

Accessibility and Usability Guidelines for Word Documents

Lance Hidy, Northern Essex Community College

ACCESSIBILITY

Make Word documents compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):

MULTIPLE FORMATS

Provide documents both as hard copy, and as accessible electronic files that can be posted online. People with vision impairment or learning disabilities like dyslexia, need accessible digital files for listening with text-to-speech software (TTS).



TAGGED HEADINGS WITH QUICK STYLES

Use Word's **Quick Style** menu for creating a tagged hierarchy of headings and text styles, such as normal, title, heading 1, and heading 2. You can customize each one. This allows blind readers to navigate with screen reader software such as JAWS.



ALTERNATE TEXT FOR IMAGES

Word allows you to add **alternate text** tags to digital images. Your “alt tag” explains what the image means with a mouse rollover, or when using screen reader software.



ACCESSIBILITY CHECKERS

In Word's **Review** tab, the first tool is “Check Accessibility.” It will show the fixes that are required for ADA compliance.

USABILITY

Usability is about designing “user-friendly” documents that are more legible and readable for a broad range of people. This includes those with learning disabilities, or who have vision problems, or are English language learners. Usability is a foundation of the global movement called **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**.

DOUBLE COLUMNS

In Word's **Layout** tab, use the double-column tool. Short lines are easier to read, especially on smart phone screens.



IMAGES IMPROVE UNDERSTANDING

Images and icons make text easier to understand. Use your own, or if you search Google Images, try adding the word *icon* or *symbol* to the search field. You must use Word's **Text Wrap** feature to unlock the image so you can move it freely on the page. Images used to be prohibitively expensive and difficult for most people to use, but digital tools have made them as easy and affordable as text. Take advantage of it!



CHUNKING OF TEXT

Divide text into chunks with numbers, bullets, subheads, line space or rules. Avoid adding borders to text boxes because they can complicate navigation for screen readers.



LARGER TYPE SIZES

Increase text size when possible to 12, 14, or even 16 point. Spill over onto the next page. Large type helps readers with vision impairments, and is less intimidating for readers with low literacy skills. This text is 14 point Gill Sans.

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HIERARCHY OF FONT WEIGHT AND SIZE

Using font size and weight to create a hierarchy for headings and text helps readers navigate a page. Subheads need to contrast with the text so they don't get lost in the texture of the page. In addition to increasing size and using bold weight, you can also use color and all capitals to make the headings stand out, as demonstrated on these pages.

LEGIBLE FONTS

Complex vs. simple—Traditional text fonts are complex forms, with thick-thin tapering, and serifs at the ends of strokes—ancient relics from times when letters were written with quill pens. Because we get so much practice reading complex letter-forms like Times



Roman, we tend to prefer them, and adapt to their complexity. However, the simple sans serif forms with monoweight strokes have gradually become more common both in print and on digital displays—and for good reason. Their simplicity can reduce eyestrain, and is more legible at small sizes, or poor light. They are especially helpful for people with impaired vision—including those with astigmatism, cataracts, or whose prescription glasses need updating.

RECOMMENDED FONTS FOR TEXT

Recommended monoweight sans serifs

Calibri Candara
Corbel Gill Sans
Lucida Sans Myriad
Trebuchet Verdana

Recommended tapered, serif fonts

Cambria Georgia

OK for headings—not recommended for text

Helvetica Arial
Avant Garde Times

TEXT LEGIBILITY IS DECREASED WHEN

Condensed *Italicized*

SET IN ALL CAPITALS

OK for headings, but not for solid text.

TYPESETTING CRIMES

Leave the type alone. Don't stretch it, or stroke it, or give it drop shadows. All of those things reduce legibility. And please don't put type over images or colored backgrounds that reduce contrast.



SIMPLE DESIGN, NO FRILLS

Every element in your design should contain essential information. Beautifully organized typography can be all you need to make the page attractive and inviting. Frills and decorations are distracting visual noise that do not help the reader.

