

# Creating Accessible Documents with Word

Content adapted with permission from the [University of Washington's Accessible Technology](#) webpages, January 2018.

Microsoft Word is a commonly-used application among individuals with a variety of disabilities, and is reasonably accessible. The text within Word documents can be read by assistive technologies such as screen readers and Braille devices. However, in order for Word documents to be fully accessible, authors must follow the steps and general principles below.

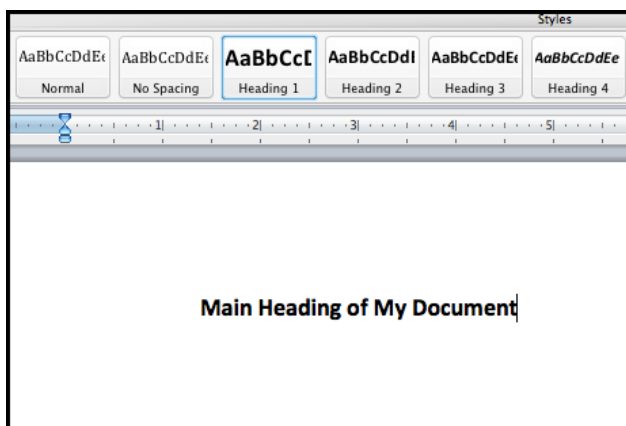
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## Headings

Using good heading structure helps people without eyesight to understand how the document is organized. Screen reader and Braille users can also jump between headings, which makes navigation much more efficient.

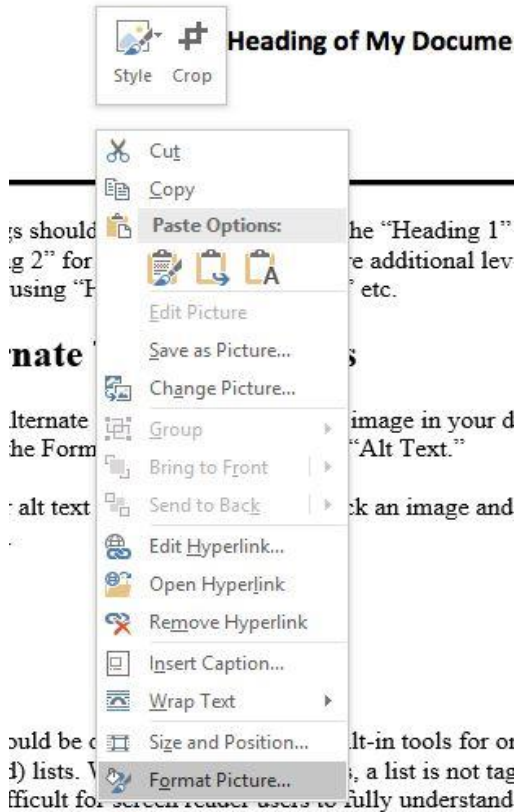
Making text larger and bold does not make it a heading. In order to convert text to a heading in Microsoft Word, you must use the built-in Heading styles like “Heading 1” and “Heading 2,” available under the Home tab > Styles in the Office menu.



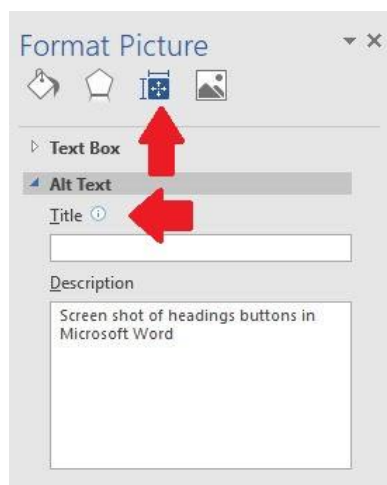
Headings should form an outline, using the “Heading 1” style for the main heading, and “Heading 2” for sub-headings. If there are additional levels of headings within the document’s outline, using “Heading 3,” “Heading 4,” etc.

