

PDF Accessibility Checklist

A step-by-step checklist for creating and verifying accessible PDF documents. This checklist covers tagged PDFs, reading order, alternative text, form accessibility, language settings, bookmarks, table structure, and how to use the Acrobat Pro Accessibility Checker. It also explains the difference between converting an accessible Word document to PDF versus building an accessible PDF from scratch, and the relative advantages of each approach.

Content

PDF Accessibility Checklist

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What this is

A step-by-step checklist for creating and verifying accessible PDF documents. This checklist covers tagged PDFs, reading order, alternative text, form accessibility, language settings, bookmarks, table structure, and how to use the Acrobat Pro Accessibility Checker. It also explains the difference between converting an accessible Word document to PDF versus building an accessible PDF from scratch, and the relative advantages of each approach.

Use this checklist whenever you create a PDF that will be shared with colleagues, clients, or the public — including fact sheets, reports, policy documents, forms, and training materials.

Why this matters for DSD

PDF is the most widely used format for sharing finalized documents in government and human services. DSD shares PDFs for intake forms, policy summaries, program guides, reports, and public-facing materials. If a PDF is not accessible:

- People who use screen readers (due to visual disabilities) may hear garbled text, incorrect reading order, or silence
- People who use Braille displays cannot navigate untagged PDFs
- People who use keyboard navigation cannot tab through forms or navigate headings
- Scanned PDFs (image-only PDFs) are effectively invisible to all assistive technology

Under the DOJ's 2024 Title II ADA Final Rule, PDFs that provide access to programs or services must be accessible. DSD's Resolution 26 requires WCAG 2.2 AA compliance, which for PDFs means meeting the PDF/UA standard (ISO 14289) and WCAG success criteria applicable to documents.

Critical distinction: Not all PDFs are created equal. A PDF exported from a properly accessible Word document is far more accessible than a PDF created by scanning a paper document. A scanned PDF is an image — it has no text that can be read, only a picture of text.

The core requirements

Accessible PDFs must:

1. Be tagged (contain document structure tags)
2. Have a logical reading order
3. Include alternative text for all images and non-text content
4. Have the document language identified
5. Have a meaningful document title
6. Include bookmarks for navigation in longer documents (15+ pages)
7. Have accessible table structure (tagged rows and header cells)
8. Have all form fields labeled and logically tabbed
9. Not be security-restricted in ways that block assistive technology
10. Pass the Acrobat Pro Accessibility Full Check

Step-by-Step Checklist

Step 1: Understand What "Tagged PDF" Means

PDF tags are the structural backbone of an accessible PDF. They work like HTML tags in a web page — they tell screen readers what each element is (heading, paragraph, list item, table cell, image, form field) and in what order to read them.

An untagged PDF:

- Has no structural information
- Screen readers must guess the reading order from visual position (often incorrectly)
- Cannot be navigated by headings, tables, or form fields
- Cannot be reflowed for readability on mobile or zoom

A tagged PDF:

- Has a tag tree defining every element's type and reading order
- Can be navigated by headings, lists, tables, and links
- Can be reflowed on mobile and zoom settings
- Can be read accurately by screen readers and Braille displays

How to check if a PDF is tagged:

1. Open the PDF in Acrobat Pro
2. Go to File > Properties > Description tab
3. Under Security (or Description), look for "Tagged PDF: Yes"
4. Or run the Accessibility Checker — it will flag "Tagged PDF" as an error if untagged

Common error: Sharing a PDF without checking whether it is tagged. Fix: Always verify tagged status before distributing any PDF.

Step 2: Create Accessible PDFs — The Best Method

The best method for creating accessible PDFs is to start with an accessible Word (or other Office) document and export it as a tagged PDF.

