



# Accessible Documents in Microsoft Word

ODLS Quick Guide series



**UMASS DONAHUE INSTITUTE**  
Organizational Development  
& Learning Solutions



## Note From ODLS

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**The Organizational Development and Learning Solutions** team is pleased to offer you this quick guide volume on creating accessible Word documents. We created this series to address common topics for existing clients, future clients, and curious minds in general. In each volume, we briefly address some of the key concepts and concerns associated with the topic, offer guidance and best practices, and provide additional resources. We hope that the series inspires confidence and creativity in your present and future projects. If you are overwhelmed or uncertain about approaching your next project, we are here to support your learning project needs.

Digital accessibility has become a significant focus in our increasingly online, computerized world. Laws in the United States of America and beyond require adherence to accessibility standards for a growing number of organizations. Microsoft Word is an application that many of us use every day, making it a great place to incorporate accessibility best practices for our colleagues, students, and clients. The principles described here also apply to a wide variety of other applications.

***-The ODLS Team***

# WHY WORD?

Whether you are just beginning to learn about digital accessibility or looking to incorporate more best practices, you may wonder why we might focus on Microsoft Word. Word is one of the most common professional applications in the world. With over a billion users and compatibility with other applications, it is hard to go far without encountering a Word document in professional and academic life. So, our first reason for focusing on Word is that it is common and pervasive in schools and professional life.

Beyond that, focusing on Word supports other formats. We can often convert accessible Word documents into Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF) or Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) with its accessibility intact. While we can make PDFs or HTML more accessible directly, those changes require more expertise and time to execute. Some elements of PDF accessibility are best addressed in the original document, not the final PDF file, as well. Finally, some of these core concepts, like logical ordering, headings, bullets, and use of color, apply to all formats, making Word as good a place to start as any.

Please note, this guide is written with Microsoft Office 365 for Windows in mind. If you are using a different version of Word, these principles still apply. However, some of the locations and names of specific tools and buttons have changed from previous versions.



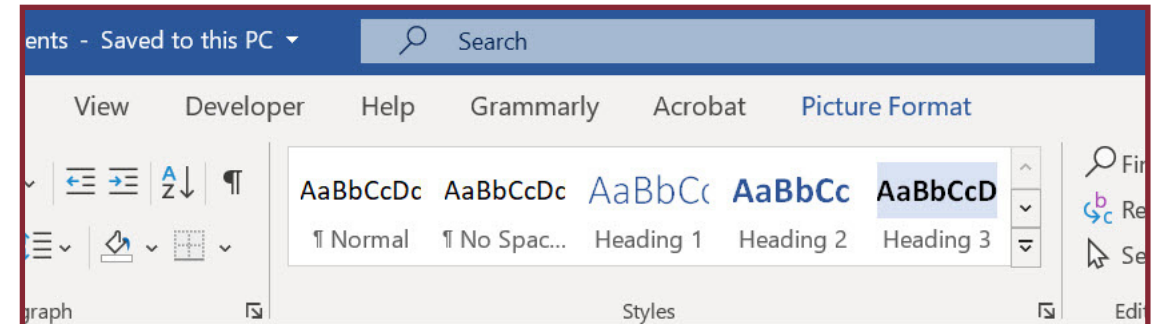
# HEADINGS AND STYLES

Using styles is one of the easiest ways to make your documents more accessible. It's also a highly under-used Word feature that improves your workflow and unlocks some of Word's most useful capabilities. Users often make headings manually, applying the format to each header as they go. Styles streamline this process and ensure consistency. They also make the document's structure visible to screen readers and enable keyboard controls to jump from section to section.

From the styles options, focus on headings and the Normal style. These styles, along with occasional lists and tables, are the building blocks of your document's structure. Using these elements also allows you to utilize the Outline View and automated Table of Contents options in Word. Be sure not to skip heading levels, however. Headings should have a clear and logical structure.

