

Guidelines for document accessibility

For the District of Saanich



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How to use this document

This guide outlines best practices for creating accessible documents. It's here to help you build accessibility in from the start—removing the most significant barriers and making your content easier to use for everyone, including people who use assistive technologies.

While it doesn't cover everything needed for full accessibility conformance, these steps will take you a long way and can greatly reduce the time and cost if professional support is needed for more **complex** or **important** documents.

General

Design

- **“Bake in” accessibility from the start:** Like adding blueberries before baking muffins, build accessibility into your document from the beginning—not after it's finished.
- **Create simple documents:** Simple is better. Try to avoid complexity and stick to text, links, headings, alt text for images, and tables with one header row.



Text and layout

- **Use readable font sizes:** Aim for at least 18pt for presentations and 12pt for other documents to keep text easy to read.
- **Use 1.5 spacing:** Provide extra space between lines to help users with reading or cognitive disabilities track text more easily. Avoid exceeding 2.0 line spacing in most cases.
- **Stick to left-aligned:** It's the easiest to read as it keeps a consistent starting point for each line (for left-to-right languages like English).
- **Use short paragraphs:** Keep paragraphs short and focused on one idea. This creates white space, makes content easier to read, and encourages users to keep going. It's okay to use a one-sentence paragraph—just not too often.

Headings

- **Use built-in heading styles:** Don't just use large bold text.

- **Maintain a logical order:** Use Heading 1 for titles, Heading 2 for sections, Heading 3 for subsections. Don't skip levels.
- **Write concise, meaningful headings:** Make them clear and informative.
- **Customize styles:** Use the "Modify" option to adjust heading styles as needed.

Links

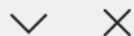
- **Insert built-in links:** Make sure links are interactable.
- **Use clear link text:** Describe the purpose or destination.
- **Avoid vague phrases:** Don't use "click here" or "read more."
- **Style links clearly:** Use both underline and colour to set them apart from surrounding text.

Images

- **Add alt text to meaningful images:** Not everyone can see images, so alt text lets screen readers describe them aloud.
- **Consider image descriptions:** You can also add an image description directly into your document to ensure its meaning is clear, especially for people who may struggle with ambiguity.
- **Mark decorative images appropriately:** If you're keeping the file in Word format, type "decorative" as the alt text or use brief alt text for images without meaningful content. If you're exporting to PDF, select "Mark as decorative" instead.



Alt Text



How would you describe this object and its context to someone who is blind or low vision?

- The subject(s) in detail
- The setting
- The actions or interactions
- Other relevant information

(1-2 detailed sentences recommended)

An ice cream scooper evenly portions batter into a muffin baking pan, each cup lined with a paper baking cup.

Generate alt text for me

☐ Mark as decorative 



Alt Text ✕

How would you describe this object and its context to someone who is blind or low vision?

- The subject(s) in detail
- The setting
- The actions or interactions
- Other relevant information

(1-2 detailed sentences recommended)

Three people in a ceramics studio, shaping clay at the Arts Centre at Cedar Hill. The bright space has tall ceilings and large windows letting in natural light.

Generate alt text for me

Approve alt text ☐

Select to verify that the alt text above is accurate.

Mark as decorative ☐

Decorative objects add visual interest but aren't informative (e.g. stylistic borders). People using screen readers will hear these are decorative so they know they aren't missing any important information.

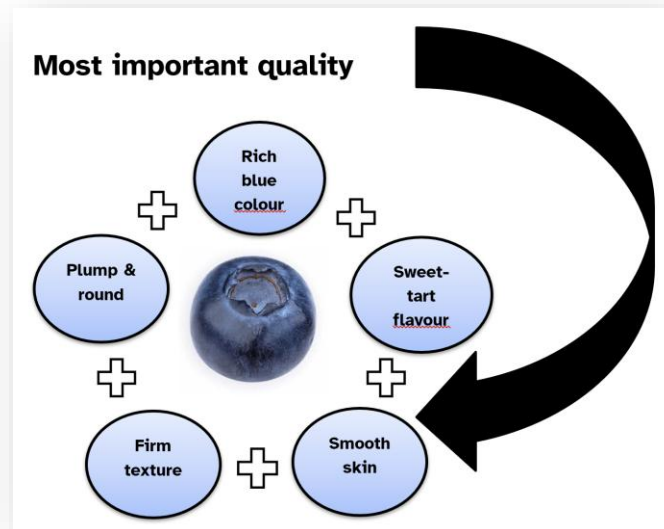
Tables

- **Use tables only for data:** Don't use them for layout.
- **Avoid complex tables:** Avoid merged cells, multiple header rows, or too many columns.
- **Split complex tables:** Break them into simpler, smaller tables.
- **Mark the top row as a header:** This helps screen readers read the table correctly.

