Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities

Creating Accessible Documents Guide

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It is important to communicate effectively when sharing documents. This guide will help you understand the concepts behind making a document accessible. It contains general concepts on creating accessible documents. If you are looking for something more specific, you can download step-by-step guides on using Microsoft Word, Adobe InDesign or Adobe Acrobat Pro at nyc.gov/AccessibilityGuides. The City's Accessible Document Requirements outline the expectations of City agencies when creating and distributing documents.

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Content

Making your content accessible will allow your readers to understand and use the content you create. Content is most accessible when you use Plain Language, write descriptive labels for links, avoid large blocks of text, and provide a clear semantic structure.

Plain Language

For your document to be understandable, it should be written using plain language. The definition of plain language is text that can be understood by all readers from the first read. This means using shorter sentences and more common words. Avoid using technical jargon whenever possible. Below are tips on how to make your content more readable.

Top 10 Principles for Plain Language

(Courtesy of the National Archives)

1. Write for your reader, not yourself.
2. Use pronouns when you can.
3. State your major point(s) first before going into details
4. Stick to your topic.
5. Limit each paragraph to one idea and keep it short.
6. Write in active voice. Use the passive voice only in rare cases.
7. Use short sentences as much as possible.
8. Use everyday words. If you must use technical terms, explain them the first time.
9. Omit unneeded words.
10. Keep the subject and verb close together.

Additional resources on how to write in plain language can be found at designsystem.nyc.gov/standards/nyc-web-content-style-guide.html#plain-language.

Paragraphs

Avoid using large blocks of text within your document. You can reduce the paragraph size by keeping them focused. Also, break up paragraphs with headings, lists, and tables (for tabular data) to make reading easier.

For both Microsoft Word and Adobe InDesign, use the built-in Style and layout functionality within the program to make headings, lists, and tables. Be sure to use the paragraph spacing settings to add space between elements, instead of using extra blank lines (pressing return/enter).

Hyperlinks

Whenever you add a hyperlink to your document, make sure that the label for the link accurately describes where the link is going and is unique to that URL.

Good Examples:

- ✓ Learn more about the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities
- ✓ Download the MOPD's Creating Accessible Documents Guide

Bad Examples:

- × Click here to visit the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities
- × Learn more about the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities
- × Learn More

Visual Appearance

There are a few ways to make the visual appearance of your document more accessible to people with disabilities. It includes using accessible fonts, paragraph spacing, and sufficient color contrast.

Accessible Fonts

Avoid using ALL CAPS (and SMALL CAPS) unless you are writing acronyms or abbreviations.

- Good Example: NYC, MTA, or PDF
- Bad Example: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING INFO
- Bad Example: ALL ABOUT THE CITY

Use Sans-Serif Fonts

- Good Font Examples: Verdana, Arial, Helvetica, Tahoma, Aptos, & Lucida Sans
- Bad Font Examples: Times New Roman, Cambria, *Brush Script*, & Garamond



Use Font Faces that are Not Condensed, Light, Narrow, or Have a Small X-Height

- Bad Font Examples: Avenir, Calibri, Grotesque Light, Arial Narrow, or Aptos Light

Font Size Minimums

- 12 pt. font minimum for printed documents (must also have a large print version available with 18 pt. font minimum)
- 12 pt. font minimum for digital documents

Colors

Use a strong color contrast between the background and text. An acceptable color contrast ratio must be a minimum of 7 to 1. To test this, you can plug the 6-character color HEX code into the WebAIM Color Contrast Checker.

Screen Reader Access

Used primarily by people with vision disabilities, a screen-reader is a type of software that reads aloud the text on a computer, smartphone, or tablet. The following sections cover important things you should know about how to make your documents accessible to people who use a screen reader. Learn more from the American Foundation for the Blind's Screen Reader page.

Image Descriptions (Alt-Text)

If you include any kind of image in your document, a screen-reader will not be able to decipher it unless it has been described using alt-text. Alt-text is a line of code, written by you, that describes what is in an image.

