

Creating Accessible Microsoft Word Documents: A Guide for Faculty, Staff, and Graduate Students

Introduction

Stephen F. Austin State University is committed to ensuring that all digital documents are accessible to individuals with disabilities. Accessible documents allow screen readers and other assistive technologies to interpret and present content accurately. Proper formatting also improves clarity, organization, and usability for all readers.

This guide outlines the required practices for creating accessible Microsoft Word documents on Windows. These standards should be followed before documents are shared publicly, submitted for publication, or uploaded to university systems.

Core Accessibility Requirements

1. Use Proper Heading Structure

Why This Matters

Headings create a logical structure that allows screen reader users to navigate content efficiently. Without proper headings, assistive technology cannot interpret document organization.

Requirements

- Use Word's built-in heading styles.
- Use only one Heading 1 per document.
- Use Heading 2, Heading 3, and subsequent levels in hierarchical order.
- Do not manually bold, underline, or enlarge text to simulate a heading.

How to Apply Headings

1. Select the text you want to format as a heading.

2. Go to the Home tab.
3. Choose the appropriate Heading style from the Styles panel.
4. Keyboard shortcuts:
 - Ctrl + Alt + 1 → Heading 1
 - Ctrl + Alt + 2 → Heading 2
 - Ctrl + Alt + 3 → Heading 3



2. Add Alternative Text to Images

Why This Matters

Alternative text (alt text) provides a description of images for users who rely on screen readers. Without alt text, images are either skipped or announced without context.

Requirements

- Provide concise and meaningful descriptions.
- Describe the purpose of the image within the context of the document.
- Do not rely solely on automatically generated descriptions.
- Mark decorative images appropriately when they do not convey meaningful information.

How to Add Alt Text

1. Right-click the image.
2. Select View Alt Text.
3. Enter a clear description in the Alt Text pane.

Alt Text ∨ ×

How would you describe this object and its context to someone who is blind or low vision?

- The subject(s) in detail
- The setting
- The actions or interactions
- Other relevant information

(1-2 detailed sentences recommended)

Mark as decorative ⓘ

3. Use Meaningful Hyperlinks

Why This Matters

Screen reader users often navigate documents by links. Generic link text such as “click here” or “learn more” is not descriptive when read independently.

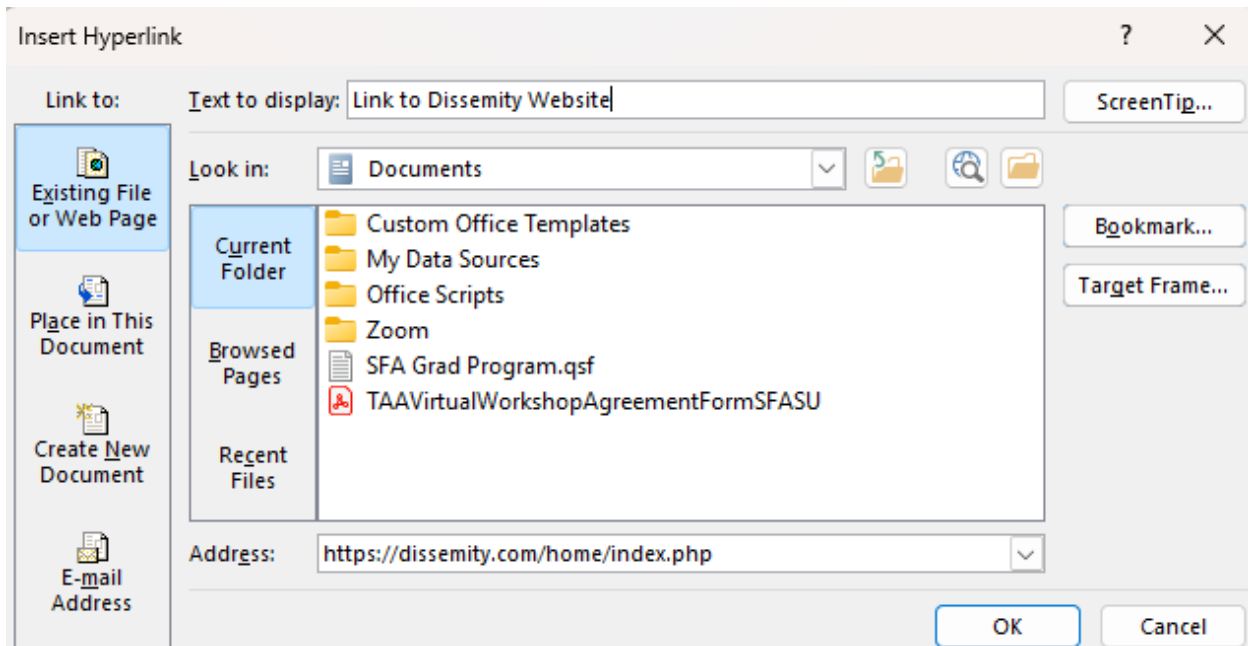
Requirements

- Use descriptive link text that explains the destination.
- Avoid pasting full URLs into the document.
- Ensure link text makes sense out of context.

