Creating accessible Microsoft Word documents

The purpose of this documentation is to highlight some of the most important steps and best practices for making Word documents accessible. Following these is critical to creating accessible documents and exporting accessible PDF versions of them as well. Visually-impaired individuals often use screen reading software/features to read the contents of a document. In general, the more logical the page order and structure, the more accessible it will be. Screen readers give users additional auditory feedback which enable users to more easily navigate get a logical sense the document efficiently. This additional feedback includes alerting the user to titles, heading including level numbers, normal paragraph, images, lists, etc.

Use headings and document styles properly

- Make use of document styles including title, headings, and normal paragraph.
- Use headings in proper order. For example, your document should only ever have a single Heading 1 (document title). Heading 2 should be used for top-level section headings, and increasing heading levels for sub-sections nested in order.
- When nesting your headings, don’t skip levels. For example, you should not go from a Heading 2 straight to a Heading 4 without having a Heading 3 in between. If you don’t like the appearance of the heading levels, you can edit those styles. (link to MS docs) Be aware that changing font styles, especially colors, may carry other accessibility implications.

Include a table of contents

Word has a table of contents feature which automatically generates a table of contents from your headings and creates anchor links to each section. This feature is especially useful for longer documents as this allows a user to efficiently skim your document using a screen reader. This can be particularly useful when sharing detailed course lecture notes that a user may want to refer back to during study and locate a specific section.

Visuals (images, diagrams, graphical charts)

The key thing to remember when using visuals in your document is to make sure you provide a text alternative that clearly describes what your visual depicts.

- Images
  - Alt (alternative) text: should briefly describe the content of the image and is read by a screen reader to communicate the content of the image to the user.
  - If you are using a decorative image that has no content to communicate, simply leave the alt text empty so it will be ignored by a screen reader.
  - Captions: consider using captions, especially for longer descriptions. Don’t forget to create a reference for the caption in the image alt text.

- Diagrams and graphical charts/data
  - Captions and long descriptions: should fully describe the content depicted within these visual elements. It is also strongly advised to use references or figure numbers to associate a specific visual element (using alt text) and its caption/description.

- Tables
  - Tables should only be used to format and display tabular chart data. **Tables should never be used for document layout purposes.**
  - Tables should include header rows/columns as necessary to clearly indicate the data within and how it is being displayed.
  - Strongly consider supplying a table summary to briefly describe the content of a specific table.

Other resources for creating accessible Word documents

- WebAIM is one of the most authoritative sources regarding digital accessibility and they offer some detailed resources to further assist in the creation of accessible documents. Learn more at: https://webaim.org/techniques/word/
- Microsoft has a great best practice sheet helping you confirm that your document is accessible: https://support.office.com/en-us/article/make-your-word-documents-accessible-to-people-with-disabilities-d9bf3683-87ac-47ea-b91a-78dcaeb3c66d