

Basics of PDF Accessibility

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Handouts

exploreaccess.org/handouts/



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Alternative Ways of Navigating

- Screen readers:
Voiceover, JAWS/Fusion, NVDA
- Magnification Software
- Braille display
- Voice recognition software
- Keyboard only navigation
- Other mouse alternatives



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Why PDF?

- PDF stands for Portable Document Format
- Often used to maintain specific look of a document
- An advantage is that it will open across several devices and platforms
- A disadvantage is that if not designed with access in mind, the document can be completely inaccessible to screen reader users



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What Makes a PDF Accessible? (1)

- PDFs must meet the same accessibility standards as other documents:
 - Good contrast
 - Clear, readable fonts of at least 12-point size
 - Proper heading structure
 - Meaningful link text
 - Alt text for images.
 - Well-structured tables



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What Makes a PDF Accessible? (2)

- Tagging layer:
 - Screen readers rely on the tag layer to interpret the document's structure and content.
 - Ensuring PDFs are generated correctly from the source will help ensure they are tagged.



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Common Barriers: PDF

- No tags
- Images missing alt text
- Missing heading structure
- Incorrect reading order
- Some content missing tags
- Improperly tagged tables
- Scanned PDFs that are an image of text
- PDF forms without correct labeling

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Screen Reader User Experience

How a Screen Reader Works

Reading a Document

How a Screen Reader Works: Reading a Document

[How a Screen Reader Works: Reading a Document\(YouTube\)](#)

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Creating an Accessible PDF from Source Document – Microsoft Applications

- Microsoft Word and PowerPoint
 - Follow best practices for accessibility in creating the original document
 - Be sure to Save as PDF rather than Print to PDF.
 - On a Mac, select the radio button that is labeled "Best for electronic distribution and accessibility"

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Creating an Accessible PDF from Source Document – Other Applications

- **Adobe InDesign** can also be used to create an accessible PDF.
- **Google Docs:** File downloaded as a PDF is accessible
- **Google Slides:** Exports are untagged and therefore inaccessible.
- **Other applications:** Exporting to PDF will have mixed results.

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Accessible Source Document: MS Word

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Using Headings to Provide Structure

- Headings provide structure to your document.
- Using normal text and applying styles such as larger size, different color, or bolder text does not create a true heading.
- Don't use headings when you don't need a true heading.

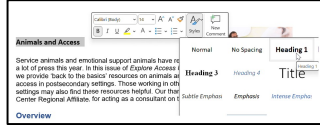
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How to Add Headings

- Highlight the text
- Click on the appropriate heading
- Or use keyboard shortcuts
 - PC: Control+Alt+1
 - Mac: Command+Option+1



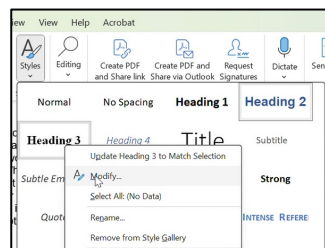
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Modify Headings

- Modify a heading by:
 - Right clicking on the heading in the styles group and choosing modify OR
 - Change the heading in your document and choosing Update Heading to Match Selection



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Alternative Text:

a text description of an image

(or other non-text content)

Also called:

alt text, image description

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Why Use Alt Text

- Without alt text, a screen reader user will not know what an image is.
- Images often convey important information.
- The screen reader will just say "graphic"



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Sample Alt Text

A Pomeranian wearing glasses looks down at an open book.



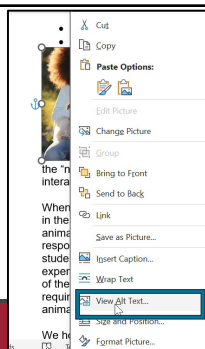
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How to Add Alt Text (1)

- Right click on the image
- Choose View Alt Text

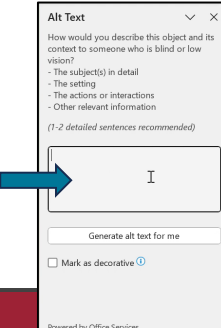


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How to Add Alt Text (2)

- Write the description in the box that appears to the right of the document.
- Describe what is in the image.
- No need to say “image of” or “picture of”



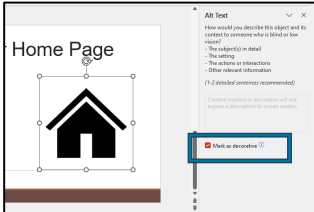
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Powered by Office Services

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Purely Decorative Image

- Images that do not add anything to the content
- Images that are redundant to the content
- Images that are visual separators



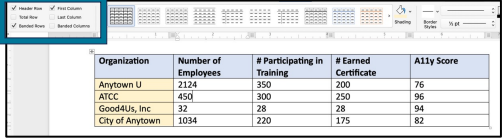
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Other Elements

