

Accessible Document Practices in Microsoft Word

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Microsoft Word is one of the most popular applications in the world, widely used to create worksheets, articles, syllabi, and other documents.

Here are a few tips and tricks to help you provide more accessible Microsoft Word documents for your students and others. Note that some techniques and features discussed in this guide may be unavailable in some versions of Word.

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Microsoft Word Accessibility To-Do List

Microsoft Office Accessibility Checker

- Use the Accessibility Checker to review accessibility issues in Word
- Accessibility Checker covers only a fraction of potential accessibility issues

Content Reading Order

- Use Headings to create outline and structure
- Provide a Table of Contents for longer documents
- Use Word Layout features—not tabs or line spaces—to provide columns, sections, and breaks

Alternative Text for Images, Graphs, and other Non-text Content

- Apply contextual alternate text to all images that provide content or functionality
- For complex images such as charts or graphs, provide a link or reference to a longer description or alternate presentation (e.g., a data table in addition to a chart, a sequence in addition to a visual process)
- For images that do not provide content or functionality, select “Mark as Decorative” (This feature is not available in all versions of Microsoft Office)
- Provide appropriate captions or transcripts for media such as linked or embedded audio or video

Data Tables

- Identify a header row and column as appropriate for each data table
- Avoid merging or splitting cells
- Include borders to clearly separate individual cells

Links

- Use descriptive text, not URLs, for links
- Ensure that links point to accessible resources, documents, and websites

Lists

- Use Word tools to create lists

Color Contrast and Use

- Ensure that all foreground/background color combinations meet or exceed guidelines for color contrast
- Do not use color as the sole means of identifying an object in your presentation

Document Information

- Add document title and author information

Microsoft Word Accessibility Checker

Microsoft Word offers an Accessibility Checker feature that can help you to manage your accessibility tasks in Word. The accessibility checker doesn't provide a comprehensive assessment of a document's accessibility, but it can help you to find opportunities to add important accessibility features to your Word document. This tool is also available in Microsoft PowerPoint and Microsoft Excel.



Run the Microsoft Office Accessibility Checker

- Open the REVIEW tab and find *Check Accessibility*
- Errors, Warnings, and Tips appear in the Accessibility Assistant

