Georgia Tech · College of Design
Center for Inclusive Design and Innovation

Document Accessibility

MICROSOFT WORD

This full how-to-guide was created by the Center for Inclusive Design and Innovation (CIDI) and includes screenshots, examples and key strategies useful for creating accessible Microsoft Word Documents. While Microsoft Word is the most widely used word processing program, the strategies and concepts in this guide can also be applied to other programs such as Google Docs.

Documents that are formatted to be accessible will work well with assistive technology. Many people with disabilities use assistive technology including screen readers, screen magnification, and text to speech to access content. Accessible documents are necessary for people with disabilities and improve the user experience for all users.

Key Strategies

Use the following key strategies to create accessible Word documents:

1. Format Headings and subheadings in a logical order using the Styles group on the Home Ribbon.
2. Use built-in tools to format accessible bulleted and numbered lists.
3. Create tables with a simple structure identifying column and row headers.
4. Add alternative (alt) text descriptions to images, charts, and graphs.
5. Choose fonts that are easy to read such as sans serif fonts like Calibri, Arial, and Tahoma. Microsoft's default font is now a sans serif font. Use a font size of at least 12 pt.
6. Use appropriate color and contrast settings. Do not use color alone to convey information.
7. Format hyperlinks with meaningful context.
8. Save files with descriptive file names.
9. Use Microsoft Word's Accessibility Checker to check your document and fix accessibility problems.
10. Save accessible source documents, including MS Word documents, as accessible PDF

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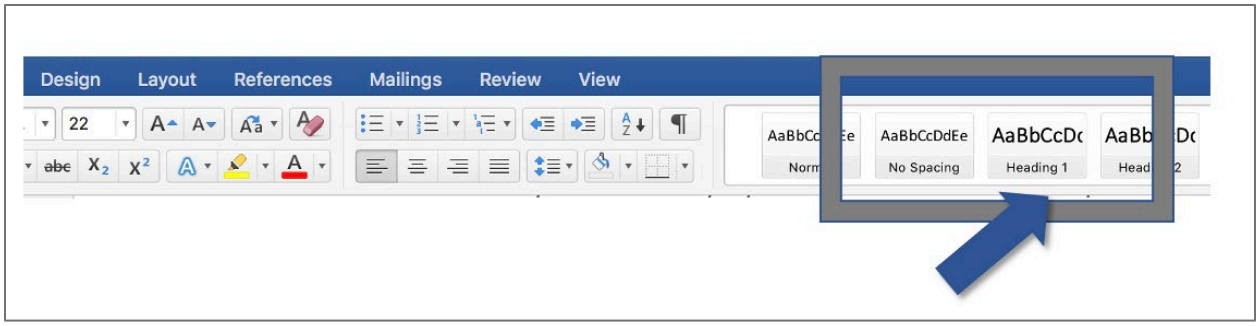
Headings and Subheadings

Users of assistive technology use headings as navigation points. Microsoft Word has built-in styles that can be used to format headings so that they are recognized by assistive technology. Headings and subheadings also provide a visual structure that is useful for all users.

Format Headings with Logical Order

Format the main headings in the document as Heading 1. Format subheadings as Heading 2. For example, format the main sections of an annual report as Heading 1 with sub sections as Heading 2.

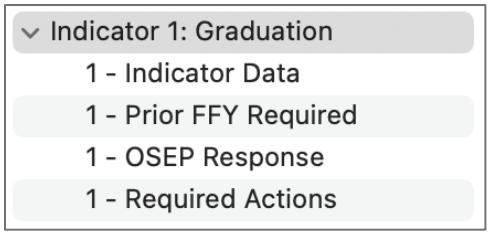
To format a heading, select the text, go to the Styles group on the Home tab and choose the appropriate heading level. Formatted headings can be viewed in the Navigation pane (View > Show > Navigation Pane) and can also be used to create a table of contents for long documents.



Example Headings

- Heading 1: “Indicator 1 Graduation”
  - Heading 2: “1 – Indicator Data”
  - Heading 2: “1 – Prior FFY Required”

The screenshot below shows the headings viewed as a nested list in the Navigation Pane.

