5 Habits for Creating Accessible Word Documents

Creating accessible documents is more a matter of changing habits then learning new technology. Word Styles are easy to use, can save you time, and will benefit your students. Follow the instructions below to develop 5 habits for creating Word documents using Styles (*Image 1*), that will solve 90% of common accessibility issues. Your students will thank you; and you will be part of creating a more inclusive campus community at Cal Poly!

*Image 1: Styles*

Habit #1: Use Headings from Styles

Students who are blind rely on screen readers to read electronic content aloud. Heading styles provide the structure for the document content. Rule of thumb is to use **Heading 1** for the **Title** of the document, **Heading 2** for major sections that follow, and **Heading 3** for further subsections. Always apply heading levels sequentially.

- **In Word 2016 for Windows**, click on the **Home** tab to access **Styles**. Click on expand icon in lower right corner. Choose styles from list. To see all styles, click on **Options** link at bottom and select **All styles** under “Select styles to show” and click **Ok**. To change a style, click on its arrow from the list and select **Modify**. (*Image 2*)

- **In Word 2016 for Mac**, click on the **Home** tab to access **Styles**. Click on **Styles Pane** icon. Choose from the styles in the list. To see all styles, click on the **List** pull-down menu and select **All Styles**. To change a style, click on its icon in the list until it becomes an arrow and select **Modify Style**. (*Image 3*)

*Image 2: Windows Styles Pane*  
*Image 3: Mac Styles Pane*

1. Select the corner arrow to open the Styles Pane.  
2. Select “Options”
Habit #2: Format your Word document using Styles

Use Styles instead of the formatting options that are available in Word’s ribbon bar. Create all these format types with the Styles menu. For example, when using bullets (List Bullet style) or numbered lists (List Number style), create them within the Styles menu (be sure to select All Styles). For hyperlinks, select Hyperlink from the Style menu. Use the Strong style for bold and the Emphasis style for italics. (Image 4 and 5)

Habit #3: Use hyperlink names that make sense

Do not label your hyperlink text using the actual URL. Also, avoid labeling hyperlinks as “Click here,” which is confusing to the listener when a screen reader reads through the document links. Instead, use just a few descriptive words for your hyperlink text that will make it clear to the listener where the link will take them. For example, if you have a link in your syllabus to the Cal Poly Disability Resource Center, you would create the hyperlink with the text, Cal Poly Disability Resource Center, not https://drc.calpoly.edu/.

Habit #4: Assign alt text to images

Image descriptions are read aloud by the screen reader to the listener to provide meaning and context. Image descriptions are known as “alternative text” or “alt text.” To add an image description, right click on the image and select Format Picture. Within the Format Picture Pane, you will see a tab or icon labeled Layout & Properties. Click on the Alt Text choice and type a description in the Description field itself and leave the Title field blank (Image 6). Image descriptions should be brief, a simple phrase or sentence. For example, in Image 7 below, “DNA Replication” is sufficient. If the details of the image are essential for understanding the page content, it’s best to place the information directly within the document itself, rather than creating a long description. If your image is merely decorative, you can place “null” text, two double quote marks (“ “) in the description field, which the screen reader will not read aloud to the listener.
Habit #5: Add a header row and alt text for tables

Tables generally make sense to people as a visual presentation since someone reading a document can refer back to the column and row headings to make sense of the data. However, imagine having the data of a table read to you. In such an instance, the header row needs to be identified so that the contents of the table can be read properly. A header row is also necessary when a table spans multiple pages. Tables also require alt text so listeners using screen readers can scan the document to quickly identify table content.

To add a header row, right-click on the Table itself and select Table Properties. Next, select the Row tab and select the checkbox next to Repeat as header row at the top of the page. Make sure the box next to Allow row to break across pages is not selected (see Image 8 below). While you are still in Table Properties, select the Alt Text tab to add your table description, such as “Weekly Assignments.” Then select OK. (See Table 1 example below).

**Table 1: Weekly Assignments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Assignment Description</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Syllabus Quiz</td>
<td>Friday, 9/28/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>Homework # 1</td>
<td>Friday, 10/5/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 3</td>
<td>Essay paper</td>
<td>Friday, 10/12/18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Final Step: Check Accessibility

One final thing you can do is run an accessibility check to see if Word finds any errors in your document:

- **Windows**: Select **File**, then **Info** from the menu, then **Check for Issues** then **Check Accessibility** (*Image 9*).
- **Mac**: Select the **Review tab**, then **Check Accessibility** (*Image 10*). A pane will open on the right side displaying any errors, warning, and tips. If there are errors listed, click on these and Word will provide suggestions of how you might fix the errors in your document.

*Image 9: Check Accessibility on Windows*

![Image 9](https://example.com/image9.png)

*Image 10: Mac Check Accessibility*

![Image 10](https://example.com/image10.png)

That’s all there is to it! Incorporate these five habits into your Word document creation process and you can be confident that your documents are reasonably accessible! Please find additional resources below. For more information please contact Pam Dougherty at padoughe@calpoly.edu.

**Resources**

1. **CTLT Accessibility Resources**
2. **Cal Poly Disability Resource Center**
3. **SensusAccess** (document converter)
4. **WebAIM: Microsoft Word** (screenshot tutorials)
5. **Accessible Electronic Documents** (video tutorials)
6. **Microsoft Office Accessible Templates**

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1 CTLT Accessibility Resources: https://ctlt.calpoly.edu/resources
2 Cal Poly Disability Resource Center: https://drc.calpoly.edu/
3 SensusAccess: https://lib.calpoly.edu/study-spaces-and-tech/convert/
4 WebAIM: Microsoft Word: https://webaim.org/techniques/word/
5 Accessible Electronic Documents: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=DzhgdBxKRae