

Microsoft PowerPoint Accessibility Checklist

A step-by-step checklist for creating accessible Microsoft PowerPoint presentations. This checklist covers slide layouts versus custom text boxes, reading order, alt text, slide titles, color contrast, animations and transitions, accessible video and audio embeds, and how to use the built-in Accessibility Checker. It also covers the most common errors and how to fix them.

Content

Microsoft PowerPoint Accessibility Checklist

Resource type: Tier 1 Flagship — Accessibility

Library home: L09 Accessibility & Plain Language Library

Companion to: WCAG 2.2 AA Flagship Module; Microsoft Word Accessibility Checklist; Accessible Meetings Checklist

Standards reference: WCAG 2.2 AA; §508 Rehabilitation Act; Title II ADA; Microsoft Accessibility documentation

What this is

A step-by-step checklist for creating accessible Microsoft PowerPoint presentations. This checklist covers slide layouts versus custom text boxes, reading order, alt text, slide titles, color contrast, animations and transitions, accessible video and audio embeds, and how to use the built-in Accessibility Checker. It also covers the most common errors and how to fix them.

Use this checklist whenever you create a presentation for a staff meeting, training, public event, or online sharing — including presentations that will be exported to PDF or recorded as video.

Why this matters for DSD

Presentations are a primary vehicle for training, policy communication, and meeting facilitation in DSD. When a presentation is not accessible:

- Staff or clients with vision disabilities cannot access the content via screen readers
- People who are deaf or hard of hearing cannot access embedded audio or video without captions
- People with cognitive disabilities are overwhelmed by slides with too much text and poor structure
- When presented virtually, poor accessibility compounds — someone using a screen reader through a Zoom screen share cannot navigate the presentation at all if reading order is not set

Title II ADA compliance applies to presentations DSD shares digitally. WCAG 2.2 AA is DSD's operating standard.

The core requirements

Accessible PowerPoint presentations must:

1. Use built-in slide layouts (not custom text boxes dropped onto blank slides)
2. Give every slide a unique, descriptive title
3. Set the reading order for each slide
4. Add alt text to every image, chart, and graphic
5. Mark decorative visuals as decorative
6. Meet color contrast requirements (4.5:1 for text)
7. Not rely on color alone to convey meaning
8. Caption all embedded video; provide audio descriptions where needed
9. Make animations and transitions keyboard-accessible and avoid strobing effects
10. Pass the built-in Accessibility Checker before sharing

Step-by-Step Checklist

Step 1: Use Built-In Slide Layouts (Not Custom Text Boxes)

This is the single most important PowerPoint accessibility step. When you use a built-in slide layout (from the Layout menu), the reading order is automatically set in a logical sequence that screen readers and keyboard navigation follow. When you add custom text boxes by inserting them manually onto a blank slide, the reading order is arbitrary — usually the order in which items were inserted — which is rarely the intended reading order.

How to use slide layouts:

1. When adding a new slide, go to Home > New Slide and choose a layout (Title Slide, Title and Content, Two Content, etc.)
2. Type content directly into the placeholders provided by the layout
3. Do not delete placeholders and replace them with text boxes

If you received a presentation that uses custom text boxes:

1. You will need to set the reading order manually for each slide (see Step 3)
2. Or recreate the slides using proper layouts

Why it matters: Screen readers read slide content in the order items appear in the Selection Pane or Reading Order Pane. Custom text boxes are added in the order they were created — which has no relationship to visual layout or logical reading order.

Common error: Starting with a blank slide and adding text boxes and images manually. This is very common and almost always creates accessibility problems. Fix: Use the Layout menu to choose an appropriate slide structure before adding content.

Step 2: Give Every Slide a Unique, Descriptive Title

Every slide must have a title. Screen reader users navigate presentations by jumping from slide title to slide title — just as sighted readers scan slide headers. Without titles, blind and low-vision users cannot orient themselves in the presentation.

Requirements:

- Every slide gets a unique, descriptive title — even "simple" or "visual" slides
- Titles should describe the slide's content or purpose, not just number it
- If the slide design does not include a visible title placeholder, you can hide the title off-slide (move it outside the visible slide area) rather than deleting it

How to add a title:

1. If the slide has a title placeholder: click it and type the title
2. If the slide has no title placeholder: go to Insert > Text Box, type the title, move it off the slide, and then set it as the first item in reading order

How to check if a slide is missing a title:

Run the Accessibility Checker — it flags slides with missing titles.