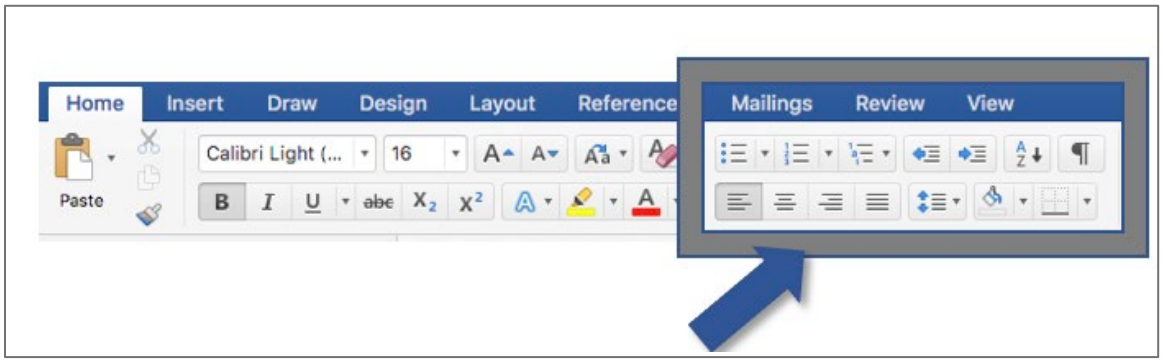


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Bulleted and Numbered Lists

Use Word's built-in list formatting tools to create bulleted and numbered lists. Screen readers will identify lists and the number of items in the list to a screen reader user. When you format a list using the built-in list tools, the list formatting will be preserved when exporting a file to another format, such as a PDF.

To format the list, highlight list items, go to the Paragraph group on the Home tab, and select numbered or bulleted list.



Tables

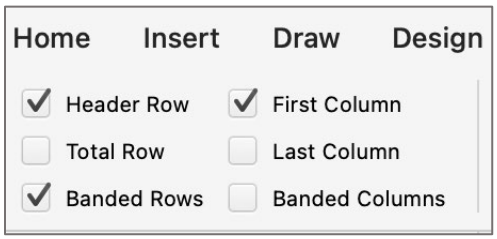
Use a simple table structure that is easier to understand for all users. A simple table structure includes data in adjacent cells with no blank or merged cells and includes clear and meaningful column header and row header labels that will be identified to screen reader users.

Format the table using Word's built-in table formatting options to ensure appropriate table structure with adequate header labels and logical reading order.

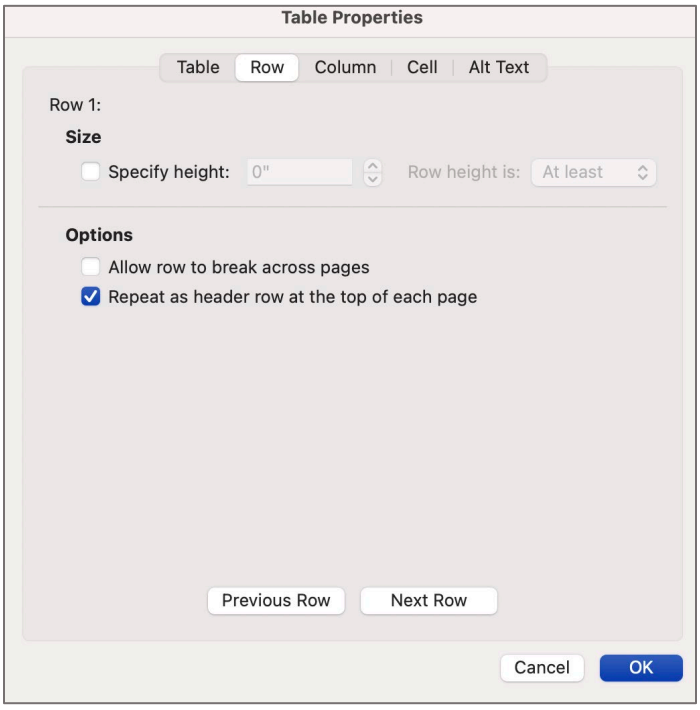
To add a table with clear headers:

1. Go to the Insert tab.
2. In the Tables section, select the Add a Table dropdown menu.
3. Select the number of rows and columns and insert the Table.
4. Enter data in the cells, including column header labels in the top row.
5. To format column and row headers, select the Table and then go to Table Tools > Design.

