

Basics of PDF Accessibility

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Handouts

exploreaccess.org/handouts/



Alternative Ways of Navigating

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



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



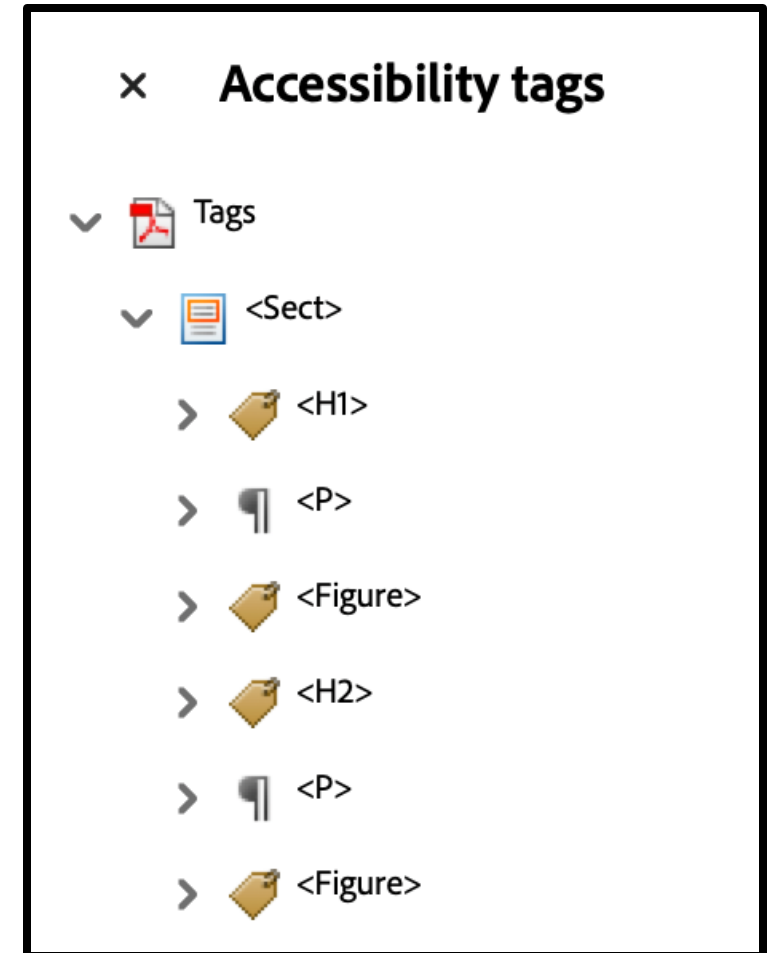
What Makes a PDF Accessible? (1)

- 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



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.



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



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\(YouTube\)](#)

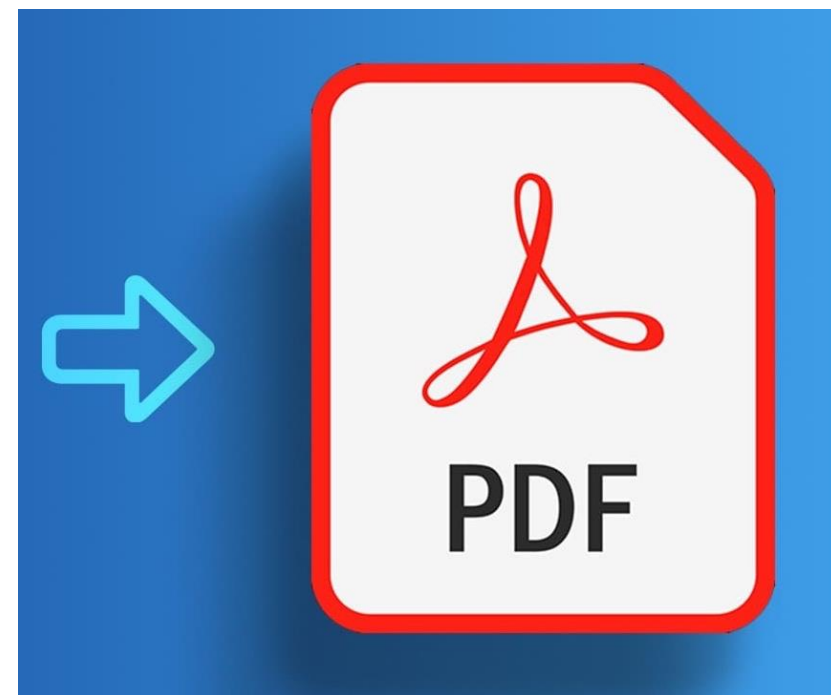
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Creating an Accessible PDF from Source Document – Microsoft Applications

- **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”



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.

