Creating Accessible Microsoft Word Documents

Kentucky Department of
EDUCATION

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Figure 1 Kentucky Department of Education Logo

Welcome

In 2024, the federal government updated the Americans with Disabilities Act to establish guidelines for digital content accessibility. The federal law mandates that digital content created by all state and local government agencies must be accessible by April 2027 or April 2028 depending on population size.

In this guide, we provide guidance and introductory instructions on creating accessible documents with Microsoft Word. There are many elements that go into making content accessible; this guide is not exhaustive.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this guide, you will be able to

- Locate and use the Accessibility Checker tool in Microsoft Word.
- Develop properly formatted lists using built-in tools.
- Create new and edit artificial intelligence (AI) generated alternative text (alt text) to images to describe their content and function.
- Set appropriate heading styles to create a logical document structure.
- Check that text is readable by using sufficient color contrast.
- Format simple table structures that avoid merged or split cells and contain headers.

Accessibility Assistant

Why Should You Run the Accessibility Assistant First?

Microsoft Word features an accessibility assistant that can help you find accessibility issues with your Word document. However, it is important to recognize that automated accessibility checkers are only capable of detecting *some* of the issues that can affect the accessibility of your document.

It is critical that you always review your document, even if the **Accessibility Assistant** does not find anything wrong.

Where is the Accessibility Assistant in Microsoft Word?

The **Accessibility Assistant** runs in the background of your document, checking the accessibility of content in real-time, while you are working.

To see what information is being captured:

1. Click the **Review** tab of the ribbon.
2. Select **Check Accessibility** to review the status of your document, the **Accessibility Assistant** pane will open on the right.
3. In the **Accessibility Assistant** pane, review and address the results from your check.

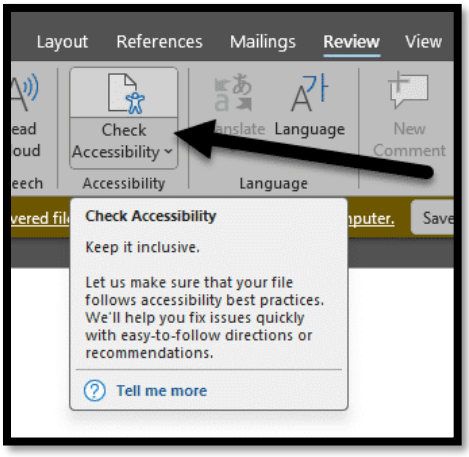

Figure 2 The Review tab is open and the Check Accessibility icon is noted with an arrow pointing toward it.

Interpreting Accessibility Assistant Results

Overview of Accessibility Assistant Findings

Source: Using the Improve accessibility in your documents with the Accessibility Assistant.

The Accessibility Assistant helps you find and resolve issues with your document. It's divided into the following categories:

- **Color and Contrast:** ensures all text is easy to read.
- **Media and Illustrations:** ensures all images and multimedia have alt text and proper alignment on the page.
- **Tables:** checks the table's structure and format.
- **Document Structure:** ensures headings are being used in a logical order.
- **Document Access:** verifies if the document can be accessed programmatically (e.g., used by screen readers).

Any items that are checked that need additional review have a white text and a number next to it (the number indicates how many issues there are). Click the name of the issue to see a description of the concern and options to resolve it.

Any items that are greyed out and have a checkmark next to them are issues that the assistant checked for and did not identify in your document. These items cannot be clicked into within the document.

Learning Tips

If you'd like to look up more information about any of the items listed in the Accessibility Assistant, click on the item in question. At the bottom of the Accessibility Assistant pane will be a **Learning Tips** link that you can click and be taken to additional guidance from Microsoft.

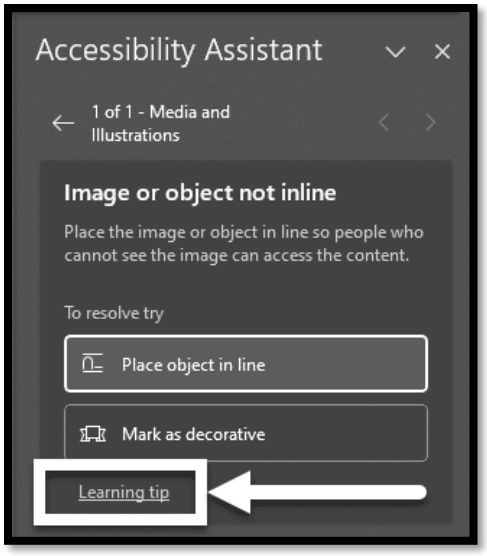

Figure 3 The Accessibility Assistant is drilled down to a specific item. The Learning Tip link at the bottom of the pane is highlighted with a box and an arrow pointing at it.

Accessibility Assistant Limitations

The Accessibility Assistant is a good starting point, but it is important to recognize that there are limits to what any automated tool can detect.

You will need to check your document to ensure the proper access strategies are applied to your content. You cannot rely on the Accessibility Assistant as the sole means of addressing accessibility in your presentation.

The following are Accessibility Assistant limitations to consider.

Alt Text

Although the Accessibility Assistant can comb through a Word document and generate a thorough list of all accessibility errors, the Accessibility Assistant cannot identify meaningful alternate text based on the document's context.

For example, if the alternate text of a picture in a document is "image1.jpg," the Accessibility Assistant will mark that picture accessible even though it is not descriptive enough.

It is still effective practice to individually check images for appropriate alternate text based on the context of the document's content.