6. In the Table Styles Options group, select the Header Row check box. It will be selected by default.



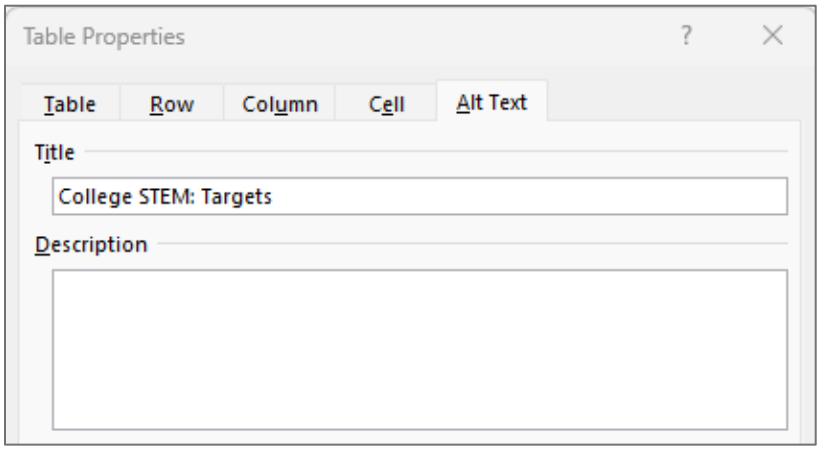
7. Once you have entered all of the data in the Table, right Click on the Table and choose Table Properties, select the Row tab and check “Repeat as header row at the top of each page” and deselect “Allow row to break across pages.”



8. Add a Title to the table, by selecting the Alt Text tab in the Table Properties section. Provide a meaningful title for the table in the Title section of the alt text dialogue box. The table title will help a screen reader user navigate tables within a document more easily. Without the title, the screen reader will identify tables as table 1, table 2, etc. The decision as to whether the table needs an alt text description depends on the length of the table and whether the content of the table is clearly described in the document text. The example below includes a table title but does not include an alt text description. The screen reader will identify the number of columns and rows in the table.

Example Alt Text Table Properties Title below: College STEM: Targets

Using banded color styles with appropriate contrast can help users keep track of data in tables with many rows.



Example Table – College STEM: Targets

The column headers in row 1 of this table have been identified. When reading this table, a screen reader will read the headers in row 1 before reading the cell data. For example, when moving through row 2, a screen reader user will hear: Subject Reading, Group A >=, Group Name Freshman, 2021 95%, 2022 95%, 2023 95%, 2024 95%, 2025 95%. With no column headers, the screen reader user will hear the cell data, but not the header labels that the data refers to.

Subject	Group	Group Name	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Chemistry	A >=	Freshman	95.00%	95.00%	95.00%	95.00%	95.00%
Chemistry	B >=	Sophomore	95.00%	95.00%	95.00%	95.00%	95.00%
Chemistry	C >=	Junior	95.00%	95.00%	95.00%	95.00%	95.00%
Physics	A >=	Freshman	95.00%	95.00%	95.00%	95.00%	95.00%
Physics	B >=	Sophomore	95.00%	95.00%	95.00%	95.00%	95.00%
Physics	C >=	Sophomore	95.00%	95.00%	95.00%	95.00%	95.00%

Alt Text Descriptions

Alternative Text Descriptions (alt text) help readers using a screen reader to access the content and function of the image. Alt text should be descriptive and concise. Best practice for adding alternative text to images is 120 characters or less.

Consider the **purpose** of the image when adding alternative text descriptions.

Images generally fall into one of **three categories: Informational, Decorative, and Functional (used as a button or link)**.

- **Informational -** If the image's purpose is to convey information or meaning, determine what information it is conveying and write a short, concise text description that will convey that information.
- **Decorative** - If the image is decorative, mark the image as Decorative so the screen reader will skip the image altogether. A decorative image does not convey information or have a functional purpose.
- **Functional** - If the image performs a function, the alt text should indicate the functional purpose of the image, for example "Link to Homepage."