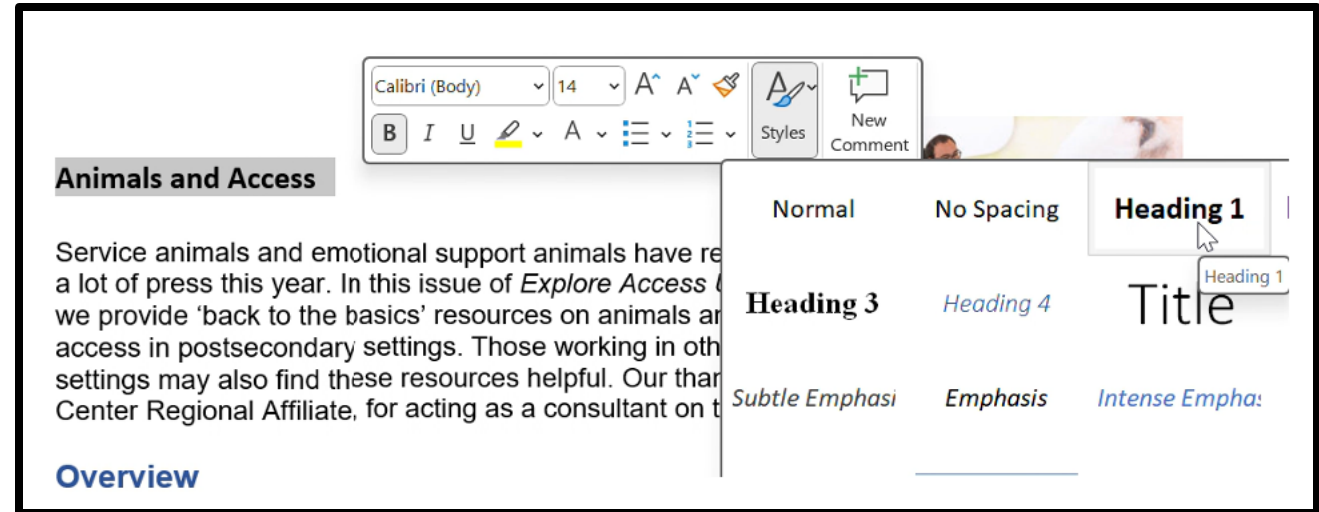
Accessible Source Document: MS Word

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.

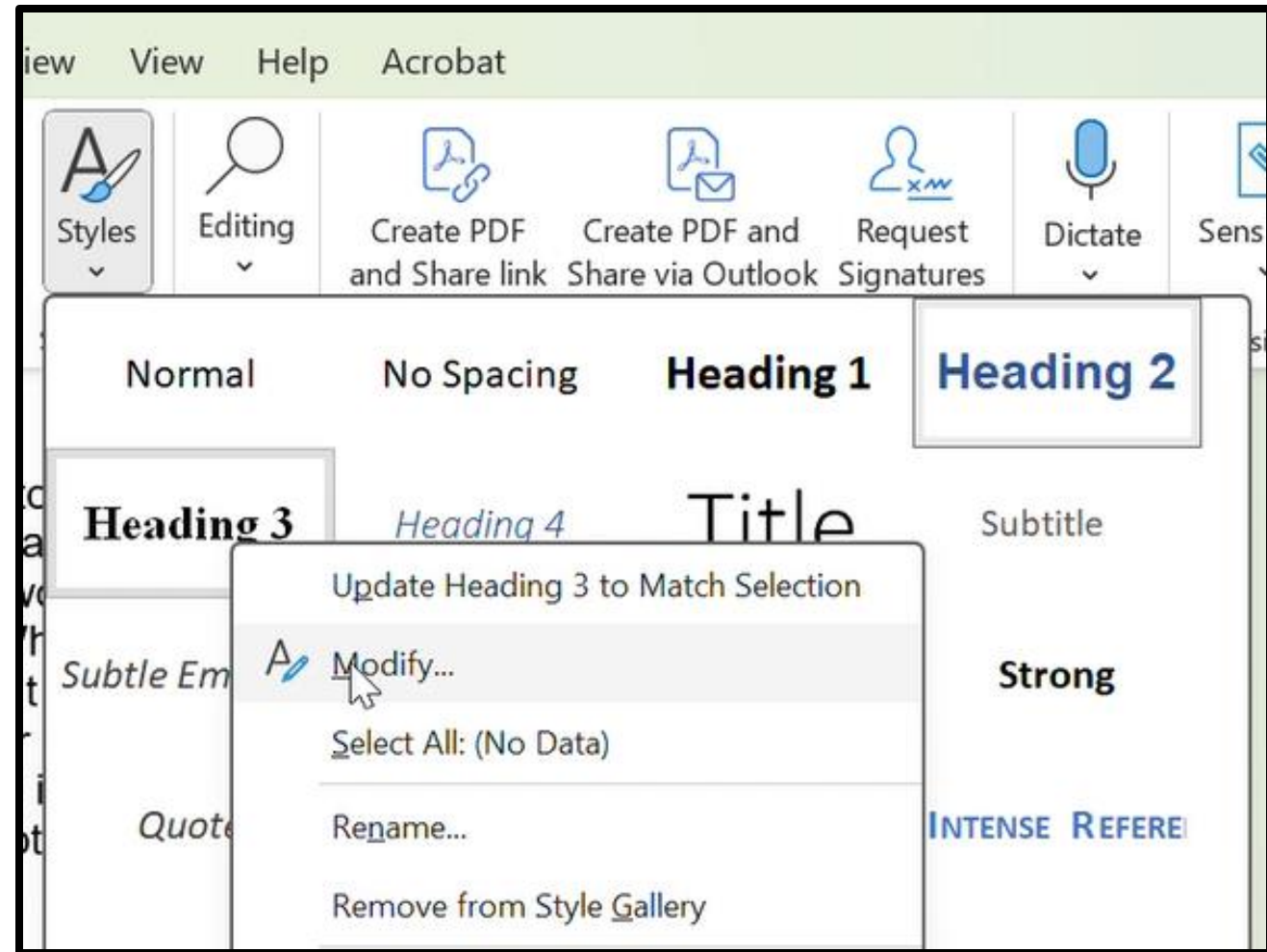
How to Add Headings

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



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



Alternative Text:

