Producing Accessible Research Documents With Microsoft Word

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Why this is important

For research output to be fully inclusive, all documents produced to communicate with participants and outcomes of the study meant for everyone, must be accessible. These documents, including Microsoft Word documents form a large part of the World Wide Web (WWW).

Accessible Word documents contribute to an inclusive Web. On the contrary, when these documents are not accessible, those we want to communicate with might not receive the full information.

Given the extra steps required to make documents accessible, the question that some people might have is "why bother?". Here are some reasons:

1. Inaccessible Word documents constitute a barrier to inclusive information and communication technologies (ICTs).
2. Persons with disabilities have the right to be included in communications. This includes producing documents in accessible ways to prevent discrimination.
3. Barriers to full educational inclusion of persons with disabilities includes inaccessible technologies.
4. In inclusive research teams, documents must be produced in accessible ways so that everyone can receive the same information.
5. There is an increasing number of persons with disabilities worldwide. Your current or future colleague who has an impairment may need to access your document.
6. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that about 15% of the world's population lives with some form of disability.
7. Legislations in many countries worldwide require the production of accessible ICTs to include persons with disabilities.
8. There is increasing awareness of the need for accessibility. We must each do something to develop an inclusive society.
9. If your products are not accessible, people will go elsewhere to find alternatives.

The following tips will help you in producing accessible Microsoft Word 2016 documents. Same principles can be applied to other versions of Word.

Tips on producing accessible Microsoft Word documents

Use the Accessibility Checker

Before you begin typing, consider displaying the accessibility checker. This will show you any errors in the document as you type in. Fixing the errors right away will be faster and easier than at the end.

To display the Accessibility Checker use the following method (also shown in Figure 1):

1. Go to the **File** menu
2. Click the **Info** tab
3. In the **Inspect Document** section, click the **Check for Issues** drop down
4. Select **Check Accessibility** to display the Accessibility Checker pane
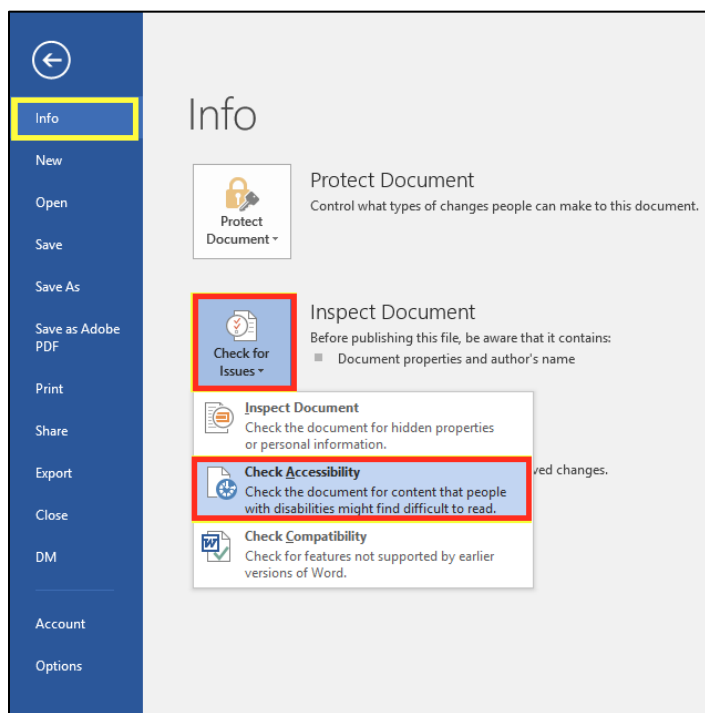