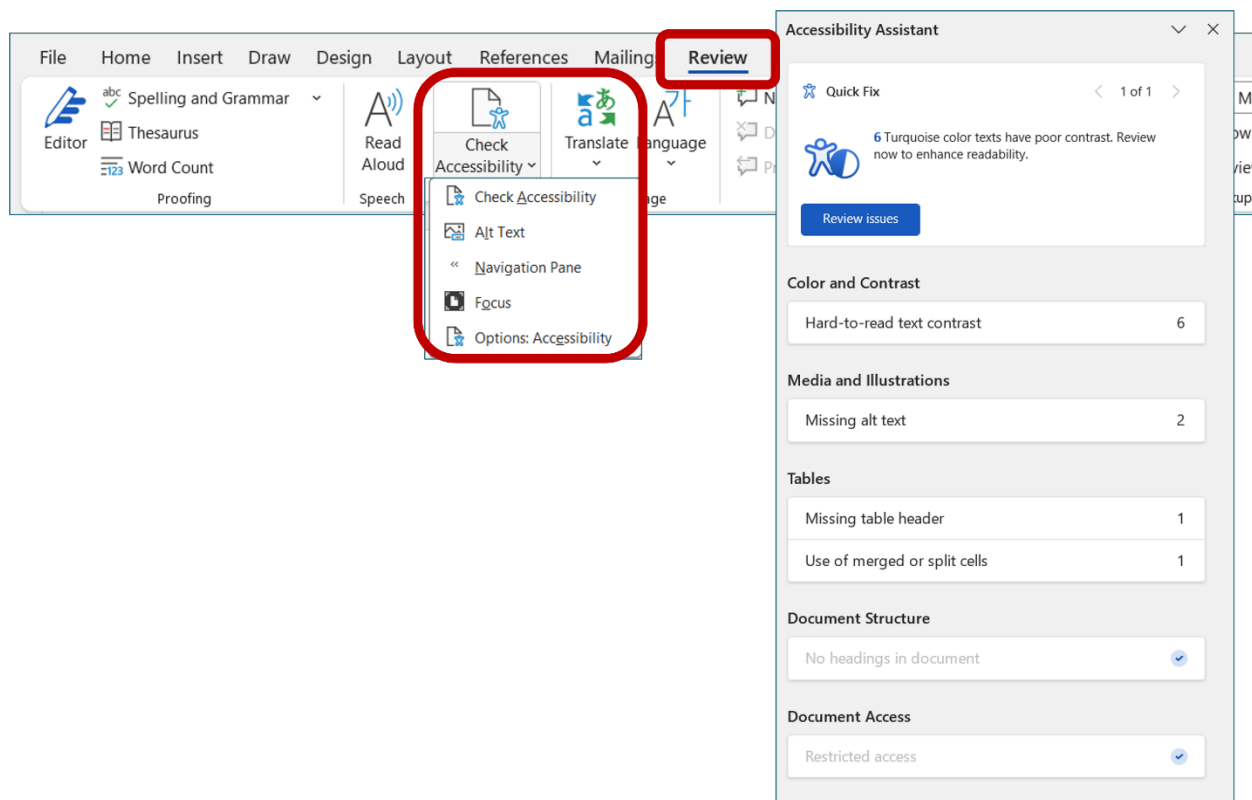


Figure 1: Word Accessibility Checker and Accessibility Assistant

When you select one of the Inspection Results, Accessibility Checker will open a panel with Additional Information that describes the accessibility problem and offers suggestions on how to fix the issue.

Note: Not all accessibility issues are of equal concern. Focus on structural and content issues like headings, tables, and ALT text. Be aware that images and other objects that are not inline will not be read by some screen readers.

Use Headings to Create Outline and Structure

For documents with multiple topics or sections, headings are a simple way to simplify navigation. Screen reader users are able to efficiently traverse a file using headings; others can use the Navigation pane or Outline view. Word headings will also export to PDF and HTML, ensuring a higher level of accessibility in those formats as well.

Document creators can also leverage headings and other style elements for consistent formatting and simplified maintenance.

Organize your document with Word headings

- Open your Word document for editing
- Review the document outline in Navigation View (View → Navigation Pane)
- Click or key your cursor into the text you want to present as a heading
- In the Formatting toolbar (Home tab) click the Heading 1 button, OR use key combo ALT+O, S to open the style pane and key to the Heading 1 style option
- Continue through the document, applying appropriately nested headings for each topic heading.
- Review the document outline in Navigation View

