



## THE CORE PILLARS OF ACCESSIBILITY

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When creating content, there are a few basic steps to follow to ensure it is accessible. The core steps needed for accessibility are the same regardless of whether your document is in HTML, Microsoft Word, Adobe PDF, or a native Canvas page:

### Use Headings

Headings and subheadings should be identified as such using the authoring tool's built-in heading features. Headings should form an outline of the page's content (Heading 1 for the main heading, Heading 2 for the first level of sub-headings, Heading 3 for the next level of sub-headings, etc.). This enables screen-reader users to understand how the page is organized and quickly navigate to the content of interest. Most screen readers have features that enable users to jump quickly between headings with a single keystroke.

### Use Lists

Any content organized as a list should be created using the list controls provided in document authoring software. Most authoring tools provide one or more controls for adding unordered lists (with bullets) and ordered lists (with numbers). When such groupings are explicitly created as lists, this helps screen readers better understand how the content is organized. When screen reader users enter a list, their screen reader informs them that they're on a list and may also indicate how many items are in the list, which can be very helpful when deciding whether to continue reading or take a break.

### Add Meaningful Alternate Text for Images

Users who are unable to see or interpret images depend on content authors to provide alt-text, often abbreviated *alt-text*. The purpose of alt-text is to communicate the content of an image to people who can't engage with it. Alt-text should be succinct, just enough text to communicate the idea without burdening the user with unnecessary detail. When screen readers encounter an image with alt text, they typically announce the image and then read the alt-text. Modern tools (Word/Acrobat/Canvas) now feature a simple "Mark as Decorative" checkbox for images that are purely for visual flair.

If images are purely decorative and contain no informative content, they do not require a description. However, they may still require specific markup, so screen readers know to skip them. The methods for hiding decorative images from screen readers are described in more detail in the format-specific pages within this document.

Also, images that require a lengthier description, such as charts and graphs, may require additional steps beyond adding alt text.

## CREATING ACCESSIBLE CONTENT

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### Identify Document Language

Leading screen reader software is multilingual and can read content in English, Spanish, French, and many other languages. To ensure that screen readers use the appropriate language profile for pronunciation, the document's language must be identified.

You should also identify the language of any content written in a language other than the document's default language. With this information, screen readers will switch between language profiles on the fly as needed.

### Use Tables Wisely

Tables in documents are useful for communicating relationships among data, especially when those relationships are best expressed in a matrix of rows and columns. Tables should not be used to control layout. Authoring tools have other ways to do this, such as organizing content into columns.

If your data is best presented in a table, try to keep the table simple. If the table is complex, consider whether you could divide it into multiple smaller tables with a heading above each.

A key to making data tables accessible to screen reader users is to clearly identify column and row headers. Also, if they are nested in columns or rows with multiple headers per cell, screen readers need to be explicitly informed which headers correspond to which cells.

## CREATING ACCESSIBLE CONTENT

### Creating High-Quality Scanned Documents

Sometimes it is necessary to scan a document for an instructional need. When documents are in electronic form, they are easier to distribute and more accessible to students with accessibility needs than print documents. However, to be fully accessible, certain steps must be followed to ensure the scanned document is of high quality. Even if no one in your course has accessibility needs, a poor scan can still negatively impact the end user's experience.

#### Evaluate Need

Before scanning a document, first evaluate whether it is needed and cannot be substituted. If necessary, search for the document online to see whether an electronic version already exists. This can save time and energy.