# Alternate Text for Images

Users who are unable to see images depend on content authors to supplement their images with alternate text (alt text). The purpose of alt text is to communicate the content of an image. Purely decorative images do not require alt text. Create alternate text by right clicking an image in your document and selecting “Format Picture.” (Sometimes you may have to access the edit window this way: Right click on picture > Picture > Alt text tab. You can edit the alt text in that dialog box.)

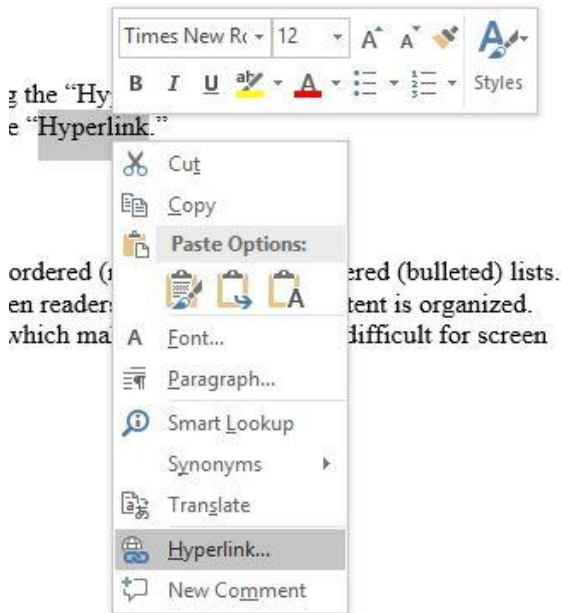


Within the Format Picture dialog, click on the “Layout and Properties” icon. Select “Alt Text.” Enter the text in the box to provide information about the content or function of the image. It is not necessary to use descriptive phrases such as “image of...” or “graphic of...” Screen readers will perform that function.

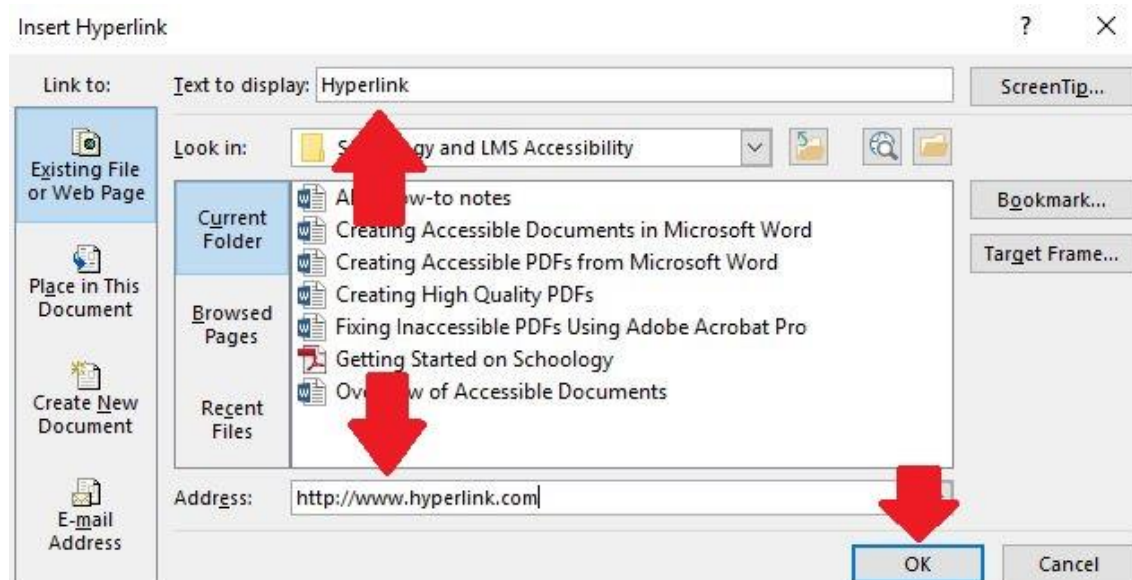


# Links

Hyperlinks in Word documents should be created using the “Hyperlink” option. Highlight the text you would like to consist of the link. Right click and choose “Hyperlink.”