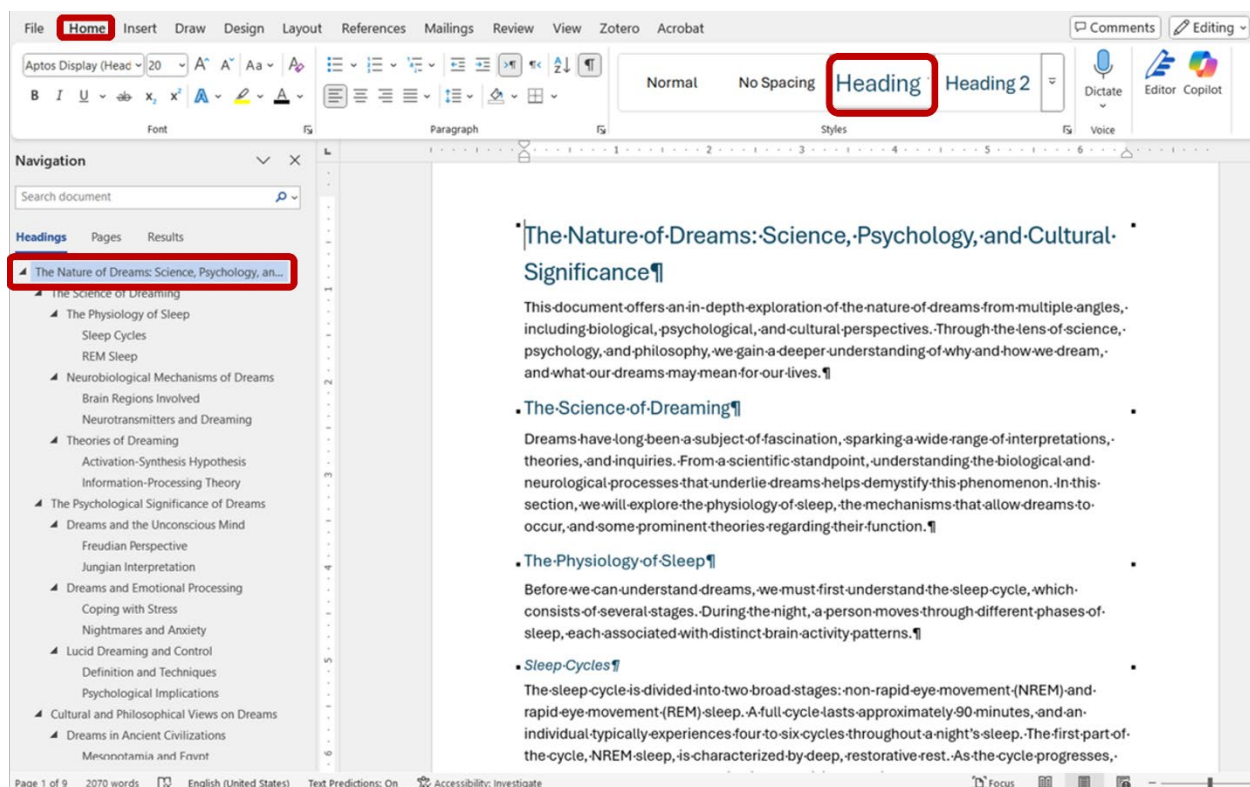


Figure 2: Navigation pane and Styles group

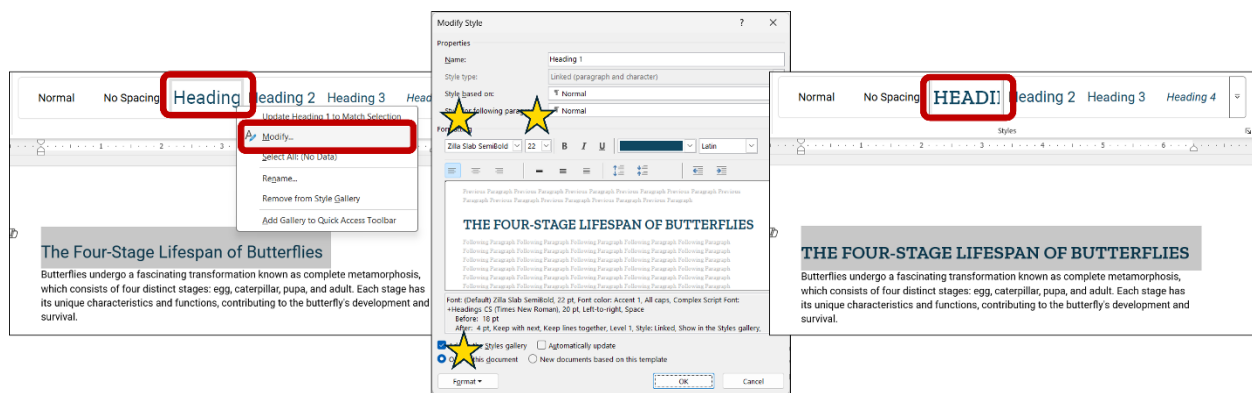
Create Custom Styles for Headings

If you don't want to use the styles included in your theme or template, you can modify the styles to better suit your project.

Modify a style from the Styles group

You can change all instances of a style by changing the formatting settings for that style.

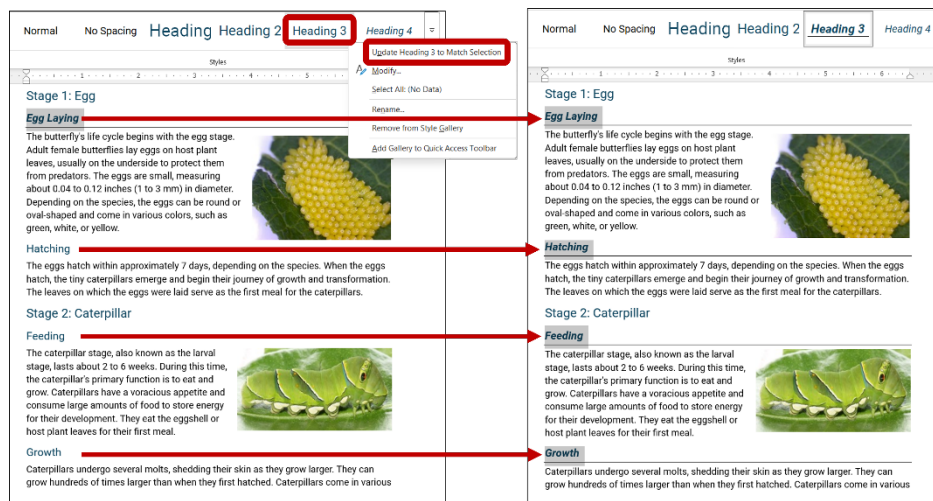
1. Open the HOME ribbon and find the STYLES group
2. Right-click or Shift+F10 on the style you want to change and select Modify
3. In the Modify dialog, make changes to Font, Paragraph, tab stops, and other settings
4. OK your style choices



Update a style to match a selection

You can change on instance of a style and then update the style to use those changes.

