

FIXING AN INACCESSIBLE PDF

It is always best to start with an accessible source document (e.g., Microsoft Word) and export it to PDF. This ensures that if the document is edited later, the accessibility features remain intact. However, if the original source is unavailable — common with older scans — Acrobat Pro can add accessibility features directly to the PDF.

Work through the six checkpoints below in order. They're sequenced deliberately: the earlier steps resolve most of what would otherwise show up as errors later, so by the time you reach the final built-in check, what's left is short and manageable instead of overwhelming.

Note: Modifying PDFs can have unpredictable results and often cannot be "undone." Save multiple versions of your work as you go.

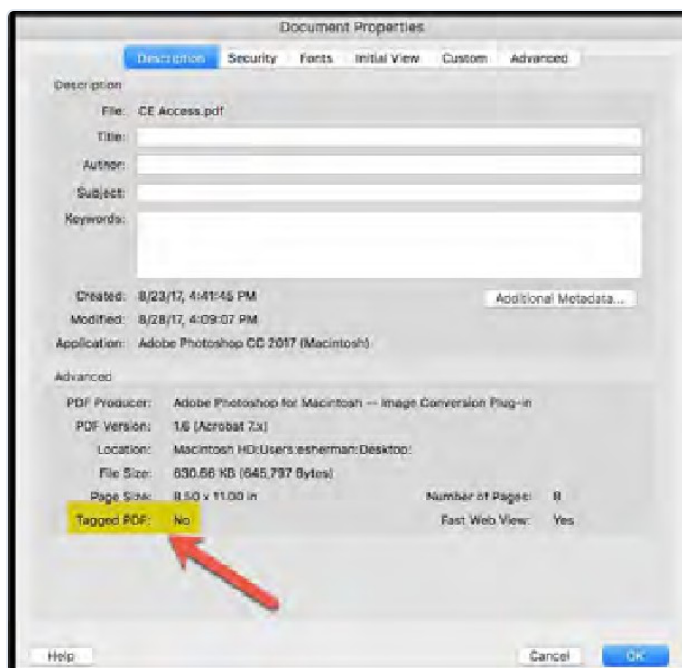
Step 1: Does the Document Have Selectable Text?

How to test: Try selecting text with your mouse, or use *Edit > Select All*. If you can't select individual words, the page is an image file, not real text — and none of the later steps will work correctly until this is fixed.

The fix: Use *Scan & OCR > Recognize Text* to convert the image into searchable, screen-readable text.

Step 2: Is the Document Tagged?

How to test: Go to File Properties (Ctrl+D in Windows, Command+D on Mac). In the bottom-left corner of the Document Properties dialog, check the *Tagged PDF* field.



If it says "No," the document needs to be tagged. Tags provide the structure accessibility is built on. Add tags by selecting *Accessibility Tool > Add Tags to Document*.

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Step 3: Refine the Reading Order

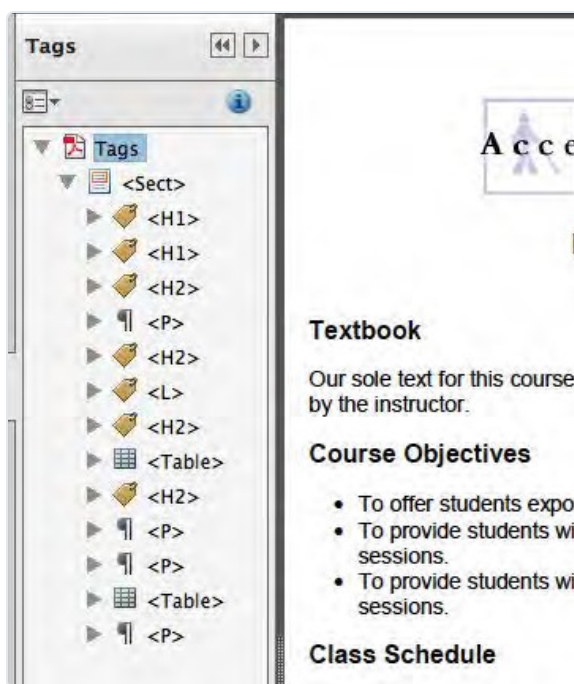
How to test: Use the Reading Order Tool to see the order in which content on the page will reflow if the document is viewed in a small window, such as on a mobile device. This gives a fairly accurate representation of the order in which screen readers will read the content.

A few fixes are commonly made using this tool:

- Hide decorative or redundant images from screen reader users — click the image, then click "background/artifact" to tell screen readers to skip it.
- Add or edit alt text for informative images — right-click the image and select *Edit alt text*.

Step 4: Verify Heading Levels

How to test: Study the document visually to confirm the heading structure forms a clean outline. Then open the Tags Panel via *View > Show/Hide > Navigation Panes > Tags*. The Tags Panel shows a tree of tags similar to HTML.



Headings should be tagged with the equivalent of HTML heading tags — `<H1>` for the main heading, `<H2>` for sub-headings, then `<H3>`, `<H4>`, etc. Some authoring tools create heading-like tag names (e.g., "Heading_Level_1") that screen readers don't actually recognize — these need to be changed. To change a tag, right-click it, select *Properties*, then choose the correct tag from the list, or double-click the tag and type the correct name directly.

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Step 5: Do Other Markups Need to Be Fixed?

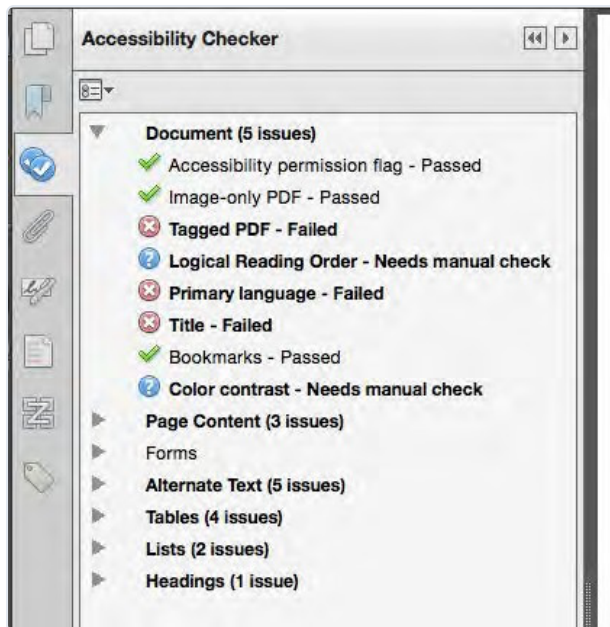
How to test: Using the same Tags Panel, look at the overall structure rather than just headings this time:

- Are lists tagged as lists?
- Does content appear in a reasonable order? (You may have already reordered some items in Step 3 — the tag tree's order is the actual order screen readers will use.)

Authoring tools generate a wide variety of tags, and most aren't cause for alarm — screen readers ignore tags they don't recognize and simply render that content as a paragraph. As long as headings, lists, tables, and images are all tagged appropriately, the document will likely be easy to navigate. In rare cases where a tag tree is a genuine mess, it can be faster to delete all tags and rebuild from scratch than to fix the existing ones.

Step 6: Check Any Lingering Errors

How to test: Run the built-in accessibility checker. Select *Tools > Accessibility > Full Check*, then read the report and follow the prompts.



The report lists items by category (Document, Page Content, Alternate Text, Tables, Lists, Headings, and more), each marked as passed, failed, or needing manual inspection. Right-click any item for options to fix it or learn more. This is deliberately the *last* step rather than the first — running it before the previous five steps often surfaces dozens of errors that are far easier to resolve once the document's real structure is already in place.