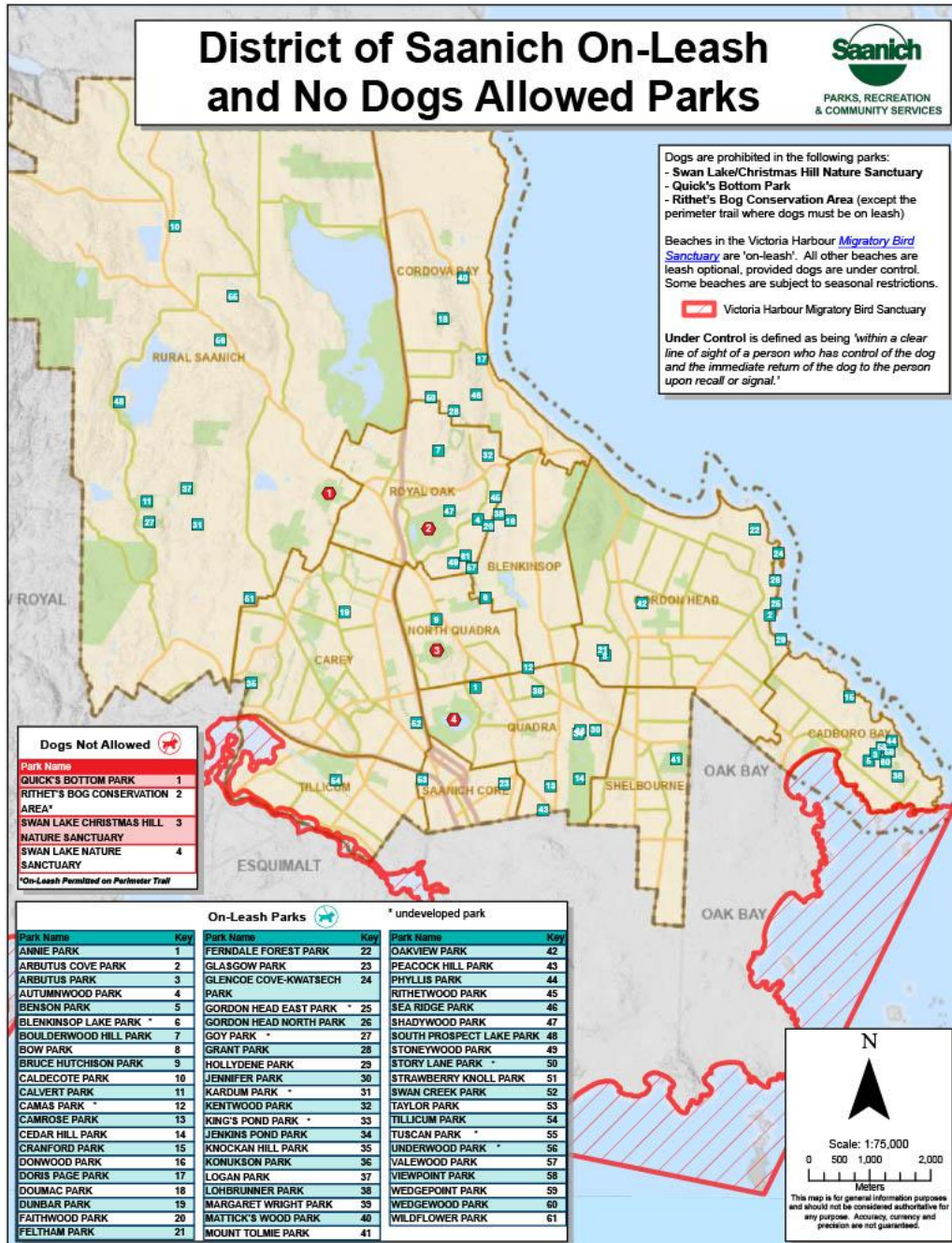
Emphasis

- **Use text-based emphasis:** For example, add "Important" before warning text—don't just use the colour red.
- **Don't rely on colour or symbols alone:** Make sure meaning is clear without visual cues.

Don't



Do



Colour

- **Don't rely on colour alone:** Avoid phrases like “the items in red.”
- **Add alternative cues:** Use text, labels, symbols, or alt text to convey meaning.
- **Use high contrast colours:** Check contrast ratios with tools like [WebAIM's contrast checker](#).

Contrast Checker

[Home](#) > [Resources](#) > Contrast Checker

Foreground

Hex Value
#4D0345

Color Picker

Alpha
1

Lightness

Background

Hex Value
#FFFFFF

Color Picker

Lightness

Contrast Ratio

14.84:1

[permalink](#)

Normal Text

WCAG AA: **Pass**

WCAG AAA: **Pass**

The five boxing wizards jump quickly.

Large Text

WCAG AA: **Pass**

WCAG AAA: **Pass**

The five boxing wizards jump quickly.

Graphical Objects and User Interface Components

WCAG AA: **Pass**

★

Text Input

Accessibility checkers

- **Use built-in Accessibility Checkers:** Available in Word, PowerPoint, Excel, and Adobe Acrobat.
- **Start with automated checks:** They help spot basic issues quickly.
- **Know their limits:** Manual review is still needed for full accessibility. Also, consider having someone else review materials to spot issues you may miss in your own work.

Accessibility Assistant

⌵ ×

Keep going!

Fix the remaining issues in the document to make it accessible to everyone.

Color and Contrast

Hard-to-read text contrast ✓

Media and Illustrations

Missing alt text 3

Tables

Missing table header ✓

Use of merged or split cells ✓

Document Structure

No headings in document ✓

Document Access

Restricted access ✓

Word

Headings

Proper headings help screen reader users navigate and make it easy to generate a table of contents.