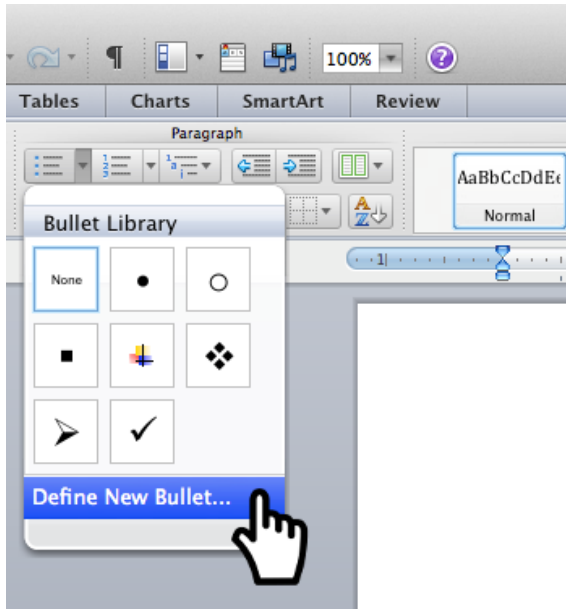


Add the “Text to display” that you want to be displayed on the page. Then add the “Address” of the url you’d like the link to take users to on the web. Click “OK.” When you use this process, the screen reader will be able to read the text on the page our loud as the display text rather than the url, which is sometimes confusing.



# Lists

Lists should be created using Word's built-in tools for ordered (numbered) and unordered (bulleted) lists. When lists are explicitly created as lists, this helps screen readers understand how content is organized. Without using these tools, a list is not tagged as a list, which makes the content more difficult for screen reader users to fully understand.



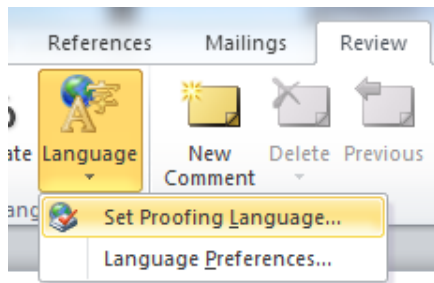
# Document Language

Many screen readers can read content in multiple languages, so identifying the document's intended language helps the reader use the appropriate language profile.

In Office for Mac, select Tools > Language from the application menu to define the default language. To define a different language for part of the document, select each foreign language individually, then select Tools > Language to define the language for each.



In Office for Windows, the language option is located in the menu ribbon. Click the “Review” tab, select the “Language” button, and then choose “Set Proofing Language.”

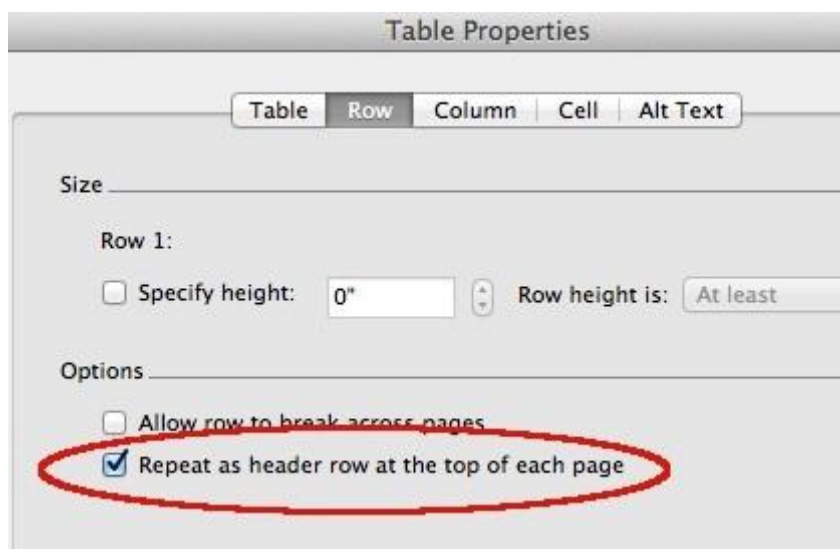


**NOTE:** Currently language settings only effect accessibility of the Word document itself. They do **not** survive when exported to PDF. If PDF is the final format in which you intend to distribute your document, you will need to define language in the PDF directly using Adobe Acrobat Pro.