**a text description of an image
(or other non-text content)**

Also called:

alt text, image description

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”



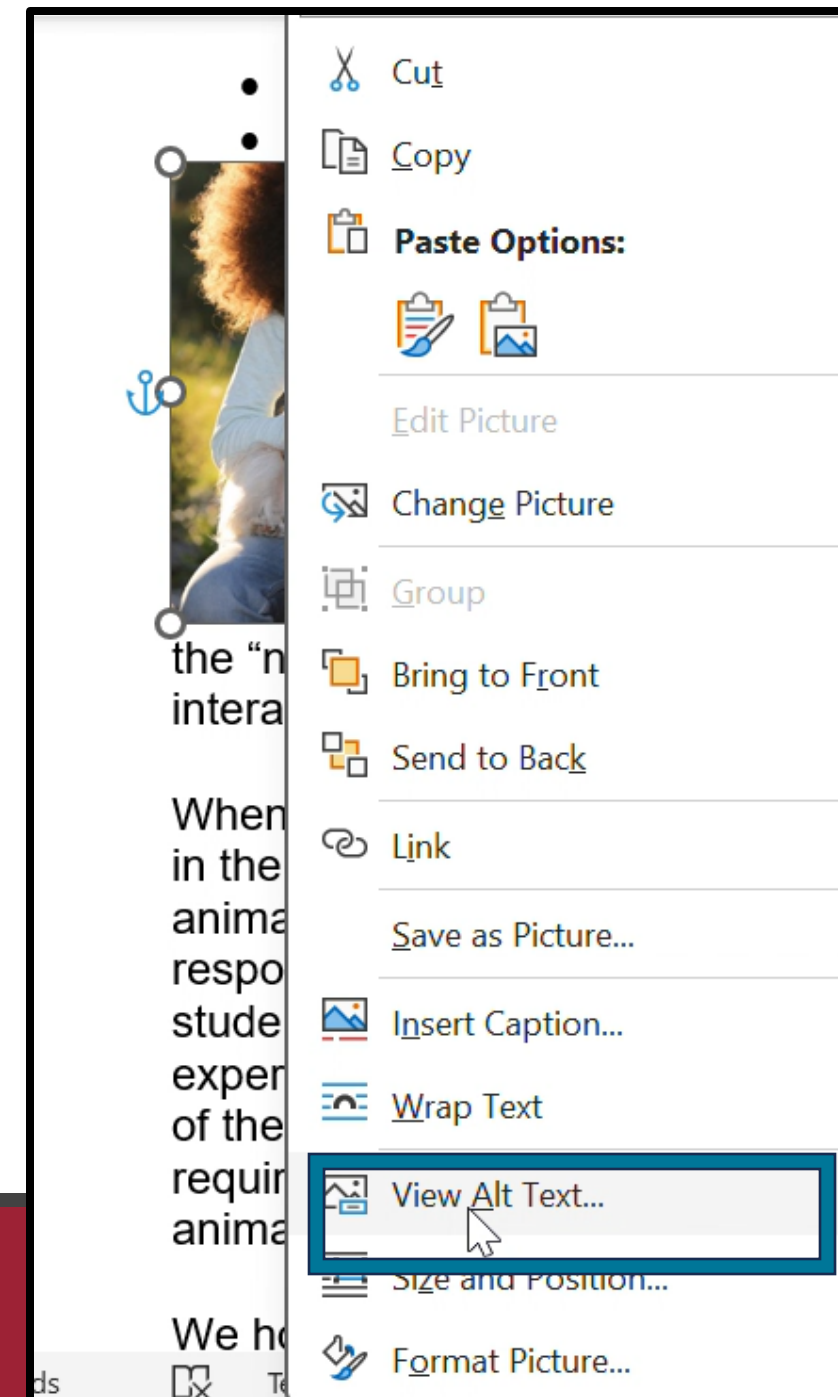
Sample Alt Text

A Pomeranian wearing glasses looks down at an open book.



How to Add Alt Text (1)

- Right click on the image
- Choose View Alt Text



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”



Alt Text

How would you describe this object and its context to someone who is blind or low vision?

- The subject(s) in detail
- The setting
- The actions or interactions
- Other relevant information

(1-2 detailed sentences recommended)

