Checking Microsoft Word Documents for Accessibility

Kutztown University Disability Services Office (DSO)

Microsoft Word is a commonly used application among individuals with a variety of disabilities and is reasonably accessible. The text within Word documents can be read by assistive devices, such as screen readers and Braille readers. However, for Word documents to be fully accessible, authors must follow some basic steps to implement accessibility.

Step 1: Use Headings

Using good heading structure helps people without eyesight to understand how the document is organized, like how a sighted person could quickly scan through pages to look for chapter titles or section headings. People who use screen reading software or Braille can also jump between headings, which makes navigation much more efficient.

Making text larger and bold does not make it a heading. To convert text to a heading in Microsoft Word, you must use the built-in Heading styles, like "Heading 1" and "Heading 2" available in the Styles section of the Home tab.

Headings should be in the form of an outline, using the "Heading 1" style for the main heading and "Heading 2" for sub-headings. If additional levels are needed, there are styles for Heading 3, 4, etc.

Step 2: Use Lists

Lists should be created using Word's built-in tools for ordered (numbered) and unordered (bulleted) lists. Without these tools, a list is not *really* a list, which makes the content more difficult for screen reader users to fully understand.

Step 3: Use Meaningful Hyperlinks

Adding meaningful hyperlinks in Word can be simple. Include language in your document that conveys relevant information about the destination of the link, highlight that text, right click, and select *Hyperlink*. Include the URL in the Address field and select *OK*. For example:

- Accessible: Disability Services Office Forms
- Not accessible: https://www.kutztown.edu/about-ku/administrative-offices/disability-services-(dso)/forms.html

Step 4: Add Alternate Text for Images

For screen reader users, alternative text helps to communicate what is important in images and other visuals. Alt text provides a textual alternative to non-text content. In most versions of Word, you can enter alternate text by right clicking an image and selecting *Edit Alt Text*. In the dialog box that appears, enter information in the description field.

Step 5: Use Tables Wisely

Word has limitations when it comes to making tables accessible. Tables can be very difficult for a screen reader user to understand unless they include "markups" that explicitly defines the relationship between all the parts (example: headers and data cells).

For a simple table with one row of column headers, Word is up to the task. Screen readers keep track of their location in a table by counting table cells. If a cell is merged or split the screen reader loses count and can't provide helpful information about the table after that point. Often, these complex tables can be simplified by breaking them into multiple simple tables with a heading above each column.

For simple tables, the only step necessary for accessibility is to identify which row contains the column headers. To do this in Word, select the appropriate row by clicking and dragging the cursor to highlight the

row, then right click on the row and select *Table Properties*. In this dialog, click the *Row* tab and check the checkbox that says, "Repeat as header row at the top of each page."

Additionally, when creating a table, two new tabs will appear in the ribbon. Selecting the *Design* tab will reveal the *Table Styles Options* group where you can define your Header Row.

Step 6: Use the Accessibility Checker

Microsoft products have a built-in accessibility checker which can help the document author test the overall accessibility of the document. The checker provides Inspection Results, feedback about the importance of each item, and tips on how to repair issues. The tool can be accessed in the *Review* tab by clicking *Check Accessibility*.

Creating Accessible PDFs from Microsoft Word

If the intention is to create an accessible PDF from a Microsoft Word document, it is possible to preserve the accessibility features of the Word document. If using Word for Windows:

- Go to *File > Save As…* and select PDF from the choices provided. By default, this produces a PDF that preserves the document's accessibility features.
- When saving, select *Options* and be sure that "Document structure tags for accessibility" is checked. This should be checked by default.
- If you select "Minimize Size" to reduce the size of your PDF, be sure to repeat the preceding step as this option might uncheck the "Document structure tags for accessibility" checkbox.

If using Word for Mac:

- Go to *File > Save As…* and select PDF from the choices provided. By default, this produces a PDF that preserves the document's accessibility features.
- When saving, be sure the radio button labeled "Best for electronic distribution and accessibility" is selected.