

Microsoft Word Accessibility Checklist

A step-by-step checklist for creating accessible Microsoft Word documents. This checklist covers every major accessibility requirement — from document title and language settings through heading structure, images, tables, links, color contrast, and the built-in Accessibility Checker. It also covers how to export accessible PDFs from Word.

Content

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What this is

A step-by-step checklist for creating accessible Microsoft Word documents. This checklist covers every major accessibility requirement — from document title and language settings through heading structure, images, tables, links, color contrast, and the built-in Accessibility Checker. It also covers how to export accessible PDFs from Word.

Use this checklist every time you create or update a Word document that will be shared with colleagues, clients, or the public — including reports, policy summaries, training materials, meeting agendas, and letters.

Why this matters for DSD

Word documents are the most common document format in DSD operations. Policy summaries, training materials, case-related letters, meeting agendas, and reporting templates are all typically created in Word. If these documents are not accessible:

- Staff and clients who use screen readers (due to vision disabilities) cannot read them
- People using Braille displays cannot navigate them
- People with low vision who use magnification software encounter poorly structured content
- People with cognitive disabilities encounter dense, unstructured walls of text
- When documents are converted to PDF for sharing, the inaccessibility carries over

Under the DOJ's 2024 Title II ADA Final Rule, documents — including Word files — that provide access to programs or services must meet WCAG 2.1 Level AA. DSD's own Resolution 26 sets WCAG 2.2 AA as the operating standard. The two frameworks overlap significantly for documents; this checklist addresses both.

The core requirements

Accessible Word documents must:

1. Have a meaningful document title
2. Have the correct language set
3. Use built-in heading styles (not manually bolded text)
4. Include alt text for every informational image
5. Use accessible table structure with header rows
6. Use built-in list formatting (not manually typed dashes or bullets)
7. Use descriptive, meaningful link text
8. Meet color contrast requirements (4.5:1 for text)
9. Not rely on color alone to convey information
10. Pass the built-in Accessibility Checker

Step-by-Step Checklist

Step 1: Set the Document Title

A document title is different from the file name. It is the name embedded in the document properties that screen readers announce when the document opens.

How to set it:

1. Go to File > Info
2. In the Properties panel (right side), find Title
3. Type a clear, descriptive title (example: "2025 DSD Equitable Engagement Plan")
4. Click back into the document to save

Why it matters: Screen readers announce the document title when a user opens the file. A title of "Document1" or a vague file name tells blind and low-vision users nothing about what they are reading.

Common error: Leaving the title blank or using the file name. Fix: Always set a meaningful title in document properties before sharing.

Step 2: Set the Document Language

Word uses language settings to tell screen readers how to pronounce content. Without it, a screen reader may use the wrong language synthesizer.

How to set it:

1. Select all text (Ctrl+A)
2. Go to Review > Language > Set Proofing Language
3. Select the primary language (e.g., English (United States))
4. Click OK
5. If the document contains sections in another language, select that text separately and set its language

Why it matters: Screen readers switch pronunciation engines based on language settings. Incorrect settings cause mispronunciation that makes content incomprehensible for blind users.

Common error: Using the default language setting without verifying it. Fix: Always verify and set language explicitly, especially in documents created from templates.

Step 3: Use Built-In Heading Styles

Headings are the most important navigation tool for screen reader users. Screen readers can jump from heading to heading, allowing users to scan and navigate a document without reading every word.

What this means in practice:

- Do not create the appearance of a heading by making text bold and large
- Use the built-in styles in the Home tab: Heading 1, Heading 2, Heading 3, etc.
- Use only one Heading 1 per document (the document title, if it is in the body)
- Use Heading 2 for major sections, Heading 3 for subsections
- Do not skip heading levels (do not jump from Heading 1 to Heading 3)
- Keep heading text concise and descriptive — screen reader users hear the heading and decide whether to jump into that section

How to apply a heading style:

1. Select the heading text
2. In the Home tab > Styles group, click the appropriate heading level

Keyboard shortcut: Alt+H, L to open the Styles gallery

Why it matters: Without headings, a screen reader user must listen to every word of a long document to find what they need. With headings, they can navigate directly to the section they want. This is the same as visual skimming for sighted readers.