- **Apply built-in heading styles:** Use built-in styles, not just bold text.
- **Don't skip heading levels:** Follow a logical order (e.g., Heading 2 after Heading 1).
- **Customize if needed:** You can adjust styles to match your design.

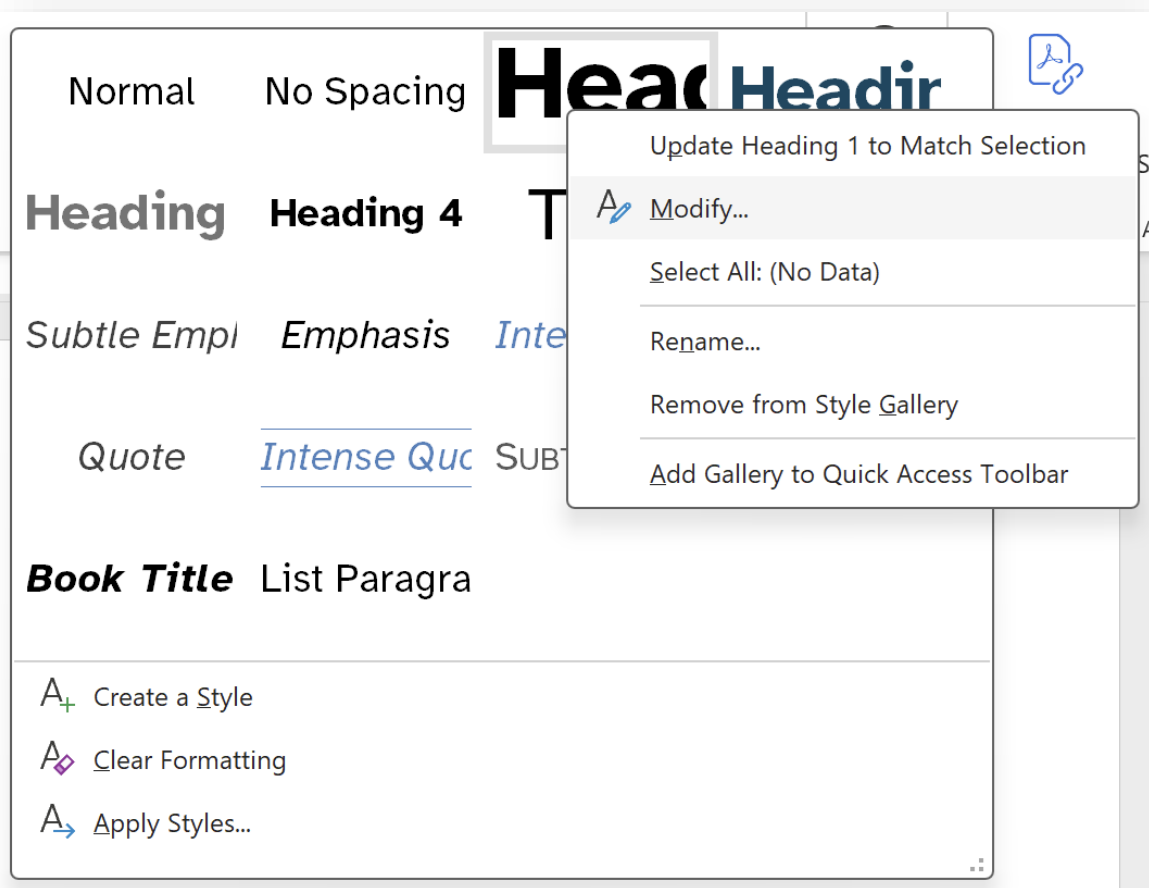
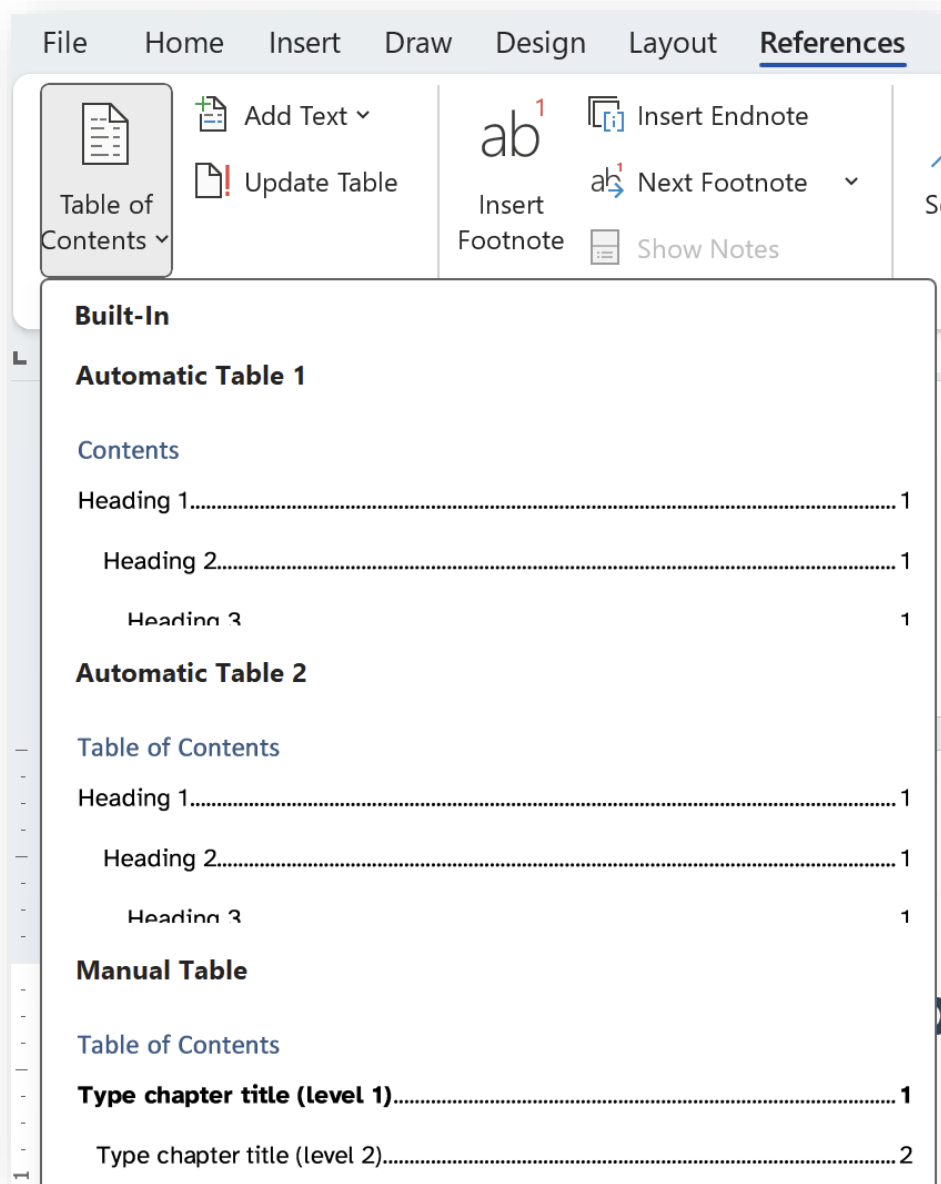