## Tables

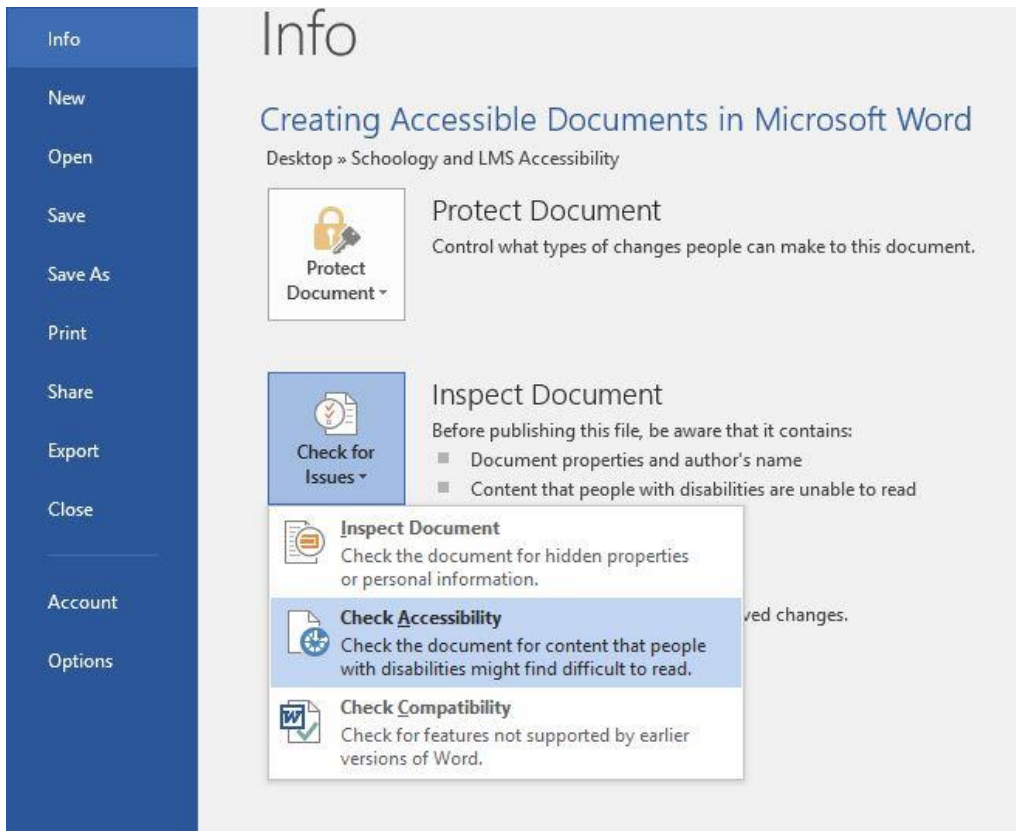
Word has limitations when it comes to making tables accessible. Tables can be very difficult for screen readers to understand unless they include markup that explicitly defines the relationships between all the parts (e.g., headers and data cells). For a simple table with one row of column headers and no nested rows or columns, Word is helpful, but more complex tables can only be made accessible within Adobe Acrobat Pro.

For simple tables, the only step necessary for accessibility is to identify which row contains the column headers. To do this in Word, select that row (Table > Select > Row), then right click the row and select “Table Properties.” In the dialog box, click the “Row” tab, and check the checkbox that says “Repeat as header row at the top of each page.”