Common error: Manually formatting text to look like a heading (bold, large font, centered) without using the Heading style. Fix: Select all such text and apply the appropriate Heading style from the Styles gallery.

Step 4: Add Alt Text to All Images

Every image, chart, SmartArt graphic, shape, screenshot, and embedded visual in a Word document needs alternative text (alt text) unless it is purely decorative.

How to add alt text:

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

Writing good alt text:

- Be concise — most alt text should be one or two sentences
- Describe what the image shows and why it is there (its purpose in the document)
- Do not begin with "image of" or "picture of" — screen readers already announce it is an image
- For charts and graphs: describe the key finding or trend, not just "a bar chart"
- Good: "Bar chart showing program enrollment increased by 22% between 2022 and 2025"
- Not helpful: "Bar chart"
- For images that contain text: repeat the text in the alt text field
- For logos: describe the logo and the organization it represents

Why it matters: Screen reader users cannot see images. Alt text provides the equivalent information in a form they can access. Missing alt text leaves a gap in the document's content.

Common error: No alt text on charts, screenshots, or icons. Fix: Run the Accessibility Checker (Step 10) to find all images missing alt text, then add descriptions.

Step 5: Make Tables Accessible

Tables are challenging for screen readers when they are complex or improperly structured. The key principle: use tables only for tabular data, and keep them simple.

Requirements:

- Every table must have a header row that labels the columns
- Do not use merged cells, split cells, or nested tables — they break the reading order for screen readers
- Do not use tables for layout (positioning content visually) — use column layouts, text boxes, or section breaks instead
- Avoid fixed-width tables when documents will be viewed on mobile devices
- Ensure tables have enough contrast between cell backgrounds and text

How to set a header row:

1. Click anywhere in the table
2. Go to the Table Design tab
3. In Table Style Options, check Header Row
4. In the first row, type your column headings

How to repeat headers on multiple pages:

1. Select the header row
2. Go to Table > Properties > Row tab

3. Check Repeat as header row at the top of each page

Why it matters: Without a header row, screen readers read tables cell by cell without context. A user in cell D4 of a table has no way to know which column or row they are in. Header rows give that context.

Common error: Using a table for visual layout (e.g., putting two images side by side). Fix: Use columns, text boxes, or side-by-side paragraph layout instead.

Step 6: Use Built-In List Formatting

Lists are one of the most effective accessibility and plain-language tools. But lists made by manually typing dashes, asterisks, or numbers are not recognized as lists by screen readers.

How to create accessible lists:

1. Click where you want the list to start
2. Go to Home tab
3. Click Bullets (for unordered lists) or Numbering (for ordered lists)
4. Type each list item and press Enter

Requirements:

- Use numbered lists when the order matters (steps, instructions, ranked items)
- Use bulleted lists when the order does not matter
- Do not insert a plain paragraph in the middle of a list — some screen readers will miscount the items
- Keep list items parallel in structure (all start with a verb, or all are noun phrases, etc.)

Why it matters: Screen readers announce "list of N items" when entering a properly formatted list and "leaving list" when exiting. This orientation helps users understand structure. Manual lists (dashes, asterisks) are read as individual characters or plain text with no structural signal.

Common error: Creating lists by typing dashes or numbers manually. Fix: Delete the manual formatting and use the built-in Bullets or Numbering buttons.

Step 7: Write Descriptive Link Text

Every hyperlink in a Word document must convey the purpose of the link from the link text alone — without needing to read the surrounding sentence.

Requirements:

- Do not use vague link text: "click here," "learn more," "see this," "read more"
- Do not use raw URLs as link text unless the URL itself is meaningful: "<https://www.section508.gov/develop/universal-design/>" is not meaningful link text
- Do use the destination's title or a clear description: "Download the WCAG 2.2 Checklist (PDF, 12 pages)"
- Add ScreenTips for additional context when helpful

How to edit link text:

1. Select the text you want to link
2. Go to Insert > Link (or right-click > Edit Hyperlink)
3. In Text to display, type the descriptive text
4. In Address, paste the URL
5. Click OK

Why it matters: Screen reader users often browse links as a list, out of context from the surrounding text. When every link says "click here," users cannot determine where each link goes. Descriptive link text is also a plain-language practice that benefits all readers.

