



How to make accessible word documents with Microsoft Word

Microsoft Word is a word processor that can be found as part of office 365, a paid suite of applications from Microsoft. It includes a desktop application and web version and is compatible with most platforms including Windows and Mac.

The accessibility tips provided below work in both desktop and web versions of Word, however [some features may vary](#) according to the version of Word that is being used and the operating system version. Many of the accessibility tips below are designed to make a document more navigable with a [screen reader](#). However, they are useful also for everyone (i.e. browse through headings, keyboard jump from link to link, etc.).

1. Use clear and **easy to understand language**

- a. Consider your **target audience** and use and **easy to understand** sentences as much as possible.
- b. Use Word's **spelling, grammar** and **readability** checkers to fix any grammar or spelling mistakes. In some versions of Word you can enable readability by:
 - i. Opening "Spelling and Grammar";
 - ii. Click on "Options";
 - iii. Click on the "Show Readability Statistics" check box;
 - iv. Close the window;
 - v. Now perform a spell check, after all errors have been corrected you will see readability statistics including reading ease, grade level and percentage of passive sentences.
- c. If your version of Word supports **Editor**, it provides a user-friendly interface for correcting spelling, grammar and readability. It is also available as a [browser](#) and [outlook](#) extension.
 - i. Open "Editor" in the Home tab to view and correct issues.
 - ii. Click on "Settings" to customize the suggestions.

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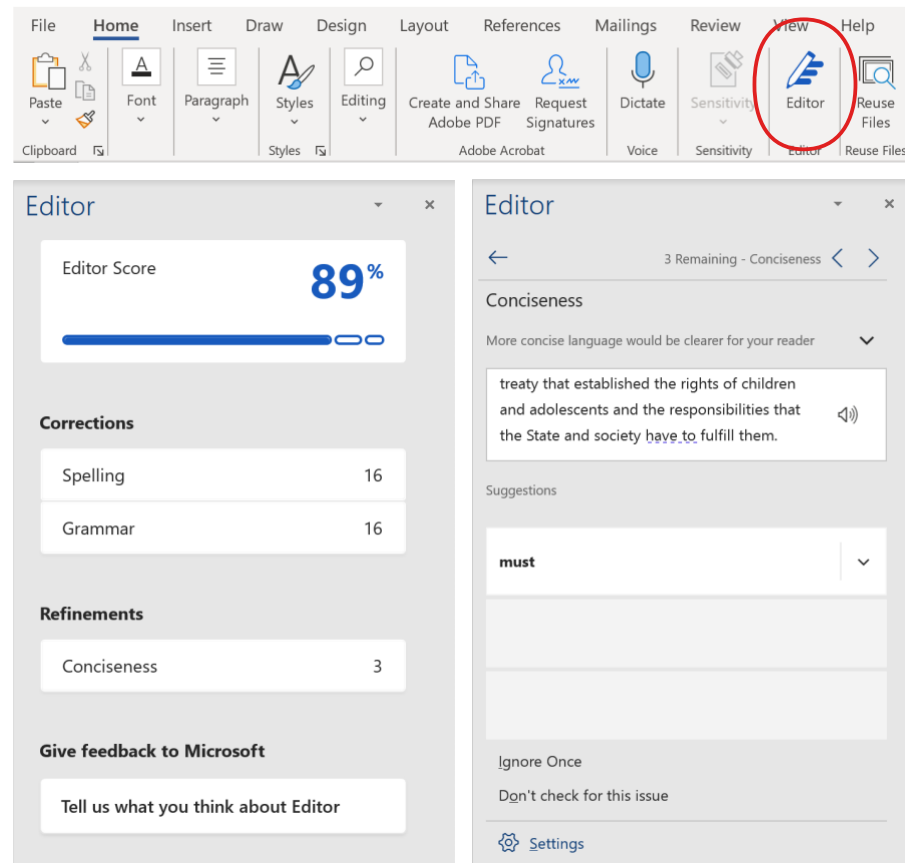


Figure 1 A dialog box showing Microsoft Word's Editor feature

- d. A tool like [Grammarly](#) can help you by providing informative hints about grammar and clarity as you type. It includes a free version that you can install as an add-in to Word.
- e. Whenever possible use [gender-neutral and inclusive language](#).