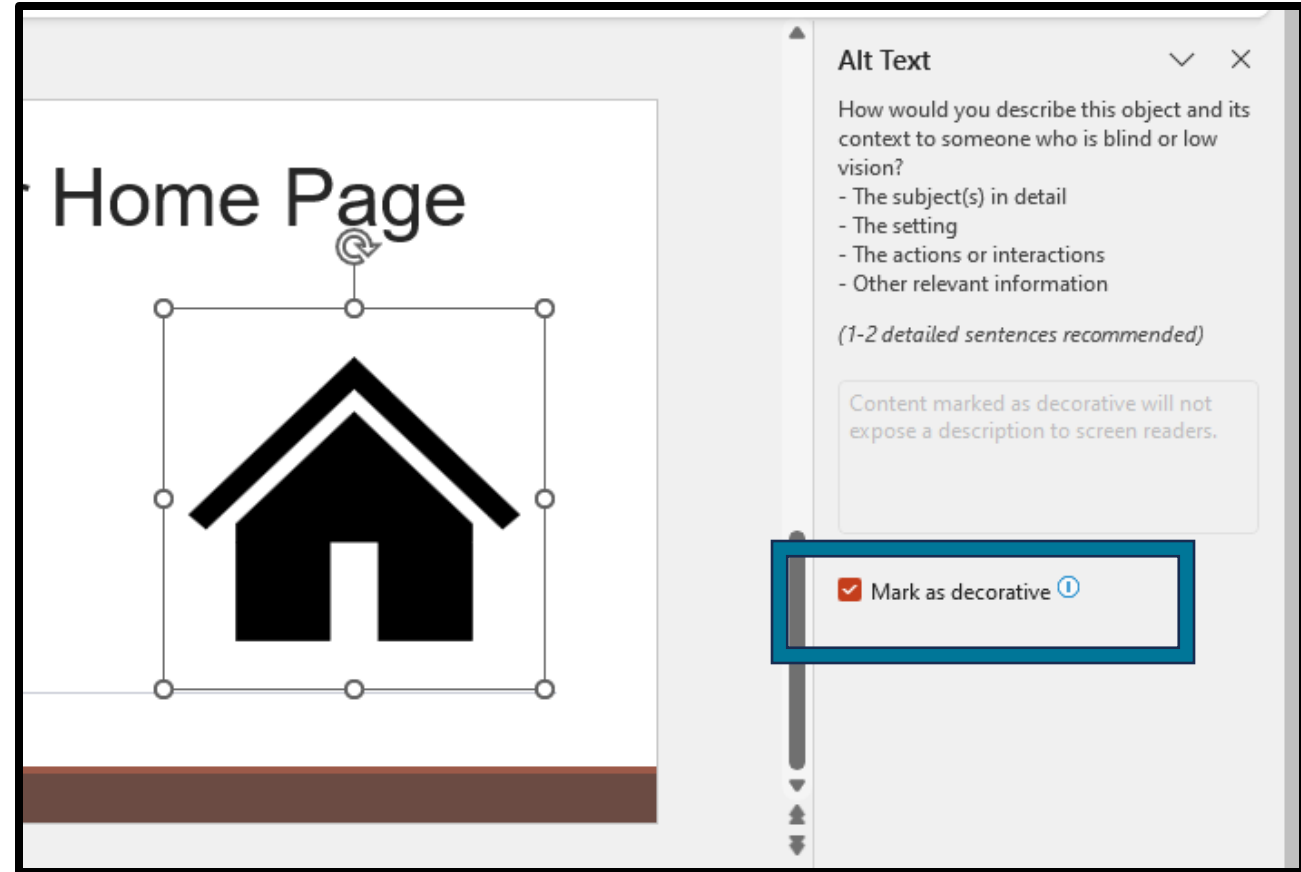
Generate alt text for me

☐ Mark as decorative ⓘ

Powered by Office Services

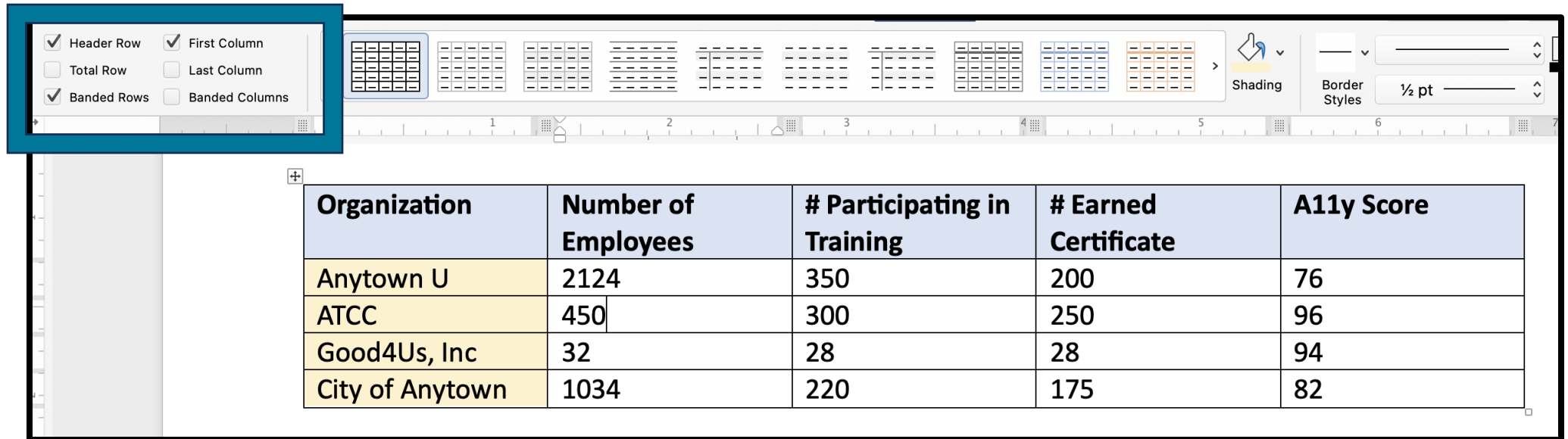
Purely Decorative Image

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



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

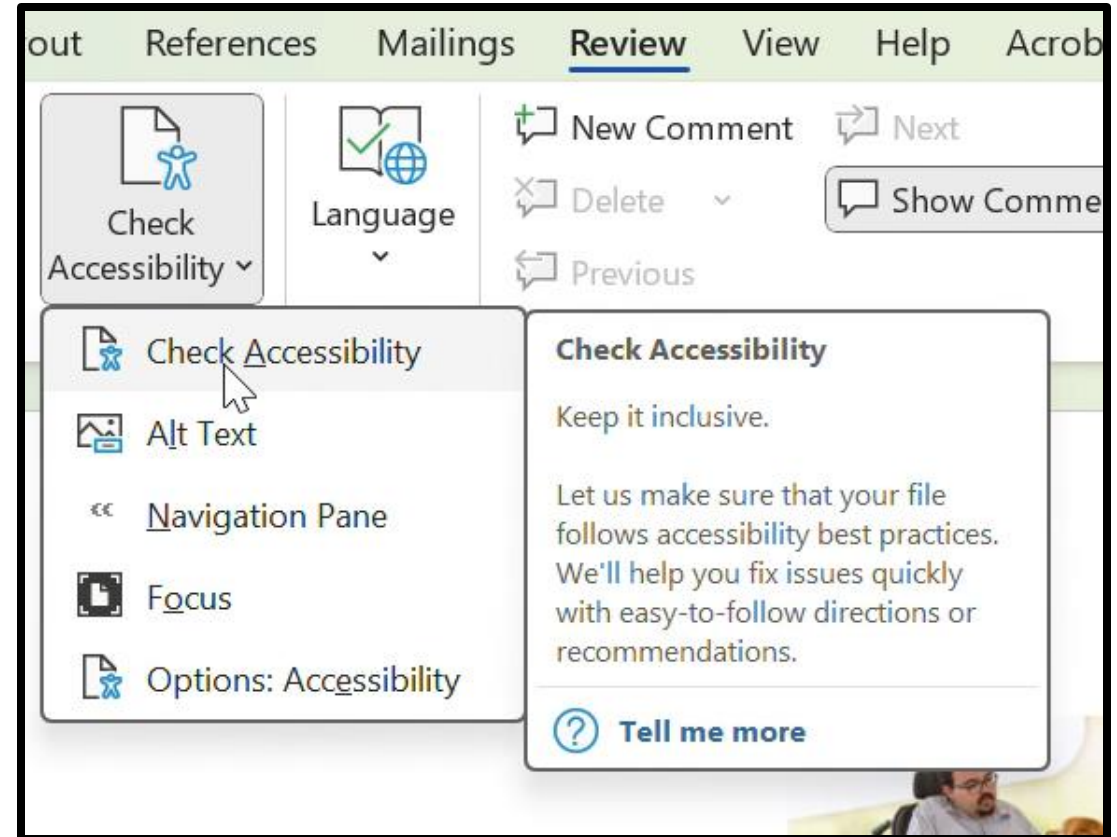


The screenshot shows the Microsoft Word interface with a table. The 'Table Design' ribbon is active, and the 'Table Style Options' task pane is open on the left. The table has five columns: 'Organization', 'Number of Employees', '# Participating in Training', '# Earned Certificate', and 'A11y Score'. The