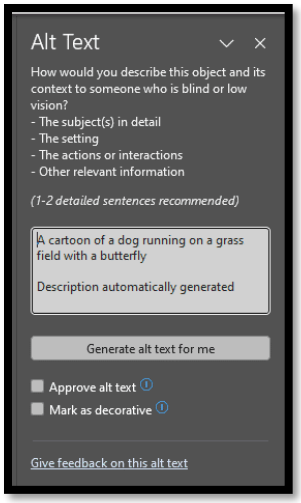

Figure 4 The Alt Text pane in Microsoft Word. An auto-generated caption is in the textbox. There are buttons below it to Mark the image as decorative or to approve the autogenerated caption.

Reading Order

Manually verifying the order in which the document content is organized ensures the information makes sense when read aloud.

To see a high-level overview of your headings, go to: Home > Find and the Navigation pane will open on the left-hand side of the screen. Under the Headings view, you'll see a list of all headers in the document and the order they've been set.

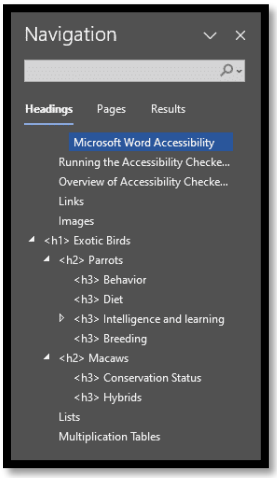

Figure 5 The Navigation pane in Microsoft Word showing a list of all headers in a document. They are not in a logical reading order since Header 1 is not tagged and the tags present are not in a linear order.

Inline Content

All document content considered inline will be read in a sequential manner, as part of the logical reading order. Content that is not inline, such as text boxes, images or floating

content, will not be read in a logical and sequential manner. This is why it's always best to set your content as "In Line with Text."

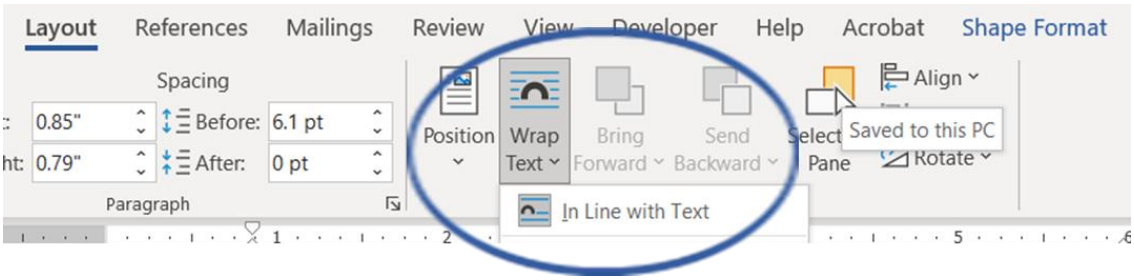

Figure 6 The image highlights where the "In Line with Text" tool is located in the Layout options.

Headings and Styles

Why Are Headings Important?

In Word, headings make text stand out to help users scan your document. The style can be customized to be distinct from other headings with a different font, text size and color.

Using headings is one of the best ways to enhance the accessibility of your document as it empowers your users to navigate content quickly. They help your audience understand the relationship between the subtopics using the default heading style size as a cue.

Where are the Heading Styles Located?

Step 1

In Microsoft Word, make sure the **Home** menu bar is activated to see the **Styles** menu.

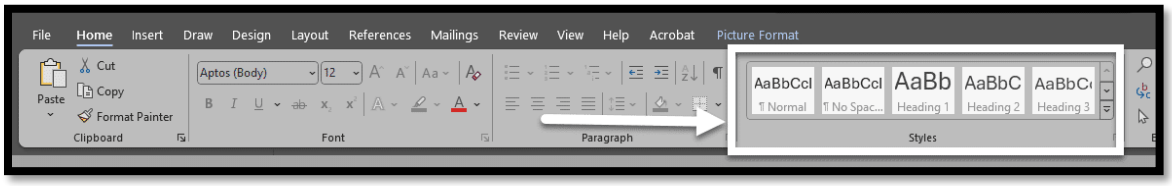

Figure 7 The Home menu bar is open and the Styles menu is highlighted by a box and an arrow pointing toward it.

Step 2

Select the heading text in your document (or place the cursor within the text).

Step 3

Click on the heading style from the **Styles** feature to apply the style to your selected text.

Note: If you prefer to use keyboard shortcuts instead of the mouse, the following keyboard commands will apply the indicated heading style to your text:

- CTRL + ALT + 1 applies the Heading 1 style

- CTRL + ALT + 2 applies the Heading 2 style
- CTRL + ALT + 3 applies the Heading 3 style

Additional Resources

Video: Improve heading accessibility

This Microsoft Video Tutorial on Headings demonstrates how to add a heading style and best practices when writing the text for them.

Tutorial: Modify or create headings and other styles

This Microsoft Tutorial on Editing Headings reviews how to edit existing headings for a specific format and how to create new styles for your document.

Logical Hierarchy

Sequencing Heading Styles

One of the concepts that apply to heading styles is that of a logical hierarchy.

Logical Hierarchy means there is an organized system for assigning headings, based on the numerical value indicated in the heading name.

The main principle of the concept is to start at Heading 1 and to not skip any levels as you go through the document.

Verifying Style

To see the style applied to any text in your document, you can use your arrow keys to navigate through the page and review each heading style within the **Styles** feature of the **Home Tab**. **Normal** is the default style for all content until you specify otherwise.

