



Writing Accessible Documents

Contents

Why it matters	1
1. Structure and Headings	2
2. Fonts and Text	3
3. Plain Language	3
4. Colour and Contrast	5
5. Images and Graphics	5
6. Tables	6
7. Links and Navigation	6
8. Lists	7
9. Reading Order	7
10. Inclusive Language	8
11. File Format and Accessibility Checking	8
12. Easy Read	9
External Resources	9

Why it matters

Accessible documents help everyone, including people with disability, to read, understand and use the information you create. When content is accessible, it supports people who use screen readers, people with low vision, people with cognitive or learning disability, and anyone who relies on clear, well-structured information.

Accessibility also reduces communication barriers and helps organisations provide equal access to information. Not every document needs the same level of detail or tone, but knowing your audience helps you choose the right style, whether the content needs to be simple, technical or formal or something in between, while still keeping it usable for as many people as possible.



1. Structure and Headings

A clear heading structure helps everyone navigate your document.

- Use real heading styles (Heading 1, Heading 2, Heading 3), not bold or enlarged text that looks like a heading.
- Do not use Title Style. This is because the Title Style may not be recognised as a heading by screen readers and other assistive technologies. Use heading 1 for the title.
- Keep headings short, descriptive, and logical.
- Maintain a clear hierarchy, do not skip from Heading 1 to Heading 3.
- Add a Table of Contents for any long document.
- Set a descriptive document title in File > Info > Properties > Title. This helps screen readers and other assistive technologies identify the document.

Step by step

1. Go to the Home tab.
2. Find the Styles section on the toolbar.
3. Choose the heading level you need, such as:
 - Heading 1 for the document title
 - Heading 2 for main sections
 - Heading 3 for subsections

Why it matters

Screen readers use heading structure to navigate. Without real headings, a person using a screen reader must listen to the entire document from the beginning to find the section they need.



2. Fonts and Text

The right font and text settings help everyone read a document more easily. The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) do not set a specific font size. What matters is that people can resize the text or adjust the settings to suit their own needs, and that the document uses clear, readable text with enough space.

- Use clear Sans-serif fonts e.g. Arial, Verdana, Helvetica, Calibri, Tahoma, Open Sans.
- Minimum font size: 12pt. Use 12–14pt for body text and 18pt or larger for large-print formats. Some individuals may prefer even larger sizes (20pt, 22pt, 24pt), so checking with the person is always best practice.
- Avoid ALL CAPS, underlining (except hyperlinks), and decorative fonts.
- Use left-aligned text. Avoid fully justified text, it creates uneven word spacing that is harder to read.
- Use line spacing of 1.5 for body text where possible to improve readability. Avoid single spacing.
- Leave space between paragraphs to improve readability.
- Use a single space between words.

3. Plain Language

Plain language means writing that is clear and easy to understand. It benefits everyone, especially people with cognitive or intellectual disability, people with low literacy, and people for whom English is a second language.

Write clearly and concisely

Sentence length

- Write clear, concise sentences.
- Aim for an average sentence length of around 15–25 words.
- Use active voice where possible. For example: *"The committee approved the proposal"* rather than *"The proposal was approved by the committee."*



- Include only the information readers need.

Paragraph length

- Keep paragraphs short. Two to three sentences is a good guide for most documents.
- In longer documents, paragraphs can be longer when needed but avoid large blocks of text.
- Focus on one main idea per paragraph.
- Use headings and lists to break up complex information.

Word choice

- Use everyday words. Write *use* rather than *utilise* or write *help* rather than *facilitate*.
- Explain acronyms the first time you use them.
- Avoid jargon or technical language unless your audience will understand it.

Readability

Readability tools can help identify long sentences and complex language, but they should be used as guides only. A readability score does not measure all aspects of accessibility and good writing. The goal is clear communication.

Other factors that affect readability and accessibility include:

- font size and font choice
- colour contrast
- spacing between letters, words and lines of text
- a clear and logical structure
- an appropriate tone
- effective use of headings, lists, images and other visual elements



Checking readability

You can use tools such as:

- Hemingway Editor
- Microsoft Word Editor and Document Stats

4. Colour and Contrast

- Ensure strong contrast between text and background, for example dark text on a light background.
- Minimum contrast ratio: 4.5:1 for normal text; 3:1 for large text (18pt+ or 14pt+ bold).
- Do not rely on colour alone to convey meaning, for example, avoid 'items marked in red are overdue.'
- Avoid patterned or image backgrounds behind text.
- Use the [WebAIM: Contrast Checker](#) to check any colour combination. You can test hex colour codes or use the eye dropper tool in the colour picker.

To use the colour picker, open your content and the Contrast Checker side by side on your screen.

Windows: Press Windows key + Left Arrow or Windows key + Right Arrow to snap windows side by side.