#### What is a High-Quality Scan?

A high-quality scan is one that is easy for everyone to read, including individuals with low-quality vision or who use assistive technologies to read text electronically. High-quality scans should be free from:

- Cut off text
- Crooked pages
- Dark gutters (the margins where shadows occur from curvature in the book's spine)
- Poor contrast
- Pages that are rotated 90° or 180°
- Handwriting
- Highlighting
- Underlining
- Watermarks/Stains
- Excessive use of script or italic fonts
- Blurry text

#### Before Scanning, Change Settings

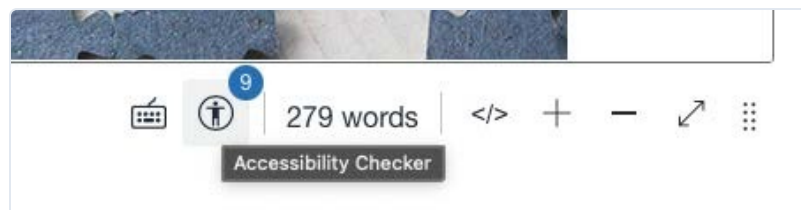
Check that the resolution is high enough to convey the content effectively. Documents scanned at a low resolution will not be recognized by conversion software. Scanning documents at 300 pixels per inch or higher might be necessary for certain STEM content or other highly formatted documents.

Check if the scanner has built-in Optical Character Recognition (OCR) capabilities. OCR turns images of text into copy-and-pasteable text. Often, this option is called "Save as Searchable PDF." Consider removing the book's binding if the gutter is small or the binding is tight. This allows for high-speed scanning. The book can then be re-bound with spiral binding at a local copy shop for low cost.

## WORKING WITHIN CANVAS

### The Canvas Accessibility Checker

Whenever you use the Rich Content Editor (where you type your Announcements, Discussion Posts, or Assignments), look for the accessibility icon at the bottom of the window. This tool instantly identifies missing alt-text, poor color contrast, or heading issues and lets you fix them with one click.



## WORKING WITHIN CANVAS

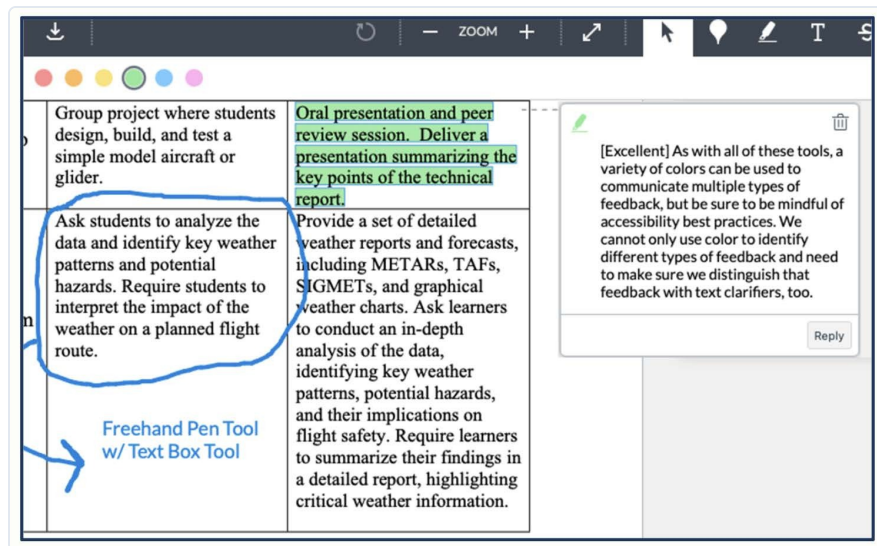
### Accessible Email & Inbox Messages

If you include images in an announcement or a Canvas inbox message, you must provide a written description of that image within the text of the message itself, as these tools often lack a traditional alt-text field. This includes images in your signature that convey information rather than being purely decorative.

### Color in Grading

Avoid using color alone to convey meaning (e.g., "Red text is wrong, green text is right," or using a markup pen or highlighter tool to solely convey meaning or intention). Students with colorblindness cannot distinguish these.