Common error: Slides with titles that are identical across multiple slides ("Introduction," "Introduction 2") or slides where the title placeholder has been deleted and replaced with a text box. Fix: Give each slide a unique, meaningful title using the proper title placeholder.

Step 3: Set the Reading Order for Each Slide

The reading order determines the sequence in which a screen reader announces the content on each slide. In PowerPoint, the reading order is set through the Reading Order Pane (newer versions) or the Selection Pane (all versions), where items are listed in reverse order — the last item in the list is read first.

How to set reading order using the Reading Order Pane:

1. Go to View > Reading Order (if available in your version)
2. Drag items in the pane to set the logical reading sequence

How to set reading order using the Selection Pane:

1. Go to Home > Arrange > Selection Pane (or View > Selection Pane)
2. Items at the bottom of the list are read first; items at the top are read last
3. Drag items to set the order (reversed from what you want to announce)

Logic to follow:

- Title should be read first (placed at the bottom of the Selection Pane)
- Body content in the order it should be heard
- Footer and slide number last (placed at the top of the Selection Pane)
- Decorative elements should be at the top of the pane (read last) or marked as decorative so they are skipped

Common error: Slides with reading order that reflects the order items were inserted, not the order they should be read. Fix: Open the Selection Pane, review the order, and drag items to correct sequence.

Step 4: Add Alt Text to All Visuals

Every image, chart, SmartArt graphic, shape, screenshot, diagram, and video thumbnail on a slide needs alternative text — unless it is purely decorative.

How to add alt text in PowerPoint:

1. Right-click the image or visual
2. Select Edit Alt Text
3. Type a concise description in the alt text box
4. For decorative visuals: check Mark as decorative

Writing effective alt text for presentations:

- Describe what the visual shows and what it is meant to communicate in this slide
- For charts: summarize the key data point or trend ("Line chart showing a 35% decrease in service wait times from Q1 2023 to Q4 2024")
- For diagrams: describe the relationship or process shown
- For photos of people: describe the activity or context relevant to the slide (not personal identifying details)
- Keep alt text to one or two sentences

Common error: Grouping multiple objects (images + text + shapes) into a single group without alt text. Fix: Ungroup and add alt text to each meaningful element, or add alt text to the group as a whole that describes the complete visual unit.

Step 5: Use Sufficient Color Contrast

All text in your presentation must have a color contrast ratio of at least 4.5:1 against its background (normal text) or 3:1 (large text — approximately 18pt or 14pt bold and above).

High-risk situations in presentations:

- Dark text on dark image backgrounds (very common in stylized presentations)
- White text on a medium-blue or medium-green background (may not meet 4.5:1)
- Yellow or orange text on white
- Light gray text on white backgrounds (common in body text and speaker notes)
- Colored text in tables

How to check contrast:

1. Use the Colour Contrast Analyser (free tool): <https://www.tpgi.com/color-contrast-checker/>
2. Or run the Accessibility Checker (Step 9) — it flags some contrast issues
3. Note: The Accessibility Checker only checks text in solid opaque backgrounds; text over images requires manual checking

Using predesigned themes safely:

Built-in PowerPoint themes are generally designed with accessible color combinations. If you use a predesigned theme without customizing colors, you reduce your contrast risk. If you customize colors, always check contrast.

Common error: White text over a photographic image background. The contrast between white text and a varied photographic background cannot be predicted — some areas may pass, others fail. Fix: Add a solid or semi-transparent overlay behind text, or use a slide design that places text on a solid background.

Step 6: Do Not Rely on Color Alone

Color cannot be the only means of conveying information. This applies to:

- Highlighting or marking certain items as important
- Status indicators ("green = on track, red = delayed")
- Distinguishing between data series in a chart

Alternatives to color-only coding:

- Add text labels to color-coded items (" On track," " Delayed")
- Use both color and pattern/texture in charts
- Add a legend that describes both the color and the meaning
- Use bold or border to distinguish highlighted items

Common error: A pie chart where the only way to distinguish segments is by color, with a color-coded legend. Fix: Add data labels directly on each segment with the label and value; or use patterns in addition to colors.