A quick way to evaluate the heading structure of an entire document is to use the **Navigation Pane** from the **View Tab** (CTRL + F on PC or Command +F on Mac).

Select the **Headings** option from the **Navigation Pane** to see your heading structure presented as an outline.

When you find a heading level has been skipped (or applied to a blank line) make the correction to your text using your **Styles** feature (and the DELETE key when appropriate).

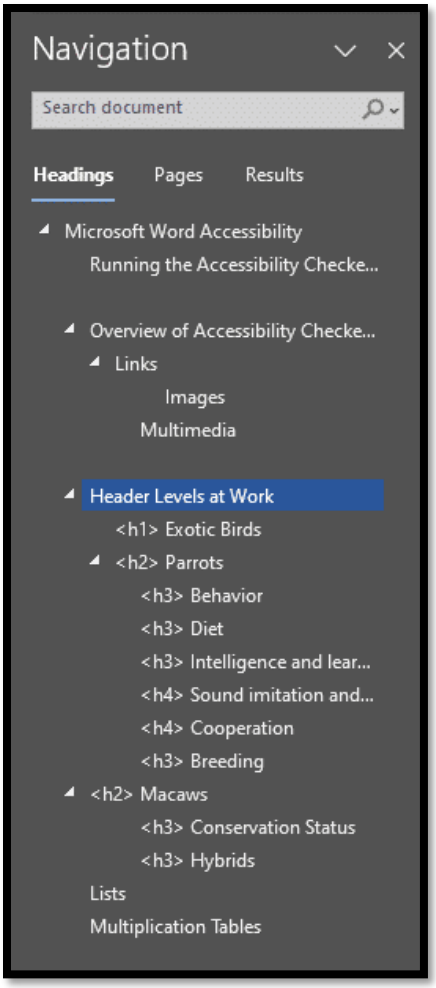

Figure 8 The Navigation Pane is open and displays the reading order for the document with Header 1, Header 2, Header 3 and 4.

Headings & Table of Contents

Table of Contents

One final benefit of using headings in your document is that you can also use your headings to create a Table of Contents for your document quickly.

In a long document, adding a Table of Contents will increase the accessibility and usability of your document.

Table of Contents & Microsoft Word Online

Unfortunately, it is not yet possible to create a Table of Contents with Microsoft Word Online, so you will need to create your Table of Contents on a locally installed desktop version of Microsoft Word.

For more information, see Microsoft's Create a table of contents.

List and Columns

Using Built-In Accessibility Tools to Customize Structure

Microsoft Word makes creating lists and adding columns very easy. Lists and columns add important hierarchical structure to a document.

Sometimes users create "lists" and "columns" manually by adding dashes and pushing "Enter" on the keyboard. While this provides visual structure for sighted users, it does not provide the structure needed for assistive technology users.

How to Apply Lists

Create a new list

To start an ordered list, type 1, a period (.), a space and some text. Word will automatically start an ordered list for you.

To start an unordered list, type * and a space before the first item of your list. Word will automatically start the unordered list.

To complete your list, press Enter until the bullets or numbering switch off.

Create a list from existing text

- Select the text or the items you want to change into a list.
    - Note: each item should be on its own line.
- Go to **Home> Bullets or Numbering**.

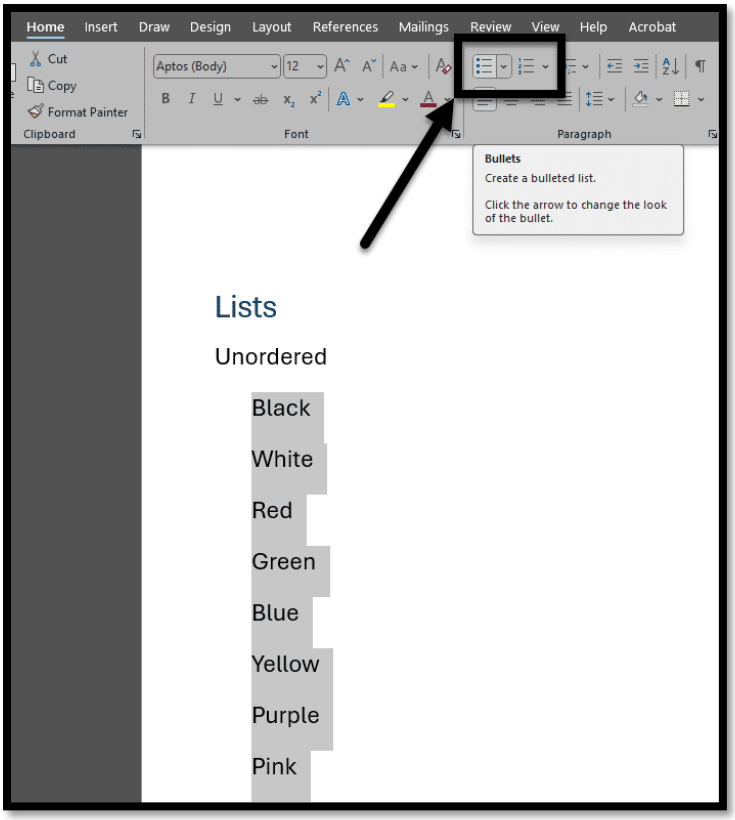

Figure 9 A potential list of items is highlighted in Microsoft Word; the Bullets and Numbering options in the Home tab are featured with a box and arrow pointing toward them.

Additional Resource

Video: Create a bulleted or numbered list

This **Microsoft Video Tutorial on Lists** demonstrates how to start a new list and how to create one using existing text.