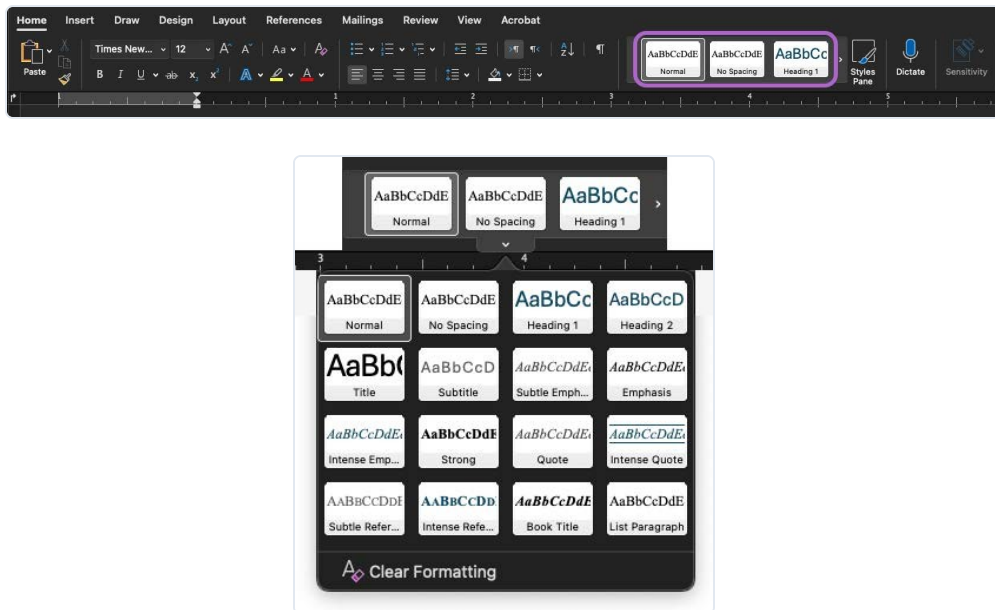
**The Fix:** You can still use color highlighting tools, but at the start of the highlight, indicate in parentheses what it signifies — for example, (well done) or (grammar). Also use labels or symbols, such as "X – Incorrect" or "✓ – Correct."



# CREATING ACCESSIBLE DOCUMENTS IN MICROSOFT WORD

## Use Headings

Using a clear heading structure helps people without sight understand how the document is organized. Screen reader and Braille users can also jump between headings, making navigation much more efficient than without headings. Making text larger and bold does not make it a heading. To convert text to a heading in Microsoft Word, you must use the built-in Heading styles like "Heading 1" and "Heading 2," available under Styles in the Home tab.



Headings should form an outline, using the "Heading 1" style for the main heading, and "Heading 2" for sub-headings. If there are additional levels of headings within the document's outline, use "Heading 3," "Heading 4," etc.

## Use Lists

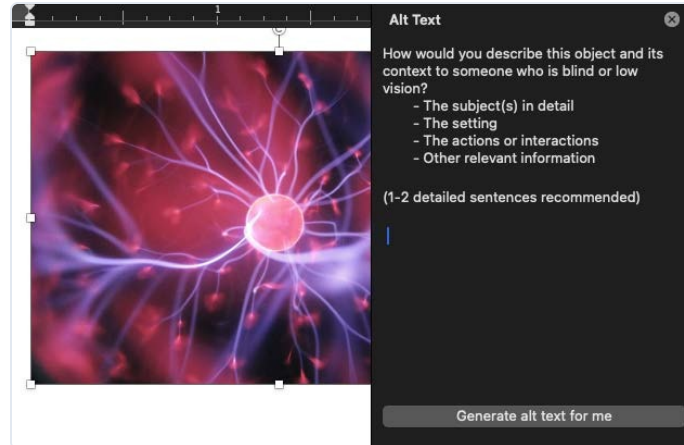
Lists should be created using Word's built-in tools for ordered (numbered) and unordered (bulleted) lists. Without using these tools, a list is not really a list, which makes the content more difficult for screen reader users to fully understand.

**Note:** Both ordered and unordered lists are highly customizable. Just click the arrow adjacent to the desired list button to design a list that meets your needs.