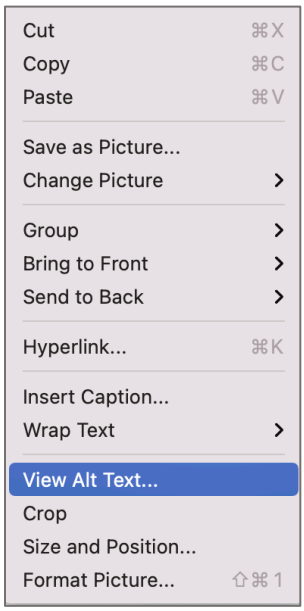
Use complete sentences with proper punctuation when writing alt text descriptions. Avoid using abbreviations or acronyms unless they have been previously defined. Do not duplicate information present in a caption.

Example Alt Text Description: Center for Inclusive Design and Innovation Logo

Alt text description on the logo below reads: "Center for Inclusive Design and Innovation logo."



To add alt text to images, right-click the image in your document, then select “View Alt Text.” In the text box, enter an alt text description. Check the “Mark as decorative” box if the image is decorative.



- Your alt text description should be short and descriptive of the image and how it relates to the text in your document.
- Avoid using “image of” or “picture of” since assistive technology already informs the user that it is an image.

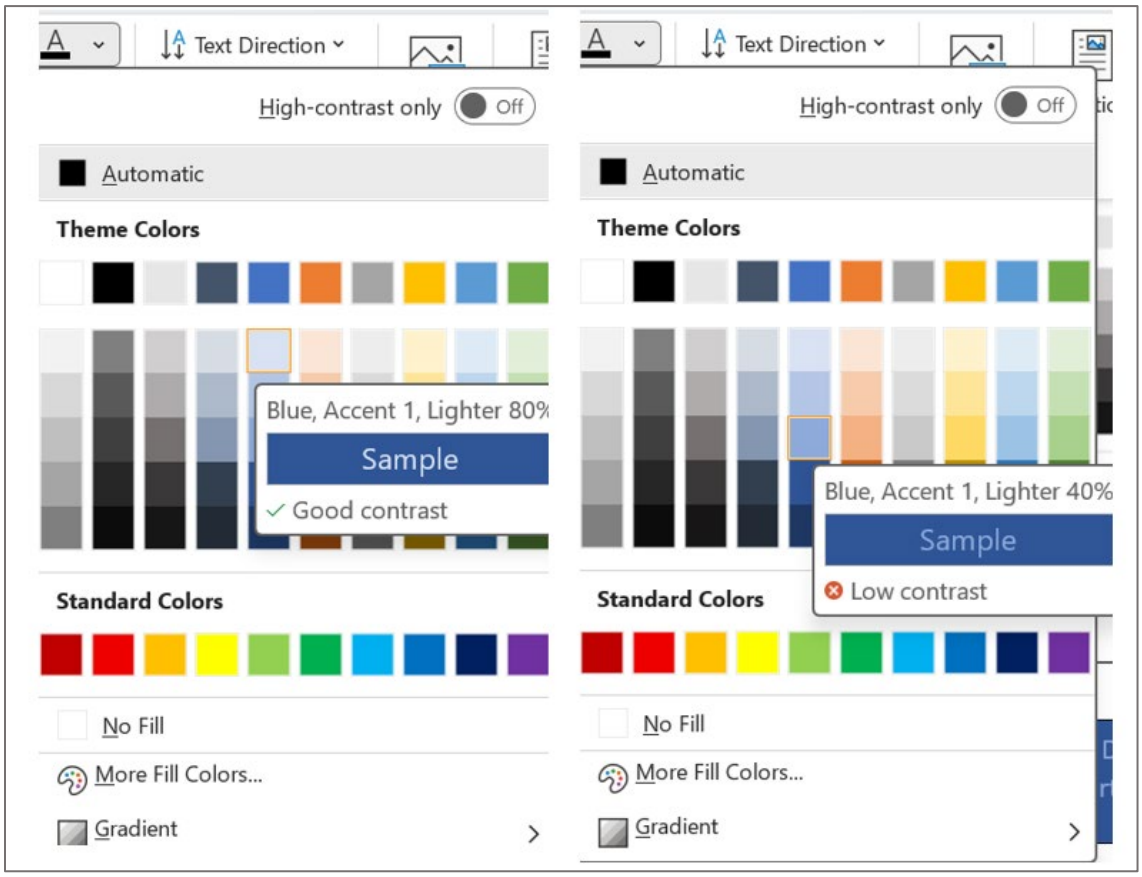
Font Design

Choose fonts that are easy to read such as sans serif fonts like Calibri, Arial, and Tahoma. Microsoft’s default font is now a sans serif font. Use a font size of at least 12 pt.