How to Apply Columns

If you need to create columns, avoid the text boxes. Instead, use Word's Column feature. By using built-in tools such as heading styles, lists and column features you can save yourself a lot of time and create a more accessible document.

Create columns

1. To lay out the whole document in columns, select **Layout > Columns**.
2. Choose how many columns you want the text to be divided into or choose **More Columns** to set your own column format.

Make part of your document into columns

- Select the paragraphs you want to lay out in columns.

- Select **Layout > Columns** and then choose how many columns you need the text to be divided into.

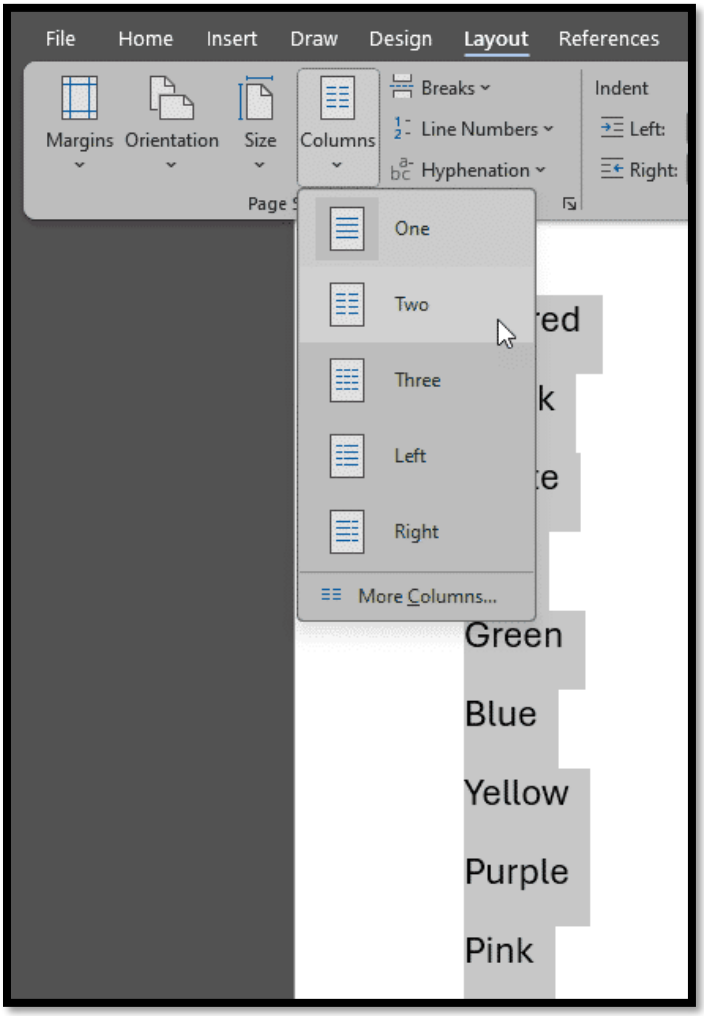

Figure 10 Text is highlighted in a Word document. The Layout tab is open, the Columns drop-down is visible and a cursor is hovering over the Two option.

Images and Non-text Content

Make Images and Non-textual Content Accessible

Images present a powerful and effective means of communicating information.

However, our computers can't determine what is in a picture for us, so to make our documents accessible we must provide the image description when we create the document.

The specific process to describe an image will vary depending on the software you are using to create your document. However, the textual description for an image is referred to as an "Alt Text" description.

How to Apply Alt Text

Alt text can be added to a variety of objects, including images, clip art, charts, tables, SmartArt, audio files and videos.

To get started, you need to open the **Alt Text** pane in one of two ways:

1. Right-click the object and select **Edit Alt Text** from the drop-down.
2. Click the object and go to **Format > Alt Text**.
    a. The Alt Text pane will open on the right-hand side of the screen.

Next, type your description of the object including any physical characteristics of it and its purpose in the textbox.

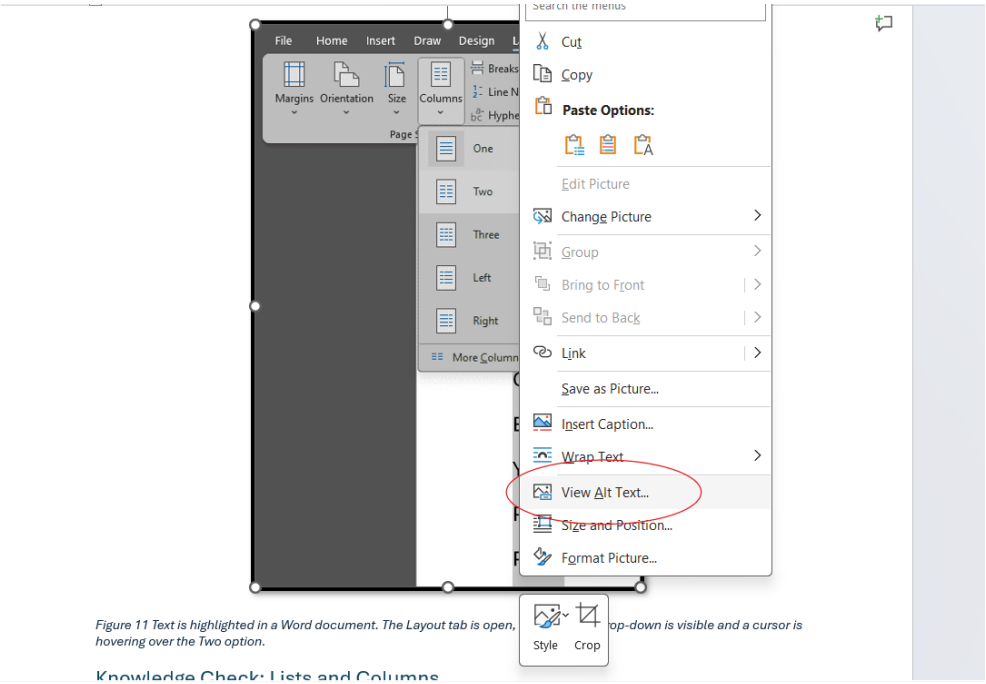

Figure 11 Text is highlighted in a Word document. The Layout tab is open, op-down is visible and a cursor is hovering over the Two option.

