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Faculty Guide – Creating Accessible Microsoft Word Documents

Microsoft Word is one of the most popular tools to use when creating documents. However, there are several important guidelines faculty need to follow in order to make documents accessible for users who rely on assistive technology (i.e. screen readers, Braille devices, etc.). The following information includes best practices to ensure your document is accessible.

Using Headings and Styles

Headings help to create a hierarchal structure in your document and helps your readers understand how the content is organized and more quickly find the information they are looking for. Use the built-in headings (on the Home tab under "Styles") instead of just changing your font size, color or format. Using Heading styles is more meaningful to screen readers because the screen reader will be able to identify headings as specific topics and navigate to them more easily.
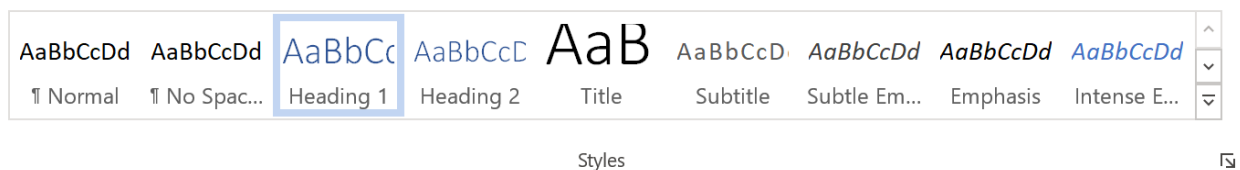

Changing the Visual Look of Heading Styles

If you wish to alter the visual style of the headings, you will want to modify the Style by right-clicking on the Heading style and clicking Modify.
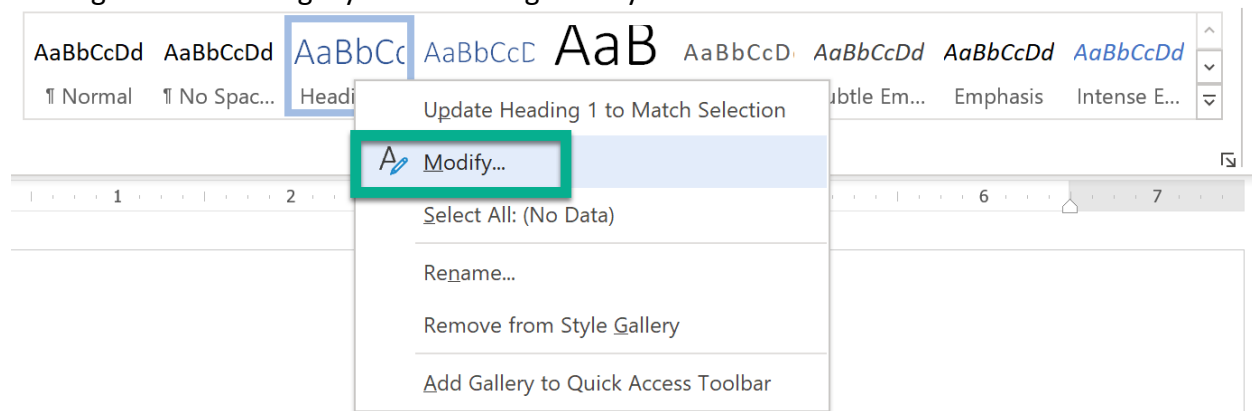

Then you can change the font, size, color, spacing between your heading and the text around it (for example), and then this style can be consistently used throughout the document.