Table of contents

A table of contents gives readers an overview and helps with navigation, especially in long documents.

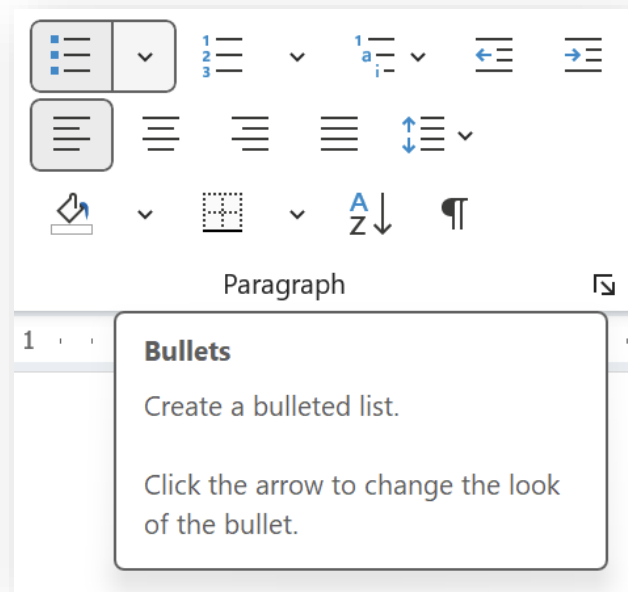
- **Use built-in headings to create a table of contents:** Add one via References > Table of Contents > Select a style.
- **Keep it updated:** Refresh it after editing to stay accurate.



Lists

Built-in lists communicate structure to assistive technologies effectively. They also group related items and layout content intuitively.

- **Insert built-in lists:** Use built-in list tools—not tabs, dashes, or manual numbering. This ensures screen readers can identify and navigate them effectively.



Accessibility Checker

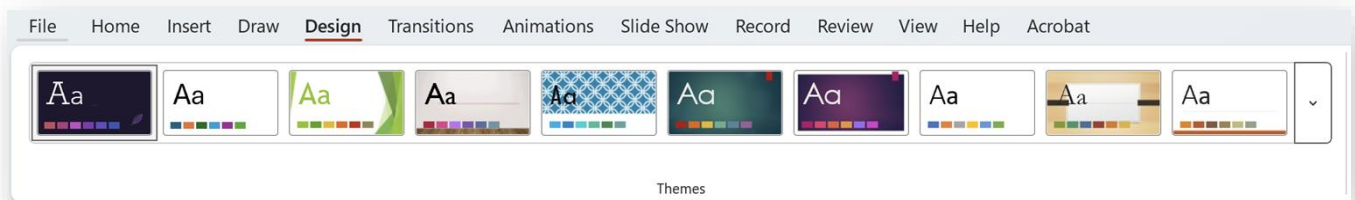
Use Word's Accessibility Checker:

1. **Open the tool:** Go to Review > Check Accessibility.
2. **Review results:** The task pane displays issues, explanations, and suggestions.
3. **Fix issues:** Follow the steps provided for each error, warning, or tip.
4. **Double check alt text:** Edit the automatic alt text to make it concise and meaningful.