Figure 2 An image has been right-clicked and the drop-down menu is open. The View Alt Text option is noted with a box.

Additional Resources

Video: Improve accessibility with alt text

This video **Microsoft Video Tutorial on Alt Text** demonstrates how to add alt text to images, shapes, charts, SmartArt and tables and best practices for writing the text.

Generative Descriptions and Decorative Images

Microsoft Word 365 includes an artificial intelligence engine that now proposes alternative text based on image analysis. This tool is not always accurate and may try to provide a description for an image that should be marked as decorative.

The Accessibility Assistant will direct you to manually check that the description is accurate and relevant to the content (i.e., it shouldn't be marked as decorative).

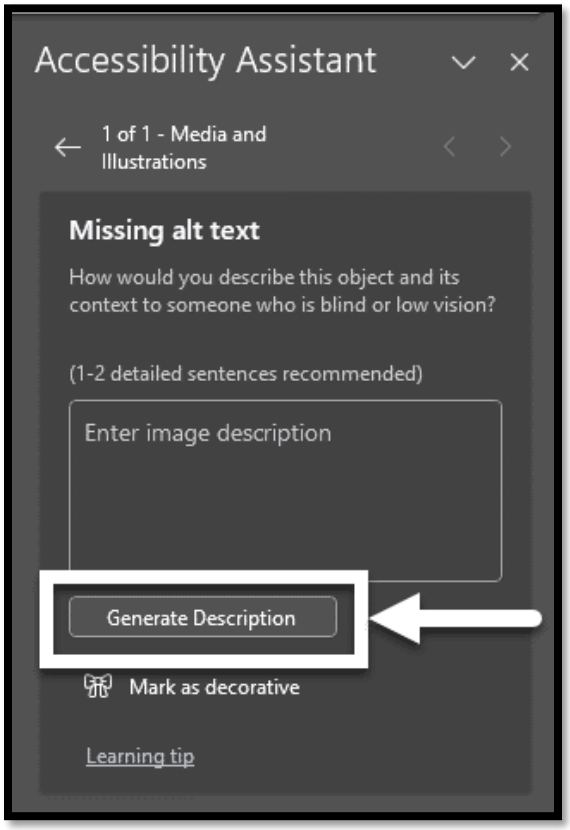

Figure 12 The Missing alt text box is open. A box indicates the Generate Description button.

Approve generated alt text

To approve the auto-generated alt text:

- Open the Alt Text pane.
- Review the displayed alt-text, make any needed edits and click the Approve alt text checkbox.

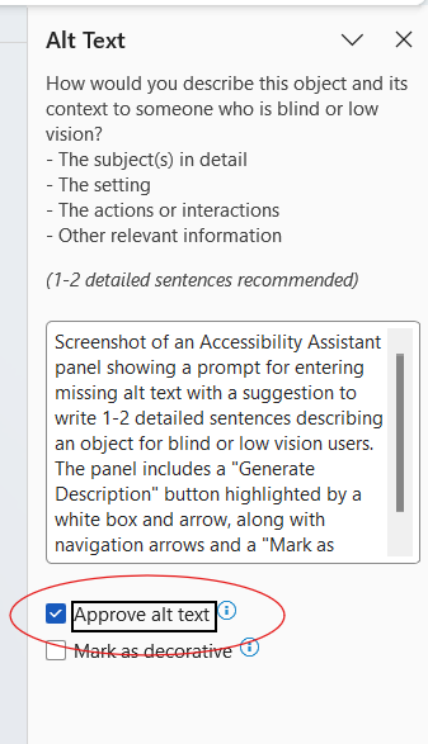

Figure 13 The Alt Text pane is open. The Approve alt text checkbox is checked and a box is indicating its location.

Mark decorative images

If an image adds no informational value, it's visually appealing but not adding anything to the content otherwise, you want to mark it as decorative. When you mark an image as decorative, it will be ignored by screen readers as if the image isn't there.

Images should only be marked as decorative if they absolutely do not add to the content. It should not be used for every image to avoid alt text or expedite a process.

How to Mark a Decorative Image

Open the Alt Text pane.

Check the Mark as decorative checkbox.

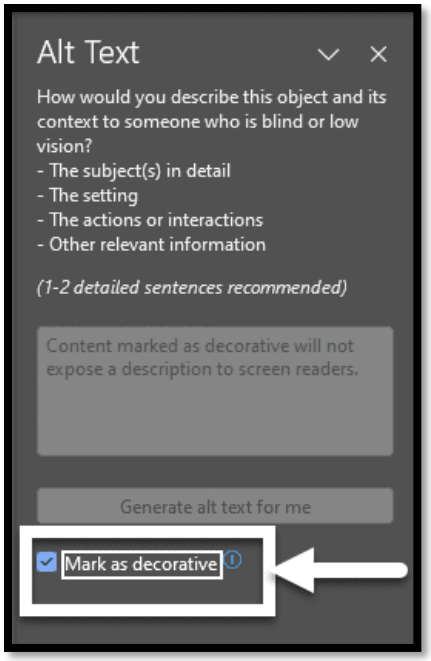

Figure 14 The Alt Text pane is open and the Mark as decorative checkbox is noted with a box and an arrow pointing toward it near the bottom of the pane.