How to Describe Images

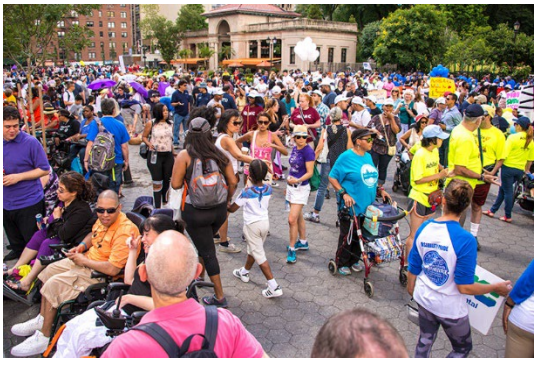
When writing alt-text descriptions, focus on the following:

- Why are you using this image? (This answer frames the overall description.)
- Who is in the image?
- What are they doing?
- Where are they?
- When is this taking place?

Overall, your description should be concise and underscore the reason that you are sharing this image in the first place. See below for two good examples of alt-text, written for the same photograph but for different contexts in which the photograph is being used.

MOPD Social Media Post

Hundreds of people with various disabilities await the start of the 2018 Disability Pride Parade carrying colorful balloons, signs, and banners.



Photography Blog Post

A crowd of people who are all in focus whether in the foreground or background.

Adding Alt Text Descriptions

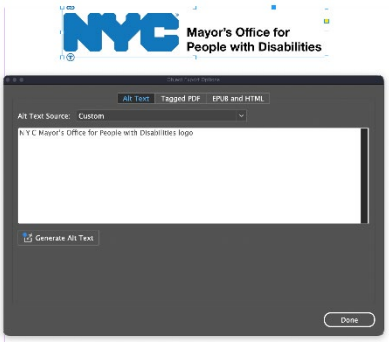
Depending on what software you are using, there are different ways to add image descriptions.

Adding Alt-Text in Microsoft 365



1. Right-click on your image.
2. Select “Edit Alt-Text.”
3. Write your description in the ‘Description’ field.
4. If an image is decorative (which means it provides no addition meaning to reader), use the ‘Mark as Decorative’ checkbox.

Adding Alt-Text in Adobe InDesign



1. Right click on your image.
2. Select “Object Export Options.”
3. Select “Alt-Text.”
4. Write your description in the text box.
5. Select “Done.”

Headings

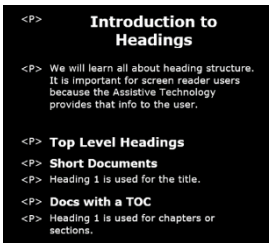
Headings act as bookmarks within your document. They can help users skim the content and find what they are looking for quickly and easily. To make headings accessible to screen reader users, use the built-in Styles functionality in Microsoft Word or Adobe InDesign (you must assign the Export Tagging to the appropriate heading level from the stye’s properties dialog). While the authoring software will have default settings for the look of these headings, they can be customized to match your document’s style.

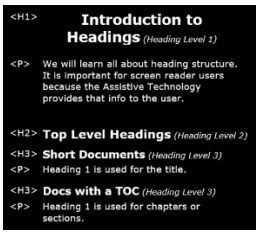
It is also important to use a logical heading structure within the document. A well-thought-out heading structure will create an outline of the content of the document. It is important that heading levels are not skipped as you go down (i.e., going from heading 2 to a heading 4). There is no problem skipping heading when going up to a higher level, however (i.e., going from a heading 3 to a heading 1).

The Importance of *Programmatic* Headings

Programmatic headings not only look like headings but also have the coding within the document to let assistive technology know that it is a heading. That behind-the-scenes coding is what creates the semantic structure that assistive technology users rely on to fully understand the content.

No Programmatic Headings: The text to the right has been made to look like headings, but has no headings assigned. The text elements are all coded within the document as paragraphs, even though they visually look like headings.





