Quick reference checklist for Accessible Document Design.

Below is a quick guide to help you design your documents in an accessible friendly way.

While it is not necessary for these suggestions to be followed in order for an accessible PDF to be produced, there are a few good reasons to keep them in mind when designing your document.

A document designed with accessibility in mind ensures a high quality, clean looking and organized end product that is search and navigation friendly.

It can also save you money. A well designed source document reduces the time required to process the document into an Accessible PDF/UA format.

1. Alternative text descriptions

Alternative text descriptions or alt text are text equivalents for non-text elements in a document. The key principle is that computers and screen readers cannot analyze an image and determine what the image presents.

For users who rely on screen readers to understand documents, alt texts ensure that they receive the same relevant information that a sighted person receives, ensuring their overall online experience is just as informative and relevant.

Alt texts are generally applied to non-text elements such as:

- Images / Photos
- Charts
- Diagrams
- Icons
- Infographics
- Graphic Advertisements
- Tables (especially holding critical data)

- Lengthy URLs (that are too long or complicated to be read out character by character)
- Forms
- And more.

Alternative text can be presented in two ways:

- Within the alt-text attribute of the not-text element (defined either in the authoring tool, or the resulting accessible tagged PDF)
- Within the content surrounding the image, such as a caption or actual text which provides an suitable description of the non-text element.

An alt-text should typically:

- **Be accurate and equivalent** in presenting the same *content* and *function* of the image.
- **Be succinct.** This means the correct content (if there is content) and function (if there is a function) of the image should be presented as succinctly as is appropriate. Typically no more than a few words are necessary, though rarely a short sentence or two may be appropriate.
- **NOT be redundant** or provide the same information as text within the context of the image.
- **NOT use the phrases "image of ..." or "graphic of ..." to describe the image.** It usually apparent to the user that it is an image. And if the image is conveying content, it is typically not necessary that the user know that it is an image that is conveying the content, as opposed to text. If the fact that an image is a photograph or illustration, etc. is important content, it may be useful to include this in alternative text.

For more information, see WebAIM's recource on alt-texts.

2. Images and Graphs

- Have you made tables and graphs as simple as possible?

- Are the key images and graphs you intend to use in this document supported by a caption?

- Do the captions add value to the reader who may be unable to see the graphs and images?

- Is there content that supports these images and graphs that communicate the insights that each is showing, such as summary of the information that is being conveyed?

- Have you ensured color or contrast is not the only means of communicating a result in a chart or diagram? Consider patterns instead.

- Have you avoid using justified alignment for text? Left aligned is the most readable type of text.

3. Document Formatting

- If your document is over 20 pages, is there a table of contents?

- Are your headings organized in a hierarchal manner to allow for easy navigation?

- Are you headings denoted using appropriate styles and not implicitly? (i.e: Using the correct styles to indicate headings instead of simply formatting text so that it looks like a heading)

- Have you avoided ALL CAPS where possible?

- Have you made sure that there is no flashing or blinking elements?

- Is your content relying on bolded text and italics to add value to the document? These won't translate in the remediated version. Will this be a problem?

- Have you referenced Footnotes or Endnotes (if applicable)?

- Have you used a font that is large enough for people with poor eyesight? We recommend basic, simple, easily-readable fonts, at 12pt or higher.

- Have you used real text rather than text within graphics?

- Have you ensured sufficient contrast between the text color and the background color?). You should aim for at least a 70% difference in colour value. See: https://www.paciellogroup.com/resources/contrastanalyser/.

- Have you avoided using empty carriage returns (pressing enter multiple times) to create blank space, instead of using paragraph spacing?

4. Tables

- Are your tables used to represent tabular data (recommended), or to layout text on the page (not recommended).

- Have you set the header rows to repeat at the start of each page?

- Have you kept your tables as simple as possible?

- Have you provided a caption or summary of the information presented in the table?

- Could the information in this table be represented in a simpler way using lists? Or using two separate simple tables?

5. Metadata

- Have you filled in the metadata for your document? Every document needs metadata. Consult your software manuals on where to find this.

- This usually includes the author and title, but may also include things like comments, keywords or tags.

6. Writing

- Have you written clearly? Unclear or confusing writing is an accessibility barrier to all readers, but can be especially difficult for people with reading disorders or cognitive disabilities.

- Do hyperlinks provide users with the proper context of where clicking the link will take them? Links should make sense out of context. Phrases such as "click here," "more," "click for details," and so on are ambiguous when read out of context.

- When possible, instead of leaving the link text as a raw URL, mask it with appropriate alternate text so that AT users can more easily determine its purpose. Often URLs do not provide helpful clues to the content to which they lead.

- Have you integrated definitions of potentially unfamiliar terms and expand all abbreviations and acronym?

- Avoid large text blocks. Break up long passages into smaller sections with meaningful subheadings.

- Is there a transcript for embedded audio? Does embedded video have closed captions?

7. PowerPoint Users

- Every slide must have a title. If you do not wish to display the title, make it match the background color.

- Have you deleted any empty bullets or lists?

- Have you made sure to use textboxes for text and not shapes?

- Delete all unnecessary or empty elements on each slide, including any text or boxes behind images, as the tagging process will be pick these up and cause issues.

To check the order in which your slide content will be read back, do the following:

- On the Home tab, in the Drawing group, click Arrange and then choose Selection Pane. The Selection Pane can also be activated using the Select dropdown menu in the Edit group.

- The Selection Pane lists the objects on the slide. Objects will be read back beginning with the bottom list item and ending with the top list item. Correct any out of order items using the Re-order arrows on the bottom of the pane. The Selection pane can be found under the Format tab in the Arrange Pane.

- Wherever possible, group separate objects together if they are meant to be part of the same figure. Did you apply alternate text applied to the grouped object instead?

- Complex graphics should be described in the body of a slide, in the notes section, or on an appendix slide. However, it is important that alternate text is applied to a chart or graph to describe the overall purpose of the figure.

8. InDesign Users

- Check your color contrast early in the design process (difference between text and background elements.

- Override all master page items especially in larger documents as these items can disappear from subsequent pages when they are tagged. This is an option within the Pages dialogue box in InDesign.

- Delete all unnecessary elements on the page, including any text or boxes behind images, as the tagging process will be pick these up and cause issues.

- Flatten all images where possible. This will also reduce the file size. In general, you should try to have as few elements on each page overlapping each other as possible. Even better, any elements that are decorative (vector) images are best to be inserted as a jpeg, especially if they fall behind text or tables.