Turn off generated alt text

If you don't want alt text to be automatically generated for you, you can turn off the feature:

Select **File >Options > Accessibility**.

In the **Automatic Alt Text** section, select or unselect the **Automatically generate alt text for me option** and then select **Ok**.

Tables

Tables Simplify Complex Relationships

Tables provide a means of presenting complex information in a manner that makes it easy to comprehend and identify relationships between the data.

Microsoft Word Online does not support the creation of accessible tables, so you will need to use your locally installed desktop version of Microsoft Word to make your tables accessible.

How to Create Accessible Table Headers

All tables need an identified header. To set the top row of your table as the header accessibly:

1. Select the top row of the table and right click.

2. Choose **Table Properties**, a pop-up window will appear.
3. In the **Row** tab, check the **Repeat as header row at the top of each page** option and make sure the **Allow row to break across pages option** is unchecked.
4. Select **OK**.

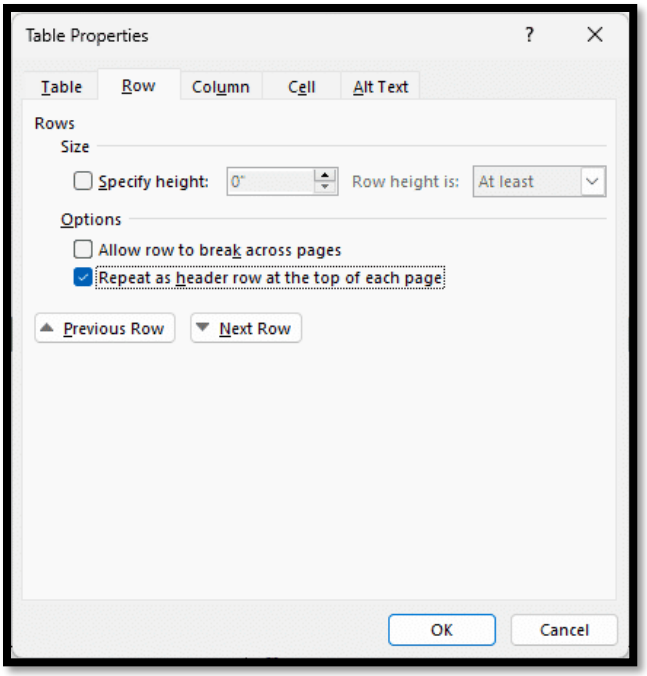

Figure 15 The Table Properties box is open on the Row tab. The Allow row to break across pages box is unchecked and the Repeat as header row at the top of each page box is checked.

Additional Resources

Video: Create accessible tables

This **Microsoft Table Accessibility video** reviews how to create accessible tables column and/or row headers.

Inaccessible Formatting

There are some common formatting mistakes that you want to avoid:

Do not use merged, nested or split cells

When tables contain merged cells and nested tables, each cell must be uniquely identified and associated with the appropriate header cell. Microsoft Word does not provide a means of doing this, so it is recommended that you keep your tables simple- for the sake of clear communication as well as for accessibility.

Header Cell for Column 1	Header Cell for Column 2	Header Cell for Column 3	Header Cell for Column 4
Data	Data	Data	Data
Data	Data	Data	Data

Figure 16 A sample of a simply formatted header. Each header cell contains a descriptive label.

Do not create your table using the Draw Table tool

While this tool can be valuable for creating images and certain annotations within documents, assistive technology won't be able to interpret the content of your drawn table to a user.

Do not control spacing in your table with blank rows or columns

When blank spaces are added to a table, some screen readers will "read" each line break to the user. That can take up a lot of their time and be disorienting for someone listening.

It is better to adjust line spacing instead by using the **Paragraph** options on the **Home** tab.

Do not use tables for design layout

If there's no clear purpose or logical connection between each field in the table, it makes the information difficult to understand. It's better to use the design, layout and paragraph tools within Word.

Table Captions and Alt Text

Table captions can provide a statement of purpose about the table for sighted, low-vision and no vision users alike.

Just like you would provide alt text for an image, you can add alt text for a table too. For tables, it's best to provide a description of the text's layout (e.g., how it's organized).

Be careful, you don't want to repeat the same information in the caption and the alt text.

Table Caption

1. Select the top row of the table and right click.
2. Choose **Insert Caption**, a pop-up window will appear.
3. Enter your summary in the **Caption** textbox.
4. Select **OK**.

Mr. Smith's History Class

Table 1The grades for the class's first two assignments.

Name	Assignment 1	Assignment 2
Jack Harkness	75	86
Martha Jones	99	95
Donna Noble	85	81

Figure 17 An example of a caption above a table.

Table Alt Text

1. Select the top row of the table and right click.
2. Choose **Table Properties**, a pop-up window will appear.
3. In the **Alt Text** tab, enter a description of the table in the **Description** box.
4. Select **OK**.

