Make Your Word Documents Accessible

This document gives you step-by-step instructions to make your Word documents accessible to people with disabilities.

MS Word 2010, installed on Windows PCs at the University of St. Thomas, has many built-in features that help people with different abilities to read and author documents. More recent versions of Word have similar or enhanced features. Among these features is the Accessibility Checker, which locates elements that might cause problems for people with disabilities.

The screenshots and instructions in most of this document refer to MS Word 2010. The equivalent screenshots and instructions for more recent versions of Word may not be exactly the same, but are somewhat similar.

Using the Accessibility Checker

The easiest way to find ways to improve a document's accessibility is the built-in Accessibility Checker feature. This tool is especially useful for large and complex documents that include graphics and tables. It examines various elements of a document and detects where accessibility elements are lacking, such as alt text, heading styles, and table headers.

To launch the Accessibility Checker:

1. Click the **File** ribbon.
2. On the **Info** tab, click the **Check for Issues** button.
3. Select **Check Accessibility** from the menu.
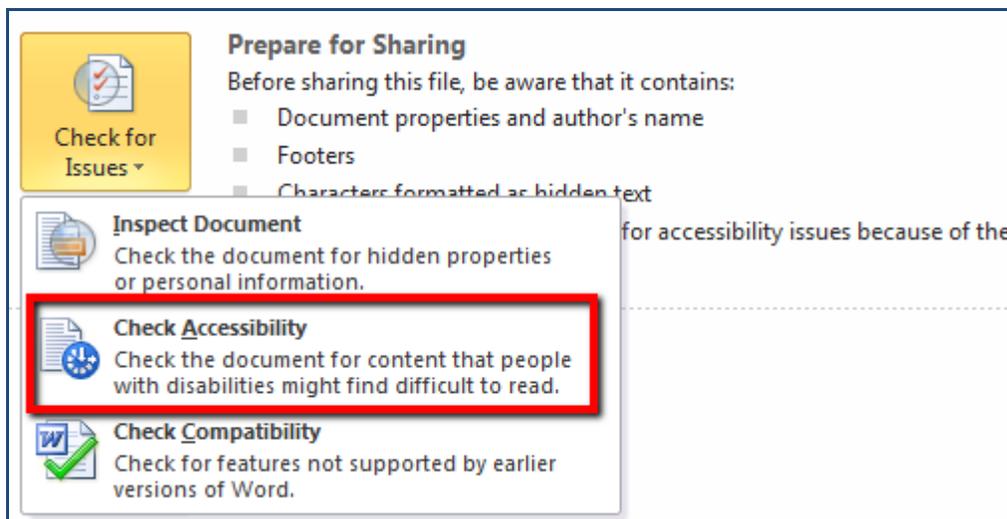
To learn more about how the Accessibility Checker works, see Rules for the Accessibility Checker.

Best practices for making Word documents accessible

What to fix	How to find it	Why fix it	How to fix it
Alt Text Include alternative text with all visuals and tables. Visual content includes pictures, clip art, SmartArt graphics, shapes, groups, charts, embedded objects, ink, and videos.	To find missing alternative text, use the Accessibility Checker. (See instructions above.)	Alt text helps people who can't see the screen to understand what's important in images and other visuals. Avoid using text in images as the sole method of conveying important information. If you must use an image with text in it, repeat that text in the document. In alt text, briefly describe the image and mention the existence of the text and its intent.	Add alt text to • images • SmartArt graphics • shapes • charts • tables
Hyperlink Text Add meaningful hyperlink text and ScreenTips.	To determine whether hyperlink text makes sense as standalone information and whether it gives readers accurate information about the destination target, visually scan your document.	People who use screen readers sometimes scan a list of links. Links should convey clear and accurate information about the destination. For example, instead of linking to the text **Click here**, include the full title of the destination page. **Tip:** You can also add ScreenTips that appear when your cursor hovers over text or images that include a hyperlink.	Add meaningful hyperlink text and ScreenTips.
Color-Coding Ensure that color is not the only means of conveying information.	To find instances of color-coding, visually scan your document.	People who are blind, have low vision, or are colorblind might miss out on the meaning conveyed by particular colors.	Use accessible text format.
Color Contrast Use sufficient contrast for text and background colors.	To find insufficient color contrast, look for text in your document that's hard to read or to distinguish from the background.	If your document has a high level of contrast between text and background, more people can see and use the content.	Use accessible text color. The Paciello [Colour Contrast Analyser](#) is an application that can help.