This approach works because:

- Word's heading styles become PDF heading tags
- Word's table structure becomes PDF table tags
- Alt text in Word becomes alt text in the PDF
- Language settings carry over
- Lists become tagged list items

Step-by-step export from Word:

1. Make the Word document fully accessible (complete the Word Accessibility Checklist first)
2. Go to File > Save As or Export > choose PDF
3. Click More options > Options
4. Check Document structure tags for accessibility
5. Check Document properties (to carry over title, language, author)
6. Click OK > Save
7. Open the resulting PDF in Acrobat Pro and run the Full Accessibility Check (Step 9)

Do NOT use these methods:

- Print to PDF — strips all tags; creates an image-based PDF
- Screenshot to PDF — creates a pure image; completely inaccessible
- Scanning a paper document to PDF — creates an image-based PDF; must be OCR'd and then tagged

Step 3: Fix Scanned or Untagged PDFs

If you have a PDF that was created by scanning or is otherwise untagged, you can still make it accessible — but it requires more work.

For scanned PDFs (image-only):

1. Open in Acrobat Pro
2. Go to Tools > Scan & OCR > Recognize Text
3. Run OCR to convert the image to searchable text
4. Then proceed with the tagging process below

For untagged PDFs:

1. Open in Acrobat Pro
2. Go to Tools > Accessibility > Make Accessible (Action Wizard)
3. Follow the guided workflow
4. Or use Tools > Accessibility > Add Tags to Document for a faster (less controlled) approach
5. After auto-tagging, use the Reading Order tool to verify and correct the tag structure

Note: Automated OCR and auto-tagging are starting points, not finished products. Always verify the result manually.

Step 4: Set Reading Order

Even in tagged PDFs, the reading order may not match the visual presentation — especially in multi-column layouts, sidebars, callout boxes, or complex table-heavy documents.

How to check and fix reading order in Acrobat Pro:

1. Go to View > Show/Hide > Navigation Panels > Tags
2. Open the Tags panel — this shows the tag tree in reading order
3. Or go to Tools > Accessibility > Reading Order
4. Use the Touch Up Reading Order tool to verify the sequence
5. Drag tags in the Tags panel to reorder them

What good reading order looks like:

- Document heading, then subheadings and body text in logical top-to-bottom, left-to-right order
- For multi-column layouts: first column complete, then second column — not alternating line by line
- Sidebars and callout boxes either integrated logically or read as distinct sections
- Page numbers, headers, and footers either at the end or marked as artifacts

Marking page furniture as artifacts:

Headers, footers, page numbers, and decorative elements that are not content should be marked as "artifacts" so screen readers skip them.

1. Open the Tags panel
2. Find the element (usually a tag labeled "<Sect>," "<P>," or similar)
3. Right-click > Change Tag to Artifact

Common error: Multi-column documents read left-to-right across both columns line by line, rather than completing the left column before the right. Fix: Use the Touch Up Reading Order tool to set the correct reading sequence.

Step 5: Add Alt Text to All Images

Images in a PDF must have alternative text in the PDF tag structure.

How to add alt text in Acrobat Pro:

1. Open the Tags panel (View > Show/Hide > Navigation Panels > Tags)
2. Find the image tag (usually labeled <Figure>)
3. Right-click > Properties
4. In the Tag tab, type the alt text in the Alternate Text field
5. Click Close

For decorative images:

Mark them as artifacts (see Step 4) rather than adding empty alt text. This tells screen readers to skip them entirely.

Writing alt text for PDFs:

- Same principles as Word: concise, descriptive, conveys the image's purpose
- For charts and graphs: describe the key finding and data points
- For logos: describe the organization and what the logo represents
- For decorative dividers or background images: mark as artifacts

Common error: Images in a PDF tagged as <Figure> with no alt text attribute, causing screen readers to say "image" or read the file path. Fix: Use the Tags panel to add alt text to every <Figure> tag.

Step 6: Set the Document Language

The document language tells screen readers which pronunciation engine to use.

How to set in Acrobat Pro:

1. Go to File > Properties > Advanced tab
2. Under Reading Options, find Language
3. Select the document's primary language from the dropdown
4. Click OK

For documents with content in multiple languages:

You can set language at the tagged element level:

1. In the Tags panel, select the element with different language content
2. Right-click > Properties > Tag tab
3. Set the Language field for that element

Common error: Language field left blank or set to the wrong language. Fix: Always set the document language in File > Properties > Advanced.

Step 7: Set the Document Title

The document title in the PDF's metadata is what screen readers announce when the file opens.