first row is highlighted in blue, indicating it is the header row. The subsequent rows are highlighted in yellow, indicating they are data rows. The 'Table Style Options' task pane shows the following settings: 'Header Row' (checked), 'First Column' (checked), 'Total Row' (unchecked), 'Last Column' (unchecked), 'Banded Rows' (checked), and 'Banded Columns' (unchecked).

Organization	Number of Employees	# Participating in Training	# Earned Certificate	A11y Score
Anytown U	2124	350	200	76
ATCC	450	300	250	96
Good4Us, Inc	32	28	28	94
City of Anytown	1034	220	175	82

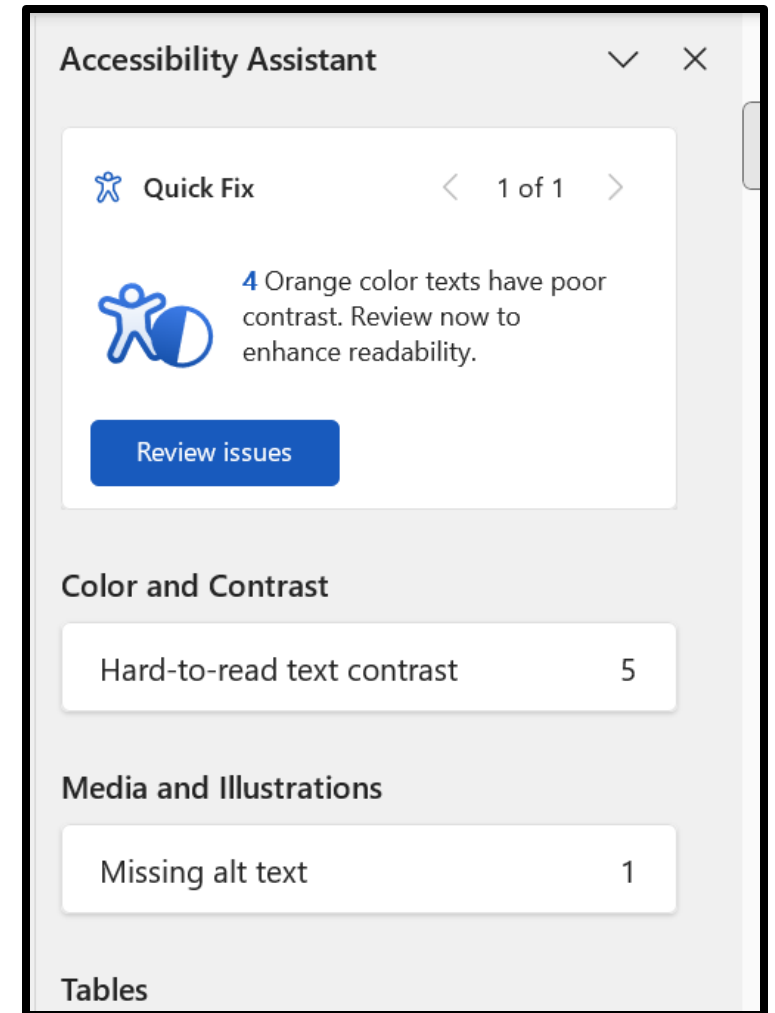
Using the Accessibility Checker (1)