Gender-neutral language is a generic term covering the use of non-sexist language, inclusive language or gender-fair language. The purpose of gender-neutral language is to avoid word choices which may be interpreted as biased, discriminatory or demeaning by implying that one sex or social gender is the norm. Using gender-fair and inclusive language also helps reduce gender stereotyping, promotes social change, and contributes to achieving gender equality¹.

¹ [GNL Guidelines_EN.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

2. Structure the text using **styles, headings, and lists**

- a. Use 'Heading 1', 'Heading 2' and 'Heading 3' styles and so forth to structure the document, and 'Normal' style for paragraphs. This will make the document easier to navigate with a screen reader. Using real headings (instead of only making titles visually bigger and bold) is also helpful to create automated tables of contents, which can be updated whenever the structure of the document or the titles are modified. Built-in table of contents also allow to click on and jump to different headings, and this feature is also reflected in PDF files created from Word files.
- b. You can find, modify and apply styles in the "Styles" pane in Home tab.
- c. Make use of built-in 'numbered' or 'bulleted' lists (instead of manually typing asterisks, points or hyphens) as they are recognized as lists and easily navigable with a screen reader.

3. Consider **font size, type, and weight**

- a. **Readable font-size**
 - i. Font-sizes where possible (and especially for documents meant to be printed) should be at least 12 pt.
- b. **Accessible font-type**
 - i. Where possible use sans-serif fonts like Arial, Calibri, or Verdana. Sans-serif fonts can be easier to read than decorative typefaces with serifs (such as Times New Roman, Garamond or Courier new) especially for persons with visual impairments or dyslexia. If a brand demands a specific font, check with the design team for which fonts options they have that are most accessible and readable.
- c. **Accessible font-weight**
 - i. Some fonts have thin or heavy varieties that can be difficult to read, for example Calibri, which also exists as Calibri light. Aim to primarily use a regular font-weight for readability.

4. Use appropriate **line and paragraph spacing**

- a. Spacing can really improve the legibility of a document and help the user break the material into sections. Line spacing of "1.15" and paragraph spacing of "6 pt" before is ideal and can be applied to styles by:

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- i. selecting the style in the style page;
 - ii. selecting “Modify style”;
 - iii. choose “Format”;
 - iv. choose “Paragraph”;
 - v. set before to “6 pt” and line-spacing to “1.15”.
- b. Use appropriate paragraph spacing whenever you have to create large empty separations between elements in a page, instead of pressing ‘enter’ many times, because this would confuse blind users who navigate with a screen reader.

5. Meaningful **hyperlinks**

- a. Avoid using the entire web address as hyperlink text in the document as it is will be spoken out loud by the screen reader and it will be difficult to understand by a screen reader user.
- b. For hyperlinks use the text or word that best describes their purpose or content. For example, if you are including a link to a document, your hyperlink should appear as the name of the document. Always avoid using hyperlink descriptors like “click here” that do not describe the content of the link (especially problematic for persons using a screen reader or browsing through links via a keyboard).
- c. Also, check external links for accessibility before recommending them.

6. **Images, charts, and graphics**

- a. Add **image descriptions** to essential images and charts.
 - i. Right click on the Image or chart > select “Edit Alt text”.
 - ii. Enter an image description (short but meaningful).