1. Select one example of the style you want to change.
2. Make all desired changes to the formatting
3. Right-click or Shift+F10 on the style you want to change and select "Update style to match selection"



Create a Table of Contents

Once you have applied a robust outline structure to your Word document, you can add another layer of accessibility by generating a Table of Contents (ToC). A ToC lists the contents of your document by topic heading and allows users to hyperlink directly from an entry in the ToC to the corresponding content in the document.

The Table of Contents uses heading levels and other styles as entries, so the ToC will reflect the true structure of the document. Note that ToC levels become Bookmarks when your document is exported to PDF.

Create a Table of Contents

- In the References tab, select Table of Contents
- Select one of the Built-In ToC options, or create a custom Table of Contents
- Select levels and other preferences
- The ToC appears at the point of insertion

The screenshot illustrates the process of creating a Table of Contents in Microsoft Word. The 'References' tab is active, and the 'Table of Contents' task pane is open. The task pane shows three options: 'Automatic Table 1', 'Automatic Table 2', and 'Manual Table'. The 'Automatic Table 1' option is selected. The 'Table of Contents' dialog box is open, showing the 'Table of Contents' tab. The 'Print Preview' section shows a preview of the Table of Contents for a document titled 'THE NATURE OF DREAMS: SCIENCE, PSYCHOLOGY, AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE'. The preview shows the following entries:

Heading 1	Page
Heading 1	1
Heading 2	3
Heading 3	5

The 'Table of Contents' dialog box also includes options for 'Show page numbers', 'Right align page numbers', 'Tab leader', 'Format', and 'Show levels'. The 'Options...' button is visible at the bottom right of the dialog box.

Create Column Sections for Layout

Objects that are “wrapped” are not accessible to assistive technologies, because their content does not appear in the content flow. Using columns for layout helps to ensure that your document content will follow a logical order and flow in a linear sequence when accessed by users of assistive technology. This is especially important when your images contain information, but you want them to “float” next to text content in your document.

For layout purposes, always use columns instead of multiple tabs or tables.

- Place the cursor at the beginning of the section where you want to apply two or more columns
- From the Layout tab, select Breaks, and then Continuous
- Place the cursor at the end of the section where you want to apply the columns
- From the Layout tab, select Breaks, and then Continuous
- Place the cursor at the point where you want your columns to break
- From the Layout tab, select Breaks, and then Column

You can also adjust the width of your columns to suit the needs of your document layout.

Once you have created your columns, you no longer need any Wrap Text settings other than “In Line with Text”. After you have applied this setting, your content will flow naturally, and your image’s ALT text will be available for screen readers and other assistive technologies.