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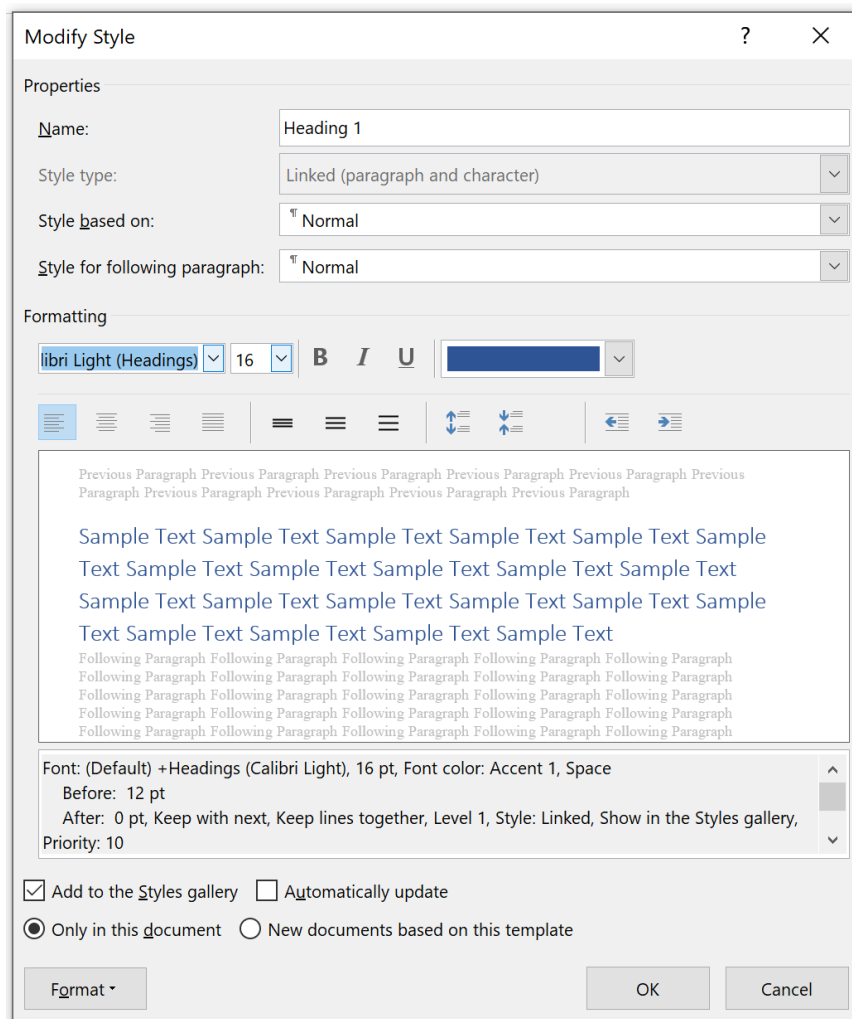
Using Bullets and Lists

Use the built-in tools (on the Home tab, under "Paragraph") to add a bulleted (unordered) or numbered (ordered) list. Lists help to group items, or present items in a sequential order, in a way that helps people using assistive devices to understand and navigate, as screen readers will let users know they are entering a list and how many items there are in the list.
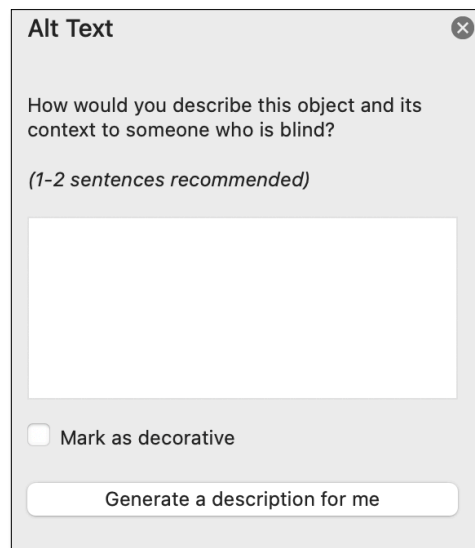
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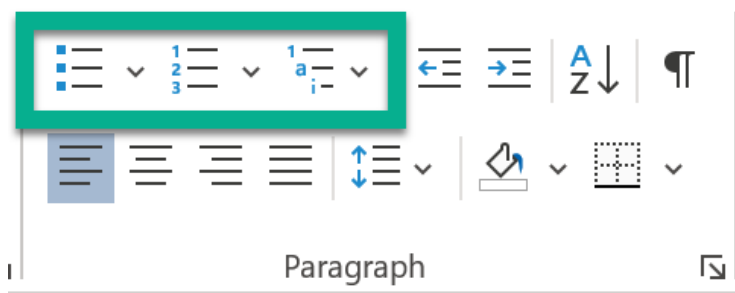
Add Alternative Descriptions to Images

Images require an alternative description or "alt text" so that screen readers can read a description of what the content is to someone who cannot see the image or see it well.

Word 365 and 2019

1. Add image to page.
2. Right click on image and select **Edit Alt Text**.
3. Describe what the image is.
4. If it is a decorative image check the **Mark as decorative** box. Screen readers will skip over an image if it is decorative.

"Generate a description for me" button

In Word 365 and 2019 there is an option to allow Word to auto generate alt text. Do not select this option. Most of the auto-generated descriptions are of poor quality and do not accurately describe the image.

