# Creating Accessible Documents

Writing with accessibility in mind means that you are trying to ensure that your content can be read and understood by as wide an audience as possible.

This factsheet presents some helpful tips on improving the accessibility of your publications, for both print and reading online.

It focuses primarily on producing accessible material using Microsoft Word – but the principals involved are universal and may easily be applied using other software.

## Key principles to follow

To be truly accessible, it is not enough for a document just to look well presented. For it to be read and understood by as wide an audience as possible – including, for example, people with visual impairments, dyslexia or learning difficulties – your document also has to work well with screen reading software.

It is good practice to write as though for electronic publishing – based on the following main principles:

* Use a proper ‘headings’ structure.
* Write in short, simple sentences.
* Write in plain language and avoid jargon and abbreviations.
* Use a common, plain font and a text size of at least 12 point.
* Use proper list formatting for numbered or bullet lists from the Styles Pane.
* Provide a meaningful description for images conveying key information.
* Check the accessibility of your document using Word’s built-in checker.

This document has been produced using all of these key principles.

## Use proper headings

You should use an appropriate heading structure for your document. This means using a hierarchy of headings – such as Heading 1, Heading 2, Heading 3 etc. This enables screen readers to identify headings for the listener.

### Word heading styles

In Word, headings are set using ‘styles’. After highlighting the text, you want to use as a heading, select your desired style from the formatting toolbar or the Styles Pane.

## Write in plain language

It is essential to use clear, simple language to communicate effectively. Using ‘plain language’ is a key aspect of organising and presenting information so that it is easy to follow.

Plain language means communication that the listener or reader can understand the first time they hear or read it. It can be defined as a simple, clear, conversational style that uses everyday words and an active voice.

While recognising the need for flexibility, the Plain English Campaign advises:

* using short sentences – a good average sentence length is 15 to 20 words
* longer sentences do not have more than three items of information
* using ‘active’ verbs mainly, not ‘passive’ ones – for example, “We will send you an appointment” (active), rather than “An appointment will be arranged for you” (passive)
* avoiding acronyms and jargon - if you must use acronyms or uncommon terms, then include an explanation of them when they are first used
* using bullet points to help break complex information down.

## Focus on your presentation and layout

The presentation and layout of information can make a big difference to reading and comprehension.

* Choosing a font - There are no hard and fast rules about the best fonts to use and users have their own preferences. However, for printed documents, many organisations recommend using a clear, ‘sans-serif’ font without too many flourishes – such as Arial, Helvetica or Verdana. These types of sans-serif fonts are also generally used in web design. Avoid light or thin fonts. People with sight problems generally find heavier weight types easier to read.
* Point size -Text size of 12 point or higher will benefit most users. However, it is good practice to make ‘large print’ versions of documents available on request. The RNIB define large print as 16 point Arial or bigger. It is also important to remember that point sizes can vary between fonts. For example:
  + this is 12 point text in Arial
  + this is 12 point text in Verdana
  + this is 12 point text in Times New Roman.

### Other important guidelines to consider:

* Lowercase letters are easier to read – avoid using capitals for continuous text.
* High contrast makes documents more legible – alternative colour contrasts (including black text on a yellow background) can be beneficial, particularly to readers who are dyslexic or have a learning difficulty.
* Avoid using colour alone to convey meaning - if you use colour to convey information (for example, by formatting certain items in a list in a different colour) then ensure that this is accompanied by a text alternative.
* White space makes information easier to read – do not overcrowd the page with text; make sure you leave sufficient space between paragraphs; and consider increasing the space between lines.
* Large and bold font is useful for highlighting and emphasising text – italics and underlining can make text more difficult to read.
* Numbers from one to nine are easier to read (in normal text) if they are written as words – numbers from 10 upwards should be presented as numerals.
* Justify text to the left – this makes it easier to find the start and end of each line and ensures an even gap between words.
* Do not hyphenate words at the end of lines.

## Tables, lists, images and hyperlinks

### Tables

Tables in Word need to have a simple structure and give column header information. To work with a screen reader, Word tables must not contain split or merged cells, blank cells, or nested tables. It is also useful to add a short descriptive caption for each table under Table Properties > Alt Text.

### Lists

Using numbered or bulleted lists in documents can be a very useful way of breaking up complex, content-heavy information, making it easier to read and follow.

For people using a screen reader, the list itself can convey some valuable information including:

* where the list starts and finishes
* how many items are in the list
* what list item the user is on

For the listing feature to work with screen-reading software, the author must create the list using the built-in list formatting within Word and not the bullet function in the Paragraph block.

### Images

Using images in a document can help convey complex information. The use of appropriate images can also often help readers with dyslexia and learning difficulties to follow meaning.

However, the placement of images on the page should be carefully considered. Images placed in a random way can interrupt the flow of the text and make it even harder to follow. Information producers should generally avoid fitting text around images. Rather, you should:

* place images at the end of paragraphs and allow sufficient space between the text and the image
* avoid placing text over any background image
* place images In Line with Text found under the Text Wrap or Position functions when the image is highlighted.

Not everyone reading your document will be able to see it. If a document is likely to be made available electronically, you must also consider adding ‘alternative text’ to your images via the 'Edit Alt Text' function, which can be accessed by selecting with the right mouse button on any image. Screen readers will subsequently convey description that you have added as an alternative to the user being able to view it.

When writing your ‘alt text’, you should consider what the image conveys. This will help you decide how to describe it so that your entire document makes sense to everyone. You do not need to include words like 'image of' in your text alternative - screen readers will automatically announce that it is an image. 'Alt Text' should also ideally be kept short - about 150 characters at most. If the image additionally requires a longer description, then consider including this in the visible text of the document.

If the image is purely decorative, you should mark it as such in the 'Alt Text' options so that screen readers are informed to ignore it.

### Hyperlinks

For documents that are accessed electronically, including hyperlinks to web pages can enhance their usefulness for the reader.

Adding hyperlinks in Word is very easy through selecting with the right mouse button on any word or group of words. However, it is important that the hyperlink make sense as standalone information. It needs to convey clear and accurate information about what it links to – for example, by including the full title of the destination page. It can also be useful to provide the full URL in brackets after the descriptive link so that it is available if the document is printed of if users wish to cut and paste it.

Avoid restyling links to remove the underline, as this may make them difficult to distinguish as links for some users.

## Use the Accessibility Checker

You can check the accessibility of your document in Word by using its built-in checker. The ‘Check Accessibility’ button is available under the ‘Review’ menu. This will highlight any accessibility-related problems with your document, describe why you should fix them, and give you guidance on how to do so.

You can also have the accessibility checker check your work while you are writing by checking the 'Keep accessibility checker running while I work' checkbox available under the checker.

## Converting to PDF

If you need to convert a Word document to a PDF, follow the instructions above to format headings, tables and lists with Word styles. Also, convert any embedded Office objects to images and add alternative text to all your images.

Ensure that the following options are selected in the PDF creation settings:

* Enable tagged PDF.
* Create headings using Word headings.

Creating a tagged PDF is especially important for accessibility as it ensures that information about document structure such as headings, lists and alternative text will be available within the PDF document.

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