How to Edit Hyperlinks

1. Right-click the link.
2. Select Edit Hyperlink or press Ctrl + K.

3. Replace the Text to Display field with meaningful wording.



4. Use True Lists

Why This Matters

Screen readers recognize built-in bulleted and numbered lists and announce them correctly. Manually typed numbers or dashes do not provide proper structure.

Requirements

- Use Word's built-in bulleted or numbered list tools.
- Do not manually type numbers, letters, or hyphens to simulate a list.

How to Create Lists

1. Go to the Home tab.
2. Select Bulleted List or Numbered List in the Paragraph group.



5. Create True Columns

Why This Matters

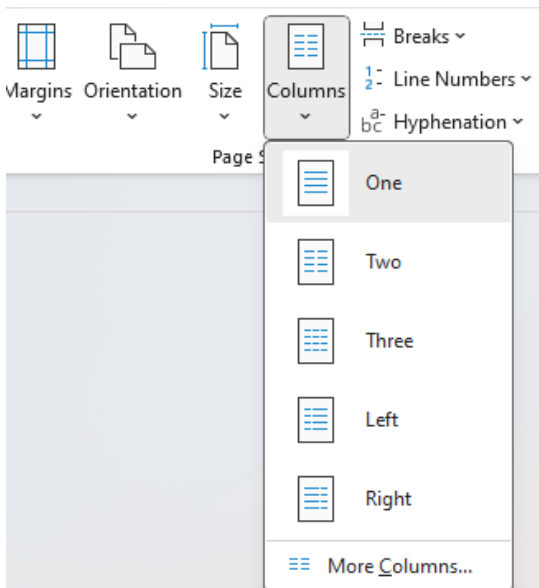
Using tabs or spaces to simulate columns disrupts reading order and causes accessibility issues.

Requirements

- Use Word's built-in column formatting tool.
- Do not use the Tab key or multiple spaces to align content.

How to Create Columns

1. Select the Layout tab.
2. Choose Columns in the Page Setup group.
3. Select the desired number of columns.



6. Format Accessible Tables

Why This Matters

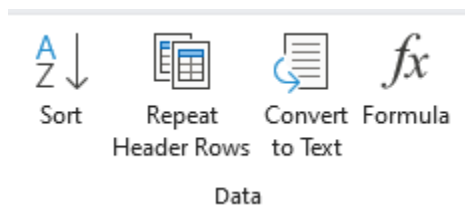
Tables should be used only for displaying data. Proper formatting ensures screen readers can correctly interpret row and column relationships.

Requirements

- Use tables only for data, not layout.
- Include a designated header row.
- Ensure header rows repeat when tables span multiple pages.

How to Create and Format Tables

1. Go to Insert → Table → Insert Table.
2. Add a header row:
 - Select the table.
 - Go to the Table Design tab.
 - Check Header Row under Table Style Options.
3. Repeat header rows if needed:
 - Go to the Layout tab.
 - Select Repeat Header Rows.



7. Run the Accessibility Checker

Why This Matters

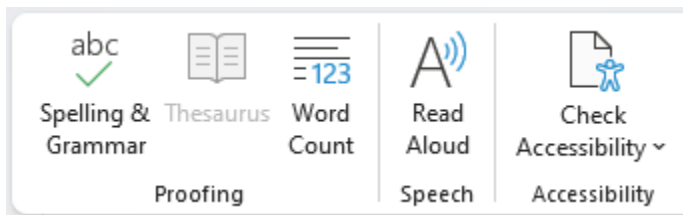
The Accessibility Checker identifies errors, warnings, and recommendations that may prevent assistive technologies from interpreting the document correctly.

Requirements

- Run the Accessibility Checker before distributing or publishing any document.
- Resolve all errors.
- Review warnings and recommended improvements.

How to Check Accessibility

1. Select the Review tab.
2. Click Check Accessibility.
3. Review the results panel and address each issue.



8. Export Documents Properly as Accessible PDFs

Why This Matters

Printing to PDF often removes structural tags, heading hierarchy, alt text, and other accessibility features. This can make a document unusable for screen reader users and noncompliant with accessibility standards.

Using Word's built-in export feature preserves document structure and accessibility information.

Requirements

- Do not use "Print to PDF."

- Use Word's Export or Save As PDF feature.
- Ensure accessibility tags are included in the exported file.
- Run the Accessibility Checker before exporting.

How to Export an Accessible PDF

1. Select File.
2. Choose Save As.
3. Select PDF from the file type dropdown menu.
4. Click Options.
5. Confirm "Document structure tags for accessibility" is checked.
6. Click Save.

Before You Share or Submit

Use the following checklist before distributing your document:

- One Heading 1 used
- Proper heading hierarchy applied
- All images include meaningful alt text
- All hyperlinks use descriptive text
- Lists are created using built-in tools
- Columns are created using Layout tools
- Tables include header rows
- Accessibility Checker has been completed
- All identified issues have been resolved