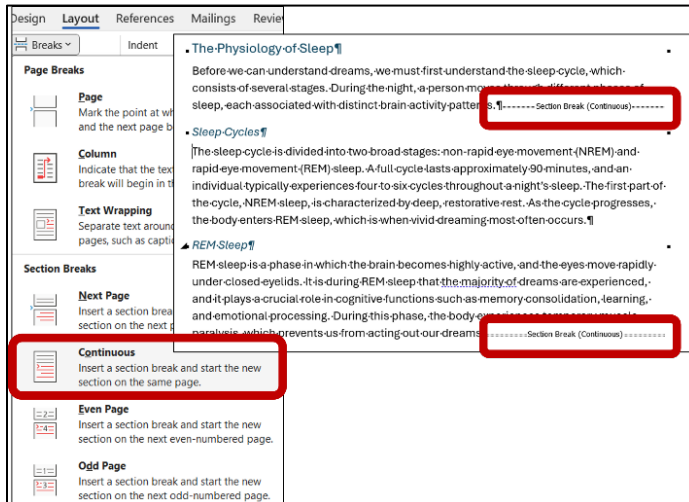


Figure 3: Continuous Section Break

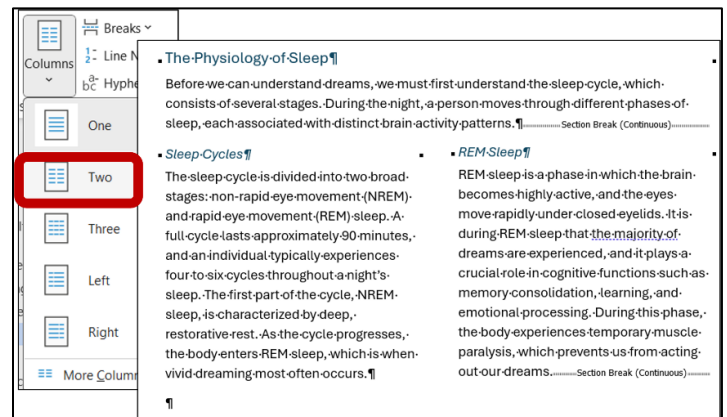
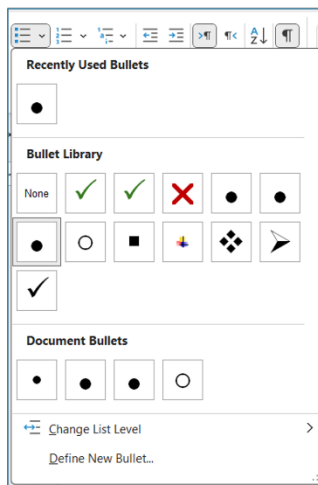


Figure 4: Columns

Create Lists with Word Authoring Tools

Lists are among the simplest semantic and organizational elements in your document. Do not simply type a sequence of items preceded by asterisks, dashes, or underscores. Your list should be created using list tools in your authoring program. Semantically sound lists provide users of assistive technology information about the number of items in a list, as well as the position of a current item (e.g., "4 of 6"). This helps keep people oriented within your content.

Word supports the creation of bulleted, numbered, and multilevel lists.



- → REM Sleep:
 - → EEG Patterns: REM sleep is characterized by low-amplitude, mixed-frequency brain waves that resemble wakefulness. These waves include beta waves (13-30 Hz) and theta waves (4-8 Hz).
 - → Brain Activity: During REM sleep, the brain is highly active, similar to when you are awake. This is the stage where most dreaming occurs, and the brain's activity is more erratic and intense.
- → Non-REM Sleep:
 - → EEG Patterns: Non-REM sleep is divided into three stages, each with its own EEG characteristics.
 - → Stage 1: Light sleep with theta waves (4-8 Hz) and occasional alpha waves (8-13 Hz).
 - → Stage 2: Characterized by sleep spindles (bursts of 12-14 Hz waves) and K-complexes (high-amplitude waves).
 - → Stage 3: Deep sleep, also known as slow-wave sleep, dominated by delta waves (0.5-4 Hz), which are high-amplitude and low-frequency.
 - → Brain Activity: Non-REM sleep involves progressively deeper stages of sleep, with brain activity slowing down significantly, especially in Stage 3. This stage is crucial for physical restoration and memory consolidation.

To make a single-level list in Word

- Enter all items in the list
- Select all items in the list
- Use the Bulleted or Numbered List tool to create the list

To make a multi-level list

- Enter all list items and create a list as described above
- Select all second-level and lower list items and press the TAB key
- Continue selecting lower level items and pressing TAB until all items are in the correct level
- With all items highlighted, select a multilevel list from the List Library

Provide ALT Text for Images

Images, charts, and other graphical elements are not read by screen readers and present an accessibility barrier to users of those technologies. Good ALT text lets users know the meaning and purpose of a graphical element when they can't view the image on the screen.

In Word, ALT text is exposed to screen readers when an image is positioned inline with text; images that use wrapping are excluded from the document flow and unavailable to screen readers. To ensure that your ALT text is exposed to assistive technology, position your images inline. If the appearance of an image wrap is essential, consider creating a section with multiple columns for layout.

Add ALT text to an image in Word

In the Insert tab, click Picture, OR use key combo (ALT+N, P) to insert an image into your Word document

- Right click on the image, OR use key combo SHIFT+F10 to open the context menu
- Select Format Picture from the context menu
- In the Format Picture menu, select ALT text
- In the ALT text view, enter your ALT text in the DESCRIPTION field
- Close the Format Picture dialog box