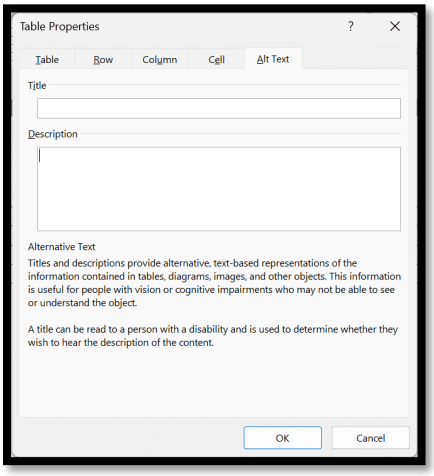

Figure 18 The Table Properties box open to the Alt Text section, including a title and description textbox.

Color Contrast and Meaning

Color Contrast?

Color contrast is required for accessibility to ensure that the meaning of the message stands out from the background of the message.

There is a measurable standard for adequate color contrast through the WCAG guidelines. W3C provides a helpful resource that goes into additional detail about color contrast.

Control Your Contrast with the Color Tools in Microsoft Word

In Microsoft Office, you can select text and background colors as well as entire color schemes through the different themes.

Font Color Picker

The **Font Color** tool can be accessed from the **Home** tab, in the Font tool-group from the toolbar.

The icon is a capital A with a solid bar of color beneath it. The bar is always the color that is currently being selected.

Simply click on one of the color swatches to apply that color as the font color to the currently selected text.

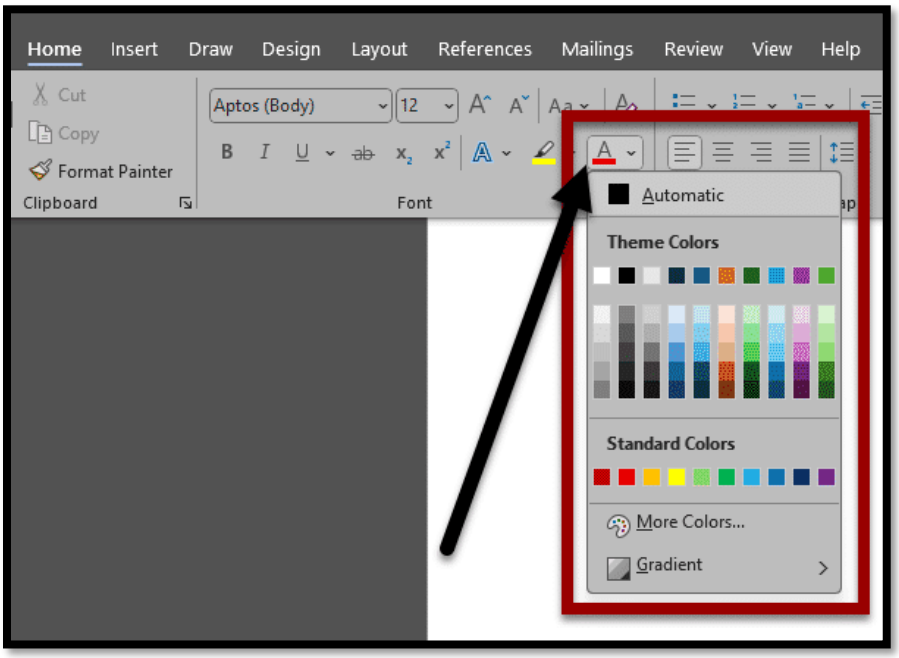

Figure 19 The Home tab of Microsoft Word. The Font Color tool is open with a box around it and an arrow pointing toward the icon.

Background Color Picker (Shading)

The **Shading Color** tool can be accessed from the **Home** tab, in the Paragraph group from the toolbar.

The icon is a bucket spilling paint over a solid bar of color. The solid bar is the color that is currently selected.

Click on one of the color swatches to apply that color as the background color for paragraphs or to the currently selected paragraph.

Be careful, as you can apply different colors to snippets of text as well as to the entire paragraph of text.

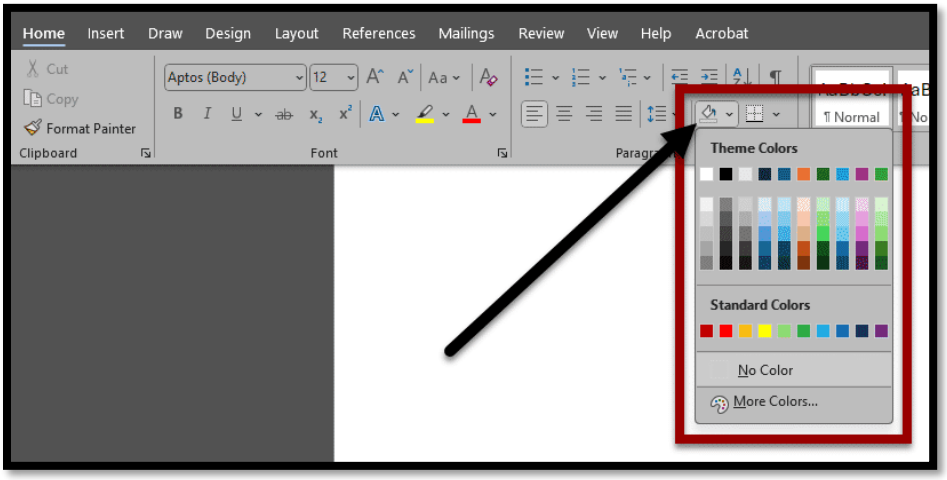

Figure 20 The Home tab of Microsoft Word. The Shading Color tool is open with a box around it and an arrow pointing toward the icon.