Word 2016 or older

1. Add image to page.
2. Right click on image and select **Format Picture**.
3. Select **Layout & Properties** in the Format Picture sidebar and choose **Alt Text**.
4. Describe what the image is in the Description field only (leave Title field blank).
5. Images that are decorative cannot be marked as such in Word 2016 or older.
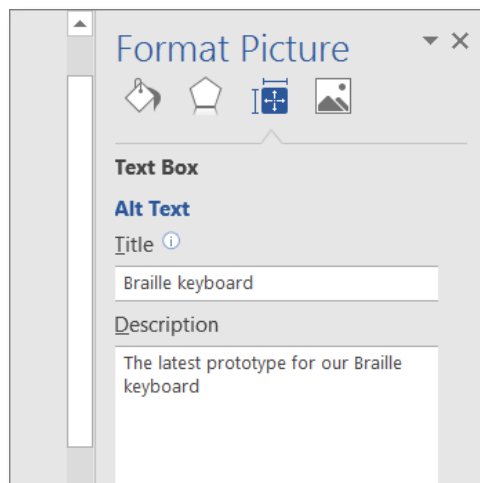
Create Accessible Tables

Tables can be very tricky for screen reader users to understand and navigate unless they are marked up properly. Do not use tables to control page layout (if you wish to have content in columns, use the Columns option, under Page Layout.) Tables should be used for tabular data only. Tables need to have properly labeled column and row headings in order for screen readers to keep track of where a user is within the table.

1. Create a table and click on it.
2. The **Table Design** ribbon should appear at the top of the menu bar.
3. If the top row and/or first column of the table contains headers, make sure the Header Row and/or First Column checkboxes are checked.
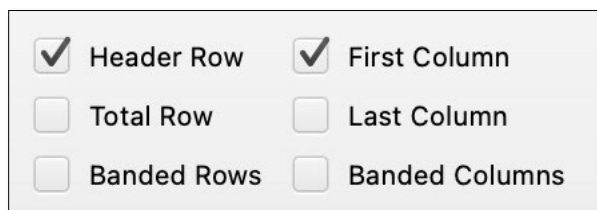

Avoid Merged, Split, and Blank Cells

Keep tables as accessible as possible by not merging cells together, splitting them, or leaving cells blank. These types of actions on tables can actually confuse a screen reader and cause a user to miss information or have it read to them incorrectly.

Tables That Span Multiple Pages

If you have a table that spans multiple pages, highlight the row, right-click to access Table Properties and make sure to check the checkbox that says "Repeat as header row at the top of each page."
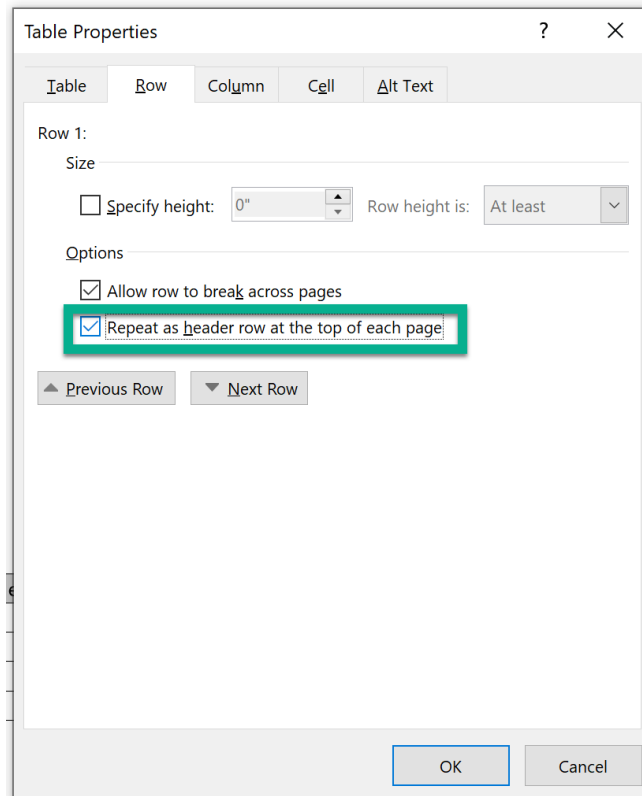
Other Tips

Below are a few other tips to help keep your presentation accessible.

Color and Contrast

Use strong color contrast between text and background (i.e. black background/white text or white background/black text). This helps users with low vision or colorblindness see content clearly. Additionally, color should not be the only way to convey information. If using color to emphasis content, include another identifier such as bolding text or adding an asterisk.

Inaccessible: Words in red are important.

Accessible: Words marked with * are important*.

Hyperlinks

Make sure links are properly titled by including descriptive information in the link name. Avoid copying and pasting a raw URL link or using generic terms such as "click here".

Inaccessible:
https://webaim.org/techniques/word/
Click here for Word techniques.

Accessible: Word Accessibility

Images of Text/Charts

Images should not consist of text or charts. These types of images will not be properly read by a screen reader and require extra work to provide descriptions. If you have an image of text or charts, best practice is to re-create that information directly onto Word.

