Accessible document quick checklist

For Word and Google Docs. Go through it before you post or send a document.

These ten checks catch the most common problems that stop people using screen readers, magnifiers or other tools from reading your document. You don't need any training or special software. Most checks take under a minute.

Structure

1. Use heading styles for headings.
Don't use bold or bigger text on its own. Screen reader users jump between headings to find their place. Use Heading 1 for the document title, then Heading 2 and Heading 3 in order, without skipping a level.

Word: Home tab, Styles. **Google Docs:** the “Normal text” menu on the toolbar.

2. Use the list buttons for lists.
Typed dashes or numbers read as ordinary text, but a real list is announced with how many items it has.

Word: Home tab, Bullets or Numbering. **Google Docs:** the list buttons on the toolbar.

3. Don't use blank lines, spaces or tabs to push things around.
Each blank line is read aloud as “blank”. Use paragraph spacing or a page break instead. Keep text out of text boxes, and set pictures to “In line with text”.

Word: the ¶ button on the Home tab shows hidden blank lines. **Google Docs:** Format, Line & paragraph spacing.

Pictures, links and tables

4. Describe every picture that carries meaning.
Write alt text that says what the picture tells the reader, in a sentence or two. Don't start with “Image of”. If a picture is only decoration, Word lets you mark it as decorative.

Word: right-click the picture, Edit Alt Text. **Google Docs:** select the picture, Image options, Alt text.

5. Make link text say where it goes.
“Library hours” works. “Click here” and long web addresses don't: screen reader users often hear a list of links with nothing around them.

Word and Google Docs: select the words, then Insert, Link.

6. Keep tables simple, and mark the header row.
Use tables only for data, never for layout. Don't merge or split cells, and don't add empty rows for spacing.

Word: click in the table, Table Design tab, tick Header Row. **Google Docs:** right-click the top row, Pin header row.

Color

7. Never rely on color alone.
“Items in red are overdue” doesn't work for someone who can't see red, or for a black-and-white printout. Add a word or a symbol as well.

8. Keep text dark on light, or light on dark.
Pale grey text and text over pictures are hard to read. Plain black on white is always safe. If you pick your own colors, check them with WebAIM's free contrast checker.

Before you share

9. Set the title and language, then run the checker.
Word: File, Info, Properties, Advanced Properties, Title (on a Mac: File, Properties, Title). Set the language with Review, Language, Set Proofing Language (on a Mac: Tools, Language). Then run Review, Check Accessibility.
Google Docs: the file name becomes the title, and the language is under File, Language. Google Docs has no built-in checker, so go through this list by hand.

10. Share the original, or a tagged PDF. Never a scan.
A scanned page is a picture of text, and a screen reader gets nothing from it.

Word on Windows: File, Save As, PDF, Options, tick “Document structure tags for accessibility”.
Word on a Mac: File, Save As, PDF, “Best for electronic distribution and accessibility”. This sends the file to a Microsoft online service. **Google Docs:** File, Download, PDF. If your document has tables, download it as Word and make the PDF from Word instead.