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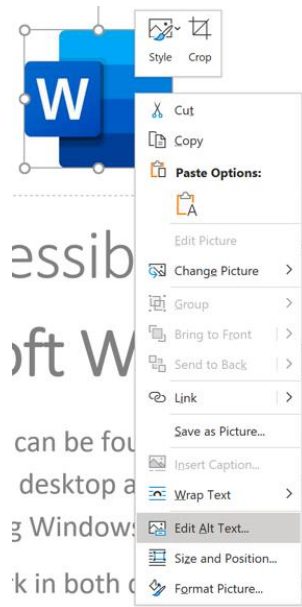


Figure 2 Right-click menu for Alt Text

- iii. Image descriptions will be read-aloud by a screen reader helping users who have difficulty seeing the content.
- iv. For tips on writing image descriptions refer to the [guidelines from the Diagram Center](#).

b. Mark non-essential visual elements as **decorative**

- i. Right click on any visual element > click “Edit Alt Text” > Check the box “Mark as decorative”.

Why? This means that a screen reader will completely ignore this non-essential visual element, which will make the document much more navigable.

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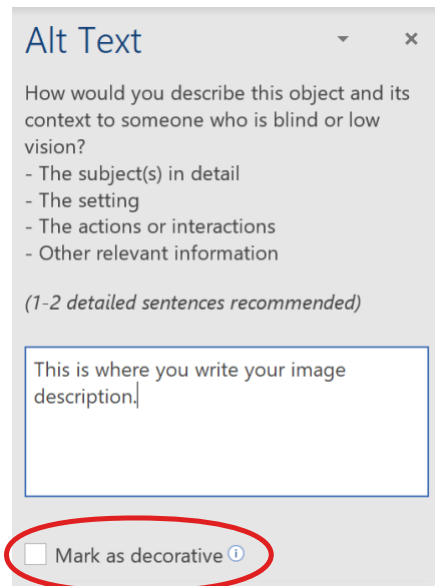


Figure 3 Screenshot of Alt Text panel in Word with the 'mark as descriptive' option

c. Choose **in line** wrapping for essential images

- i. Select the image.
- ii. Right click and choose “Wrap Text”.
- iii. Select ‘In line with text’ in the toolbar.

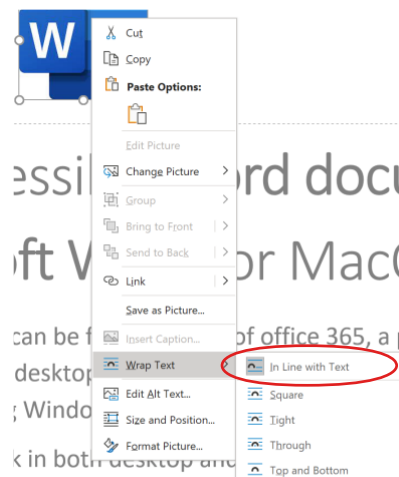


Figure 4 Screenshot of Word panel to select the wrapping style for an image

- iv. This puts the image in logical reading order within the text, so a screen reader will read it when you intend it to be read.
- v. In some cases, you may not be able to make a graphic element in line; in this case ensure it is marked as decorative so as not to confuse a screen reader.

7. Ensure color **contrast** between text and background.

- a. The Word accessibility checker will help you by displaying a warning if the contrast between the color of your text and the color of your background does not meet the requirements for persons with visual impairments; your target contrast should be a 3:1 ratio.
- b. You can use this app; [Color Contrast Analyzer](#) to help you.

8. Do not rely only on **color** to communicate meaning.

- a. Color should be used sparingly as a design element to help guide the reader. Color should not be used as the only way to provide an information, because this would be missed by color blind persons.
- b. Symbols and/or patterns used together with color can make a graph or a diagram more accessible by helping users who cannot differentiate color.

