

Making Word Documents Accessible

Basic Formatting

Layout of content

- Divide content into manageable blocks of text to make it easier for users to navigate the document. Include headings and sub-headings to divide text into related paragraphs and sections.
- Use bulleted or numbered lists to display lists instead of using lengthy sentences.

Language used

- Use language appropriate to your target audience.
- If using abbreviations or acronyms, make sure to provide the fully expanded definition the first time you use them in a document.

Font type

- Stick to using standard fonts that are available on the end user's device.
- Documents with only one, or only a few font faces are usually easier to read. Using too many font faces can create a confusing visual layout, which is bad for all users, but may be especially difficult for users with reading disorders, learning disabilities, or attention deficit disorders.
- When in doubt, use **Verdana**. It has a simple, straightforward design, and the characters are not easily confused.

Text color

- Some users cannot perceive certain colors (green and red). Therefore, do not rely on color alone to emphasize text in a document.
- Underline or bold text that you wish to emphasize.

Contrast

- Use a high contrast between text and background colors.
- Use dark text on light backgrounds and light text on dark backgrounds.

Use of Styles

Using styles is a way to "tag" elements in your document in order to define whether the text is a Heading 1, Heading 2, a paragraph, a column, a bulleted or numbered list, etc. We use these tags in the same way we think of an outline; the title of the document is typically Heading 1, while subtitles are Heading 2, sub-subtitles are Heading 3, and so on.

Why should we use Styles?

Using Styles is critical for individuals using a screen reader because it allows them to detect the type of text they are reading from the tagging you have used to create your document. These tags are actually part of the code of the document. Because the headings and bullets are embedded in the code, the screen reader will alert the listener to the existence of those headings and bullets. Without styles, the text reads as continuous text with only line breaks.

Styles are also beneficial for the **sighted user** because they provide an organized and clear structure that is easier to read and that is maintained across formats. It's a win-win!

Using Images in a Word document

Besides text, many Word documents also contain images. The overall purpose of including images in a document should be to help the reader comprehend the purpose and/or meaning of the content they are reading. Some of the most common image types used within documents are:

- Descriptive or informative images
- Decorative images such as icons or logos
- Charts/graphs to represent information from a data table

Why are accessible images necessary?

Screen-reading software **can only read text**, not images or non-text graphics. Therefore, a reader who cannot see your document will only learn that there is an image there, not what the image is or what function it serves in the document.

Adding an alternative text description, also known as **alt text**, to the image alerts the screen-reading software that there is text to read aloud. When the screen reader passes over the visual element, it will read the alt text.

Alt text also makes web pages more accessible to anyone who is browsing on a weak internet connection or a small portable device like a smart phone. The alt text labels become visible while images are loading.

Alt text should not repeat what is already stated in captions or other document text. Think of it as a secret code that only screen reader users will be aware of. It will not appear to the naked eye, but rather is part of the document's code.

Using Hyperlinks

Hyperlinks are elements within a document that link to another section in the document or to another source, such as a webpage, another document, a presentation, spreadsheet, etc. They are often preceded by "www" (e.g. www.solano.edu).

Why are accessible hyperlinks necessary?

Just think of it from the perspective of someone listening to your document, instead of reading it. Ambiguous labels like "Click here" can confuse the listener as it is not clear where the link will take them once they click. Plus, JAWS may not read the link in order that the author intended, causing further confusion.

Accessible hyperlinks have a text description that will become the active link to the website or other document. Only listing the URL to a website (<http://www.solano.edu>) as a link is not sufficient. Instead, a descriptive text label (i.e. Solano Community College website) is required.

It's fine to list a URL to a website at the side of a descriptive text label for a link. For example, "Disability Services Program at Solano Community College website (www.solano.edu/dsp/)".

Using Tables

Tables can be great ways to organize information so it is clearer and more easily digestible. The reader's eyes can scan across and down rows and columns quickly, instead of reading a paragraph. Simple tables (tables with one row of headings or one column of headings or both) are usually the easiest for screen reading software (like JAWS) to decipher.

Why are accessible tables necessary?

Assistive technology, such as screen readers (JAWS), read tables in a **linear form**. For example, the screen reader begins reading from the first row of the table and then progresses left to right across the columns. When the row ends, it continues to the start of the second row, and so forth.

Also, screen readers always assume that the first row and column of a table contain heading information. Use Styles to designate which row(s) and column(s) are your headers.

If the table continues on to another page, make sure to turn on the "Repeat Header Rows" function. See below for instructions on how to do this.

Use the accessibility checker

PowerPoint has an accessibility checker built in that can be used to verify that the presentation is accessible to people with disabilities. If an issue is found, PowerPoint will tell the user how to fix it, typically in less than a minute.

Information above was adapted from Diablo Valley College's Online Accessibility page at <https://www.dvc.edu/faculty-staff/online-accessibility/index.html>.