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Headings and Lists Use built-in headings and styles, rather than just making text bold and a larger font size. Apply Bullets or Numbering to paragraphs in a list. Word's Auto-Correct feature automatically applies these when you type certain characters at the beginning of a paragraph.	To find headings that are not in a logical order, use the Accessibility Checker.	To preserve tab order and to make it easier for screen readers to read your documents, use a logical heading order and the built-in formatting tools in Word. For example, organize headings in the prescribed logical order. Use Heading 1, Heading 2, and then Heading 3, rather than Heading 3, Heading 1, and then Heading 2. In addition, organize the information in your documents into small chunks. Ideally, each heading would precede only a few paragraphs.	Apply built-in heading styles: 1. Click in the paragraph that serves as a header. 2. On the **Home** ribbon, in the Styles group, click the most appropriate Heading style (e.g., **Heading2**). Also, where appropriate, use bulleted or ordered (numbered) lists. These commands are found in the Paragraph group of the **Home** ribbon.
Table Headings and Structure Use a simple table structure, and specify column header information.	To ensure that tables don't contain split cells, merged cells, nested tables, or completely blank rows or columns, use the Accessibility Checker.	Screen readers keep track of their location in a table by counting table cells. If a table is nested within another table or if a cell is merged or split, the screen reader loses count and can't provide helpful information about the table after that point. Blank cells in a table could also mislead someone using a screen reader into thinking that there is nothing more in the table. Screen readers also use header information to identify rows and columns. Table headers are those rows that repeat at the top of the next page when a table extends beyond a page break (as in this table). This helps the reader keep track of what data each column contains.	Designate one or more header rows for your table: 1. Click anywhere within the table. 2. On the **Table Design** ribbon, check the **Header Row** checkbox. (This is usually checked by default.)

Add alt text to visuals and tables

The following procedures describe how to add alt text to visuals and tables in your Word documents. The procedure usually involves right-clicking the element and selecting the **Format [element]** command, and then selecting the **Alt Text** tab of the dialog box that appears.
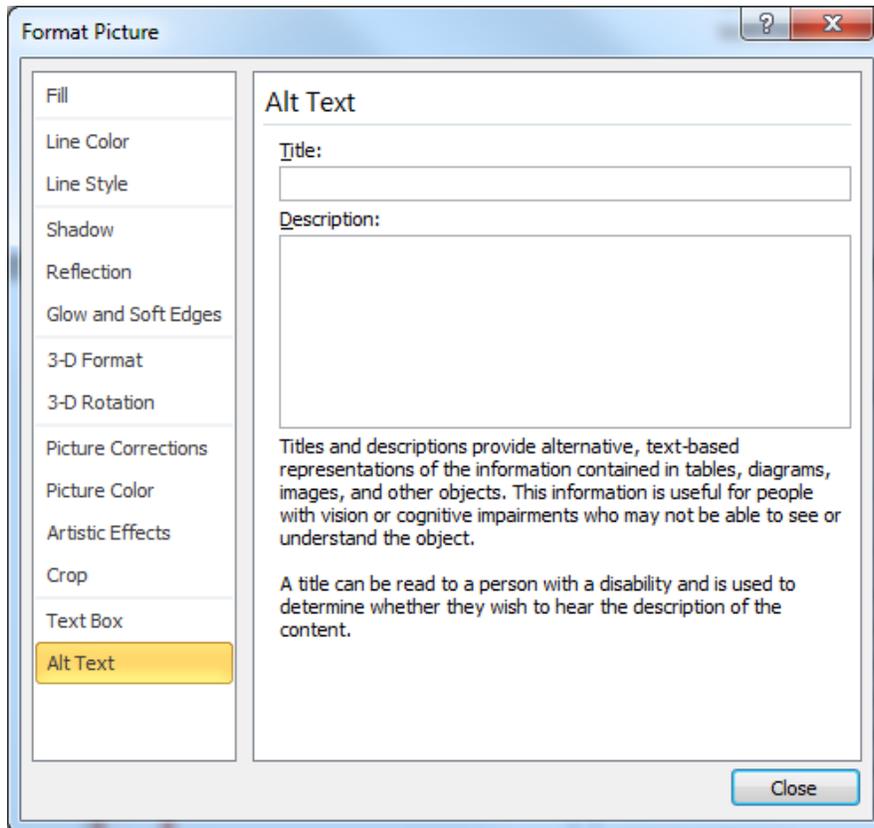
Note: If the Alt Text tab of the Format dialog box contains a Title field, we recommend leaving the Title field blank and putting text in the Description field only. This will provide the best experience with most major screen readers, including Narrator. For audio and video content, in addition to alt text, include closed captioning for people who are deaf or have limited hearing.