# CREATING ACCESSIBLE DOCUMENTS IN MICROSOFT WORD

## Add Alternate Text for Images

In most versions of Word, you can enter alternate text by right-clicking an image and selecting *View Alt Text*. A sidebar will appear, giving you the option to enter a 1–2-sentence description of the image — and newer versions of Word can even generate a starting description for you automatically.



## Identify Document Language

Select *Tools > Language* from the application menu to define the default language. To define a different language for part of the document, select each foreign-language passage individually, then select *Tools > Language* to define the language for that selection.

**Note:** Language settings only affect accessibility of the Word document itself. They do not survive when exported to PDF. If PDF is the final format in which you intend to distribute your document, you will need to define language in the PDF directly using Adobe Acrobat Pro.

## Use Tables Wisely

Word has limitations when it comes to making tables accessible. As explained in the Overview of Accessible Documents, 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).

Often complex tables can be simplified by breaking them into multiple simple tables with a heading above each.

For simple tables, the only step necessary for accessibility is to identify which row contains the column headers. To do this in Word, select that row (*Table > Select > Row*), then right-click the row and select *Table Properties*. This brings up the Table Properties dialog. In this dialog, click the Row tab, and check the box that says "Repeat as header row at the top of each page."

## CREATING ACCESSIBLE PDF FORMS USING ACROBAT PRO

A traditional print form intended to be filled out by hand is inherently inaccessible to those with visual or manual dexterity impairments. The most accessible solution is an **interactive electronic form**.

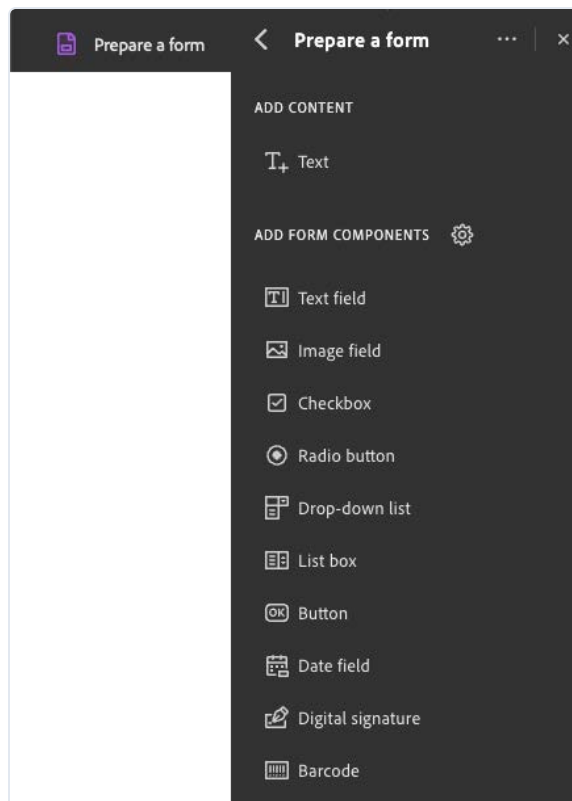
The best form of accessibility is interactive and can be completed on a computer. Users with disabilities can complete these forms using assistive technologies such as screen readers, Braille devices, speech recognition systems, alternative keyboards, and countless others.

Like all documents, though, electronic forms are not automatically accessible. Key considerations when creating an electronic interactive form are:

1. **Explicit Labels:** Labels and prompts must be explicitly associated with their respective fields so screen reader users know what information to enter.
2. **Logical Tab Order:** Users should be able to "Tab" through the form in a predictable sequence.

### PDF Form Workflow

1. Use Acrobat's Prepare Form tool to automatically detect fields.
2. Manually edit fields the tool missed.
3. **Tooltips are Labels:** In a PDF form, the "Tooltip" field in the Properties menu acts as the label for screen readers. Ensure every field has a detailed, easy-to-understand Tooltip.
4. **Radio Buttons:** Group buttons with the same name so the user knows they are selecting one option from a set.