Figure 1. Displaying the Accessibility Checker pane in Microsoft Word

Include alternative text for all visuals

Screen reader users can understand an image if an alternative text (Alt Text) is included. If your visual does not have an alternative text, the Accessibility Checker will display an error as shown in Figure 2.
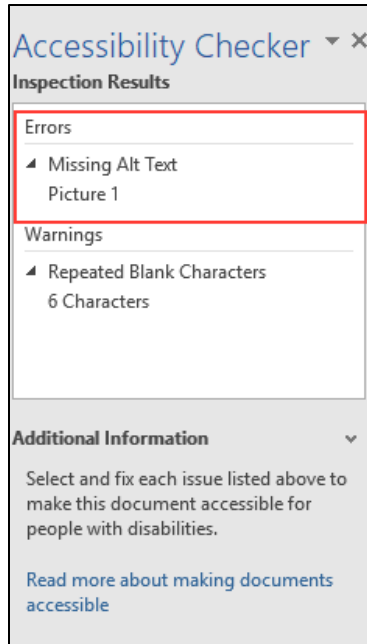
Figure 2. Accessibility Checker displaying an error due to the lack of Alt Text for an image

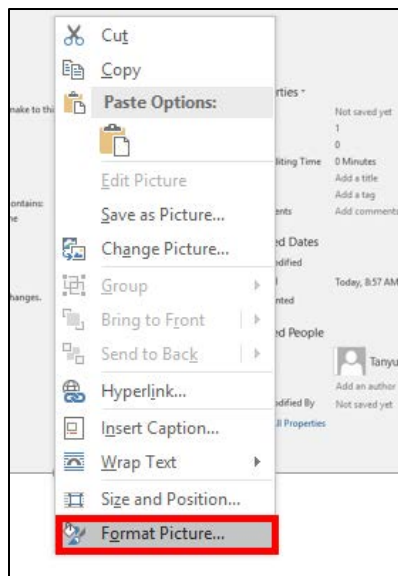To add an Alt Text, **right click** the image and proceed as follows:

Figure 3. Opening the Format Picture pane

1. Select **Format Picture** (as shown in Figure 3). The Format Picture pane opens. When adding the Alt text for an object, you would select Format Object.
2. Select the **Layout and Properties** icon

3. Enter a **Title** for the image, then a full **description** as shown in Figure 4. The title is read first then the screen reader user can decide whether to read the full description or not.

Although alternative texts are also required for text boxes, they are generally not accessible and should be avoided.

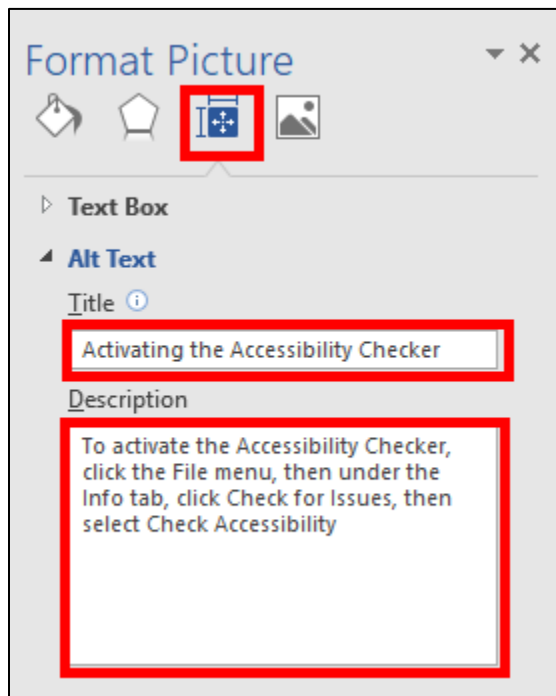When inserting visuals, ensure that they are in line with text, to be accessible.

Figure 4. Adding Alt Text to an image

Alternative texts should also be entered for Tables. Please see the Tables section for instructions on how to do this.

Use built-in headings

Using headings correctly and appropriately nesting them helps screen reader users jump to specific headings within the document. Use the built-in headings and styles within Microsoft Word. These can be accessed by going to the **Home** tab and selecting an appropriate heading in the **Styles** group (Figure 5).

The heading structure is hierarchical, beginning at Heading 1 which is usually the title of the page or main heading on the page and proceeding to other sub headings H2-H6.

