General Tips for Creating Accessible PDFs

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This information is available in alternate formats on request. Please contact the Manitoba Accessibility Office at MAO@gov.mb.ca or 204-945-7613 or toll free at 1-800-282-8069, ext. 7613.

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Introduction

A PDF (Portable Document Format) is a common format for distributing printable documents. The PDF was created by Adobe and can be opened with Adobe Acrobat, Reader, as well as many other tools and some web browsers.

What Makes a PDF Accessible?

An accessible PDF is usable by people with a variety of disabilities. For instance, a blind user may use a screen reader, a braille display, or even print the document in braille format. A person with a motor impairment may use a keyboard rather than a mouse to navigate between form fields. Other users may need to adjust the font size or spacing to help with vision loss or learning / cognitive disabilities.

General document accessibility guidelines also apply to PDFs. This means that a document should be properly structured with headings, feature contrast between the background and text, and images should include alternate text.

Since PDF documents often contain interactive parts like forms, their accessibility should be evaluated based on the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. Following these directions does not guarantee accessibility compliance, but it is a good start.

Document accessibility can depend on a variety of factors.

Two questions to ask when testing a document for accessibility are:
- What was the original format of the document?
- How was the document converted to a PDF?

One of the most important parts of document accessibility is the way page elements and text are defined. Assistive technologies interpret tags in a document and provide content to a user accordingly. A well-tagged document enhances accessibility, whereas a poorly tagged document creates accessibility barriers. Always remember to check your document templates for accessibility and to ask the public for feedback.

Parts of your document to check:

Language

- For screen readers and other assistive technologies to correctly read a document, designate the language in which the document is written.
- If lines or blocks of text within the document change language, that text should be tagged separately.

Document Title

- All documents should include a title.
- It is also helpful to provide the name of the author, a description, relevant keywords, and contact information.

Tagging Text

- Text that is not actively tagged by the author will automatically be tagged as paragraph text.
- If the text is a heading, make sure you select a level of heading (Heading 1, Heading 2, etc.), rather than just changing font size, color, or format.
- The most efficient way to tag the various elements of content is by using the "Styles" feature in the "Home" menu of MS Word toolbar.
- Highlight the text and select the style needed to tag each section appropriately.
- After structuring your content, you can then change the font types and colors of these headings by modifying the heading style within the "Styles" menu.

Images

- An image can have different purposes depending on how it is used.
- Many images are purely decorative, and should be described using alternative text (alt text). It is important to define these images as "artifact".
- Other images may have some sort of function or convey important information and, therefore, need a different kind of description in the alt text.

Tables

- When data tables are used, it is important to tag their structure.
- At a minimum, make sure you define which are the column and row headings.
- Keep your table structure as simple as possible; try not to merge rows and columns, as it complicates navigation for assistive technology users.

Reading Order

- Assistive technologies rely on logical reading sequences to present content to users.
- During a document's creation, it is extremely important to ensure there is a sensible reading order.

Bookmarks

- For many users, the easiest and most accessible way to organize a table of contents is to provide bookmarks based on document headings.
- This gives users the ability to navigate the PDF using bookmarked headings, rather than having to read the entire document to find what they need.

Export (Conversion)

- There are many ways to create PDFs from different editing programs.
- A document's accessibility can vary greatly depending on the way it is exported, converted, or saved.
- We cover three types of programs: Microsoft Word, Excel, and Adobe InDesign.

Security Settings

- Lock settings on documents can create barriers for assistive technologies when extracting content and presenting it to the user.
- Do not lock final documents, which will allow screen readers and other accessibility tools to access it.
- Locking a PDF is not the same as password protecting it.

Have you created an accessible document in Word, Excel, or InDesign?

Congratulations! …But you are not done yet!

Always open the PDF in Adobe Acrobat and perform the Make Accessible feature. This is the final check needed to ensure that your document is accessible. In most cases, this is where you will add/confirm the title of the document.

To run the Make Accessible feature in Adobe Acrobat:
1. Open the PDF in Adobe Acrobat
2. Select **Tools** in the upper right-hand corner
3. Expand the **Action Wizard** and select **Make Accessible**
4. Select **Start** and follow the prompts

Contact Information

If you have any questions or require this information in an alternate format, please contact the Manitoba Accessibility Office.

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