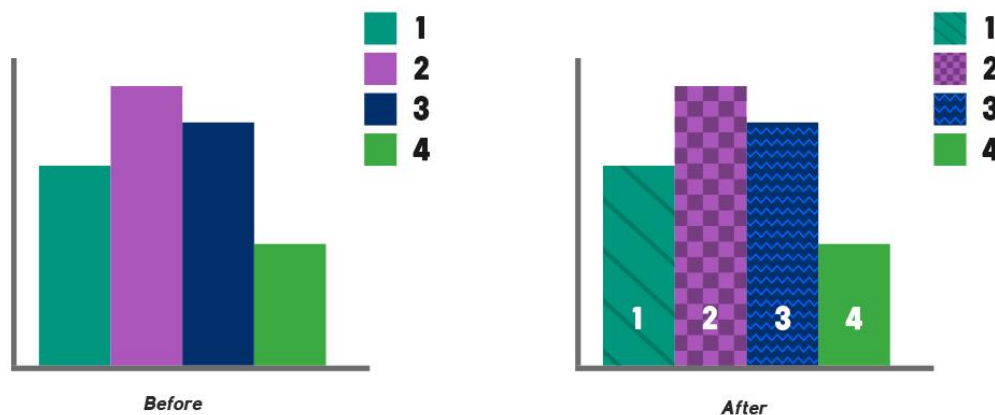


Figure 5 Difference between an infographic based only on color and one which uses also textures and lettering

9. Making **tables** accessible.

- a. Use “header rows” in a table to improve navigation with a screen reader.
 - i. Select the row on the table you want to be a “header row.”
 - ii. Go to the “layout” tab in the toolbar (after the “table design” tab).
 - iii. Select the option “repeat header rows.” This option will only be visible if you have the table selected. This will allow your header row to be recognized as such by a screen reader (helping users who are blind in navigating the table) and at the same time it will repeat the header at the top of the page whenever the table is split between two or more pages.

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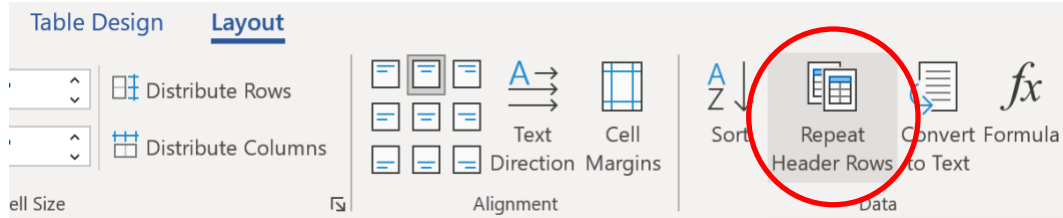


Figure 6 Screenshot of the toolbar with 'Repeat Header Rows' Option selected in the Layout tab

- b. Where possible **avoid merging cells** as this will create issues for a screen reader.
- c. Add "Alt text" to the table by:
 - i. Right click a table;
 - ii. Select "Table properties";
 - iii. Select the tab "Alt text";
 - iv. Enter a title and description in the box and hit save.

10. Avoid **textboxes**

- a. A textbox can cause issues for a screen reader, particularly when wrapping is not set to "in line with the text".
- b. Instead of a textbox, consider a single cell table with formatting, or formatting applied directly to a normal text (background color, margins, etc.).

11. Use the built-in **accessibility checker**.

- a. Go to the "Review" tab > click on "Check Accessibility" and follow the onscreen prompts.