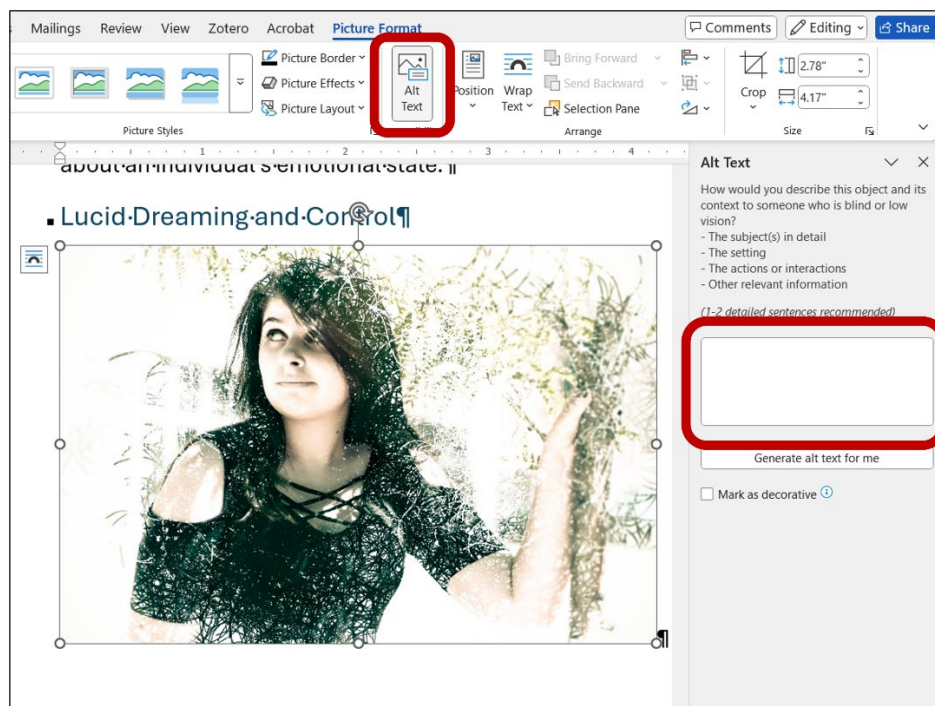


Figure 5: A person gazes upward as if in a dreamscape

Provide Header Cells for Data Tables

Compared to other file formats, Word offers little in the way of accessibility for data tables. Still, there are a couple of steps you can take to ensure that your data table is as accessible as Word will allow.

Your best bet is to keep your table as simple as possible; straightforward, grid-shaped tables with a single row of header cells will yield the most accessible results.

Create Your Table

In the Insert tab, select Table (ALT+N, T) to open the Table grid

- Drag or arrow through the grid to select the dimensions of your table
- Enter your data into your table
- Edit the caption if necessary

Designate Header Row

- Place the cursor in a header cell in the top row
- Select the “Design” tab in the “Table Tools” section
- Make sure that “Header Row” is checked

The screenshot shows a Microsoft Word document with a table titled "Sales by Quarter, 2018". The table has 7 columns: Product, Retail Price, Jan-Mar, Apr-Jun, Jul-Sep, Oct-Dec, and Total Sales. The first row is highlighted with a red box, indicating it is the header row. The "Table Tools" ribbon is visible, with the "Design" tab selected. The "Header Row" checkbox is checked, and the "Banded Rows" checkbox is also checked. The "Table Style Options" section shows "Banded Rows" and "Banded Columns" options.

Product	Retail Price	Jan-Mar	Apr-Jun	Jul-Sep	Oct-Dec	Total Sales
Smart Trainer	\$600.00	21346	8416	2685	1954	\$29977.00
Treadmill	\$3400.00	3011	4111	2873	2664	\$16259.00
Kettlebells	\$15.00	4773	3564	3412	1884	\$13648.00
Resistance Band	\$5.00	2136	1933	2544	3835	\$10634.00
Fitness Watch	\$380	3128	2855	2100	4011	\$12474.00

Provide Meaningful Link Text

If you use links in your Word documents, be sure the text of the link clearly indicates where the link goes. Avoid generic link text such as "More" or "Click Here", in favor of descriptive text such as "Read a biography of Jung at Wikipedia" or "View a PDF map of the Canary Islands"

Bad: [Click here](#)

Slightly better, but still not great: [Click here to learn more](#)

Good: [Learn more about Lucid Dreaming](#)

Still better: [Download "The Nature of Dreams" \(Tagged PDF, 1.2 MB\)](#)

Consider all the information contained in the last hyperlink example above—document title, document format, file size—each element conveys information to the user about the upcoming experience and helps the user to make an informed choice about how to approach the material.