How to set in Acrobat Pro:

1. Go to File > Properties > Description tab
2. In the Title field, type a clear, descriptive title
3. Click OK

How to make Acrobat show the title (not the file name):

1. Go to File > Properties > Initial View tab
2. Under Show, select Document Title
3. Click OK

Common error: The title field is blank, so screen readers announce the file name instead. Fix: Always set the Title in File > Properties > Description.

Step 8: Add Bookmarks for Navigation

Bookmarks in Acrobat are the equivalent of a clickable table of contents. For documents longer than 15 pages, bookmarks are essential for navigation.

How to create bookmarks from Word headings:

When you export an accessible Word document with heading styles to PDF (using the proper export method in Step 2), Word headings automatically become PDF bookmarks. No additional work needed.

How to manually add bookmarks in Acrobat Pro:

1. Navigate to the page/section you want to bookmark
2. Go to View > Show/Hide > Navigation Panels > Bookmarks
3. Click the New Bookmark icon
4. Name the bookmark to match the section heading

Bookmark structure:

- Nested bookmarks reflect heading hierarchy (Heading 1 ! Heading 2 ! Heading 3)
- Bookmark names should match the visible headings in the document

Common error: A long PDF with no bookmarks, requiring users to scroll through the entire document. Fix: Export from Word with heading styles to automatically generate bookmarks, or add them manually in Acrobat.

Step 9: Ensure Table Accessibility

Tables in PDFs need tagged structure to be accessible. The table tag structure must include <Table>, <TR> (row), <TH> (header cell), and <TD> (data cell) tags.

If converting from Word:

Tables with properly set header rows in Word will generally convert to tagged tables in PDF. Verify by opening the Tags panel and checking the table structure.

How to verify table tags in Acrobat Pro:

1. Open the Tags panel
2. Find the <Table> tag
3. Expand it to see <TR> tags for rows
4. Within rows, verify <TH> for header cells and <TD> for data cells
5. Header cells should have Scope attributes set to "Column" or "Row"

How to set the scope attribute:

1. In the Tags panel, select a <TH> tag
2. Right-click > Properties > Tag tab
3. In the Attribute field, find or add: Scope = Column or Scope = Row

Common error: Table cells all tagged as <TD> with no <TH> tags — screen readers cannot tell which cells are headers. Fix: Rework the table in the source document with proper header rows, then re-export.

Step 10: Make PDF Forms Accessible

PDF forms must be keyboard-operable, properly labeled, and logically tabbed.

Requirements:

- Every form field has a tooltip that describes what should be entered ("First Name," "Date of Birth," "Check if you are applying for CDCS")
- Form fields can be reached and completed by keyboard only (Tab to navigate, Enter/Space to activate)
- The tab order matches the logical visual order of the form
- Required fields are identified as required (not only by color)
- Error messages appear as text near the field when a field is invalid

How to set field tooltips in Acrobat Pro:

1. Go to Tools > Prepare Form
2. Double-click a form field
3. In the General tab, enter a description in the Tooltip field
4. Click Close

How to set tab order:

1. Go to Page thumbnail panel
2. Right-click a page > Page Properties > Tab Order tab
3. Select Use Row Order or Use Column Order as appropriate
4. Or set Use Document Structure to follow the tag order

Common error: A fillable PDF form with no field tooltips — screen reader users hear "text field" with no indication of what to type. Fix: Add descriptive tooltips to every form field using Acrobat's Prepare Form tool.

Step 11: Check Security Settings

PDF security settings can block assistive technology from reading the document — even if the PDF is otherwise accessible.

Requirements:

- Do not apply security settings that prevent screen readers from accessing the text
- Acrobat allows you to restrict editing and printing while still allowing screen reader access

How to set accessible security in Acrobat Pro:

1. Go to File > Properties > Security tab
2. If using password security, click Change Permissions Password
3. In the permissions settings, ensure Enable text access for screen reader devices for the visually impaired is checked
4. Click OK

Common error: Applying "no printing, no copying" security settings that also block screen readers. Fix: Use the security options that allow screen reader access separately from editing/printing permissions.

Step 12: Run the Acrobat Pro Accessibility Full Check

Acrobat Pro's Accessibility Checker is the most comprehensive automated PDF accessibility tool available.

