



Document Accessibility Checklist and How-To Guide

Introduction

Creating accessible documents is an important aspect to think about when you are making documents that will be used and consumed by a large audience. This document is intended to give some basic guidance and instructions for ensuring that a document is accessible. The list of things to consider is not an exhaustive list, however, it will cover some of the most important and easy things that can save a lot of time and effort later in the document remediation process.

Also included in this document is the Web Content Accessibility Guideline (WCAG) related to each topic. While in general WCAG was not intended for document accessibility, any document that is created and will be posted on the web must meet WCAG compliance. Steps for making your document accessible are also included for each topic.

Give Your Document a Descriptive Title

WCAG Success Criteria 2.4.2: Page Title

This is one very easy but often overlooked accessibility guideline. We often think we have titled our document properly; however, a common occurrence is a document title with acronyms or abbreviations that may or may not make sense depending on whether the person has background knowledge of the document. An example of a good document title is "Web Accessibility Checklist." A bad example is "Checklist." Notice that a good example tells you what kind of checklist to expect. Ask yourself whether the title would make sense to you if someone sent you the document unexpectedly. The one thing that you should not do is use the Title style in your document for the title.

To ensure you have titled your document correctly do the following:

1. Open the save dialog box by exiting the document or by pressing Control + S.
2. Type a descriptive title in the edit field. Word will auto populate with the first line in your document. This may or may not be the best title so edit as needed. If this is a PowerPoint presentation the default is Presentation followed by a number depending on how many new presentations, you have open. You must change this to the title of your presentation.

3. Navigate to the Save button and click on it or press spacebar to save your document. For screen reader users this is a typical dialog box that can be navigated using Tab and Shift + Tab.

Use Real Headings for Document Structure and Navigation

WCAG Success Criteria 1.3.1: Info and Relationships

Headings are extremely important for individuals who are blind or low vision and use assistive technology to interact with web content and documents. Screen reader users can use keystrokes to navigate headings and to specific heading levels. Document structure is important for everyone. If you are sighted, you can gain a lot of information about the document layout visually. An individual who is using a screen reader must take extra steps to gain that same information. They can do this more quickly if the proper heading level structure is in place. Without the headings, they would have to read the entire document, which takes more time and decreases productivity.

The headings must be styled headings. Simply making it bolded to look like a heading will be invisible to assistive technology. There should be a logical structure heading usage. The headings are your document's outline. You should have only one heading level at the top with your document's title as Heading level 1. The next largest section, such as chapters, should be Heading level 2. If there are subsections in each chapter, then they should be made Heading level 3. Heading names should have a logical name.

Ensure you are creating real headings by doing the following:

1. Place your cursor where you want your heading to be.
2. Navigate to the ribbon at the top of the document and find the Styles tab.
3. Locate the appropriate heading level and select it.
4. Activate the Apply button.

Alternatively:

1. Place your cursor where you want your heading to be.
2. If it is a heading level 1, 2, or 3 you can press Control + Alt + 1, 2, or 3.
3. Type your heading and press enter. You can also type your heading, select the text, and use either method listed above for making it into a real heading.

Add Alternative Text to Images

WCAG Success Criteria 1.1.1: Non-text Content

Alternative Text or Alt Text is used for any images that convey meaning and/or information so individuals who are blind or low vision can get the same information in a text-based format. When a user navigates to an image without alt text using a screen reader, the screen reader will say graphic, photo, or image. This lets the person know that there is a photo present, but that is all that it does. Adding descriptive and meaningful alt text prompts the screen reader to read the description to the user when navigating to the image.

Alt text should be no more than 150 characters in length. A strategy that can assist in writing good alt text is pretend you need to describe the image to a friend or coworker who can't access the picture. You should not include the words image description, picture of, or other variations. The screen reader will identify it is an image, so adding this into the alt text would be redundant information.

An example of a good alt text description is, "A black cat sitting on a windowsill facing the camera." A bad example is "A picture of a cat."

Ensure Adequate Contrast Between the Text and the Background

WCAG Success Criteria 1.4.3: Contrast

Making sure the text in your document is easy to see and read is crucial for many individuals with low vision, but it also ensures a pleasant experience for everyone. WCAG has very specific rules around adequate contrast. For regular text the ratio between the text and the background must be at least 4.1 to 1 ratio. For bold text it must be at least 3 to 1 ratio.

Ensure that you are using good contrast by doing the following:

1. Open the ribbon and navigate to the font grouping. The keyboard shortcut for the font dialog box is control + D.
2. Navigate through the dialog box and make any necessary font adjustments and color adjustments to maximize contrast.
3. Navigate or Tab to the apply Button and activate it. There is also a radio button selection to either make these your default font setting or just for the current document. Choose the appropriate option and then press the OK button.

Create Real Tables for Tabular Data

WCAG Success Criteria 1.3.1: Info and Relationships

Tables are a great addition when you need to show specific kinds of data. Individuals who are blind or low vision can also benefit from information being presented in a table. There are keyboard commands that someone using a screen reader can use to navigate through the table. To ensure these commands will work for anyone using assistive technology, you must use the table style to create a real table. Column and row headers must also be set and given a name. It is best to keep the table simple and avoid merging cells.

[Article by Perkins on creating an accessible Table.](#)

Give Links a Descriptive Name

WCAG Success Criteria: 2.4.9 Link Purpose

It is important that hyperlinks within a document are given a meaningful and descriptive name. It can be frustrating to be reading a document, and the link be a hyperlink that does not indicate where the link goes, or the link name is long.

A couple of examples of good hyperlinks are “Download our catalog,” or “Campus Map (PDF, 5.62 MB).” Bad examples are “Learn more,” or “Click Here.” The bad examples do not tell the screen reader user where the link is going or what it is.

Avoid Using Color Alone for Meaning

WCAG Success Criteria 1.4.1: Use of Color

Many people use different colors to convey meaning. For individuals who are blind or low vision, this poses a barrier to accessing the necessary information. While it is possible for a screen reader user to find out the color using their screen reader, it requires additional keystrokes, and most users turn off color reporting if it is an option. Not all screen readers have this feature. In addition to the extra work accessing this with a screen reader, individuals who have low vision or are color blind will not be able to visually distinguish certain colors. This doesn't mean that you can't use colors for conveying meaning, but you will also need to provide an alternative such as text.

Use the List Style to Create Lists

WCAG Success Criteria 1.3.1: Info and Relationships

Just as you would ensure proper headings and tables, lists that are designated as a list allow screen reader users to move more quickly and efficiently through your document.

There are keyboard commands to move from list to list and from the top or bottom of a list. It is also helpful to know when you are entering a list of items and how many items are in the list.

To create a bulleted list type * before the list item and press enter. Pressing enter twice will end the list. This will also work for numbers, letters, and roman numerals.

Conclusion

These are the top things to consider when creating accessible documents. The list does not cover every possible scenario that could arise when creating content. Following these suggestions, however, will ensure that your documents do meet basic accessibility. It is still advised to consult experts in the field for any unique situations and to also ensure that all accessibility implementations were successful.