With Programmatic Headings: The text to the left has been formatted using heading styles. As a result, the text is both displayed visually as headings and has the correct coding to give it the appropriate semantic structure. The italicized text within the image is what is said to the user by access technology.

Organizing Your Headings

The heading structure that you create should assist you in organizing the information within your document. There are two types of heading structures that we recommend. One for short documents and another for longer documents.

One-to-Seven-Page Documents

- Use the heading 1 style for the main title of your document.
- Heading level 2 should be used at the beginning of major sections in your document.
- Heading level 3 should be used for sub-sections within heading 2 sections.
- Heading levels 4 through 6 should be used for subsections within each heading level 3, 4, and 5 sections.

Longer Documents

- Use the Title style for the main title of your document.
- Heading level 1 should be used for chapters or main sections.
- Heading level 2 should be used for major sub-sections of each chapter or main section.
- Heading levels 3 through 6 should be used for subsections within each heading level 2, 3, 4, and 5 sub-sections.

Adding Headings within Your Document

Depending on the software you are using to create your document, there are different ways to add headings.

Adding Headings in Microsoft Word (Microsoft 365)

1. Highlight the text you would like to make a heading.
2. Move your cursor to the “Styles” pane at the top of the screen.
3. Select the Heading level that you would like to apply.

If you would like to change the visual formatting of the heading you have selected:

1. Right-click on that heading within the “Styles” pane.
2. Select “Modify.”
3. Customize the formatting based on your individual preferences. Keep in mind the visual accessibility guidelines above.
4. Check “Add to Template”.

Adding Headings in Adobe InDesign

1. Highlight the text you would like to make into a heading.
2. Go to *Window* > *Style* > *Paragraph Styles*.
3. Select “Add New” (the small post-it icon).
4. Customize the visuals as desired.
5. Click on the “Export tagging" tab on the left.
6. Under the ‘PDF’ section, set the tag to the appropriate heading level.

Tables of Content

If your document exceeds seven pages, there should be a table of contents with links to those sections of the document. This process becomes easier if your document is already organized using a proper heading structure.

Adding a Table of Contents in Microsoft Word (Microsoft 365)

1. Ensure that all your headings are properly set using the built-in Styles functionality.
2. Place your cursor at the desired location of the Table of Contents. This should be at the beginning.
3. Go to the “References” tab and select “Table of Contents”.
4. Select your preferred Table of Contents style. Feel free to customize the look of the Table of Contents to fit the design of the rest of your document.
5. Your Table of Contents will be automatically generated using your heading structure.

Note: You can still edit your document. Your Table of Contents can be updated by right-clicking on any item within it and choosing ‘Update Field’. If you have only added/changed content, and not added or changed the headings, choose ‘Update Page Numbers Only’. Otherwise, choose ‘Update Entire Table’.

Creating Accessible PDFs

Once you have created an accessible document, it is easy to turn it into an accessible PDF document.

Saving a Microsoft Word Document as PDF

Go to File -> Save As, and then in the File Format dropdown select “PDF.” If you have Acrobat Pro installed, you will have an additional ‘Save As Adobe PDF’ option in the file menu, which can also be used. ***Do not*** “Print” to PDF. All the accessibility features will be stripped from the PDF.

Saving an Adobe InDesign File as a PDF

Once you have finalized your InDesign File and are ready to export to PDF, follow these steps.

1. Go to File > Adobe PDF Presets > Interactive PDF.
2. Choose your preferred file name and location.
3. Make sure “Hyperlinks” is checked.
4. Make sure “Create Tagged PDF” is checked.
5. Choose Export.

Resources

For questions and additional information, you may Contact the Digital Accessibility Coordinator.

- WebAIM Color Contrast Checker (webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker/)
- NYC.gov Plain Language Resources (nyc.gov/standards/nyc-web-content-style-guide.html#plain-language)
- PlainLanguage.gov
- Other Digital Accessibility Guides