I Use Word Documents and/or PDFs

Do you distribute information to students using Microsoft Word (i.e., .docx) documents or PDFs?

All students benefit from organized, clear, concise and well laid out assignments, syllabi and handouts. These tips can help you make your Word documents and PDFs accessible to the greatest number of students and limit the amount of work you will need to do to make a document accessible to students with disabilities.

What makes a Word Document Accessible?

An accessible Word document is one that can be read and understood by any student. It uses structural elements such as headings and alternative text for images that make the document easier for individuals with disabilities to navigate and understand. This is especially true for persons using adaptive technology (AT) to compensate for a perceptual disability while performing tasks such as reading, operating a computer, etc.

Examples of AT include:

Screen readers - programs that enable users with perceptual disabilities to interact with computer content such as written text using auditory feedback and keyboard commands.

Screen magnifiers - programs that enable users to magnify computer screen content, adapt the colour and contrast, make the mouse more visible, etc.

Creating accessible Word documents is easily done simply by using your word processor's built-in formatting tools.

What makes a PDF Accessible?

Accessible PDFs consist of actual text that can be copied and pasted. PDFs created by scanning paper originals are almost always inaccessible as they consist only of an image of text and not actual electronic text which can be read by a screen reader. Like accessible Word documents, they contain structural elements or 'tags' that make the content more intelligible and navigable to users of AT.

In order to create an accessible PDF, you need to ensure that the original document has been structured for accessibility and that these structures are properly exported to the PDF in the conversion process.

Step 1: Create an Accessible Word Document

General Tips

- Text should be at least 12-point type; fonts should be simple and sans serif (e.g. Arial, Tahoma, Trebuchet MS, and Verdana)
- Maintain a high text/background contrast (black text on white or white text on black offers the highest contrast). If you use colour, use highly contrasting colours
- Avoid using text boxes and watermarks

I Use Word Documents and/or PDFs

Use Styles

When you design and format documents using your word processor's "Styles" menu, you make the content more intelligible and navigable for screen reader users. For instance, a heading created using a larger, bolded font may work visually but it is not perceived as a heading by a screen reader. Alternatively, headings created through the Styles menu are recognized as such by screen readers.

- View Word's paragraph styles in the "Home" tab, within the "Styles" menu group
- Edit Styles by right-clicking on a style and selecting "Modify > Format"
- Use "Styles" to create hierarchical and logical headings: "Title", "Heading 1", "Heading 2", etc.
- Use 'strong' and 'emphasis' from the styles menu in place of bold and italics.
- Format the layout or spacing between paragraphs by customizing your styles

Tables, Columns, Lists

- Present tabular data using uncomplicated formatting - avoid nested tables and merged or split cells inside tables
- Ensure that the tab order within a table is logical; to test the navigation of a table Tab order, select the first cell of the table, then press the "Tab" key repeatedly to ensure that the focus moves across the row and then down to the first cell of the next row
- Use the Tables menu to add a heading row to your table if you need to distinguish between heading text and data.
- Use Word's "Column" command to create multi-column documents
- Use the commands in the Paragraph menu to create bulleted or numbered lists rather than creating them manually.

Adding Alternative Text ('Alt Text') to Images

What is Alternative Text (Alt Text)?

Alt Text is text that describes an image and conveys the same essential information as the graphic. If the reader cannot perceive the image, the Alt Text ensures no information or functionality is lost. Therefore, in accessible documents and websites (including lecture presentations), all images, graphical objects, and tables must be given Alt Text.

What are the qualities of effective Alt Text?

Effective Alt Text gives an accurate description of what the item is, so that the user's assistive technology may convey what information is being provided by the item.

Effective Alt Text:

- Communicates the purpose of the graphic accurately and succinctly.
- Does not repeat the text of an adjacent caption (screen readers read both the caption and the Alt Text, so avoid having the same details in both)
- Does not add the words "Image of" at the beginning of the Alt Text (screen readers tell the reader that there is an image and then read the Alt Text)
- Indicates "Screen shot of...", if it is a screen shot
- Indicates "Photo of...", if it is a photo.

- Contains words important to the reader's understanding
- Uses punctuation for full sentences

How to use Alt Text

Provide Alt Text for all graphics, images and multimedia content. To add Alt Text in Microsoft Word 2007 and 2010 for Windows:

- Right click on the image.
- Select "**Format**".
- Select the "**Alt Text**" tab and type in the text that describes the image (e.g. "Logo of Council of Ontario Universities"). Use clear but concise descriptions.

Note for MAC users: Neither Pages nor Keynote in the iWork '09 productivity software suite for Apple computer users can add Alt Text to images at this time. Pages users should include descriptions of important images in the body of their document. We will update this tip sheet when this changes.

Step 2: Configure the PDFMaker

Once you have prepared your Word document with accessibility in mind, you are ready to convert it to a PDF. Do not create your documents using the "Print" to PDF method, as this creates an untagged (inaccessible) PDF. You must use the Acrobat PDFMaker tool within Word to create a tagged PDF:

- In the top toolbar, click the "**Acrobat**" tab.
- Select "**Create PDF**".
- In the "**Save**" box, select the "**Options**" button. Select the "**Enable Accessibility**" and "**Reflow with Tagged Adobe PDF**" options.
- Name the file as desired, select a destination folder, and click "**Save**".

Note for MAC users: Neither Pages nor Keynote can create a tagged, accessible PDF document at this time. This also applies to Microsoft Office 2011 for Mac. If you're a Mac user and need to create an accessible PDF, send your Word document to an individual who has a copy of Office for Windows 2007 or 2010 for the final PDF conversion. Alternatively, download one of the open source productivity software suites, LibreOffice or OpenOffice. Both programs can create accessible, structured Word documents and export in accessible, tagged PDF format. We will update this tip sheet when program accessibility changes occur.

Step 3: Check and Fix Accessibility in Acrobat

If you have followed all of the above guidelines for creating your Word document, the resulting PDF has a basic level of accessibility. However, it is important to note that this document may not be fully accessible to all screen readers or assistive technologies; you may need to provide additional information using Adobe Acrobat software.

For information about creating accessible PDFs using Acrobat software, see the Adobe Acrobat Accessibility Guide.

I Use Word Documents and/or PDFs

More resources on Creating Accessible Word Documents and PDFs:

WebAim is a web accessibility website that offers more in-depth information on a variety of topics, including Microsoft Word Documents and Fonts and Styles.

The Accessible Digital Office Project (ADOD) as part of the Inclusive Design Research Centre at OCADU has a number of resources such as Authoring Techniques for Accessible Office Documents. This resource includes step by step instructions on many of the Microsoft Office Programs, including Word, Excel and PowerPoint, as well as other tutorials.

The California State University offers a number of web tutorials.

The CNIB Print Guidelines offer some useful tips on print documents

Chronicle of Higher Education, Creating Accessible Documents.

To obtain this document in an alternative format, please contact:

Library Accessibility Services
First Floor, McLaughlin Library
University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario N1G 2W1

Tel: 519-824-4120 ext. 52312
Email: liblcsd@uoguelph.ca
Web: www.lib.uoguelph.ca/assistance/LCSD/