## To apply styles:

1. Find the Styles gallery on the Home tab in Word.



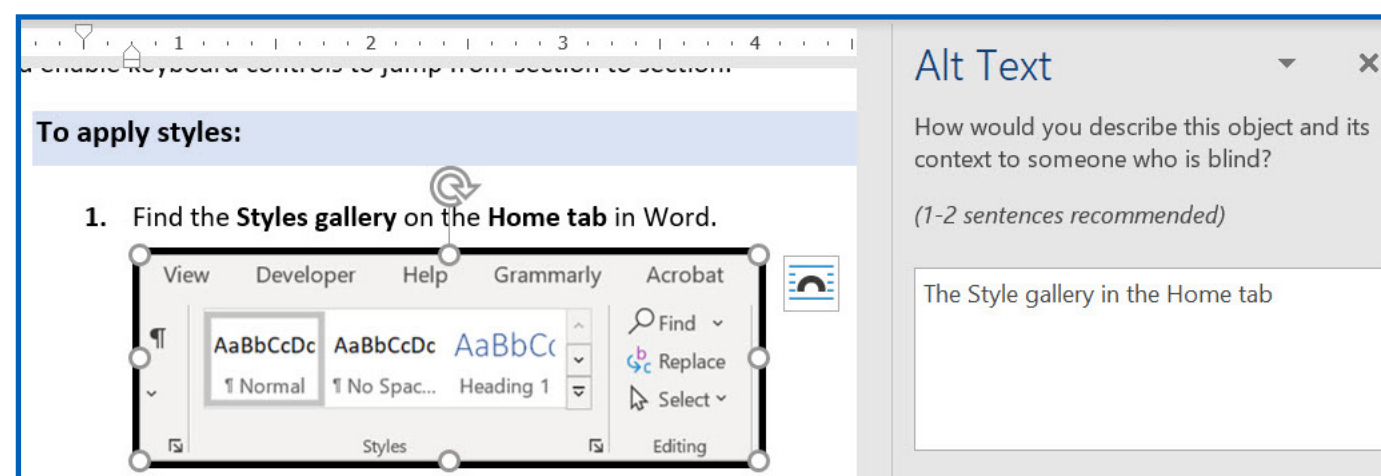
2. Place your cursor on the blank line or paragraph to be formatted.
  3. Click on the desired style from the Style gallery.
- You may also highlight text and apply the style. Still, you should not apply multiple styles or switch heading levels within a paragraph.
  - There are many pre-defined styles to choose from in the Design tab of Microsoft Word.
  - You can modify these styles in several ways, including by right-clicking on style and selecting "Modify" from the context menu. An updated style will automatically apply to all matching sections.

# ALTERNATIVE TEXT

Alternative text, also known as alt text or alt tags, allows users to access text-based descriptions for images and diagrams as provided by the author. All images with information that is not contained in the text should be provided alt text. A user interacting with the document via screen reader will hear the alt text read aloud when they reach the image in the file.

## To apply Alt Text:

1. Right-click the image and select “Edit Alt Text” from the context menu.
  2. Enter a brief description in the text box appearing in the new Alt Text panel.
- You should omit words and phrases such as “A picture of” or “an image showing” in your alternative text. Screen readers will alert users to the presence of an image description.
  - If the graphic contains no information, is entirely represented in the text, or is a background element, check the box in the Alt Text panel labeled “Mark as decorative.” This causes screen readers to skip over the image during navigation and reading.



# READABILITY AND COLOR

## Ensuring Readability

Selecting an easy-to-read typeface reduces eye strain and fatigue and avoids confusion for users with limited vision. Many of the default fonts in Word are suitable, such as Calibri for on-screen text and Times New Roman for printed text. Decorative and handwriting fonts may make the document more difficult to read. Avoid excessive use of italics, bolding, and underlining, which may not be described by screen readers and can occasionally cause confusion. Normal text should be black and placed on a white background. Font size should be set to 12 points in most cases. Although users can magnify the document, smaller font sizes cause individual text lines to be very long. Text should be right-aligned in Word in most cases. Using a line spacing of 1.5 allows users to read blocks of text comfortably.

### **Good Fonts for Readability:**

Arial, Calibri, Georgia, Lucida Sans, Palatino, Tahoma, Times New Roman, Verdana

### **Poor Fonts for Readability:**

ALGERIAN, Bradley Hand ITC, *Brush Script*,  
Curlz Mt, Harrington, *Lucida Calligraphy*,  
*Monotype Corsiva*, Papyrus

## Using Color

Color should never be the only way that a concept is communicated. For users who are using a screen reader or who have colorblindness, information and essential context can be missed if color conveys meaning. For example, if incorrect examples are marked by using a red typeface and correct examples are marked using a green typeface, many users will not be able to tell the difference. Be sure to use labels and descriptions and not color alone. When you use color for text or important diagrams, you must also ensure sufficient contrast between the elements. Contrast describes how different colors are and how light or dark they are compared to one another. Insufficient contrast makes distinguishing between elements difficult.

