Create more navigable documents

Accessibility Basics Tutorial Series

Contents

Overview

These guidelines help you produce files that are more readable with assistive technology like screen readers. Many of these recommendations improve readability for everyone.

Headings

Headings let the audience navigate between sections in the document and find information in a particular section again. They're crucial for navigating documents with assistive technology.

- Break documents up into sections and subsections.
- Give each section and subsection an informative heading.
- Format your headings using the **built-in heading styles**. Find these under "Styles" in the main toolbar in Microsoft Office and Google Docs.
- Select heading levels based on the logical structure of the document, and then change the visual formatting of the heading levels as desired. If you need help choosing the right heading level, imagine converting the document into an outline.
  - Heading 1 is the main title.
  - Heading 2s are the main sections.
  - Heading 3s are subsections of Heading 2 sections. And so on.

To change the visual formatting for the heading level, follow these steps in this order:

1. Apply the logically correct heading level to your heading text.

2. Highlight the heading text and manually change the font, text size, color, etc. to achieve your desired visual formatting.

3. Highlight the heading text and then go to Styles. In Microsoft Office, right click the corresponding heading style and then select "Update Heading _ to Match Selection." In Google Docs, hover over the arrow on the right side of the heading menu and then select "Update Heading _ to match"

Slide titles

Slide titles let the audience navigate the slide deck and find information on a particular slide again. They're important for navigating slide decks with assistive technology.

- Give every slide a title.

- Titles should be unique and informative.

- Add a slide title using the built-in function rather than just formatting a text box with large font at the top of the slide. In PowerPoint, go to Home > Layout > Title Only. In Google Slides, go to Slide > Apply layout > Title Only. Selecting "Title Only" will add a field for a title without removing any existing content on the slide.

Lists

Lists make documents more accessible and easier to read when you use them for their true purpose, which is to list things. The benefits of lists start to be lost when the lists are too long (too many list items) or individual list items are too long.

Tables

Tables are inherently difficult to read with assistive technology. For every table cell, a screen reader has to report the meta-information about the position of the cell in the table as well as the text contained in the cell. Tables can also be difficult to interpret for people with visual or cognitive impairments. It is best not to use a table if you can avoid it.

If you need to use a table:

- Format tables with a header row. When available, use the built-in function to define the header row. To do this in Microsoft Word, go to Table Tools > Design and check the "Header Row" checkbox.
- Stick to tables that are a simple grid layout. Don't use split or merged cells or multiple header rows.

- Include alt text for the table. The alt text should summarize the information people should glean from the table. In Word, right click on the table and go to Table Properties > Alt Text. If you're working in another program that doesn't allow alt text for tables, or if the information to glean from the table is too long for alt text, include a summary in the body of the document before the table.

PDFs

PDFs are one of the worst offenders in terms of everyday digital accessibility barriers.

- Some PDFs are totally unreadable by a screen reader. If text can't be grabbed and highlighted with the cursor, then the PDF is totally inaccessible.

- Many PDFs are barely readable by a screen reader user because all the text in the document reads as a solid, continuous wall with no structure or organization. It is also common for words and sentences to get distorted or the order of text to get garbled. This is true for PDFs exported from Google Workspace, unless you use the third party app [Grackle Docs](#).

Any PDF can be remediated (made accessible) by someone with the necessary software and skillset, but this is an involved process. The following alternative strategies can improve accessibility.

1. Don't use a PDF. Share a Word document, Google Doc, or HTML webpage. This is the safest and most equitable strategy.

2. Create your PDF by composing the document in Microsoft Office and exporting it from there. If you follow the guidelines in the rest of this tutorial series and run the automated Microsoft Office Accessibility Checker, then the resulting PDF should be reasonably accessible.

3. Use a PDF, but include the phrase "Alternative accessible format available upon request" in the webpage or email from which the PDF can be downloaded. See the "alternative file formats" section for more information.