Creating accessible content

Writing with accessibility in mind means that you are trying to ensure that your content can be read and understood by as wide an audience as possible.

This factsheet presents some helpful tips on improving the accessibility of your publications, for both print and reading online.

It focuses primarily on producing accessible material using Microsoft Word – but the principles involved are universal and may easily be applied using other software.
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1. Key principles to follow

To be truly accessible, it is not enough for a document just to look well-presented. For it to be read and understood by as wide an audience as possible – including, for example, people with visual impairments, dyslexia or learning difficulties – your document also has to work well with screen reading programmes.

It is good practice to write as though for electronic publishing – based on the following main principles:

- use a proper ‘headings’ structure
- write in short, simple sentences
- write in plain language and avoid jargon and abbreviations
- use a common, plain font and a text size of at least 12 point
- use proper list formatting for numbered or bullet lists
- provide a meaningful description of important images
- check the accessibility of your document using Word’s built-in checker.

This document has been produced using all of these these key principles.

2. Use proper headings

You should use an appropriate heading structure for your document. This means using a hierarchy of headings – such as Title, Heading 1, Heading 2, Heading 3 etc. This enables screen readers to identify headings for the listener, and also allows navigation of the document by its headings.

In Word, headings are set using ‘styles’. After highlighting the text you want to use as a heading, select your desired style from the formatting toolbar or the Styles Pane. The styles we have used for this document are:

- Title for the name of the factsheet
- Heading 1 for the main section headings
- Heading 2 for any sub-headings within a section.
3. Write in plain language

It is essential to use clear, simple language to communicate effectively. Using ‘plain language’ is a key aspect of organising and presenting information so that it is easy to follow.

Plain language means communication that the listener or reader can understand the first time they hear or read it. It can be defined as a simple, clear, conversational style that uses every day words and an active voice.

While recognising the need for flexibility, the Plain English Campaign advises:

- using short sentences – a good average sentence length is 15 to 20 words
- ensuring longer sentences do not have more than three items of information
- using ‘active’ verbs mainly, not ‘passive’ ones – for example, “We will send you an appointment” (active), rather than “An appointment will be arranged for you” (passive)
- avoiding acronyms and jargon
- using bullet points to help break complex information down.

4. Focus on your presentation and layout

The presentation and layout of information can make a big difference to reading and comprehension.

Choosing a font

There are no hard and fast rules about the best fonts to use and users have their own preferences. However, for printed documents, many organisations recommend using a clear, ‘sans-serif’ font without too many flourishes – such as Arial, Helvetica or Verdana. These types of sans-serif fonts are also generally used in web design. Light or thin fonts should be avoided. People with sight problems generally find heavier weight types easier to read.

Point size

Text size of 12 point or higher will benefit most users. However, it is good practice to make ‘large print’ versions of documents available on request. The RNIB define large print as 16 point Arial or bigger. It is also important to remember that point sizes can vary between fonts. For example:

- this is 12 point test in Arial
- this is 12 point text in Verdana
- this is 12 point text in Times New Roman.
Other important considerations

Other important guidelines to consider in producing more accessible content are that:

- lowercase letters are easier to read – avoid using capitals for continuous text
- high contrast makes documents more legible – alternative colour contrasts (including black text on a yellow background) can be beneficial, particularly to readers who are dyslexic or have a learning difficulty
- white space makes information easier to read – do not overcrowd the page with text; make sure you leave sufficient space between paragraphs; and consider increasing the space between lines
- large and bold font is useful for highlighting and emphasising text – italics and underlining can make text more difficult to read
- numbers from one to nine are easier to read (in normal text) if they are written as words – numbers from 10 upwards numbers should be presented as numerals
- justify text to the left – this makes it easier to find the start and end of each line and ensures an even gap between words
- do not hyphenate words at the end of lines.

5. Tables, lists, images and hyperlinks

Tables

Tables need to have a simple structure and give column header information. To work with a screen reader, tables must not contain split or merged cells, completely blank rows or columns, or nested tables.

Lists

Using numbered or bulleted lists in documents can be a very useful way of breaking up complex, content-heavy information, making it easier to read and follow.