PowerPoint

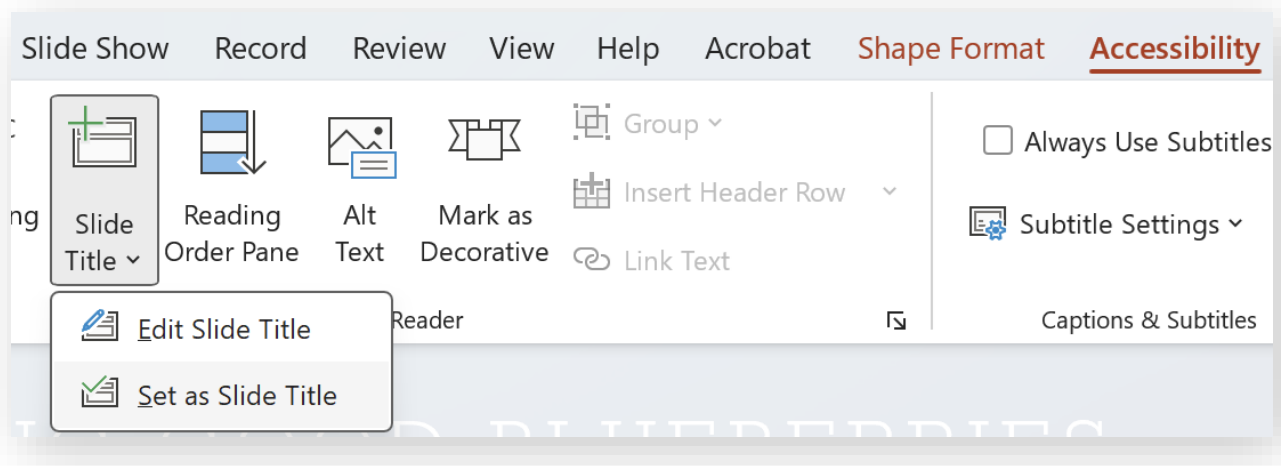
Design themes

- **Use built-in themes:** They ensure accessible structure and logical reading order.
- **Avoid complex designs:** Skip background patterns or gradients that reduce readability.
- **Modify colours in Slide Master:** Fix contrast or readability issues across the entire presentation.
- **Add content in logical order:** This maintains proper screen reader flow (e.g., title first, then body text).



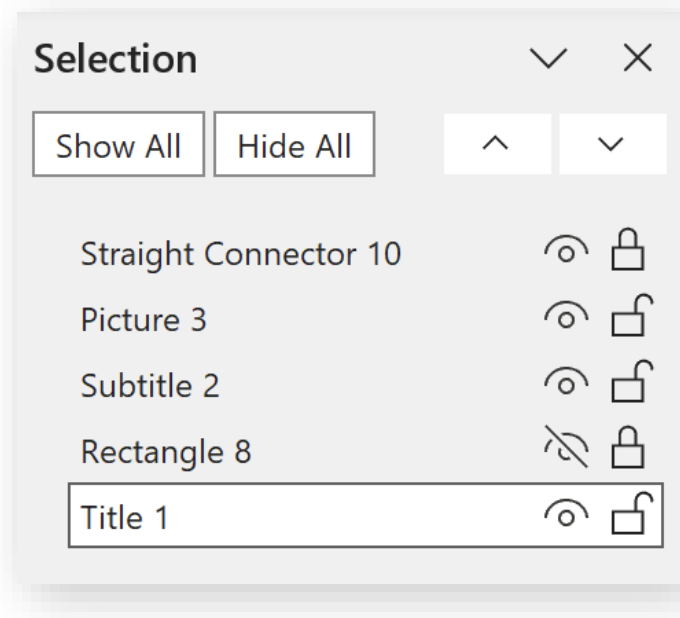
Slide titles

- **Use unique, informative slide titles:** This helps all users—especially screen reader users—navigate and understand the content (Review > Check Accessibility > Slide Title).



Reading order

- **Check the reading order:** Screen readers follow the order items were added to the slide—it might not be logical.
- **Fix it in the Selection Pane:** Reorder items so titles come first, followed by body text and other content.



Excel

Worksheet name

- **Use unique worksheet names:** Make them concise and descriptive to help users navigate efficiently.
- **Avoid defaults:** Replace names like “Sheet1” or “Sheet2.”
- **Delete unused sheets:** This keeps the workbook simple to use.

Cell A1

Cell A1 is especially important—it’s the first cell screen readers read. So using it well sets the tone for an accessible experience.

- **Use Cell A1 for orienting information:** For example, worksheet or workbook summaries, the number of sheets, or navigation instructions for complex workbooks (an index).
- **Avoid leaving Cell A1 blank:** This ensures screen readers announce the content on the worksheet.
- **Format text in Cell A1 using “Wrap Text”:** This keeps descriptions concise and readable without cropping or spilling out.

	A	B
1	The pie chart highlights how blueberry muffins are enjoyed across three main categories: homemade (50%), store-bought (30%), and those from cafes or bakeries (20%).	
2		

Text

- **Make text fully visible:** Avoid cropping or overflowing.
- **Keep content clear, readable, and accessible:** Users shouldn’t need to scroll or adjust settings to read it.
- **Use “Wrap Text” for longer text:** This keeps everything readable within the cell.
- **Resize columns and rows for shorter text:** This prevents cut-off content.