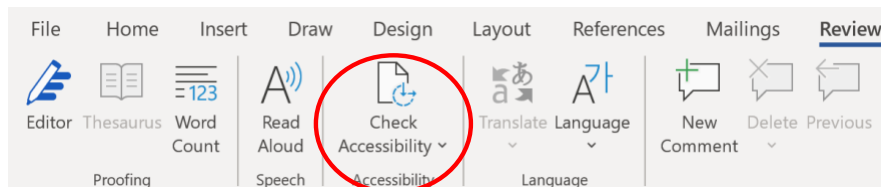


Figure 7 Screenshot of the toolbar with 'Check Accessibility' enabled

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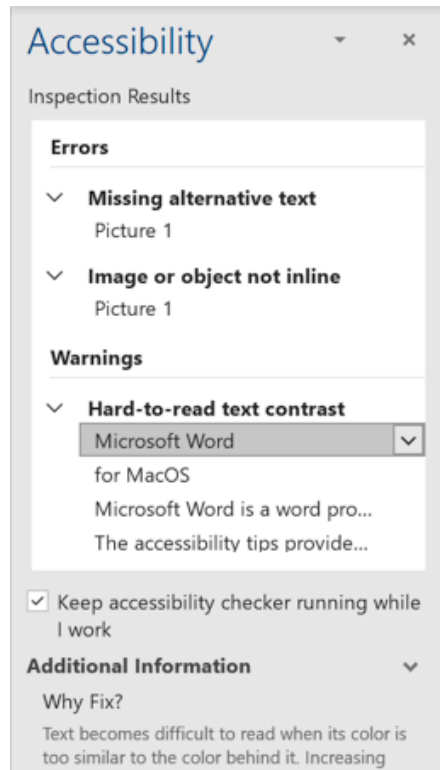


Figure 8 Example of accessibility errors detected by the Word accessibility checker

- b. The accessibility checker can be a useful tool for learning about why specific accessibility issues are relevant and how to fix them.
- c. An automated accessibility checker like the one included in Word is a very useful tool for validating a document; however, it cannot detect all accessibility issues and it is important to also consult persons with a disability as a final step.

12. Test with a **screen reader** and include **persons with disability** in the process.

- a. You can test how your document performs with a screen reader using the 'Narrator' built into Windows, 'Voiceover' built into Mac or [NVDA](#), a free screen reader for Windows that is widely used.

13. Try **read-aloud** learning tool **immersive reader**

- a. Try the "Immersive Reader" in the word application on desktop and in the web version. The web version has the best performance and range of voices.

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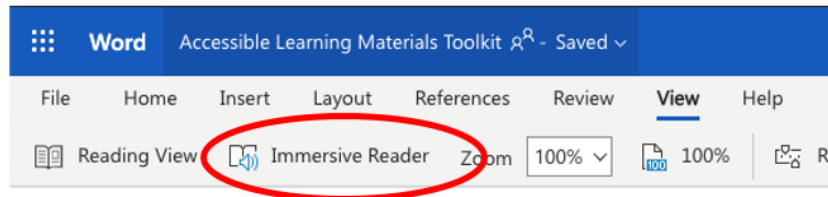


Figure 9 'Immersive reader' tab on the web version of Word

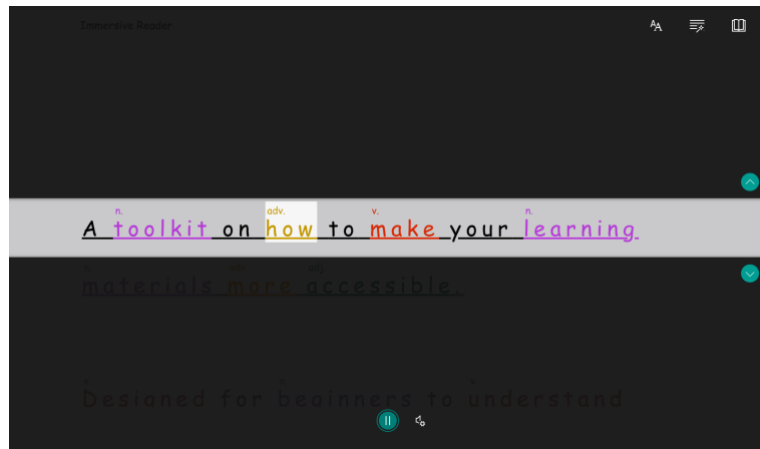


Figure 10 Screenshot of Word immersive reader functionality

- b. Select a voice. Word has some of the most natural sounding voices.
- c. Watch the text highlighted as you read.
- d. In the web version you can select options to highlight nouns, verbs, and other grammar structures.

Additional Links

Read more about ways to make your word documents accessible:

- <https://webaim.org/techniques/word/>
- <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/make-your-word-documents-accessible-to-people-with-disabilities-d9bf3683-87ac-47ea-b91a-78dcac3c66d>
- <https://www.washington.edu/accessibility/documents/word/>
- <https://abilitynet.org.uk/factsheets/creating-accessible-documents-0>