 for table accessibility); however they should be avoided at all costs when they are incorrectly used for formatting. In the example below, the author has used an invisible table to format the image and text. A screen reader will find this difficult to navigate as it won’t know where to start reading and may confuse cell order.

As we can see in the corrected document, the table was unnecessary clutter and the same visual effect can be achieved by simply inserting the image onto the page and using Word’s own image formatting options.
If you genuinely require the use of a table to display data within your document, you will need to identify structure. After a table has been created and populated with data, a ‘Header Row’ needs to be identified to allow the heading text to be distinguished 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 for the context menu and select ‘Table Properties’

Under the ‘Row’ tab ensure ‘Allow row to break across pages’ and ‘Repeat as header row’ are ticked

Always try to construct simple tables with only one header row, never merge or split cells and try not to leave any cells blank. Not following this method of construction makes it very difficult if not impossible for someone using assistive technologies to understand the table.

Accessible Hyperlinks

Hyperlink text should provide a clear description of the link destination. One of the ways a person who uses assistive technology can navigate a document is skipping 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 link. Instead we should write Visit Toolkit online and use the URL only in the address box.

Accessible Formatting

Using Word’s built-in formatting styles is a hugely important step in making documents accessible. They provide a logical reading order that serves as a navigation guide for persons utilising assistive technologies. Most importantly, use styles to create headings and lists as a screen reader can jump between headings to navigate.

Headers and Footers

Avoid placing important information in the Header or Footer areas, as some screen readers will not read out the information in the Header/Footer area. If a piece of information is important, make sure you include it in the main body of the document.
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.

Good Contrast

Poor Contrast

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 call on 01224 273336.