Data

- **Avoid blank or hidden content:** Screen readers can get stuck or skip important information.
- **Use only one blank row between tables:** More than one can confuse users.
- **Remove unused sheets:** This streamlines navigation.
- **Mark blank cells clearly:** Use text like “No data” instead of leaving them empty.
- **Avoid hidden rows and columns:** They’re hard to detect and can frustrate assistive tech users.

PDF

Many programs, like Word, can create tagged PDFs. PDF tags are behind-the-scenes labels that define a document’s structure (like headings, lists, and tables), so screen readers and other assistive technologies can interpret the content in a clear, logical, and accessible way.

However, even accessible source documents often need accessibility touch-ups after conversion to tagged PDFs. Adobe Acrobat Pro is required for this step. If not all employees have access, we recommend setting up a process so those with Acrobat Pro can review and fix tagged PDFs before they’re shared.

File formats

While PDFs remain popular for valid reasons, they're frequently less compatible with assistive technologies, don't adapt well to different screen sizes (often requiring excessive scrolling), and are more difficult and costly to maintain in an accessible way. Many positives of PDFs are also achievable (or better) using alternative formats, like Word.

Recognizing these challenges, accessibility leaders like the [UK Government are shifting away from providing PDFs](#) by default and instead publishing documents in more accessible formats. Supporting this approach, a 2019 [WebAIM survey of 1,568 screen reader users](#) found that most preferred Word documents over PDFs, both in terms of format (68.9% vs. 12.9%) and overall reading experience (60.6% vs. 17.3%)

- **Provide multiple formats:** PDFs are popular and offer design control but often don't work well with assistive technology. Include an accessible Word version (instead of or in addition to PDFs).
- **Only focus accessibility efforts on editable PDFs:** Only offer and make PDF documents accessible that are meant to be edited (like forms) to save on costs to make them accessible. Make exceptions as needed.
- **Hire a professional if needed:** Especially for important or complex PDFs.

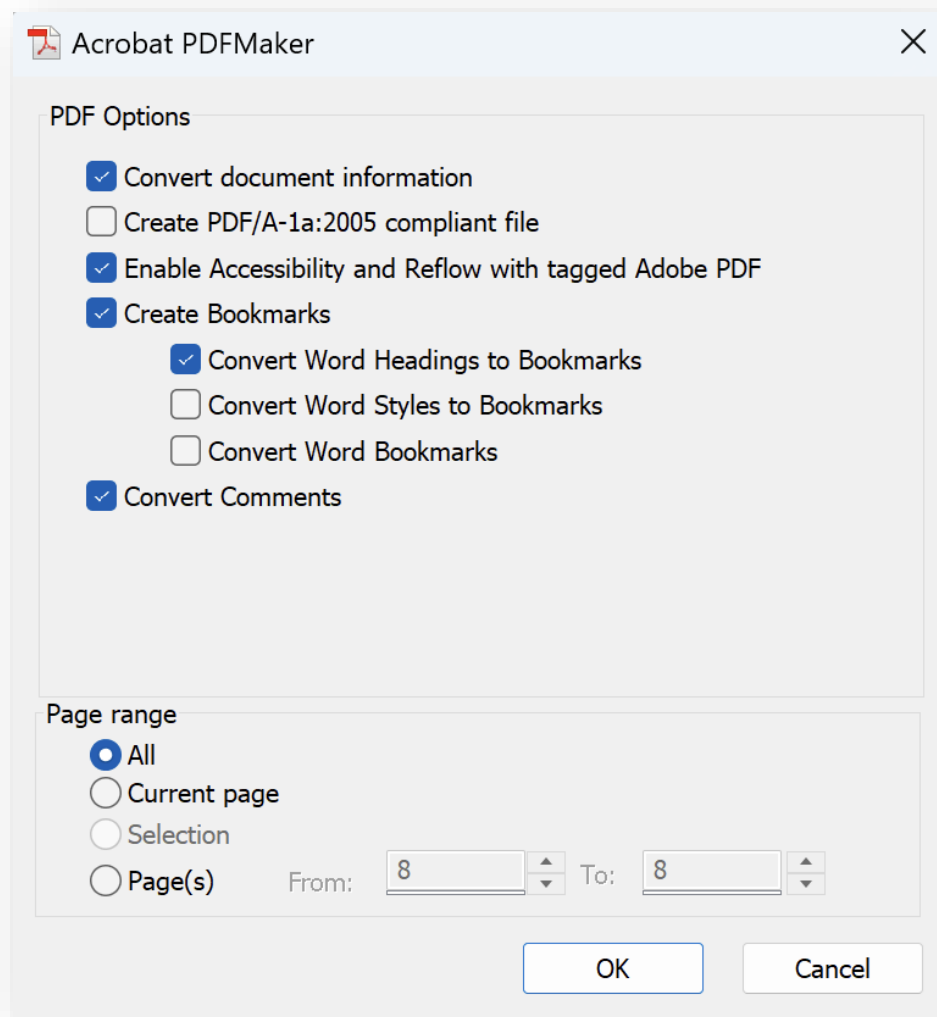
Approach

Follow these steps to remove the most significant accessibility barriers:

1. Make the source document accessible.
2. Save as a tagged PDF.
3. Add a document title.
4. Review the tag order.
5. Run the Accessibility Checker.
6. Fix remaining issues it finds (e.g. table headers).

