Digital Accessibility Practices for ATE Evaluation Reports

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Evaluation reports are only as useful as they are usable. Attention to the accessibility of digitally shared documents supports the understanding and use of evaluation findings. The practices in this guide support the principles of digital accessibility, making documents perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust for all (w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines).

When Structuring Documents

☐ Use proper heading styles to structure your content.

Headings are the backbone of an accessible document. True, nested heading styles allow screen readers to navigate your document's structure. A document without true headings is, to an assistive technology user, a wall of undifferentiated text. Headings also support neurodiverse readers' comprehension.

- Use Heading 1 for the title and Heading 2 for the top-level heading.
- Check your headings using the Navigation Pane (View → Navigation Pane).

After selecting the text you want to format as a heading, navigate to the **Home** tab in the ribbon. In the **Styles** gallery, select **Heading 1**, **Heading 2**, or **Heading 3** based on the hierarchy of your content.

☐ Ensure logical reading order is encoded in the document.

Logical reading order means that the sequence in which content appears on screen matches the sequence in which it should be understood. For most documents built in a single column without text boxes or floating elements, Word automatically maintains reading order. Problems arise when content is placed in text boxes, positioned with workarounds, or structured in ways that look correct visually but are read out of sequence by assistive technology.

To check reading order, run the **Accessibility Checker** under the **Review** tab and review any flagged reading order warnings.

☐ Use built-in list tools when writing lists.

A list that looks like a list is not always recognized as one by screen readers. Text formatted with manual hyphens, asterisks, or repeated dashes is visually similar to a bulleted list but carries no structural meaning for screen readers. Word's built-in list tools create true ordered and unordered lists that assistive technologies can identify, announce, and navigate correctly.

To insert a list, use the **Bullets** or **Numbering** buttons in the **Paragraph group** on the **Home** tab.

When Creating Tables

☐ Use tables for content that is a grid of related data. Not for design or formatting.

Tables are for data or information, not for controlling layout. When used correctly, they communicate relationships between rows and columns that assistive technologies can interpret and announce. When used as a layout tool, they create navigational confusion for screen readers who encounter table structure where none was intended.

Insert a table using the **Insert** tab, **Table**.

☐ Don't merge or split cells.

Tables should have the same number of columns in every row. Merging or splitting cells disrupts the order in which assistive technology reads content, making the connections between cell content and its corresponding header unclear. This is easier said than done when communicating complex data sets. Often, the solution is to split a complex table into multiple, simpler tables.

☐ Indicate header rows in Word.

Tables should have clearly labeled headers for each column. These header rows should be coded accordingly so that assistive technology can navigate the content correctly. Clearly identified headers make tables clearer and easier to understand for everyone, including neurodivergent readers.

To designate the first row as a header row, click into the table, in the **Table Design** ribbon, check the box labeled **Header Row**. It's also good practice to repeat the header row if your table spans multiple pages. To do this, right-click the row, select **Table Properties**, navigate to the **Row** tab, and check **Repeat as header row at the top of each page**.

When Using Visuals

☐ Write meaningful alt text.

Alt text is used to convey the meaning of images or visuals to visually impaired readers. Alt text allows screen reader users to receive the same information a sighted reader gets from a visual.

- Strong alt text:
  - Is short and to the point.
  - Shares the same information as the visual.
  - Describes the relevant content, not just how the image looks.

    - Leaves out unnecessary details.
    - Doesn't repeat what's already in the surrounding text.
- Decorative images, those that add visual interest but carry no informational content, should be marked as decorative so screen readers skip them rather than announcing them unnecessarily (Edit alt text → Mark as decorative).
- For guidance on when to use alt text, refer to this alt text Decision Tree by W3C (https://bit.ly/alt-text-decision).
- For more guidelines on how to write alt text for graphs, refer to these Image Description Guidelines by the Diagram Center (https://bit.ly/alt-text-guidance).

To add alt text, right-click the image and select **Edit Alt Text**. Write a concise description of what the image communicates, not what it looks like.

☐ Choose high-contrast colors and distinct colors for colorblind readers.

Readers who are colorblind, have low vision, or use high-contrast display settings may not perceive color distinctions as intended. Sufficient contrast between text and background is required, and any information conveyed through color must also be conveyed through text, shape, or another visual indicator.

To check contrast, use a free tool such as the WebAIM Contrast Checker. Aim for a contrast ratio of at least 4.5:1 for standard text and 3:1 for large text, per WCAG 2.1 AA standards.

When Finalizing Your Document

☐ Use descriptive hyperlinks.

Link text is read aloud by screen readers, often out of context, as part of a list of links on the page. "Click here" and "read more" are meaningless in that context. Descriptive link text tells every reader exactly where a link leads or what action it performs, without requiring surrounding context to understand it.

To insert or edit a hyperlink, select your text and press **Ctrl +K** (Windows) or **Command +K** (Mac). Use the display text field to write a clear, descriptive label.

☐ Check your document's metadata, including the Language and Document Title.

Two small settings carry significant weight in accessibility. The document language tells screen readers which language rules to apply when reading content aloud. Without it, pronunciation and interpretation may be incorrect. The document title is the first piece of metadata a screen reader announces and appears in search results, browser tabs, and file previews. Both should be set intentionally before a document is shared.

To set the document language, navigate to **Review** > **Language**, then choose **Set Proofing Language**. To set the document title, go to **File** > **Info**, then enter a clear, descriptive title in the **Properties** panel on the right.

☐ **Run the built-in Accessibility Checker.**

Word's built-in Accessibility Checker is your first line of review before any document is shared externally. It scans your document for common accessibility errors, such as missing alt text, unlabeled tables, low contrast, and reading order issues. It provides explanations and suggests fixes for each. It does not catch everything, but it catches the most common problems and is fast to run.

To open the Accessibility Checker, navigate to the **Review** tab and select **Check Accessibility**. A panel will open on the right side of your screen listing errors, warnings, and tips in order of severity. Address errors first, then work through warnings before finalizing the document.

Resources

Tips for Creating Accessible PDFs https://bit.ly/PDF-tips
This tip sheet, developed by Access ATE, provides clear how-tos for checking the accessibility features in a document that has been exported to PDF.

WCAG in Plain English https://bit.ly/wcag-plain-english
Created by Aardvark Accessibility, this guide translates the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines into easy-to-understand language, including examples and explanations for each criterion.

How to Create Accessible Documents https://bit.ly/accessibility-SLIDE
Remember accessible practices with the mnemonic SLIDE, which stands for Styles are used for section headings, Links are descriptive and meaningful, Images have text descriptions, Design is perceivable, with high contrast, and Evaluation is holistic and authentic. Read more in this practical guide developed by CAST.

Image Description Guidelines https://bit.ly/alt-text-guidance
Created by the DIAGRAM Center (Digital Image and Graphic Resources for Accessibility Materials), this collection of guidelines provides suggested structures when writing alt text or text alternatives for image descriptions.

Screen Reader Demo for Digital Accessibility https://bit.ly/Sutton-SR-demo
This video, created by Marc Sutton from the University of San Francisco's IT Web Services Department, gives a tour of screen reading technology.

An alt Decision Tree https://bit.ly/alt-text-decision
This decision tree, developed by the Web Accessibility Initiative, describes when and how you should use alt text for images.

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