For people using a screen reader, the list itself can convey some valuable information including:

1. where the list starts and finishes
2. how many items are in the list
3. what list item the user is on.
For the listing feature to work with screen-reading software, the author must create the list using the built-in list formatting within Word.

**Images**

Using images in a document can help convey complex information. The use of appropriate images can also often help readers with dyslexia and learning difficulties to follow meaning.

However, the placement of images on the page should be carefully considered. Images placed in a random way can interrupt the flow of the text and make it even harder to follow. Information producers should generally avoid fitting text around images. Rather, you should consider placing images at the end of paragraphs and allow sufficient space between the text and the image. You should also avoid placing text over any background image.

Not everyone reading your document will be able to see it. If a document is likely to be made available electronically, you must also consider adding ‘alternative text’ to your images (through Word’s ‘Format picture’ options). Screen readers will subsequently convey the title and description of your image that you have added as an alternative to the user being able to view it.

When writing your ‘alt text’, you should consider what the image conveys. This will help you decide how to describe it so that all of your document makes sense to everyone.

**Hyperlinks**

For documents that are accessed electronically, including hyperlinks to web pages can enhance their usefulness for the reader.

Adding hyperlinks in Word is very easy through right-clicking on any word or group of words. However, it is important that the hyperlink makes sense as standalone information. It needs to convey clear and accurate information about what it links to – for example, by including the full title of the destination page.

**6. Use the Accessibility Checker**

You can check the accessibility of your document in Word by using its built-in checker. The ‘Check Accessibility’ button is available under the ‘Review’ menu. This will highlight any accessibility-related problems with your document, describe why you should fix them, and give you guidance on how to do so.
7. Other useful links and resources

Office Accessibility Centre

Microsoft provide extensive resources in different media on how to make your content accessible for all – in each of the Office 365 apps. These resources are free to access at the Office Accessibility Centre.

My Computer My Way

It is essential that your computing equipment is set up the best way possible to suit your particular needs, especially if you are affected by some kind of impairment. My Computer My Way can help you achieve your optimum setup. It is a free, interactive tool developed by AbilityNet that makes any computer, tablet and smartphone easier to use.

You can use it for free at www.mycomputermyway.com

8. About AbilityNet

AbilityNet is the national charity that supports people with any disability, of any age. Our specialist services help disabled people to use assistive technology and the internet to improve their lives, whether at work, at home or in education. We offer:

Digital Accessibility Services

The AbilityNet team of expert consultants and user testers help businesses, charities and public bodies ensure that their websites, apps and other digital services are usable, accessible and comply with current legislation.

Find out more about our Accessibility Services

Workplace Services

Even small adjustments to equipment and work patterns can transform the lives of people with disabilities and have a profound impact on well-being and productivity. Our team of expert assessors identify the Reasonable Adjustments that help employees achieve their full potential.

Read more about our Workplace Services
DSA/Students Services

Technology can help disabled people of all ages succeed in education. AbilityNet has a network of DSA Assessment Centres and is one of the largest providers of specialist assessments to HE students in the UK.

Find out more about our DSA/Students Services

Free IT Support for disabled and older people at home

AbilityNet has a national network of disclosure checked volunteers offering support to disabled people and older people. Our volunteers have relevant IT skills to help people get the most from computer systems, laptops, tablets and even some smartphones.

Find out more about our IT Can help Volunteers

Expert Resources

Our free expert resources have been produced for people with any disability of any age, as well as their employers, family, friends, colleagues and anyone else with an interest in helping disabled people achieve their goals.

Find out more about our expert resources

Call the Helpline

Call our free Helpline on 0800 269 545 to ask anything about how computers can be adapted to meet the needs of disabled people.

Support us

Visit www.abilitynet.org.uk/donate to learn how you can support our work.

Contact us

- Telephone 0800 269 545
- Email enquiries@abilitynet.org.uk
- Web: www.abilitynet.org.uk

We are always keen to help share knowledge about accessibility and assistive technology. If you have any questions about how you may use the contents of this factsheet, please contact us at AbilityNet and we will do all we can to help.
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