Common error: Pasting raw URLs as link text. Fix: Always replace the raw URL with a descriptive phrase that indicates the destination.

Step 8: Meet Color Contrast Requirements

Text must have sufficient contrast against its background to be readable by people with low vision and color vision deficiencies.

WCAG 2.2 AA requirements:

- Normal text (under 18pt regular or 14pt bold): 4.5:1 contrast ratio minimum
- Large text (18pt regular or 14pt bold and above): 3:1 contrast ratio minimum
- UI components and graphical objects: 3:1 contrast ratio minimum

Common high-risk situations in Word documents:

- Light gray text on white background (common in templates)
- Yellow or light text on white backgrounds
- Red or green used for status — many people with color blindness cannot distinguish these
- Colored text in tables with colored cell backgrounds

How to check contrast:

1. Use the free Colour Contrast Analyser tool (<https://www.tpgi.com/color-contrast-checker/>)
2. Or run the Accessibility Checker (Step 10), which flags some contrast issues

How to fix contrast problems:

1. Select the text with insufficient contrast
2. Go to Home > Font Color
3. Choose a darker color that meets the 4.5:1 ratio
4. Or change the background to a lighter or darker shade

Requirements beyond contrast:

- Do not use color as the only way to convey information (e.g., "items marked in red are overdue")
- Add a secondary indicator: bold text, an icon, a label, a note

Common error: Using light gray text (#999999 on white) for captions or secondary information. This common design choice fails the 4.5:1 requirement. Fix: Use #767676 or darker on white.

Step 9: Create Accessible PDFs from Word

When you export a Word document to PDF, the accessibility of the PDF depends on the accessibility of the source Word document. Fixing accessibility in Word is easier and more reliable than fixing it in Acrobat after the fact.

Best practice: Make the Word document fully accessible before exporting.

How to export an accessible PDF from Word:

1. Go to File > Save As or Export
2. Choose PDF (.pdf) as the format
3. Click More options (or Options in the dialog)
4. Check Document structure tags for accessibility
5. Check Document properties (if available)
6. Click OK, then Save

Do NOT use Print to PDF — this method strips accessibility tags and creates an image-based PDF that is not accessible.

After exporting:

- Open the PDF in Adobe Acrobat Pro
- Run the Accessibility Full Check (Tools > Accessibility > Full Check)
- Fix any remaining issues in Acrobat
- Verify tab order in forms
- Add bookmarks if the document is long (Acrobat can create them from heading structure)

Why it matters: A "Save As PDF" export that does not preserve tags creates a PDF that is essentially a picture of the document — screen readers cannot read it, and it cannot be navigated by keyboard.

Common error: Using Print to PDF or exporting without checking the "document structure tags" option. Fix: Always use File > Save As or Export > PDF, and always check the accessibility tagging option.

Step 10: Run the Built-In Accessibility Checker

Microsoft Word's built-in Accessibility Checker runs automatically in the background and can also be run manually. It finds the most common accessibility errors and explains how to fix them.

How to run it:

1. Go to Review > Check Accessibility
2. The Accessibility pane opens on the right
3. Review each item under Errors, Warnings, and Tips

4. Click each item to jump to its location in the document
5. Follow the suggested fixes

What the Accessibility Checker finds:

- Missing alt text on images
- Tables with no header row
- Merged or split cells in tables
- Insufficient color contrast
- Missing document title
- Slides with no reading order (in PowerPoint)
- Links with non-descriptive text

What the Accessibility Checker does NOT find:

- All heading structure problems (it checks for some but not all)
- Language settings issues
- Quality of alt text (it checks for presence, not meaning)
- All color-coding problems
- Reading level or plain language issues

The Accessibility Checker is a starting point, not the finish line. Run it, fix all Errors and most Warnings, and then do a manual review using the checklist steps above.