By looking at the Table of Contents, you could verify if the heading structure is logical and hierarchical.
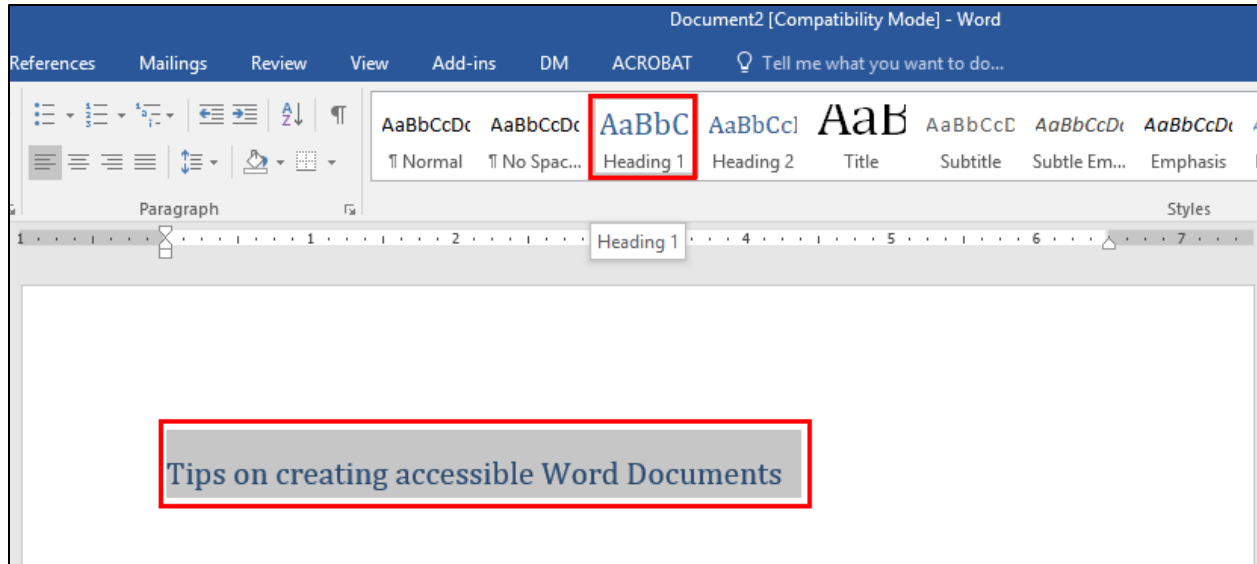
Figure 5. Using the Microsoft Word built-in heading styles

Use built-in lists

Screen readers read ordered or unordered lists (Figure 6) correctly when the built-in list in Word is used to create them.
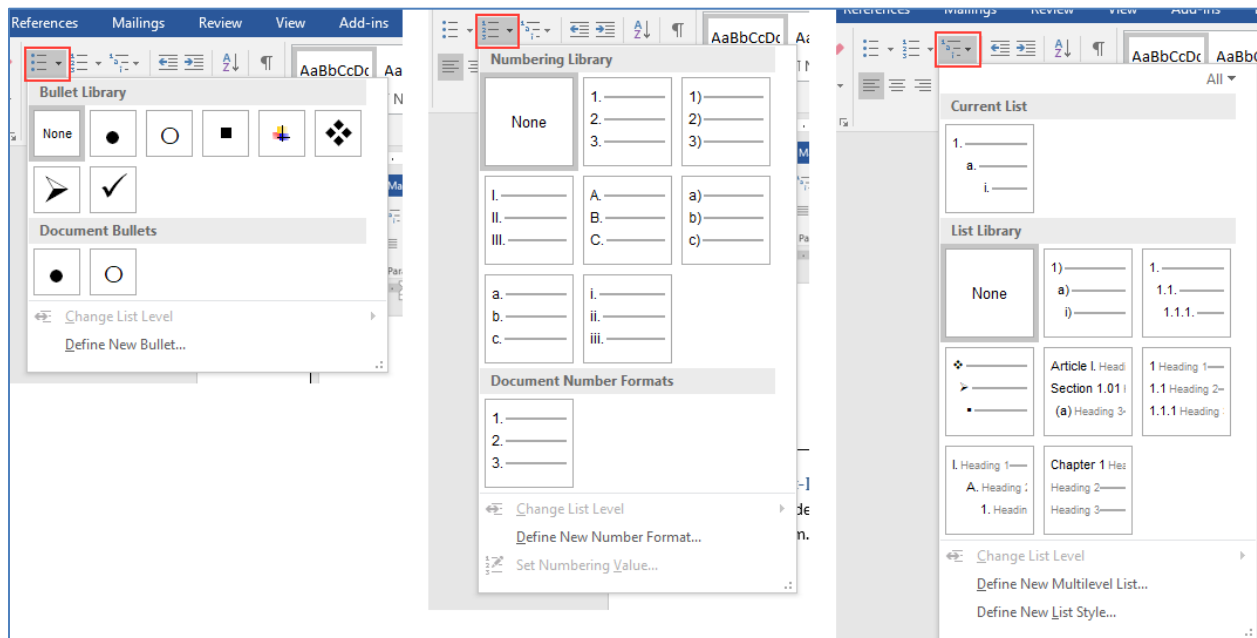