Tip: Include the most important information in the first line, and be as concise as possible.

Add alt text to images

Add alt text to images, such as pictures, clip art, and screenshots, so that screen readers can read the text to describe the image to users who can't see the image.

1. Right-click an image.
2. Select **Format Picture**.
3. Click the **Alt Text** tab.
4. Type a description and a title.

Add alt text to shapes and SmartArt graphics

1. Right-click a shape or SmartArt graphic.
2. Select **Format Shape**.
3. Click the **Alt Text** tab
4. Type a Description and, if necessary, a Title.
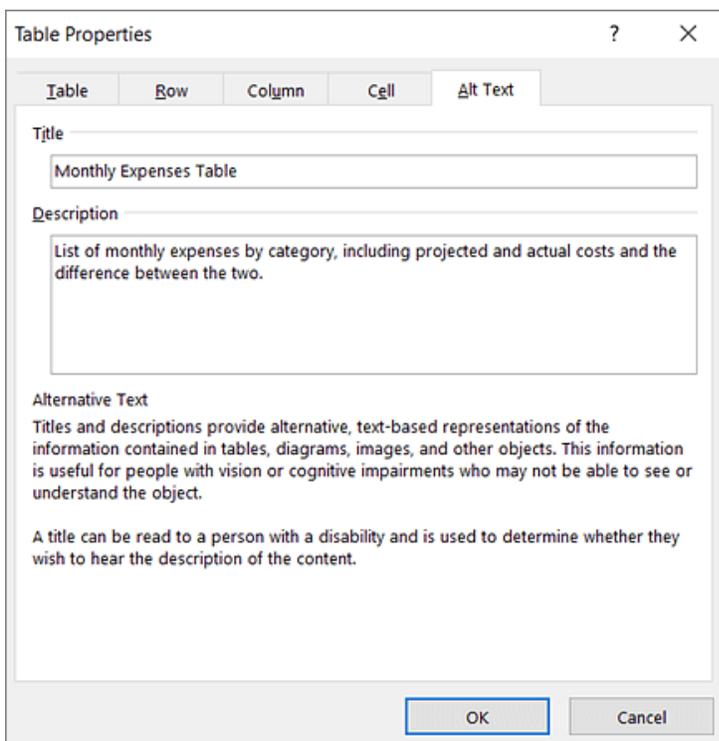5. Click **Close**.

Add alt text to charts

1. Right-click a chart.
2. Select Format Chart Area > Chart Options > Layout & Properties.
3. Select **Alt Text**.
4. Type a description and a title.

Add alt text to tables

1. Right-click the header row in a table.
2. Select **Table Properties**.
3. Click the **Alt Text** tab.
4. Type a Description and, if necessary a Title.

Tip: Include the most important information in the first line, and be as concise as possible. Titles are usually not necessary; they may also cause difficulties for screen-reader software.

Make hyperlinks, text, and tables accessible

The following procedure describes how to make the hyperlinks, text, and tables in your Word documents accessible.

Add hyperlink text and ScreenTips

1. Select the text to which you want to add the hyperlink, and then right-click.
2. Select **Hyperlink**.
   The text you selected displays in the **Text to display** box. This is the hyperlink text.
3. If necessary, change the hyperlink text.
4. In the **Address** box, enter the destination address for the hyperlink.
5. Select the **ScreenTip** button and, in the **ScreenTip text** box, type a ScreenTip.