Color and Contrast

Colors must have sufficient contrast between text color and background. This includes text on images, icons, and buttons. It also includes colors used to convey information on diagrams, maps, and other types of images. Word’s color and contrast tools in the shape format color options can help you choose colors with adequate contrast.

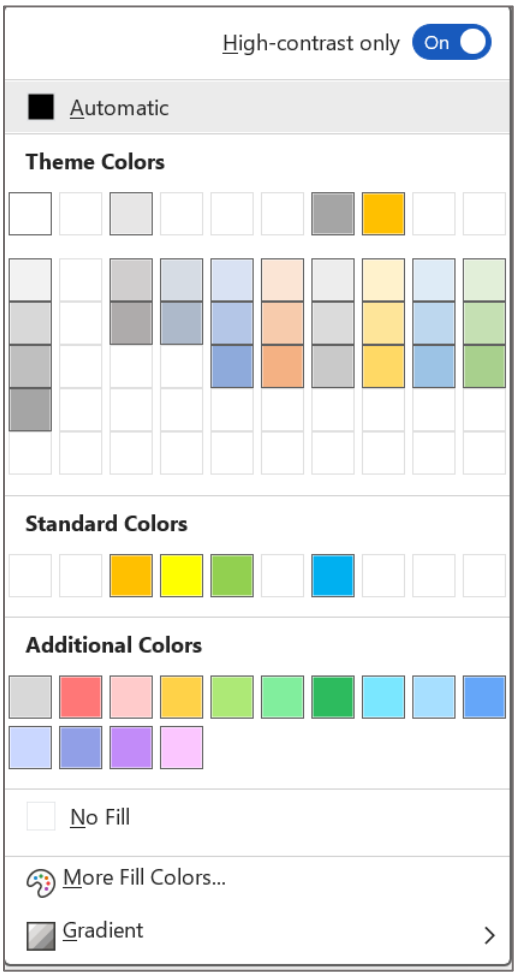
When choosing a background or **Shape Fill** color, the color picker tool will provide you with information regarding the contrast level between the fill color (background) and the text. It will also identify if the color combination provides either ☑ **Good contrast** or ☒ **Low contrast** during the selection.



Example showing good contrast on left and low contrast on right.



You can also turn on the **High-contrast only** option to select only high contrast colors in the theme you are using.



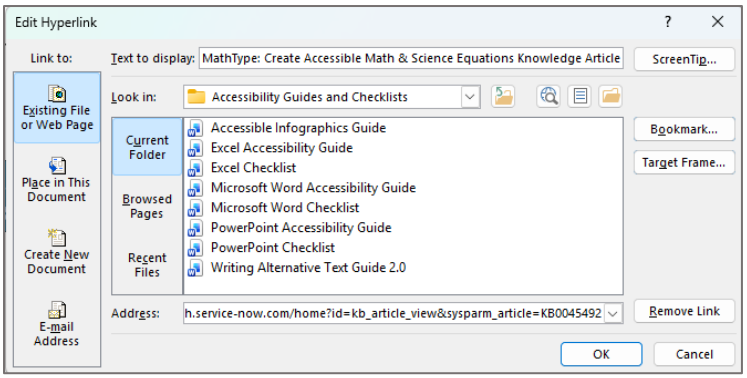
Do not use color as the sole indicator of information. When color is used to convey information, add additional labels. For example, rather than just using the color red to indicate required information, also add an asterisk and the label “required” as alt text.

Hyperlinks

Accessible hyperlinks help all users make an informed decision about which links they want to follow. Hyperlinks in your document should be clear and descriptive of where the link leads to.

- Avoid common phrases such as “Click Here” that do not inform the user where the link will take them.
- Hyperlinks sometimes perform specific functions such as opening a new page. If your hyperlink performs a function, be sure to include the function in the description.
- Ensure your hyperlink has a meaningful description. An example of a meaningful description could be “MathType: Create Accessible Math & Science Equations Knowledge Article (Opens New Window).”

To add a hyperlink, highlight text > go to Insert tab > select Hyperlink in the Links group. Enter the Text to Display and the URL address.