Figure 6. Microsoft Word 2016 built-in lists

Create simple data tables

Use tables to present data and when doing so, create simple, rather than complex tables. A simple table is one without merged cells. The table header rows must be identified to enable screen readers to better interpret the table.

To create a simple table and define the header rows, proceed as follows (also shown in Figure 7):

1. Go to the **Insert** Menu and select **Table**
2. Define the number of columns and rows
3. To define the header row, select the First row, go to the **Layout** menu and under the Data styles, select **Repeat Header Rows**.
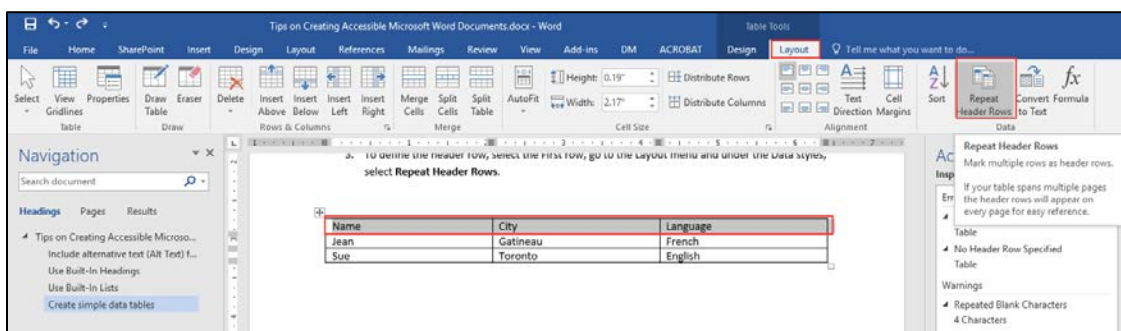

Figure 7. Defining the table header

4. Add Alt Text to the table by right clicking in the table, selecting **Table Properties** (Figure 8) and in the **Alt Text** tab, entering the title and the description.
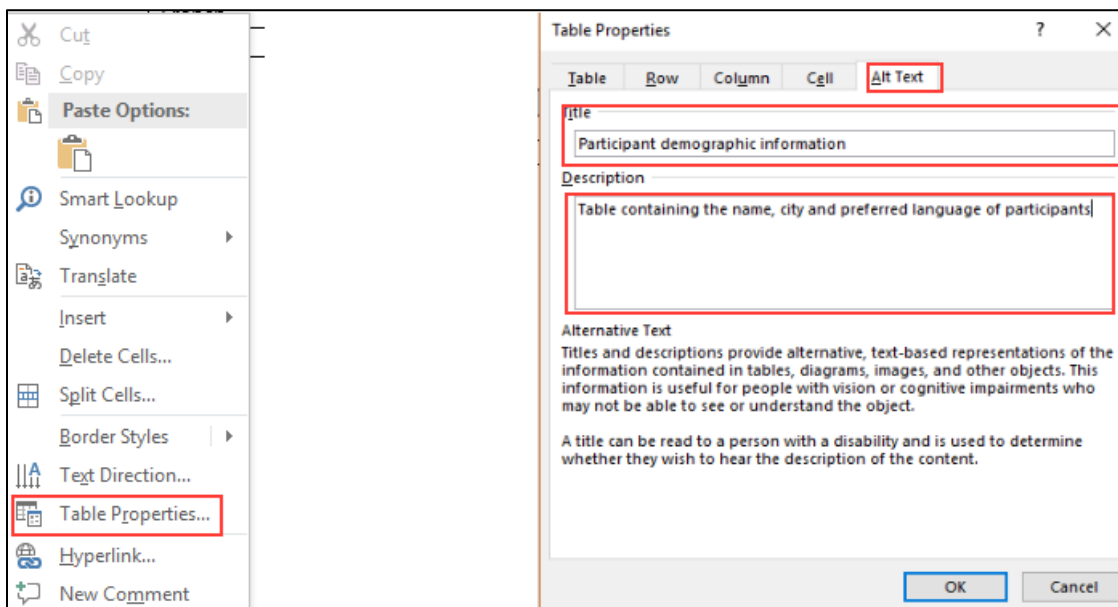