## FIXING AN INACCESSIBLE PDF

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It is always best to start with an accessible source document (e.g., Microsoft Word) and export it to PDF — that way, accessibility features survive if the document is edited later. But if the original source isn't available, which is common with older scans, Adobe Acrobat Pro can add accessibility features directly to the PDF.

Acrobat Pro's accessibility workflow follows six checkpoints, each building on the last:

1. **Selectable text?** If you can't select individual words with your mouse, the page is an image, not real text. Use Acrobat's OCR (*Scan & OCR > Recognize Text*) to fix this first — everything else depends on it.
2. **Is the document tagged?** Tags provide the structure accessibility is built on. Check under File Properties, or add tags via the Accessibility Tool.
3. **Is the reading order correct?** Use the Reading Order Tool to confirm content flows the way a screen reader would actually read it, and to mark decorative images so they're skipped.
4. **Are heading levels correct?** Headings should form a clean outline — H1 for the main heading, H2 for sub-headings, and so on — visible in the Tags Panel.
5. **Are lists, tables, and other markup tagged appropriately?** Confirm lists read as lists, and that the overall tag structure isn't a tangled mess.
6. **Run the built-in Accessibility Checker.** Save this for last — the earlier five steps resolve most issues, so the final check comes back short and manageable instead of overwhelming.

A companion piece walks through each of these six steps in full detail, with the exact menus and tools involved.

## CREATING ACCESSIBLE VIDEOS

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Videos should be produced and delivered in ways that ensure every member of the audience can access them. An accessible video includes captions, a transcript, and audio description, and is delivered through an accessible media player.

### Captions

Captions are text versions of the audio, synchronized with the video — essential for viewers who are deaf or hard of hearing, and genuinely helpful for non-native speakers and anyone searching for a specific moment in the video. YouTube's free automatic captioning is the simplest modern starting point, but the machine-generated text always needs a human editing pass before it's trustworthy.

### Audio Description

Audio description is a separate narrated track describing important visual content — on-screen text, key actions — for viewers who can't see the video. This can be produced by an outside service, or done yourself by narrating what's happening as part of post-production.

### Transcript

A transcript is a text version of the full media content, including on-screen text and key visual descriptions. If a video is already captioned, a transcript is often available as a direct byproduct of that same process.



# CREATING ACCESSIBLE VIDEOS

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## Choosing an Accessible Media Player

Whether you're picking a media player or a hosting service, ask:

1. Does it support closed captions?
2. Does it support audio description, with narration toggled on and off?
3. Can its controls be operated without a mouse?
4. Are its buttons properly labeled for screen readers?
5. Is it fully functional, accessibility features included, across platforms and major browsers?

A companion piece covers the full captioning workflow — DIY and automated options, adding captions to Canvas-hosted videos, and doing your own audio description — in complete step-by-step detail.

## Canvas Videos: Upload or Embed?

The practical question most instructors actually face isn't which media player to choose — it's whether to upload a video file directly into Canvas, or host it on YouTube and embed it into the course page. As a partner, we almost always recommend **embedding from YouTube** over uploading directly into Canvas.

**Why embed from YouTube:** YouTube automatically optimizes video quality to match each student's connection speed, so a student on a slower connection still gets a smooth streaming experience — something a file uploaded directly into Canvas doesn't do on its own. It also keeps your course's Canvas storage footprint small, and gives you a head start on captions, since YouTube generates them automatically (though, as covered earlier, always review and correct them before relying on them). There's a longer-term benefit for you as the instructor, too: a video hosted on your own YouTube channel stays yours even if your access to a particular Canvas course ever ends, which isn't true of a file uploaded directly into that course.

**Embed, don't link:** This recommendation is specifically to *embed* the video so it plays inside the Canvas page itself — not to post a link that sends students away to YouTube. Students should never need to leave Canvas to watch course content if it can be avoided.