Mac: Click and hold the green full-screen button in the top-left corner of the window, then choose to position the window on the left or right side of the screen

5. Images and Graphics

- Add alt text to every meaningful image that supports or explains the content.
- Describe the purpose of the image, not just what it looks like.
- If an image is decorative and does not add meaning, mark it as decorative.



- Avoid embedding important text inside images.
- For complex visuals (charts, infographics), provide a summary above or below the image.
- Explain the key message or findings.

How to add alt text in Word

Right-click the image > Edit Alt Text. Write a description that explains the purpose of the image in context.

6. Tables

- Use tables only for data, not for layout or visual design.
- Include a header row and mark it as a header in the table properties.
Select the first row, right click and choose table properties, go to the Row tab, tick Repeat as header row at the top of each page, click OK.
- Use the document's built-in table function.
- Keep tables simple. Avoid merged cells.
- Provide a brief description above the table explaining what it shows.

7. Links and Navigation

- Use descriptive link text e.g. 'Read the Safe Ministry Policy' not 'Click here' or a raw URL.
- Ensure all hyperlinks are live and go to the correct destination before sharing.
- Check that headings appear correctly in the document Navigation Pane (View > Navigation Pane).
- Add a Table of Contents for long documents.

8. Lists

- Use built-in bulleted or numbered list styles, not manual dashes, asterisks, or hyphens.
- Use numbered lists when order or sequence matters.
- Use bulleted lists for items with no particular order.
- Keep list items short and consistent. Where possible, start each item in the same way.

9. Reading Order

Screen readers read content in a specific order. If a document contains text boxes, images, tables or columns, the reading order may not match the way the page looks.

Make sure content is read in a logical order from beginning to end.

- Avoid multi-column layouts unless they are necessary.
- Use text boxes sparingly.
- If you use columns, text boxes or floating objects, check the reading order.
- Review the document with the Accessibility Checker before sharing it.

Check the reading order in Word

1. Go to **Review**.
2. Select **Check Accessibility**.
3. Review and fix any reading order issues identified by the Accessibility Checker.

Check the reading order in PowerPoint

1. Go to **Home**.



2. Select **Arrange**.
3. Choose **Selection Pane**.
4. Reorder items so they are read in the correct sequence by screen readers.

Check the reading order in PDF (Adobe Acrobat Pro)

1. Open the **Accessibility** tools.
2. Select **Reading Order**.
3. Check the numbered order
4. Correct any items that are out of sequence.

Tip: Use built-in headings, lists and layouts wherever possible. Avoid placing content using text boxes, floating objects or manual positioning, as this can create reading order problems.

10. Inclusive Language

- Use person-first language: ‘person with disability’ rather than ‘disabled person’ unless a different preference is stated by the individual or community.
- Avoid jargon, abbreviations, and acronyms unless explained on first use.
- Ensure content is welcoming, accessible, and inclusive of everyone.

11. File Format and Accessibility Checking

- Before sharing any document, run the **Microsoft Accessibility Checker: Review tab > Check Accessibility**.
- Resolve all errors and address warnings before distributing.
- Export to PDF with accessibility features enabled: File > Save As > PDF. In Options, check that ‘Document structure tags for accessibility’ is enabled.



- After exporting, check the PDF's accessibility using available tools (e.g. Adobe Acrobat's Accessibility Checker or the free PAC).

12. Easy Read

Easy Read is an alternative format that uses simple language, short sentences, and supporting images to make written information accessible to people with low literacy, people with intellectual and cognitive disability or anyone who finds standard language documents hard to read. It is different from plain language.

Consider doing an Easy Read version for documents that are particularly significant to people with disability, or for important community-facing information.

External Resources

Resource	Links
Australian Government Style Manual — plain language	Plain language and word choice Style Manual
Hemingway App, readability tool	Hemingway Editor
WebAIM Contrast Checker	WebAIM: Contrast Checker
Writing alt text for images	Alt text, captions and titles for images Style Manual
W3C alt text decision tree	An alt Decision Tree Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) W3C
Microsoft Accessibility Checker guide	Improve accessibility with the Accessibility Checker - Microsoft Support
Create accessible documents — Microsoft	Create accessible Office documents Microsoft Support Create accessible PDFs - Microsoft Support



PDF Accessibility Checker (PAC) — free tool	PDF Accessibility Checker - PAC
Microsoft Accessibility Training	Accessibility fundamentals - Training Microsoft Learn
Scope Australia, Easy Read resources	Easy Read Service - Easy English Training by Scope
Access Easy English	Accessible Information & Easy English Access Easy English
People With Disability Australia Language Guide (inclusive language)	Language Guide - People with Disability Australia
Vision Australia accessible alternate formats.	Alternate format production Vision Australia. Blindness and low vision services