Example Hyperlink

URL: https://gatech.service-now.com/home?id=kb_article_view&sysparm_article=KB0045492
Text to display: MathType: Create Accessible Math & Science Equations Knowledge Article
Accessible hyperlink with context: MathType: Create Accessible Math & Science Equations Knowledge Article

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White Space and Line Spacing

Use Word's default margins and line spacing options to create adequate white space in your document. Adequate white space improves readability of the document and improves understanding of the content. Additional tips to improve the white space and readability of your document include:

- Use formatted headings and subheadings to divide content into manageable chunks.
- Keep paragraphs short.
- Use bulleted and numbered lists.
- Use a font size of 12 pt.
- Use "Normal" default margins of 1 inch whenever possible.
- Use default spacing between paragraphs. When spacing is reduced the text becomes difficult to read.

Descriptive File Name and Document Properties

Provide a descriptive file name that identifies the content and makes the document easier to find. The document's title is unique and descriptive of the general topic of the document.

- The file name should include a date that is relevant to the document.
- Add the Title of the document to the Title section of the Document Properties. Go to **File> Info> Properties**. If appropriate, add the organization's name as the author.

Example: MathType: Create Accessible Math & Science Equations Knowledge Article

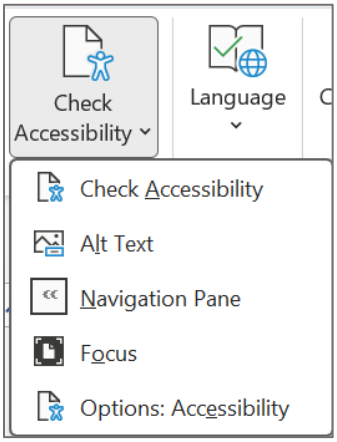
MathType: Create Accessible Math & Science Equations Knowledge Article

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Accessibility Assistant

Microsoft Word has a built-in Accessibility Assistant that will inspect your document and produce a report noting accessibility errors and warnings such as missing alt text and unclear hyperlinks.

To access the Accessibility Assistant, either select **Check Accessibility** under the Review tab or select the Accessibility: Investigate icon at the bottom left corner of the workspace.



The Accessibility Assistant reviews your document by checking the following categories and listing any accessibility issues found within the categories:

- **Color and Contrast** – identifies hard-to-read text contrast.
- **Media and Illustrations** – identifies missing alt text and missing audio or video subtitles.
- **Tables** – identifies missing table headers and use of merged or split cells.
- **Document Structure** – identifies missing and duplicate slide titles, default and duplicate section names, and prompts you to check reading order on slides.
- **Document Access** – identifies if content is restricted.

Click on the results to fix the issues found in the report.

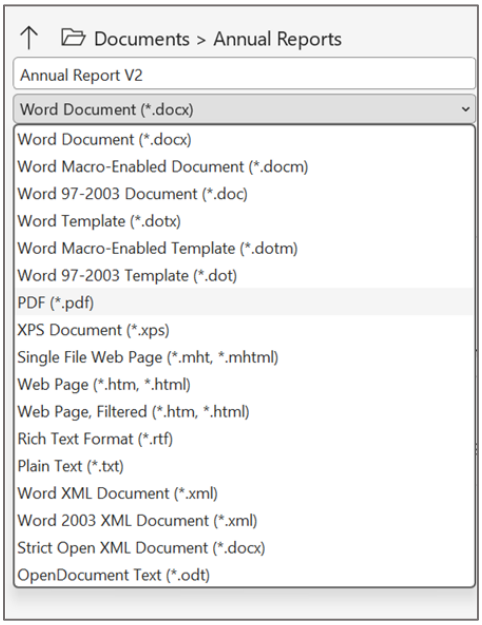
Microsoft Word also will prompt you to address accessibility issues as you are working. The **Review accessibility issue** icon will appear if there is an issue that needs attention, for example, an image needs alt text or text contrast is hard to read.