Ensure that links are understandable out of context

If you include links in a body of text, make sure that the link text contains all of the information a user needs to understand the purpose and target of the link. Do not use link text that consists only of the URL; if you want to provide the URL, place it AFTER the link text, and not in the link itself.

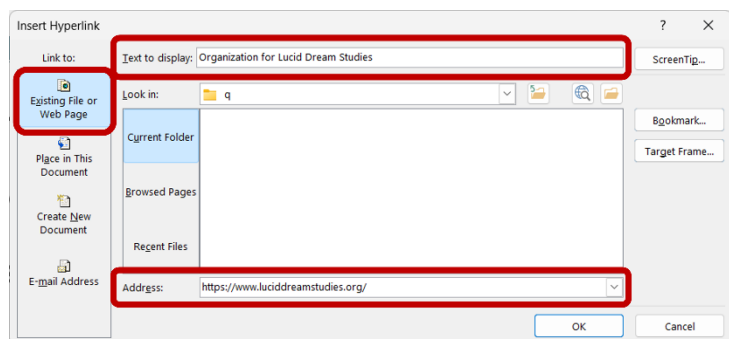
Example: [View the International Space Station Overview](https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/station)
(https://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/station)

Enter or edit link text in your document

To create or edit link text, you can use the Insert Hyperlink command (Control+K), or select Hyperlink from the Insert tab. This opens the Insert Hyperlink dialog box, where you can add both your text and your link's URL.

Place the cursor where you want to add a hyperlink

- Open the Insert Hyperlink dialog (Control+K)
- In the "Text to display" field, enter the text of your link (you can also highlight the text before opening the Insert Hyperlink dialog)
- In the "Address" field, enter or paste the URL of your link



Quick Tip: Highlight your text first and then press CTRL+K (Command+K for MacOS) to add a link to existing text.

Use Sufficient Color Contrast

Providing sufficient contrast between background and foreground colors is not specifically a Microsoft Word accessibility technique; all documents need a level of contrast that makes them readable by low-vision or color-blind users. In general, light text should go on a dark background, and dark text on a light background.

In digital documents, colors are constructed using a Red, Green Blue (RGB) color model. In Microsoft Word, authors typically select colors from a palette associated with the current document. If you are uncertain which colors your document contains, you can evaluate them for sufficient contrast.

Use the Colour Contrast Analyser

Download the CCA at <https://www.tpgi.com/color-contrast-checker/>

- Select your foreground and background colors from the CCA color picker, or use the eyedropper to select colors from an existing document, or enter color values into the foreground and background color fields
- To change between HEX and RGB color values, select Options → Displayed Color Value (Control+E for HEX; Control+R for RGB)
- Make necessary adjustments to corresponding colors in your Microsoft Word document

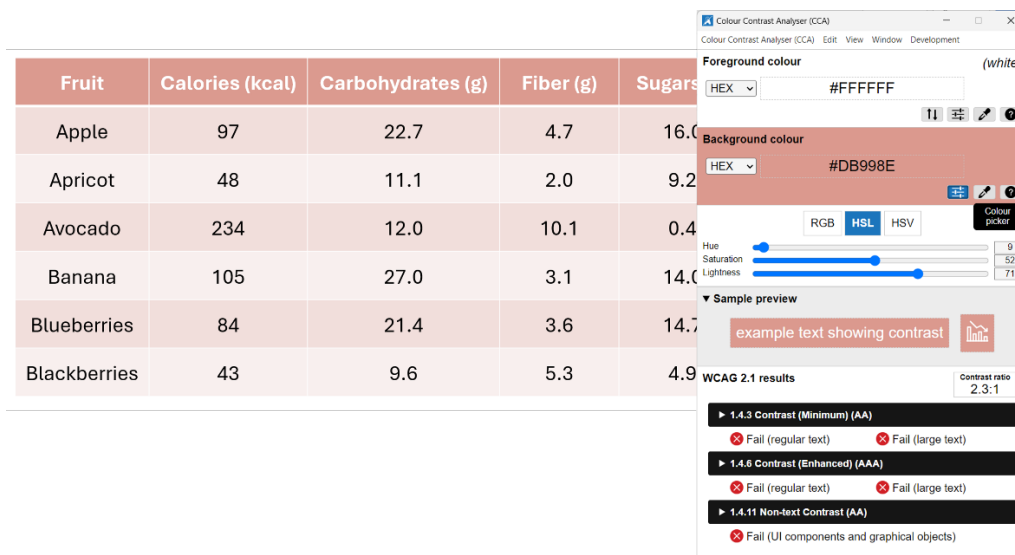


Figure 6: Colour Contrast Analyser

Set the Human Language

Setting the human language of content enables assistive technology to accurately and properly convey the inflection and pronunciation of text, providing a more accurate experience for the user.