Step 7: Make Animations and Transitions Accessible

Animations and transitions can create accessibility barriers if they are too fast, too complex, or strobe-like.

Requirements:

- Avoid animations that flash more than three times per second — this can trigger seizures in people with photosensitive epilepsy (WCAG 2.3.1)
- Do not use rapid, blinking, or strobing effects
- Prefer simple fade or appear animations over complex spinning, swirling, or motion-path animations
- Respect prefers-reduced-motion — when presenting to an audience or sharing as a file, be aware that some users have motion sensitivity; offer a motion-free version if complex animations are central to the content
- Avoid auto-advancing slides — this removes user control over pacing; if auto-advance is used, provide a way to pause
- Ensure that content conveyed through animation is also available in a static form (e.g., the final state of an animated diagram includes all the information)

For presentations shared as files:

- Consider providing a version of the presentation with animations removed for users who will read it with a screen reader
- Or export to PDF as a non-animated version

Common error: Complex "fly-in" or "spin" animations on every bullet point. Fix: Use simple "Appear" or "Fade" animations, or use "With Previous" so all bullets appear at once.

Step 8: Caption All Embedded Video and Audio

Any video embedded in a PowerPoint presentation must have closed captions. Any audio-only content must have a transcript.

For prerecorded video:

- Include closed captions encoded in the video file before inserting it into PowerPoint
- PowerPoint for Windows supports separate caption files (.srt, .vtt) for some video formats
- Warning: If you use Compress Media or Optimize Media Compatibility, captions, subtitles, and multiple audio tracks may be removed
- Test captioning after any media optimization

For live presentations:

- Use Microsoft Teams or Zoom live captioning features
- Or provide a CART (Communication Access Realtime Translation) captionist
- See the Accessible Meetings Checklist for the ASL interpretation request process

For audio descriptions:

- If a video conveys visual-only information (diagrams, demonstrations, text on screen) without narration, it needs audio description
- Audio description narrates the visual content for blind and low-vision viewers
- Contact the DSD Equity Team for guidance on commissioning audio descriptions

Common error: Inserting a video without captions because "the video was created by someone else." Fix: All video embedded in DSD presentations must have captions regardless of origin; request captioned versions from vendors or caption them yourself.

Step 9: Run the Built-In Accessibility Checker

PowerPoint's Accessibility Checker runs automatically in the background and can be launched manually.

How to run it:

1. Go to Review > Check Accessibility
2. Review all items under Errors, Warnings, and Tips
3. Click each item to jump to the affected slide element
4. Follow the suggested fixes

What the PowerPoint Accessibility Checker finds:

- Slides with missing titles
- Images, shapes, and visuals with missing alt text
- Slides with possible reading order issues
- Tables without header rows
- Insufficient color contrast (for solid backgrounds)
- Small text sizes
- Animations that may be difficult for some users

What it does NOT find:

- Alt text quality (presence only, not accuracy)
- Color-over-image contrast
- Caption quality
- Reading order accuracy (flags "possible issues" but does not verify logical order)

Run the Accessibility Checker before every share, every export to PDF, and before every presentation.

Common error: Only running the Accessibility Checker at the very end of a complex presentation. Fix: Run it periodically as you build the presentation, especially after adding images or complex slide structures.

Step 10: Save Accessible PDFs from PowerPoint

When exporting a presentation to PDF for sharing, preserve the accessibility tags.

How to export:

1. Go to File > Save As or Export
2. Choose PDF (.pdf)
3. Click More options > Options
4. Check Document structure tags for accessibility
5. Click OK, then Save

Do NOT use Print to PDF — this strips all accessibility tags.

After exporting, open in Adobe Acrobat Pro and run the Accessibility Full Check to verify and fix any remaining issues.