Figure 8. Adding Alt Text to Tables

Include meaningful hyperlinks

When creating a link in the document, include link text that helps users understand where the link leads them, thereby providing context. Link texts such as "Click here" do not provide context for the users.

To add a link, highlight the word or phrase you want to add a link to.

1. Go to the **Insert** Menu
2. In the Links group, select **Hyperlink**.
3. Paste the destination page link in the **Address** field.
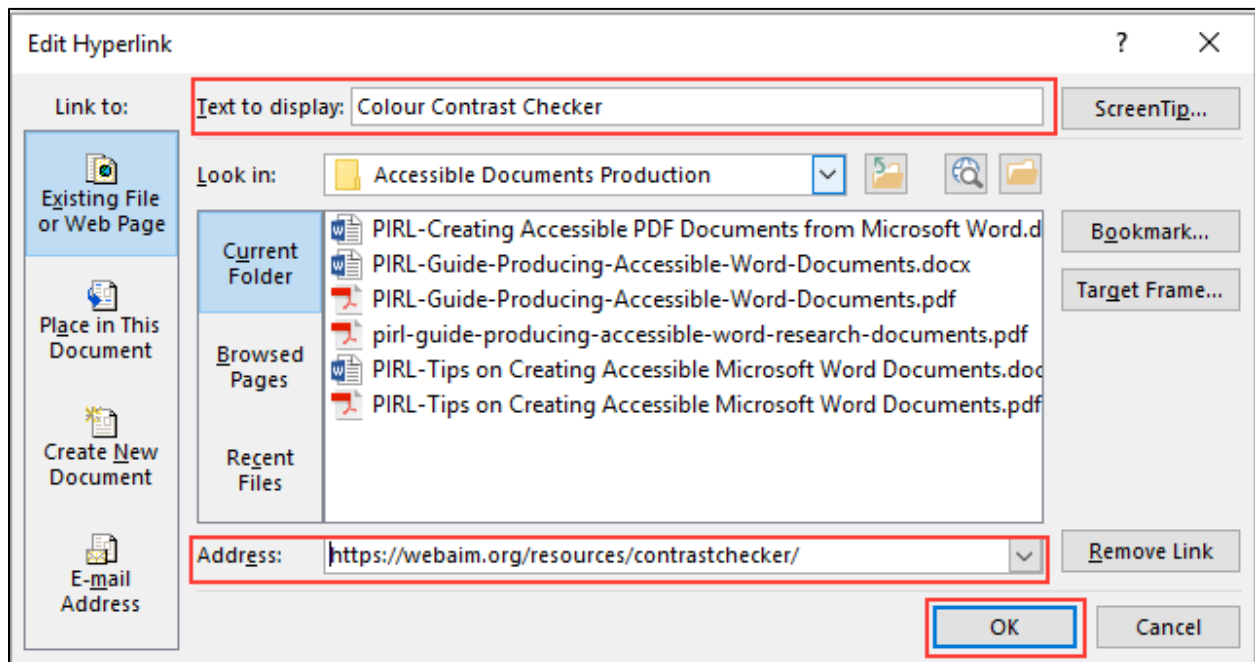4. Click **OK** (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Adding meaningful hyperlinks

Use high colour contrast

For people with visual impairment, it is important to have an accessible contrast between the foreground and background colours.