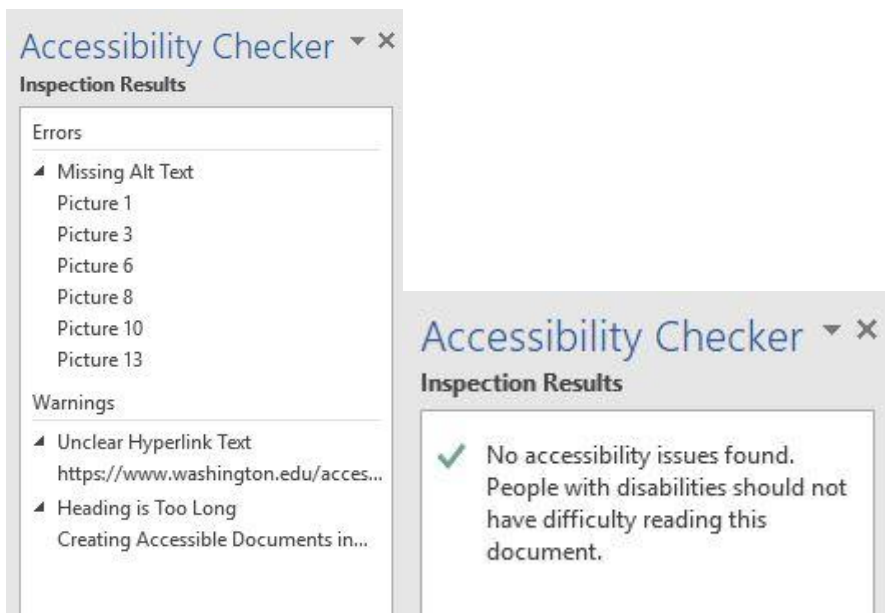


# Accessibility Checker

Use Word's Accessibility Checker to check for accessibility issues. Choose File > Info > Inspect Document > Check for Issues > Check Accessibility.



If you have any issues you will see a window like the one below telling you what needs to be fixed. Click on one of the errors or warnings and the document will jump to that location. Run the Accessibility Checker after fixing your errors. You should see a message indicating no accessibility errors found.



## Creating a PDF from an Accessible Word Document

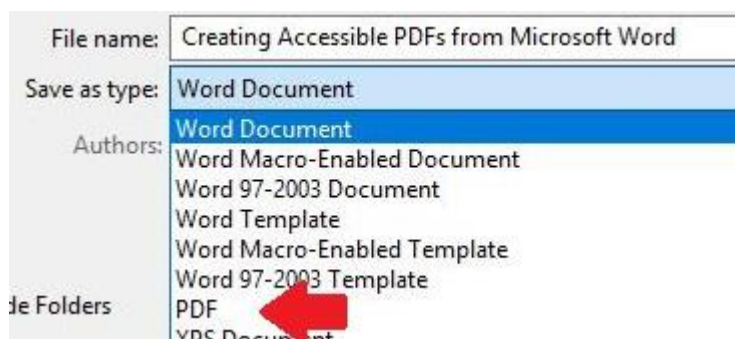
The first step in creating an accessible PDF from Microsoft Word is ensure that the original Word doc is accessible. See [Creating Accessible Documents in Microsoft Word](#) for instructions on how to do that.

The goal in exporting to PDF from Word is to preserve the accessibility features of the Word document, including heading structure, alternate text for images, and markup that explicitly identifies lists, tables, document language, and other content that is important for accessibility.