Common Errors and How to Fix Them

Error — Impact — Fix

Custom text boxes on blank slides — Screen reader reads in wrong order — Recreate using built-in slide layouts

Slides with no title — Screen reader users cannot navigate — Add unique, descriptive title to every slide

Visuals with no alt text — Blind users miss the content — Right-click > Edit Alt Text > add description
Reading order not set — Content read in wrong sequence — Open Selection Pane and set correct order
Low contrast text over images — Low-vision users cannot read text — Add solid or semi-transparent overlay behind text
Color-only data labels in charts — Colorblind users cannot interpret chart — Add text labels or patterns in addition to color
Flashing or rapid animations — Can trigger seizures — Remove strobing effects; use simple Appear/Fade
No captions on embedded video — Deaf/HoH users miss audio content — Add captions to video before embedding
Print to PDF export — Creates inaccessible image-based PDF — Use File > Save As > PDF > check structure tags
Very small font sizes (under 18pt) — Hard to read for low-vision users — Increase font size; use 18pt or larger for slides

Where to Get Help

- Microsoft PowerPoint Accessibility Documentation: <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/make-your-powerpoint-presentations-accessible-to-people-with-disabilities-6f7772b2-2f33-4bd2-8ca7-dae3b2b3ef25>
- WebAIM PowerPoint Accessibility: <https://webaim.org/techniques/powerpoint/>
- Section508.gov — Creating Accessible Presentations: <https://www.section508.gov/create/presentations/>
- Colour Contrast Analyser: <https://www.tpgi.com/color-contrast-checker/>
- One DSD Equity Team: Contact for accessibility review support

Connection to DSD's Six Program Goals

DSD Program Goal — PowerPoint Accessibility Connection

Equity and inclusion — Presentations shared with or about people DSD serves must be accessible to all
Cultural and linguistic competence — Language identification and multilingual slide content requires proper settings
Olmstead implementation — Training about community integration must itself be accessible
Workforce development — Staff with disabilities need accessible training materials and meeting slides
Quality improvement — Accessible presentations are better structured and more effective for all audiences
Leadership and accountability — Leaders presenting to DSD staff model accessibility practices with every slide deck

Sources

- Microsoft — Make your PowerPoint presentations accessible: <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/make-your-powerpoint-presentations-accessible-to-people-with-disabilities-6f7772b2-2f33-4bd2-8ca7-dae3b2b3ef25>
- Section508.gov — Creating Accessible Presentations: <https://www.section508.gov/create/presentations/>
- WebAIM — Microsoft PowerPoint Accessibility: <https://webaim.org/techniques/powerpoint/>
- Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.2, W3C, December 2024: <https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG22/>

- DOJ ADA Title Two Web Accessibility Final Rule, April 2024: <https://www.ada.gov/resources/2024-03-08-web-rule/>

Accessibility is everyone's responsibility. When in doubt, ask people with disabilities what works for them.

Use this checklist whenever you create a presentation for a staff meeting, training, public event, or online sharing — including presentations that will be exported to PDF or recorded as video.

Use built-in slide layouts (not custom text boxes dropped onto blank slides)

Set the reading order for each slide

Make animations and transitions keyboard-accessible and avoid strobing effects

Use Built-In Slide Layouts (Not Custom Text Boxes)

Set the Reading Order for Each Slide

Select Edit Alt Text

For consultant operations, use Microsoft PowerPoint Accessibility Checklist to prepare the agenda, participation methods, access supports, decision points, and follow-up; adapt the guidance to the request, test assumptions, document advice, and route authority questions. Start by use this checklist whenever you create a presentation for a staff meeting, training, public event, or online sharing — including presentations that will be exported to PDF or recorded as video.

Do not replace official legal, policy, clinical, supervisory, program, or Tribal authority.

Do not infer an individual's identity, preferences, needs, or experience from group-level information.

State uncertainty, use current authoritative sources, and escalate when the decision exceeds the user's role.

A step-by-step checklist for creating accessible Microsoft PowerPoint presentations. This checklist covers slide layouts versus custom text boxes, reading order, alt text, slide titles, color contrast, animations and transitions, accessible video and audio embeds, and how to use the built-in Accessibility Checker. It also covers the most common errors and how to fix them. Step 1. Use this checklist whenever you create a presentation for a staff meeting, training, public event, or online sharing — including presentations that will be exported to PDF or recorded as video. Step 2. Use built-in slide layouts (not custom text boxes dropped onto blank slides) Step 3. Set the reading order for each slide Step 4. Make animations and transitions keyboard-accessible and avoid strobing effects Step 5. Use Built-In Slide Layouts (Not Custom Text Boxes) Step 6. Set the Reading Order for Each Slide Step 7. Select Edit Alt Text