

Word 2013 & 2016: Requirements to Make a Document Accessible

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Introduction

Accessibility of our Electronic and Information Resources (or EIR), is becoming more important as legislation, publicity and outreach programs focus attention on making more resources available to people with disabilities, including employees and the public. Microsoft Word, for example, is commonly used both at the workplace and at home, and is now providing more tools than ever to improve accessibility.

Unfortunately, a “make accessible” button does not exist on our computers, so it’s necessary for us to know how to create accessible documents on our own.

Fortunately, a dedicated group of Texas state agency employees collaborated to create a Productivity tab with useful features to help make Word documents more available to those with disabilities. It’s important to remember that Word is only a medium through which we communicate, so we should utilize these tools to be as clear and effective as possible.

People with visual impairments frequently use assistive technologies to read a document. This is typically software that reads a computer screen out loud. These screen readers detect the structure and features of a document by looking at the document’s underlying code. When the document is coded properly, it is accessible.

Seven Requirements.

There are **seven requirements** to make a Word document accessible related to

1. Document Structure
2. Figures
3. Hyperlinks
4. Lists
5. Columns

6. Color and Contrast

7. Tables

The other modules in this course will explain these in more detail.

Structure

First, and most important, a document must have **Structure**. You structure and organize the Word document by applying heading styles. Microsoft provides multiple levels of heading styles, with the highest and most important level listed as Heading 1. As heading levels decrease in importance, the heading number increases. Most documents use only three or four heading levels.

You can think of document structure as an outline. Word lets you view this structure, or outline, using Document Navigation. When you look at the Document Map in the Navigation Pane, notice that each descending level of heading style is indicated by an indentation to the right, similar to the appearance of an outline. The Document Map allows you to see the organization of the document and easily move through it by clicking on appropriate headers.

A properly structured document also lets you create an automated Table of Contents with two simple clicks. If your document is edited after the Table of Contents is created, a single click on the Productivity tab will update it.

Figures

Another requirement concerns **Figures**. A figure can be a photograph, drawing, chart, graph, or other image. You will need to add Alternate Text, which is a brief description of the figure, and position the figure properly. The Figures module provides more details.

Hyperlinks

Descriptive **Hyperlinks** are important to accessibility. Use meaningful text for hyperlinks, instead of the once common “Click Here” or “For More Information”. Screen readers vocalize the document’s hyperlink. Imagine the confusion when hearing this list of links: “click here, click here, click here.”

Lists

Use list styles when making **Lists**. Microsoft offers a variety of list styles, including bulleted, numbered (or lettered), and paragraph. The Lists and Columns module provides more information.

Columns

Create Columns with the Columns Tool in the **Layout** group. If you are not familiar with this feature, you may be tempted to create the appearance of columns by using the **Tab** key to format. Columns are meant to be read from top to bottom, and left to right, like articles in a newspaper, and lists created with tabs do not work that way. Using the Columns tool ensures that screen readers can read the document properly. Plus, that makes it much easier to edit text within the columns.

Color and Contrast

Color and contrast are important accessibility considerations. If you convey any information via color you must also communicate it in another way. Many people are colorblind and may not be able to distinguish a color you use in a document. Good contrast is essential for many readers. Black and white is a good default combination, while red on black, for example, may be nearly invisible. Some useful websites and tools that determine acceptable color contrast combinations are discussed in the Colors and Contrast module.

Tables

If your document includes **tables**, you **must** format them correctly to make them accessible. How to properly format a table is covered in the Tables module. We can note now, however, that screen readers cannot handle split or merged table cells.

Things to Avoid

1. Avoid use of **text boxes or paragraph frames** in your documents. They are intended to direct attention to areas of text, but are completely inaccessible to screen readers because they read right over them. Instead, try adding borders to a selected area of text.
2. Don't use **watermarks** on your document. It's invisible to screen readers, and it's also very hard to read for those with low vision.
3. Do not use **Drop Caps** in your document. They may look fancy, but they are invisible to those using a screen reader.
4. Avoid using **Text Art**. They are done in text boxes, so as mentioned before, they are read right over by screen readers.

This concludes our overview of what is required to make a document accessible. We encourage you to view the other modules in this series, *Creating Accessible Documents in Word 2013 & 2016*.