- Link names should be meaningful out of context.
- Lists should use bulleted list tools within MS Word.
- Tables should have designated header rows



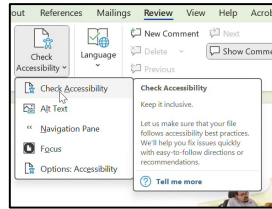
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Using the Accessibility Checker (1)

- Select Review Ribbon
- Select Accessibility Checker



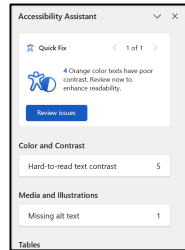
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Using the Accessibility Checker (2)

- Panel opens to the right
- Identifies accessibility issues



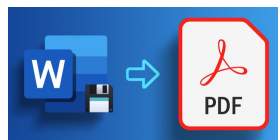
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Save as PDF

- Always "Save As" PDF instead of Printing to PDF
- Newer versions: Save a Copy and then choose PDF from dropdown menu
- If using a Mac, also choose "Best for electronic distribution and accessibility"



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Demo: MS Word to PDF

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Working with Existing PDFs

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Is the PDF Accessible?

- Is there actual text?
- Is the PDF tagged?
- Are there accessibility errors?



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Free Accessibility Checkers

- [PDF Accessibility Checker \(Windows\)](#)
- [AxesCheck](#)



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Demo: Checking Existing PDFs

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Fixing Inaccessible PDFs

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Fixing an Existing PDF

Options:

- Going back to the the original source document
- Exporting the PDF to MS Word (or another format)
- Auto-tagging untagged PDF
- Using the Check for Accessibility in Acrobat Pro
- Manually remediating tags in Acrobat Pro



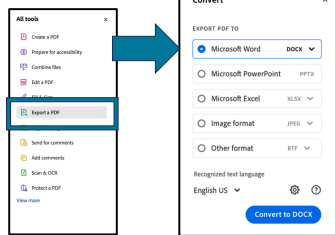
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Exporting PDF to MS Word

- Choose All Tools
- Then Export a PDF
- Then Microsoft Word (or PowerPoint)



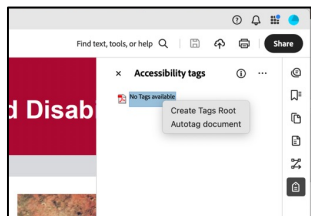
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Auto-Tagging a PDF

- Open tags panel
- Right click on No tags available
- Choose Autotag document



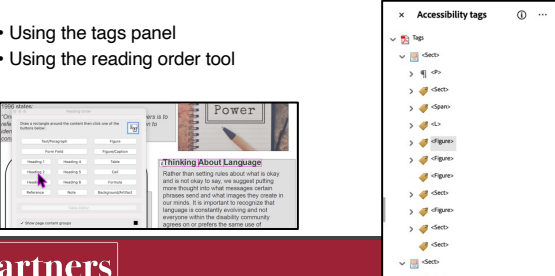
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Remediating a PDF in Acrobat Pro

- Using the tags panel
- Using the reading order tool



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Demo: Fixing Existing PDFs

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Other PDF Accessibility Remediation Tools

- [AccessibilityNow Remediate \(Crawford Technologies\)](#)
- [CommonLook PDF \(Allyant\)](#)
- [Equidox PDF Accessibility Software](#)
- [Grackle PDF](#)
- [PDFix](#)
- [PREP Document Remediation Software \(Continual Engine\)](#)



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Resources

- [Adobe: PDF accessibility](#)
- [Deque: 8 Step PDF Accessibility Checklist](#)
- [Deque: Quick Reference Guide: Basic PDF Accessibility \(PDF\)](#)
- [Harvard: PDF Accessibility](#)
- [University of Arizona: PDF Accessibility](#)
- [University of Colorado – Boulder: Understanding PDF Accessibility](#)
- [University of Washington: Checking PDFs for Accessibility](#)
- [WebAIM: PDF Accessibility](#)
- [W3C: PDF Techniques](#)

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A Partnership between U of A Partners and iCAN

- iCAN (Increasing Capabilities Access Network) is the Arkansas statewide Assistive Technology program designed to make technology available and accessible for everyone who needs it.
- Partners collaborates to promote disability access through training, technical assistance, resource development and dissemination, and research.



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Upcoming Webinars

- December 4th:
The Basics of PDF Accessibility
- January 15th:
Universal Design and Instruction
- Dates to be determined:
 - Accessible Tables and Excel Worksheets
 - Accessibility with Canva
 - Creating an Accessible Campus
- Visit: uofapartners.uark.edu/news-events



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ArkaHEAD Fall Virtual Workshop

Navigating Title II Digital Access Regs in Higher Education

Presented by Korey Singleton

- November 13, 2025
- 9:30 AM to 12:00 Noon Central
- Registration:
 - \$40 Individual
 - \$75 Institutional
- Register at arkahead.org



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