Tip: If the title on the hyperlink's destination page gives an accurate summary of what's on the page, use it for the hyperlink text. For example, this hyperlink text matches the title on the destination page: Templates and Themes for Office Online.
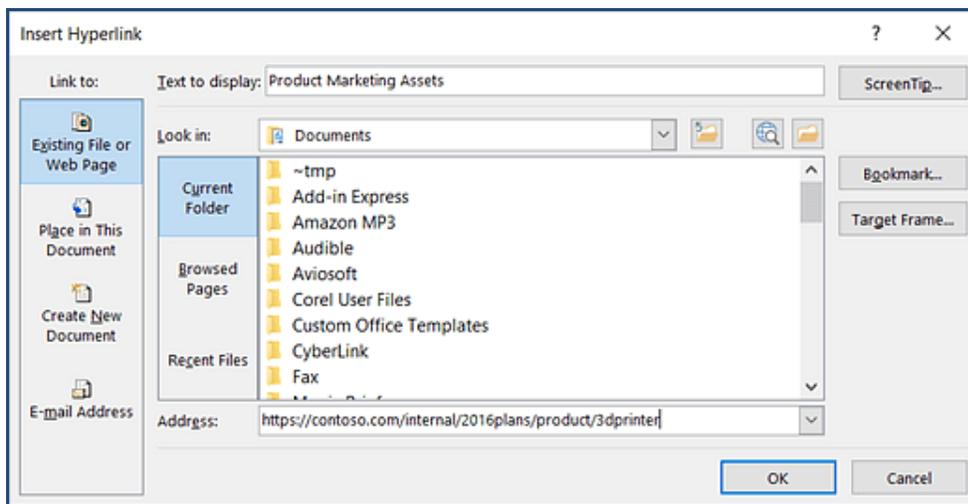

Apply built-in heading styles

1. Select the heading text.
2. On the **Home** tab, in the **Styles** group, select a heading style, for example, **Heading 1** or **Heading 2**.

Use bulleted lists

1. Position the cursor anywhere in your document.
2. Select the **Home** tab.
3. In the **Paragraph** group, select the **Bullets** button, or click the drop-down arrow to select a bullet style.
4. Type each bullet item in the bulleted list. Press Enter (Return) twice after the last item.
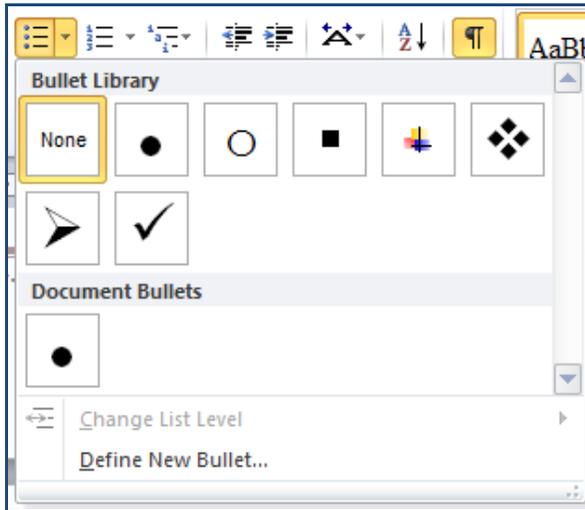

Use ordered lists

1. Position the cursor anywhere in your document.
2. Select the **Home** tab.
3. In the **Paragraph** group, select the **Numbering** button, or click the drop-down arrow next to it to choose a numbering style.
4. Type the sequential steps. Press Enter (Return) twice after the last item in the list.
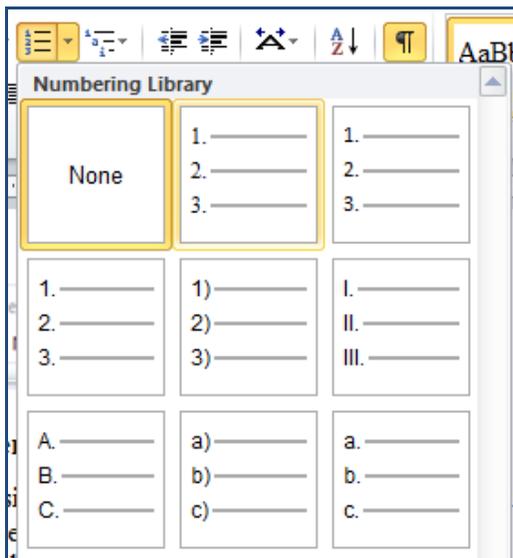
Use accessible text color

Here are some ideas to consider:

- Ensure that text displays well by using the **Automatic** setting for font colors. Select your text, and then select **Home** > **Font Color** > **Automatic**.
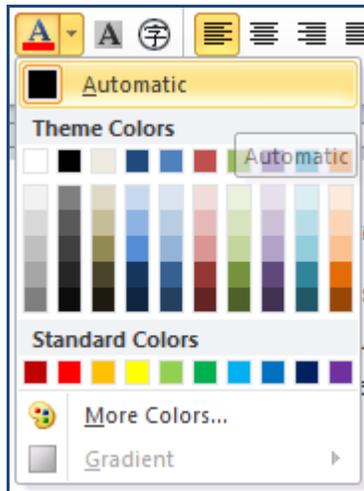
- Use the Colour Contrast Analyzer, a free app that analyzes colors and contrast, and displays results almost immediately.