Inaccessible:

Intensity of Feelings	HAPPY	SAD	ANGRY	AFRAID	ASHAMED
HIGH	Elated Excited Overjoyed Thrilled Exuberant Ecstatic Fired up Passionate	Depressed Agonized Alone Hurt Dejected Hopeless Sorrowful Miserable	Furious Enraged Outraged Boiling Irate Seething Loathsome Betrayed	Terrified Horrified Scared stiff Petrified Fearful Panicky Frantic Shocked	Sorrowful Remorseful Defamed Worthless Disgraced Dishonored Mortified Admonished
MEDIUM	Cheerful Gratified Good Relieved Satisfied Glowing	Heartbroken Somber Lost Distressed Let down Melancholy	Upset Mad Defended Frustrated Agitated Disgusted	Apprehensive Frightened Threatened Insecure Uneasy Intimidated	Apologetic Unworthy Sneaky Guilty Embarrassed Secretive
LOW	Glad Contented Pleasant Tender Pleased Mellow	Unhappy Moody Blue Upset Disappointed Dissatisfied	Perturbed Annoyed Uptight Resistant Irritated Touchy	Cautious Nervous Worried Timid Unsure Anxious	Bashful Ridiculous Regretful Uncomfortable Pitied Silly

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The five core emotions run left to right across the top of the table. Manifestations of each emotion based upon the intensity felt are described down each of the columns in the table.

Accessible:

Intensity of Feelings	Happy	Sad	Angry	Afraid	Ashamed
High	Elated Excited Overjoyed Thrilled Exuberant Ecstatic	Depressed Agonized Alone Hurt Dejected Hopeless	Furious Enraged Outraged Boiling Irate Seething	Terrified Horrified Scared stiff Petrified Fearful Panicky	Sorrowful Remorseful Defamed Worthless Disgraced Dishonored

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	Fired up Passionate	Sorrowful Miserable	Loathsome Betrayed	Frantic Shocked	Mortified Admonished
Medium	Cheerful Gratified Good Relieved Satisfied Glowing	Heartbroken Somber Lost Distressed Let down Melancholy	Upset Mad Defended Frustrated Agitated Disgusted	Apprehensive Frightened Threatened Insecure Uneasy Intimidated	Apologetic Unworthy Sneaky Guilty Embarrassed Secretive
Low	Glad Contented Pleasant Tender Pleased Mellow	Unhappy Moody Blue Upset Disappointed Dissatisfied	Perturbed Annoyed Uptight Resistant Irritated Touchy	Cautious Nervous Worried Timid Unsure Anxious	Bashful Ridiculous Regretful Uncomfortable Pitied Silly

Adapted from and reproduced by permission from Julia West. The five core emotions run left to right across the top of the table. Manifestations of each emotion based upon the intensity felt are described down each of the columns in the table.

Accessibility Checker

Even after using all the tips and best practices mentioned in this guide, it is recommended to use the accessibility checker built into Word. The accessibility checker can help you identify content in your presentation that is inaccessible as well as offer additional tips on how to fix remaining issues. Go to the **Review** tab and select **Check Accessibility**.

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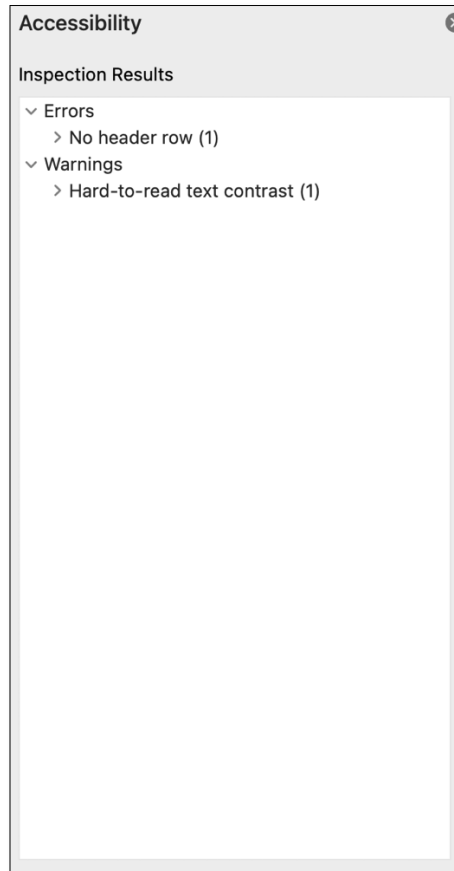
Export to PDF

The best way to share your Word document is by exporting it as a PDF. When a document is exported as a PDF, the accessible structures created in Word will carry over into the document. This means all heading structures, alt text, and tables/charts will be accessible by PDF as well.

Revision History

Version	Date	Description of change	Author
1.0	4/1/21	Initial version	M.F. Cho
1.1	4/28/21	Edits of initial version	M. Otis