Although text colors with appropriate contrast against a black background are possible, it's highly discouraged to use light text against a black/dark background. It tires the eye quickly and can produce a shimmering effect that's hard to read.

Setting a Chart Design with Direct Labels

There are many ways of making an accessible chart with high contrast colors or that use patterns.

As a better practice in Microsoft Word, set your chart to include direct labels. This means that there are labels and values to guide users through the data that don't rely on color alone.

To find the most accessible chart design for you:

1. Select the chart in your document
2. Click the **Chart Design** option.
3. Click the **Quick Layout** tool and select a layout with direct labels from the options listed in the drop-down.

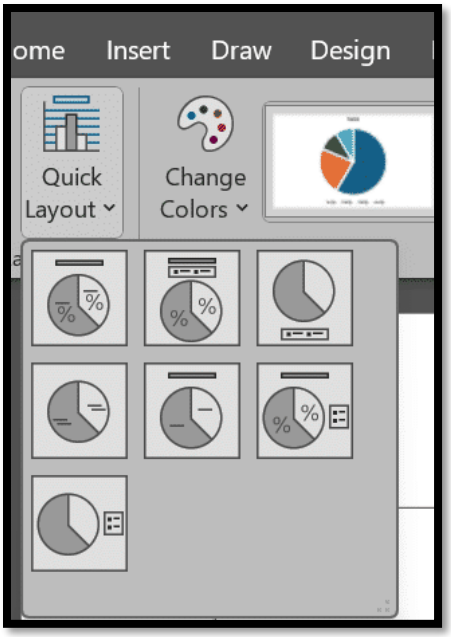

Figure 21 The Quick Layout drop-down is open from the Chart Design option of the ribbon.

Accessibility Assistant Limitations

The Accessibility Assistant has a criteria for "Hard to read text contrast." This applies to plain text on the background.

Unfortunately, the Accessibility Assistant does not catch all contrast issues when you use SmartArt or charts. Those need to be manually checked by content creators. The WebAim Color Contrast Checker is a good tool for this work.

Do not assume that the pre-designed themes will provide sufficient color contrast. It is important to verify and ensure that your font colors provide sufficient contrast to the background colors.

Exporting a Microsoft File to PDF and Keep the Formatting

When converting Microsoft Word documents to PDF for posting, districts must use a method that preserves accessibility features.

Required method for Windows:

- Select File
- Select Save As (or Save a Copy if autosave is on)
- Choose file location
- Select PDF (*.pdf) from file type menu
- Select Options

- Ensure “Document structure tags for accessibility” is enabled
- Select OK, then Save

The “Print to PDF” function must not be used, as it removes structural information required for accessibility.

The “Save as Adobe PDF” add-in should not be used if it results in loss or inconsistency of accessibility tagging.

The next step is to review the Accessibility Tags of the PDF output for accuracy.

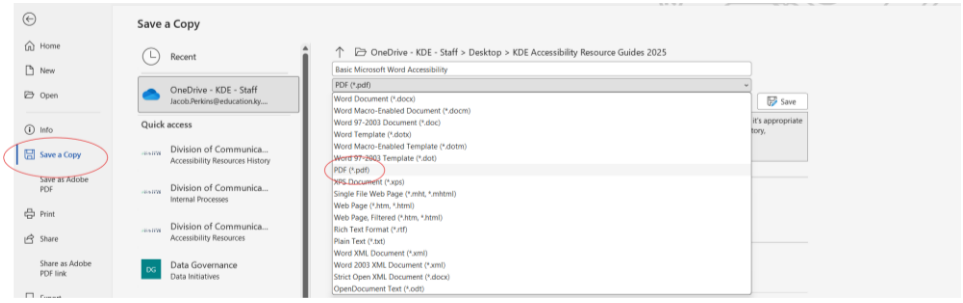

Figure 22 Save As dialogue box in Word for Windows

Required method for Mac:

- From the File menu, select “Save As…”
- Choose PDF from the options provided. By default, this produces a PDF that preserves the document structure and helps with accessibility.
- When saving, be sure the radio button labeled “Best for electronic distribution and accessibility” is selected.

The next step is to review the Accessibility Tags for accuracy.

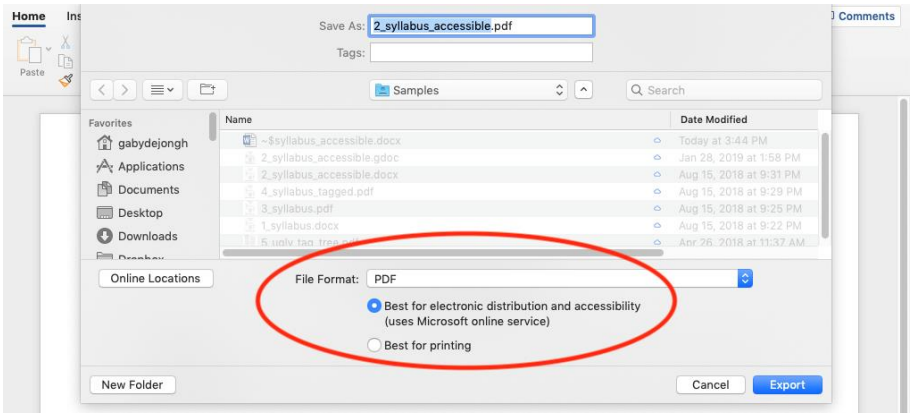

Figure 23 Save As dialogue box in Word for Mac