# LISTS AND HYPERLINKS

## Using Lists

When using the automated list tools from the Paragraph section of the Home tab, the list should be appropriately structured without further adjustments. Users often customize their lists. If you customize your list style, stick with simple, geometric shapes for bullet lists and letters or numbers for sequential lists. Checkmarks, images, or complex symbols may confuse users and screen readers. You should avoid making lists manually. As with headings, you should maintain a consistent and logical structure for lists.

## Formatting Hyperlinks

When you include links in your document, the purpose of that link should be clear to users. A link that reads “click here” or which contains an unintelligible URL is not sufficient. The link text should include a decipherable URL or a concise description of where it will take users or what it will do.

### **Example:**

[https://www.fs.fed.us/nrs/pubs/gtr/gtr\\_nrs79.pdf](https://www.fs.fed.us/nrs/pubs/gtr/gtr_nrs79.pdf)

This link is long and full of acronyms and symbols. Readers will not be able to tell what it is just by reading it, and screenreaders will stumble over this string of characters.

[Click Here to learn more.](#)

This link is readable, but users have no idea what they’re clicking on based on this text.

[The USDA Field Guide to Eastern Mushrooms in PDF format](#)

This link is readable and descriptive.

# **TABLES IN WORD**

Tables can be incredibly complicated for accessibility purposes. In many cases, it may be best to avoid using a table altogether. Some of the ways users are accustomed to using tables in Word are not appropriate for an accessible document. For example, using tables can give you fine control over the layout and formatting of your text. Still, while this can help you improve the document's visual structure, it dramatically confuses any attempt to decipher the table in a logical order. When a screen reader or keyboard controls are used to navigate a table, they will approach it from a left-to-right orderly perspective, row by row. Complex tables with blank spaces, merged cells, or split purposes become difficult to follow. Never use Tabs to simulate a table as screen readers may not interpret your preferred order and structure for the included information.

## **Creating Accessible Tables**

- Always include a header row with descriptive header labels.
- Create multiple, simple tables where appropriate, rather than one complex table.
- For large tables that cross multiple pages, allow the heading row to repeat on each page.
  1. Access the "Table Properties" window by using the table's context menu or selecting it from the Table Design tab.
  2. In the Row tab of the Table Properties window, activate the box marked "Repeat as header row at the top of each page" and click "OK."
- Add a summary. In the Table Properties window, you can find an Alt Text tab allowing you to provide a description. Alternatively, describe the table in detail in a paragraph before or after the table.



## **GENERAL TIPS**

- Word has an in-built accessibility checker tool for reviewing and troubleshooting your document. The “Check Accessibility” button is found in the Review tab of Word. When you press this button, it will give you a list of warnings and recommendations to further improve your document.
- Use the paragraph options for your text to add space before and after paragraphs or list items; do not press Enter multiple times to create space. Likewise, insert page breaks to force a page to end rather than manually filling the page with blank lines. This makes documents easier to navigate.
- Avoid using text boxes, word art, or use drop caps in accessible documents. These features are not as accessible and may require additional steps to ensure that screen readers can interpret them.
- If your document contains more than one language, or is in a language other than your primary language, be sure to set the language for the document or specific passages using the Language button on the Review tab. This allows screen readers to properly understand and repeat the written language.

# **CONCLUSION**

We hope that you have found this ODLS Quick Guide volume on accessibility helpful. Although designing your course with accessibility in mind takes a little additional time and compromise, it allows a broader audience to access the course and improves everyone's experience. As accessibility requirements become more pervasive and more specific across industries, being ahead of the requirements will also save you time and money in the future.

If this all sounds overwhelming or difficult still, don't forget that we are here to help you. From start to finish, ODLS staff can support your organization's design and development of learning materials and events with a wealth of project management, facilitation, design, and development experience.

Thank you.

## **Learn More:**

- For more help, tools, and information on web accessibility, visit [WebAIM.org](https://webaim.org). The Contrast Checker tool is especially useful.
- For more information and tools related to color blindness, including the Coblis simulation tool, [visit Colblindor](#).
- For a detailed explanation of the Web Accessibility Initiative's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, the basis for many digital accessibility standards, [visit the World Wide Web Consortium website](#).
- For more information on using Word's accessibility features, [visit the Microsoft support page dedicated to the topic](#).



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