Common error: Treating a green "no issues" result as full accessibility compliance. Fix: Use the Accessibility Checker as a baseline, then manually check headings, language, alt text quality, and link text.

Step 11: Spacing and Typography for Accessibility

Typography choices affect readability for people with dyslexia, low vision, and cognitive disabilities.

Recommendations:

- Use sans-serif fonts: Arial, Calibri, Verdana — these are generally more readable on screen than serif fonts
- Set body text at 11–12pt minimum; 14pt for materials intended for older adults or people with low vision
- Set line spacing to at least 1.15 — 1.5 is better for readability
- Leave at least 6–12pt spacing between paragraphs
- Do not justify text (full justification creates uneven word spacing that is difficult for people with dyslexia)
- Use left-aligned text for body content
- Avoid ALL CAPS for body text — use bold for emphasis instead
- Avoid excessive italics — reserve for titles, terms, or occasional emphasis

Common Errors and How to Fix Them

Error — Impact — Fix

No document title in properties — Screen reader announces file name — File > Info > Properties > set Title

Language not set — Wrong pronunciation for screen readers — Review > Language > Set Proofing Language

Headings created by bold+large font — No navigation structure for screen readers — Apply built-in Heading styles from the Styles gallery

Images with no alt text — Screen reader users miss the content — Right-click image > Edit Alt Text > add description

Merged cells in tables — Screen reader loses count in table — Remove merged cells; use simple table structure

No table header row — Screen reader cannot identify columns — Table Design > Table Style Options > Header Row

Non-descriptive links ("click here") — Screen reader link list is meaningless — Rewrite link text to describe destination

Light gray or low-contrast text — Text invisible to low-vision users — Darken text color to achieve 4.5:1 ratio

Color used alone for status — Colorblind users miss meaning — Add bold, icons, or text labels alongside color

"Print to PDF" export — Creates inaccessible image-based PDF — Use File > Save As > PDF > check structure tags

Manually typed dashes as bullets — Not recognized as lists by screen readers — Use built-in Bullets/Numbering formatting

Where to Get Help

- Microsoft Accessibility Documentation: <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/make-your-word-documents-accessible-to-people-with-disabilities-d9bf3683-87ac-47ea-b91a-78dcacb3c66d>
- WebAIM Word Accessibility Guide: <https://webaim.org/techniques/word/>
- Section508.gov Word Accessibility: <https://www.section508.gov/create/documents/>
- Colour Contrast Analyser (free tool): <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 — Word Accessibility Connection

Equity and inclusion — Every document must be readable by staff and clients with disabilities

Cultural and linguistic competence — Language settings enable screen readers to serve multilingual users correctly

Olmstead implementation — Plain, accessible documents support people exercising informed choices

Workforce development — Accessible training materials support staff with vision, cognitive, and motor disabilities

Quality improvement — Accessible documents are better structured and easier for all readers

Leadership and accountability — Leaders model accessible document practices and require them from their teams

Sources

- Microsoft — Make your Word documents accessible to people with disabilities: <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/make-your-word-documents-accessible-to-people-with-disabilities-d9bf3683-87ac-47ea-b91a-78dcacb3c66d>
- Section508.gov — Creating Accessible Documents: <https://www.section508.gov/create/documents/>
- WebAIM — Microsoft Word Accessibility: <https://webaim.org/techniques/word/>
- 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/>
- One DSD Action Plan v3.1, Resolution 26

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

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Use built-in heading styles (not manually bolded text)

Include alt text for every informational image

Use accessible table structure with header rows

Use built-in list formatting (not manually typed dashes or bullets)

Use descriptive, meaningful link text

Set the Document Title

For consultant operations, use Microsoft Word Accessibility Checklist to draft, structure, test, and distribute communication in usable formats; adapt the guidance to the request, test assumptions, document advice, and route authority questions. Start by use this checklist every time you create or update a Word document that will be shared with colleagues, clients, or the public — including reports, policy summaries, training materials, meeting agendas, and letters.

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.

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