Save as PDF

- Don't "Print as PDF".
- "Save as PDF" instead:
 1. Select **File > Save as Adobe PDF**.
 2. In the pop-up dialog, select **Options**:
 - Check **Enable Accessibility and Reflow with tagged Adobe PDF**
 - Check **Convert Word Headings to Bookmarks**.

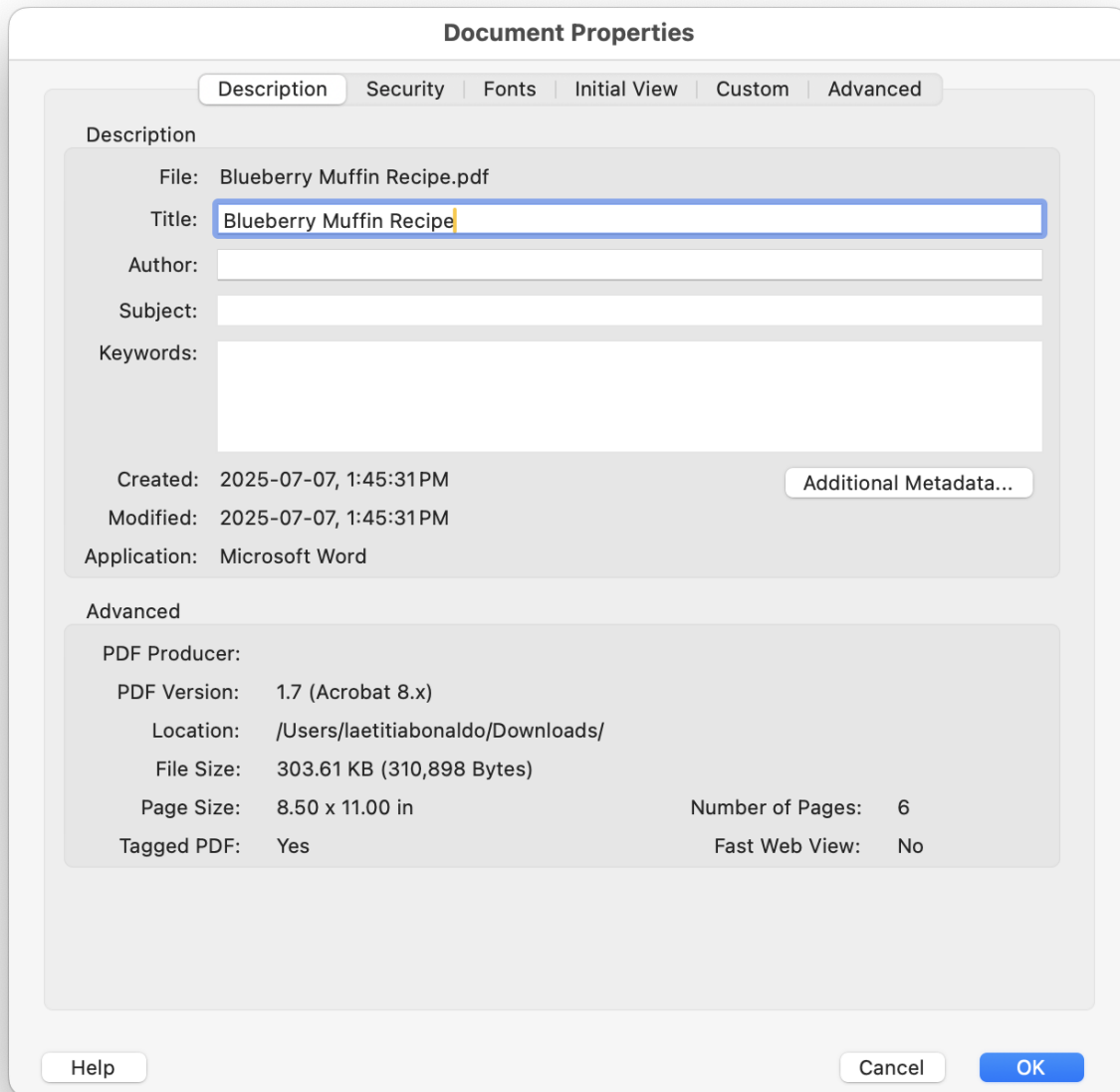


Note: Saving as tagged PDF varies slightly across programs.

Document title

Screen readers announce a document's title first, and sighted users see it in the title bar.

- **Add a document title:** Go to File > Document Properties > Description and enter it in the Title field.



The image shows a 'Document Properties' dialog box with two tabs: 'Description' and 'Advanced'. The 'Description' tab is active, showing fields for File, Title, Author, Subject, and Keywords. The 'Advanced' tab is also visible, showing PDF metadata such as PDF Producer, PDF Version, Location, File Size, Page Size, Number of Pages, Tagged PDF, and Fast Web View.

Document Properties

Description

File: Blueberry Muffin Recipe.pdf

Title: Blueberry Muffin Recipe

Author:

Subject:

Keywords:

Created: 2025-07-07, 1:45:31 PM

Modified: 2025-07-07, 1:45:31 PM

Application: Microsoft Word

Additional Metadata...