How to run it:

1. Go to Tools > Accessibility > Full Check (or Accessibility Check)
2. Select the checking options — check all categories
3. Click Start Checking
4. Review the results report
5. Click each issue to jump to it in the document
6. Use the Fix Accessibility tool or the Tags panel to address issues

What the Acrobat Full Check finds:

- Untagged or improperly tagged documents
- Missing document title and language
- Images without alt text
- Tables without proper header/data cell structure
- Forms without field labels
- Tab order problems
- Security settings blocking screen reader access
- Reading order issues

What it does NOT find:

- Quality of alt text
- Reading level or plain language issues
- All color contrast issues (especially over images)

- Whether the reading order is logically correct (only that tags exist)

Run the Full Check on every PDF before sharing. A "passes Full Check" result is a necessary but not sufficient condition for accessibility. Always follow up with manual testing.

Common Errors and How to Fix Them

Error — Impact — Fix

Untagged PDF — Screen reader cannot read the document — Add tags via Acrobat's Make Accessible tool, or re-export from accessible Word

Scanned (image-only) PDF — No text for screen readers to read — Run OCR in Acrobat Pro, then add tags

Incorrect reading order — Screen reader reads content in wrong sequence — Use Touch Up Reading Order tool in Acrobat

Images with no alt text — Blind users cannot access image content — Add alt text via Tags panel > Figure > Properties

Language not set — Wrong pronunciation in screen readers — File > Properties > Advanced > Language

No document title — Screen reader announces file name — File > Properties > Description > Title

No bookmarks in long PDF — Keyboard navigation through entire document required — Export from Word with headings, or add manually in Acrobat

Tables with no header tags — Screen readers cannot identify column headers — Fix in source document and re-export, or retag in Acrobat

Form fields with no tooltips — Screen reader says "text field" with no context — Prepare Form > double-click each field > Tooltip

Security blocking screen readers — Assistive technology cannot access document — File > Properties > Security > allow screen reader access

Where to Get Help

- Adobe PDF Accessibility Overview: <https://www.adobe.com/accessibility/pdf/pdf-accessibility-overview.html>
- Section508.gov — Creating Accessible PDFs: <https://www.section508.gov/create/pdfs/>
- WebAIM PDF Accessibility: <https://webaim.org/techniques/acrobat/>
- PDF/UA Standard (ISO 14289): <https://www.pdfa.org/>
- One DSD Equity Team: Contact for accessibility review support on complex forms

Connection to DSD's Six Program Goals

DSD Program Goal — PDF Accessibility Connection

Equity and inclusion — Client-facing PDFs (intake forms, program guides, notices) must be accessible to all

Cultural and linguistic competence — Language settings allow screen readers to serve multilingual clients correctly

Olmstead implementation — Information that enables people to exercise community choice must be accessible

Workforce development — Staff-facing PDFs (policy documents, training guides) must be accessible to staff with disabilities

Quality improvement — Accessible PDFs are structured documents — better organized and more professional

Leadership and accountability — Leaders ensure procurement of accessible PDF tools and require accessible PDFs from vendors

Sources

- Adobe PDF Accessibility Overview: <https://www.adobe.com/accessibility/pdf/pdf-accessibility-overview.html>
- Section508.gov — Creating Accessible PDFs: <https://www.section508.gov/create/pdfs/>
- WebAIM — PDF Accessibility: <https://webaim.org/techniques/acrobat/>
- 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/>
- PDF/UA Standard (ISO 14289-1), PDF Association: <https://www.pdfa.org/>

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

Use this checklist whenever you create a PDF that will be shared with colleagues, clients, or the public — including fact sheets, reports, policy documents, forms, and training materials.

Include alternative text for all images and non-text content

Include bookmarks for navigation in longer documents (15+ pages)

Create Accessible PDFs — The Best Method

Make the Word document fully accessible (complete the Word Accessibility Checklist first)

Check Document structure tags for accessibility

Check Document properties (to carry over title, language, author)

For consultant operations, use PDF 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 whenever you create a PDF that will be shared with colleagues, clients, or the public — including fact sheets, reports, policy documents, forms, and training materials.

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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