To set the human language of a word or phrase:

- Select the content
- From the Review tab, select the Language tool
- Apply the desired language to the content

English	Spanish
Good morning.	Buenos días.
Good afternoon.	Buenos tardes.
Good evening.	Buenos noches.
I want some breakfast.	Yo quiero el desayuno.
Where is the beach?	Donde es la playa?
What is the telephone number?	Cual es el numero de telefono?



Provide a Meaningful Document Title

In addition to the file name and the content title, your document has a title property. This title is provided to assistive technologies before any document content. If the title is not present, assistive technologies may announce the file name, which may not communicate the nature of the document.

To avoid confusion, consider using the same title as the one in your content.

To add a document title:

1. From the FILE tab, select INFO
2. In the PROPERTIES section of the Info window, locate Title
3. Enter a Title for the document.

The screenshot displays the Adobe Acrobat interface with the 'Info' window open. On the left, a vertical sidebar contains icons and labels for 'Home', 'New', 'Open', 'Info' (highlighted with a blue bar), 'Save', 'Save As', 'Save as Adobe PDF', 'Print', 'Share', 'Share as Adobe PDF link', 'Export', 'Transform', and 'Close'. The main panel on the right is titled 'Properties' and is divided into several sections: 'Properties' (with a dropdown arrow), 'Related Dates', 'Related People', and 'Related Documents'. The 'Properties' section lists document metadata: Size (3.55MB), Pages (15), Words (2331), Total Editing Time (331 Minutes), Title (Accessible Document Practice, which is highlighted with a blue selection box), Tags (Add a tag), and Comments (Add comments). The 'Related Dates' section shows 'Last Modified' as 'Yesterday, 11:53 AM' and 'Created' as '6/8/2025 9:13 AM'. The 'Related People' section lists 'Author' as 'T.M. Weissenberger' (with a circular profile icon) and 'Last Modified By' as 'Weissenberger, T M' (with a circular profile icon). The 'Related Documents' section includes an 'Open File Location' button. At the bottom of the main panel is a link that says 'Show All Properties'.

Properties	
Size	3.55MB
Pages	15
Words	2331
Total Editing Time	331 Minutes
Title	Accessible Document Practice
Tags	Add a tag
Comments	Add comments

Related Dates	
Last Modified	Yesterday, 11:53 AM
Created	6/8/2025 9:13 AM
Last Printed	

Related People	
Author	T.M. Weissenberger
Add an author	
Last Modified By	Weissenberger, T M

Related Documents	
Open File Location	

[Show All Properties](#)

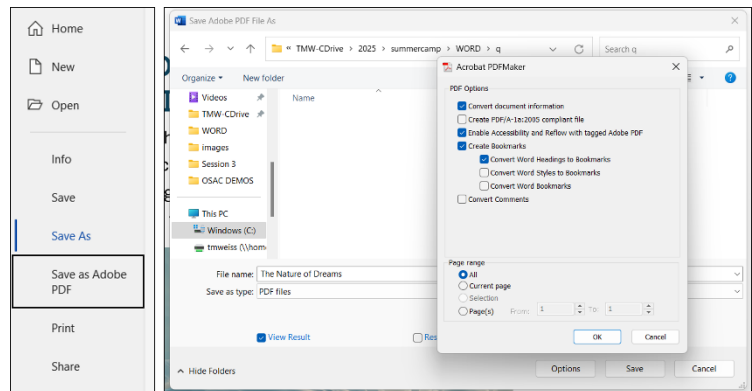
Export to PDF

If you have created your Word document with accessibility in mind, most or all of the accessibility features should transfer to the PDF version of your document. When you export to PDF, check your Save As options to make sure accessibility features are included.

Save as Adobe PDF

To save your Word document as an Adobe PDF

- Create your Word document, applying any appropriate accessibility features
- In the File page, choose *Save as Adobe PDF*
- Adjust the Options as necessary in the Save As dialog box



Use the Create PDF Add-in

Note: you must have the Acrobat toolbar to perform the following task.

To export your Word document to PDF

- Create your Word document, applying any appropriate accessibility features
- In the Acrobat toolbar, set preferences such as Heading conversion, Advanced tagging, etc.
- Select the “Create PDF” tool from the toolbar