Advanced

PDF Producer:

PDF Version: 1.7 (Acrobat 8.x)

Location: /Users/laetitiabonaldo/Downloads/

File Size: 303.61 KB (310,898 Bytes)

Page Size: 8.50 x 11.00 in

Number of Pages: 6

Tagged PDF: Yes

Fast Web View: No

Help Cancel OK

Tag order

Reminder: PDF tags are behind-the-scenes labels that define a document's structure (like headings, lists, and tables), so screen readers and other assistive technologies can interpret the content in a clear, logical, and accessible way.

- **Review the tag order:** Screen readers read tags top to bottom. Think like a user—what should be heard first?
- **Adjust as needed:** Drag and drop tags to fix the order.

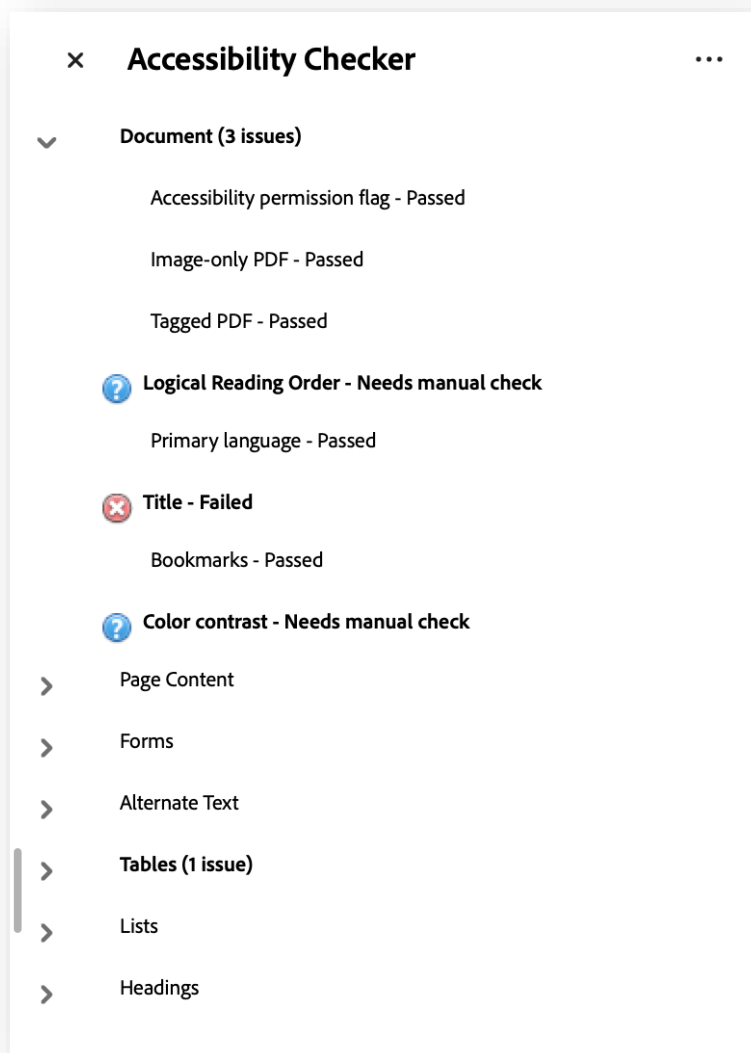
Note: Tag order affects screen reader flow, not visual layout.

Accessibility Checker

From the All tools pane, run the Accessibility Checker:

1. Select **Prepare for accessibility**.
2. Select **Check for accessibility**.
3. In the modal, select **Start Checking**.

If any issues remain, right-click the issue and choose **Explain** to see how to fix it.

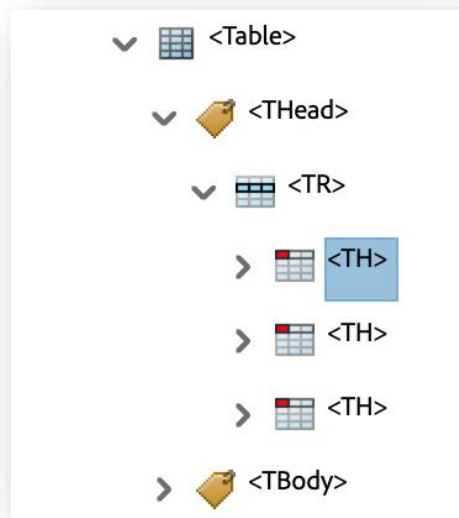


Tables

Table headers might not be tagged correctly when converting to PDF. They can look right visually but still be read incorrectly to screen readers.

- **Check the Tags panel:** Make sure headers are correctly tagged and nested:
 - Each header cell should be tagged as `<th>` (table header).

- Table headers (<th>) must be inside a <tr> (table row).
- Table rows must be inside a <table> (table).
- **Add table headers (if needed):** To change a tag to a table header:
 - Double-click the **tag** and type “<th>”, or
 - Right-click the **tag** > select **Properties** > choose **Table Header Cell** from the **Type** drop-down.



Resources

- [Make your content accessible to everyone](#)
- [Make your content accessible in the Microsoft 365 apps](#)
- [Improve accessibility with the Accessibility Checker](#)
- [WebAIM - Contrast Checker](#)
- [Create accessible PDFs - Microsoft Support](#)
- [Create and verify PDF accessibility - Acrobat Pro](#)