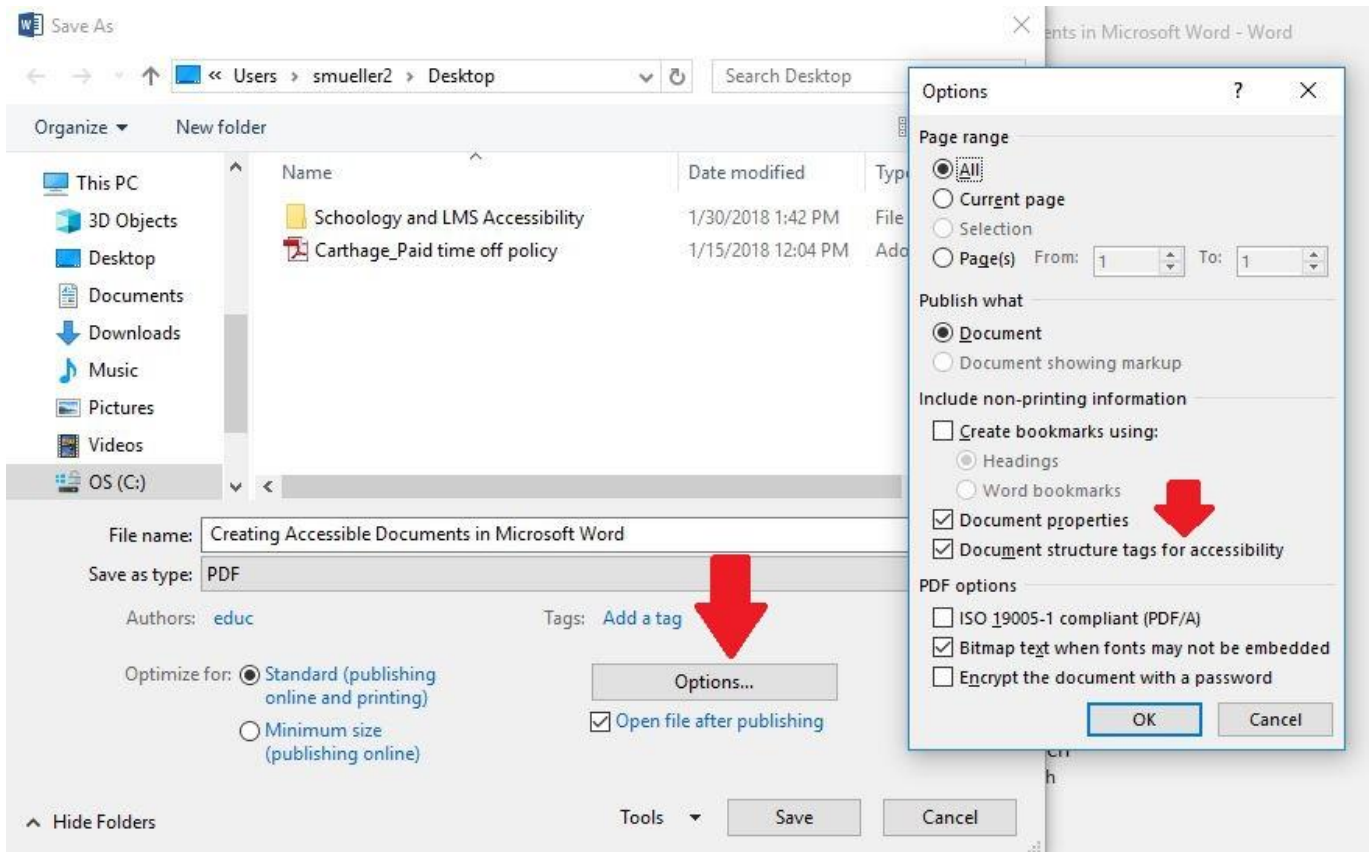
Do not create a PDF by using “Print to PDF” from your Print menu. This will not preserve accessibility features.

### For Windows

Go to File > Save As and select “PDF” from the file type choices.



In that same dialog box, click the “Options” button. The Options menu will open. Make sure the box next to “Document structure tags for accessibility” is checked. Click “OK,” then “Save.”



### For Macs

Go to File > Save As and select “PDF” from the file type choices. When saving, be sure the box labeled “Best for electronic distribution and accessibility” is checked.

Saving an already accessible Word doc to a PDF in this way should mean that you won’t have to complete the recognize text function in Adobe Acrobat Pro, but it couldn’t hurt to run the check anyway. (See Creating High Quality PDFs for more information.)