- Select Review Ribbon
- Select Accessibility Checker



Using the Accessibility Checker (2)

- Panel opens to the right
- Identifies accessibility issues



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”



Demo: MS Word to PDF

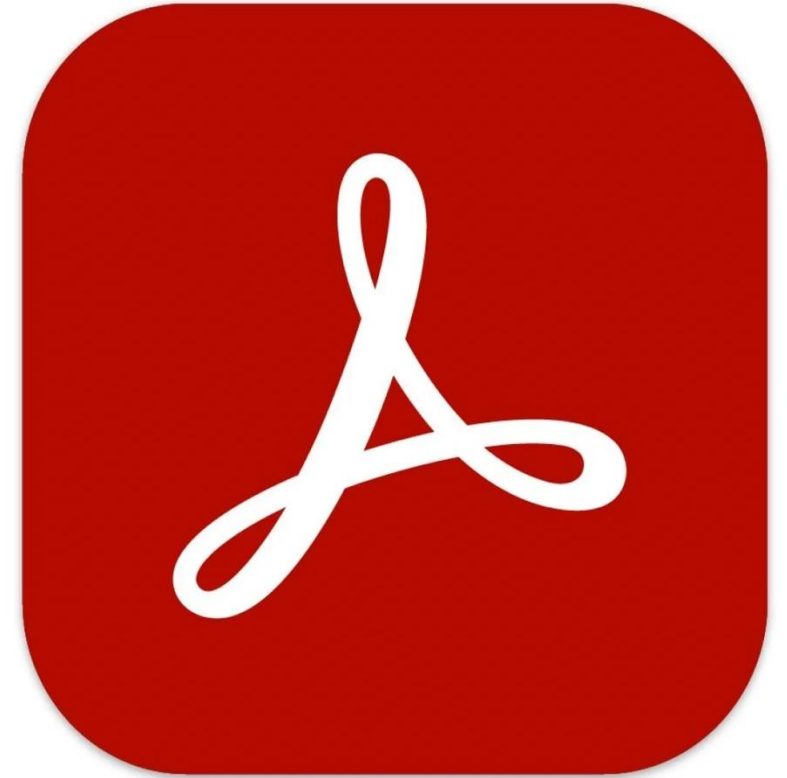
Working with Existing PDFs

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Is the PDF Accessible?

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



Free Accessibility Checkers

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



Demo: Checking Existing PDFs

Fixing Inaccessible PDFs

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Fixing an Existing PDF

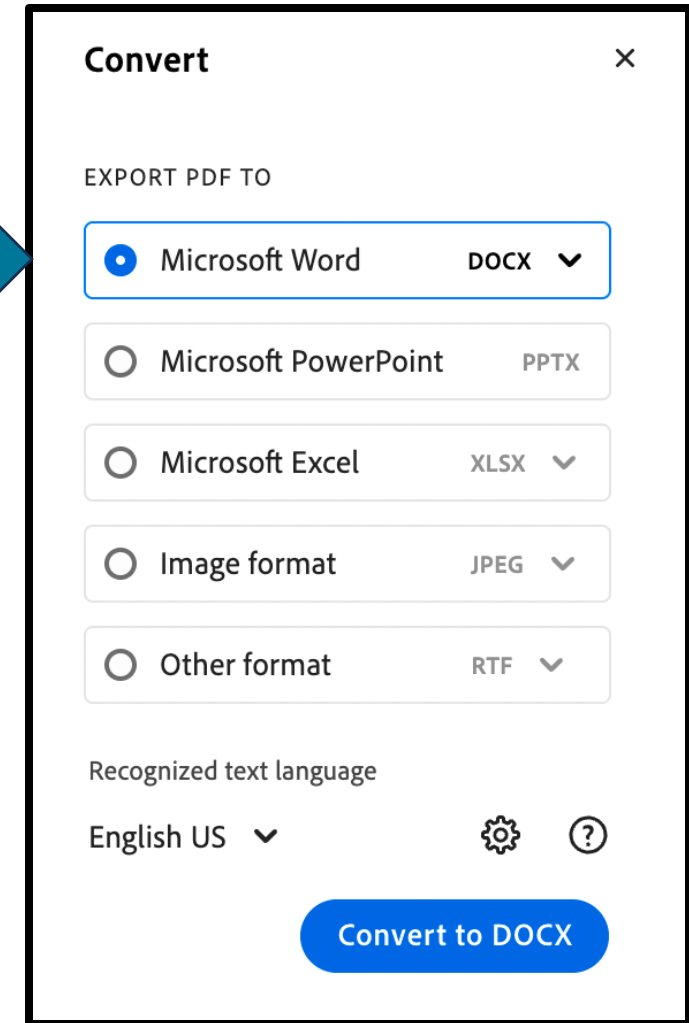
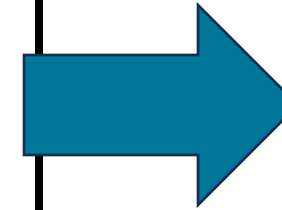
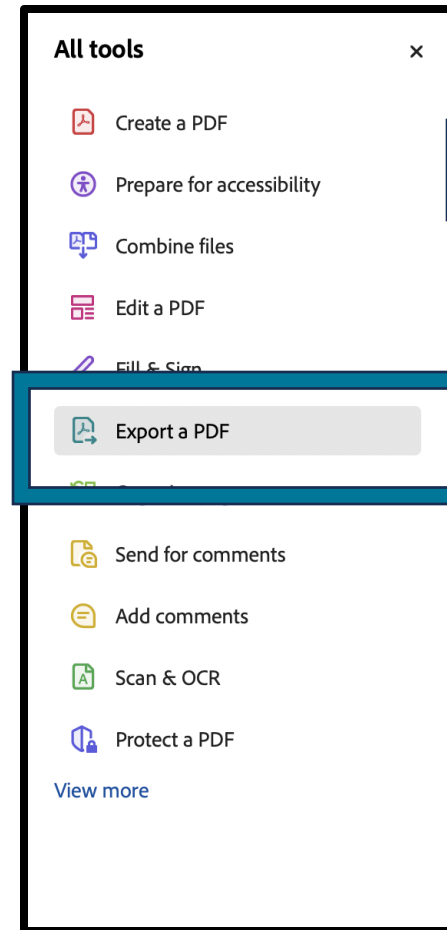
Options:

- 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



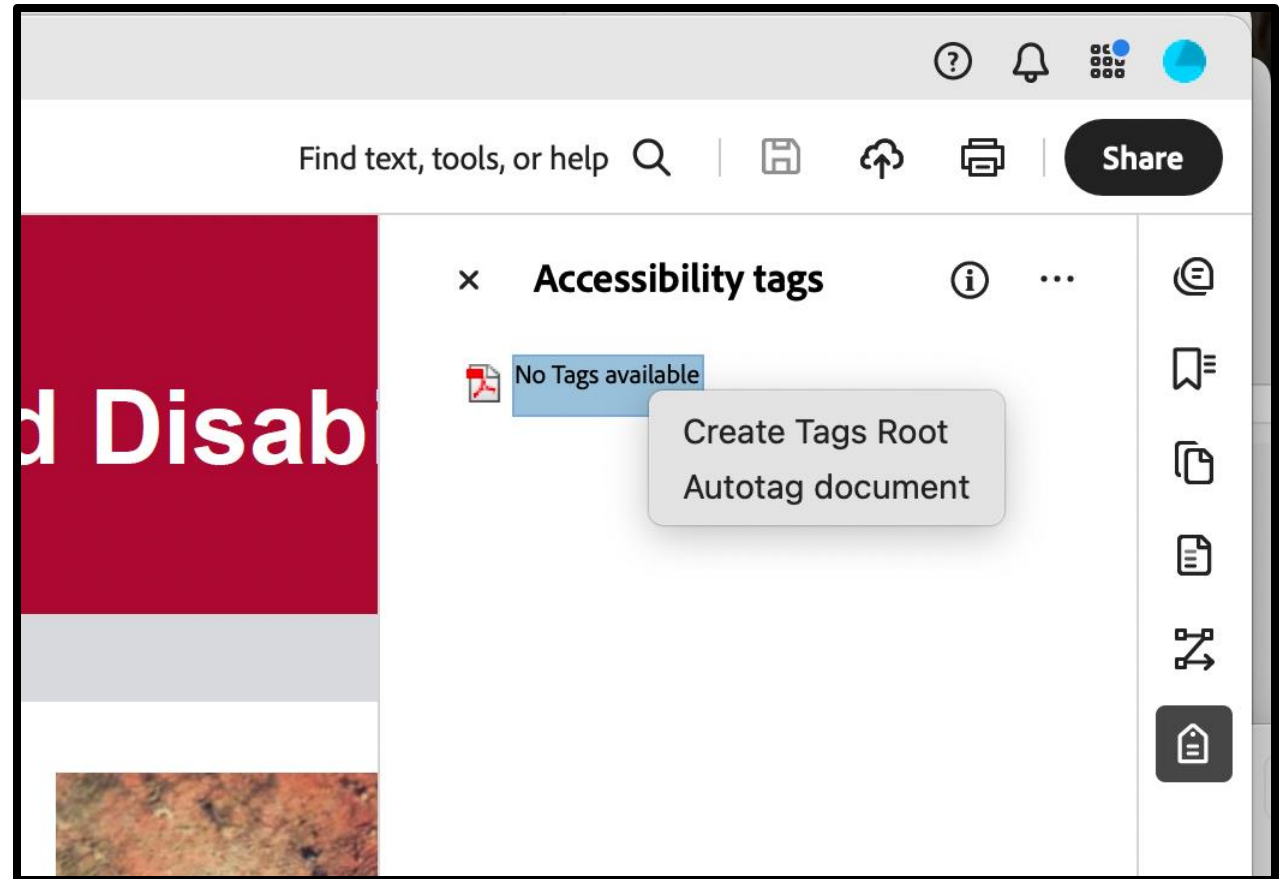
Exporting PDF to MS Word

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



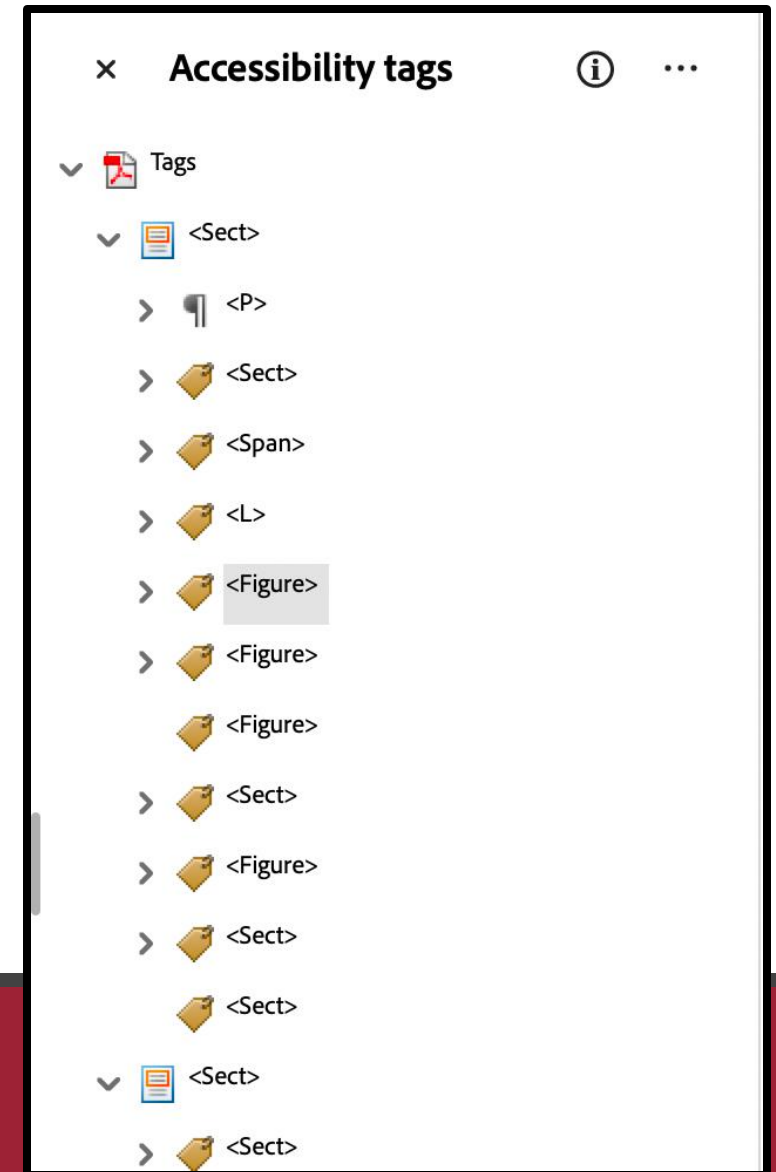
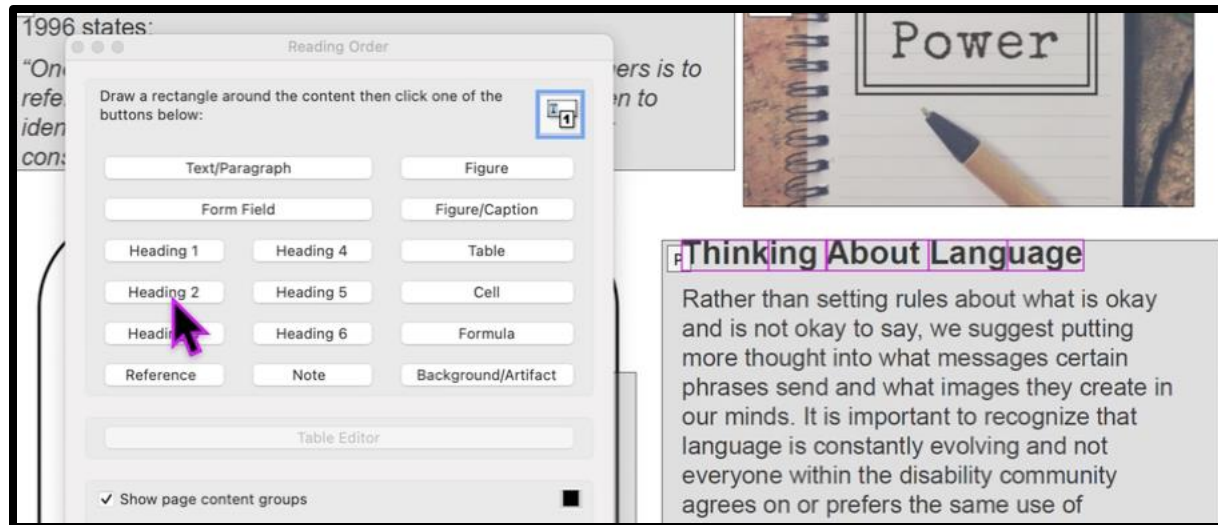
Auto-Tagging a PDF

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



Remediating a PDF in Acrobat Pro

- Using the tags panel
- Using the reading order tool



Demo: Fixing Existing PDFs

Other PDF Accessibility Remediation Tools

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



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](#)

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.



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



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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