Use accessible text format

Here are some ideas to consider:

- Add an underline to color-coded hyperlink text. That can help colorblind people know the text is linked even if they can't see the color.
- Add shapes if color is used to indicate status. For example, add a checkmark symbol if green is used to indicate "pass" and an uppercase X if red indicates "fail."

Note: These resources provide other suggestions: usability.gov and Web Accessibility for Users with Color Blindness.

Use text spacing

Increase or decrease white space between sentences and paragraphs.

1. Select your text.
2. On the **Home** ribbon, in the **Paragraph** group, in the lower-right corner of the group, click the **More** button.
3. The **Paragraph** dialog box opens, showing the **Indents and Spacing** tab.
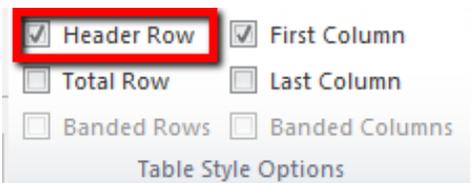
4. Under **Spacing**, select the spacing options you want.
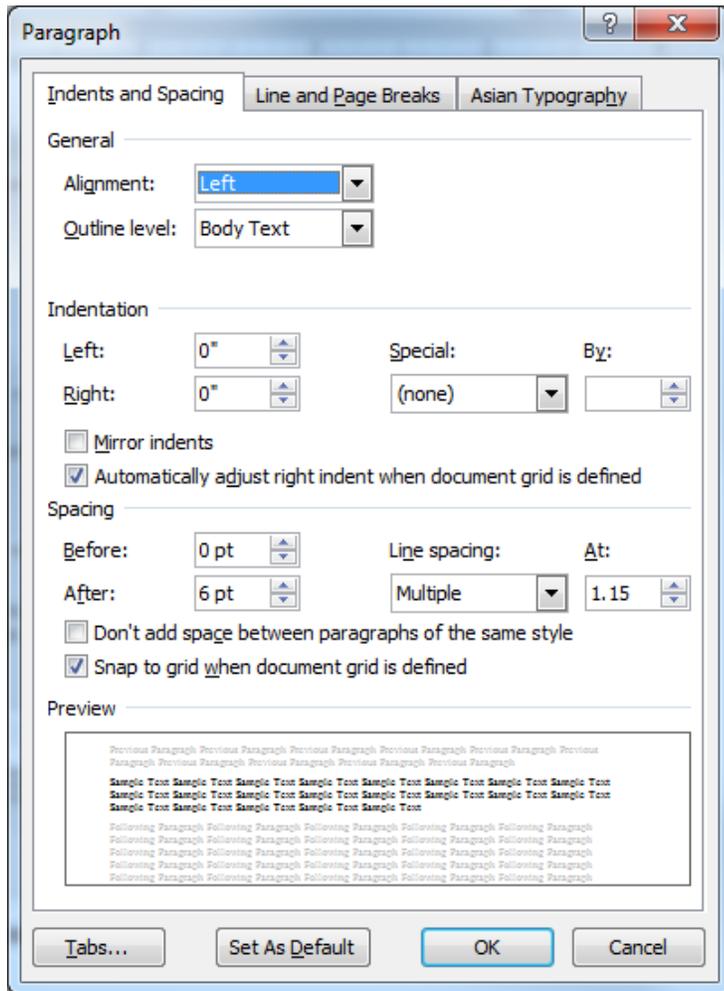
Tip: For paragraph spacing, remember that 1 point (pt) equals one-twelfth of an inch.

Use table headers

1. Position the cursor anywhere in a table.
2. On the **Table Design** tab, in the **Table Style Options** group, check the **Header Row** check box.
3. Type column headings if necessary.

See also

- [Use Accessibility Checker rules to help ensure your Office documents, spreadsheets, and presentations are accessible](#)
- [Make your Excel spreadsheets accessible](#)
- [Make your PowerPoint presentations accessible](#)
- [Make your Outlook email accessible](#)

Acknowledgments

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