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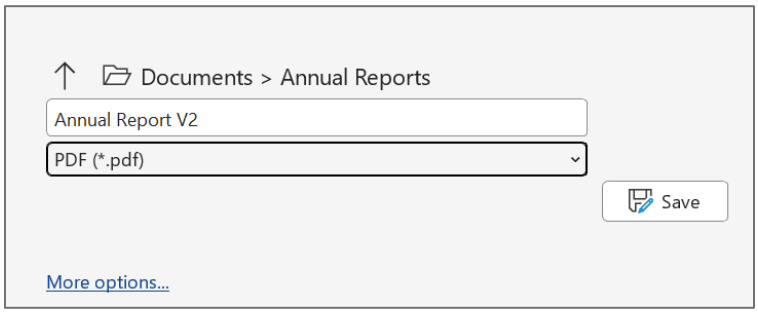
Save as PDF

MS Word includes the option to save your accessible formatting such as headings and alt text when the document is saved as a PDF. To save your Word doc as an accessible PDF format:

1. Go to **File > Save as** and select **PDF** from the "Save as" dropdown menu options.

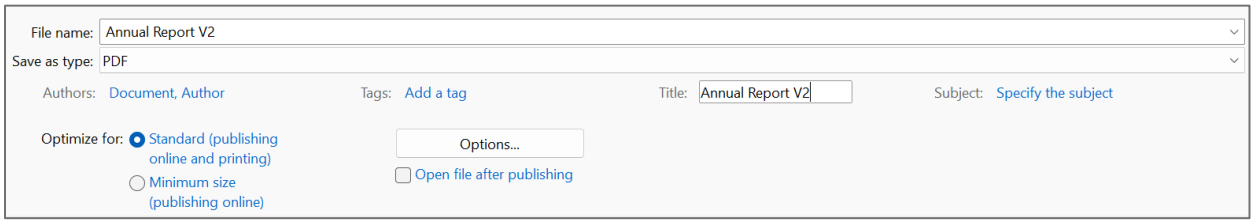


2. Next, click **More options…** directly below the Save as filetype dropdown menu.

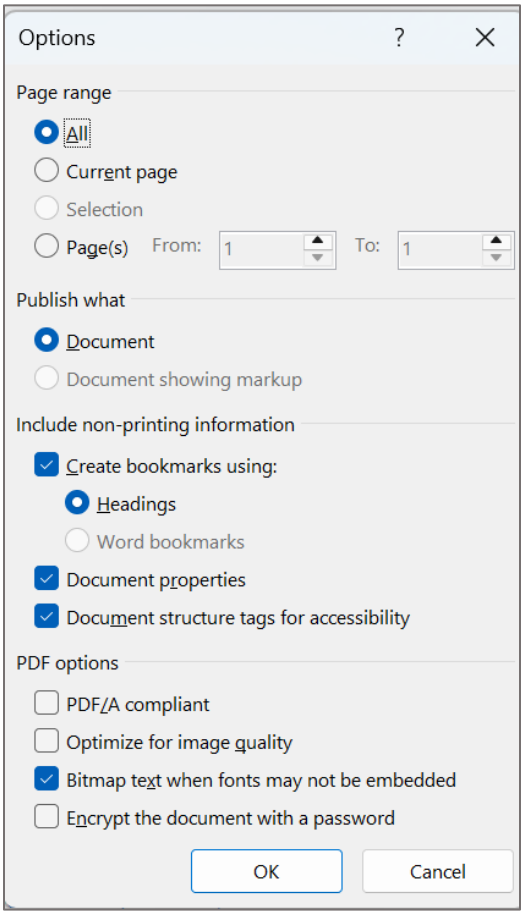


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3. Optimize for: **Standard (publishing for online and printing)** should be selected by default.



4. Go to **Options** to ensure **Document structure tags for accessibility** is selected and add checkmark to option **Create bookmarks using: Headings.** Click OK.



5. Click **Save** to save the tagged PDF.

When saving, **do not** choose the “Print to PDF” or “Save as Adobe PDF” as this does not preserve the accessibility features and creates a PDF that will not be accessible.

The resulting PDF will include bookmarks for navigation and structure, while also retaining other accessibility features that include formatted lists and alternative text descriptions, and tags, which will enhance functionality for screen reader accessibility.

Need additional assistance? Our team of accessibility experts is here to help. Whether you have questions, would like to schedule a training, or need guidance on the upcoming deadline for the new Title II regulations, please reach out to our Customer Support team at cidi-support@design.gatech.edu, call (404) 894-7756, or book a free consultation through CIDI’s online form. Our team can help assess options and determine level of effort and resources required to meet your needs.

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