Tools such as the Colour Contrast Analyser (downloadable) and Colour Contrast Checker (Web-based) can help with choosing an accessible colour contrast (Figure 10).
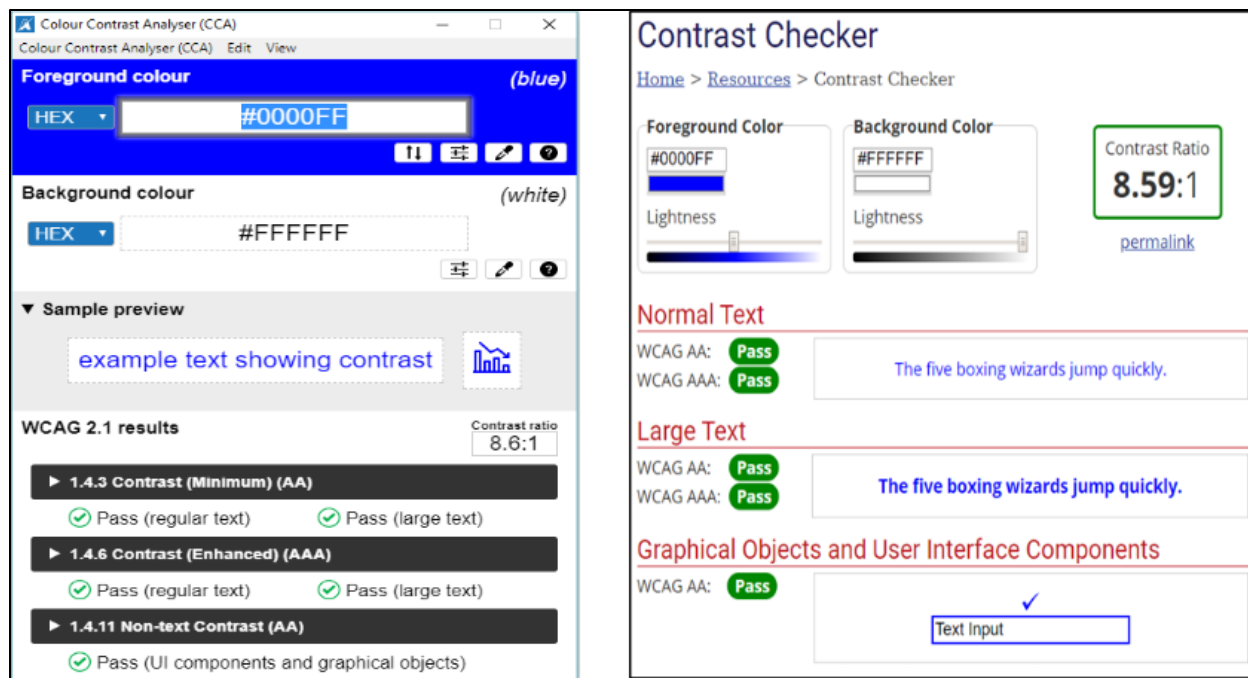
Figure 9. The Colour Contrast Analyser and Colour Contrast Checker tools

Generally, in producing communications, avoid using colour as the only way to convey information. People who are colour blind will be excluded from the information.

Use accessible fonts

It is important to be consistent in the use of fonts. It is also recommended to use the more legible sans serif fonts such as Arial, Helvetica and Verdana. For body text, a font size of at least 12 is recommended.

Other considerations for fonts include:

1. Do not write in all upper case letters
2. Consider using bold for emphasis rather than italics and underlining
3. Consider left aligning the text rather than justifying the text which is not accessible

Resources

To further explore different aspects of Microsoft Word accessibility, please visit the page: Make your Word documents accessible to people with disabilities.