



Digital downloads are a common way for foundations and organizations to share knowledge and resources. Regardless of whether you are creating a Word document, PDF, slide deck, or spreadsheet, there are steps you can take to make your download more accessible to people with disabilities.

Understanding Document Accessibility

Millions of people with disabilities navigate the internet through the use of assistive technology. For example, people who are blind or have low vision may use screen readers to read a website's text aloud. In order for these devices and software to effectively access content and functionality on a website, the site needs to be designed and built to certain web accessibility standards. While web accessibility is commonly considered for the HTML pages on a site, content creators often overlook accessibility standards for their downloadable content, causing potential challenges for people with disabilities.

Document Accessibility Checklist

We've put together a checklist of things you can do to make your downloadable documents more accessible. We recognize that this checklist is not a comprehensive guide on how to make all downloads completely accessible for all users. Instead, it is intended as a general-use guide and highlights the important factors to consider when designing and creating a downloadable document. These recommendations follow WCAG 2.1 standards for AA accessibility.

Design

- **Use a Simple Layout.** Focus on creating a layout that helps users understand what order the content should be read in, and how the sections of content relate to each other. Use built-in functionality like columns, line spacing, and alignment options to organize the layout, not “shortcuts” like including extra spaces to change alignment. Simple layouts will enable assistive technology to more easily navigate the document, and it will help people with cognitive and sensory processing disabilities too.
- **Use Headings Correctly.** Almost all authoring software will include a built-in function that lets you apply headings and subheadings to your document. Headings and subheadings should form an outline for your document (Heading 1 for the main document heading, Heading 2 for the first tier of sub-headings, Heading 3 for the next tier of sub-headings, etc.). Using headings correctly will enable screen readers to easily navigate through the sections of your content.
- **Check Color Contrast.** Make sure the colors you choose for your document’s background, text, and links offer enough contrast so users who are colorblind or have other vision disabilities can differentiate between them. WCAG guidelines recommend a color contrast ratio of 4.5:1 for text and background, and a color contrast ratio of 3:1 for headings and background. Logos are exempt from this, but if you have the option to use a high contrast version of your logo then we encourage you to do so.

Maximum contrast



21:1

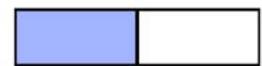


4.5:1



3:1

Insufficient Contrast



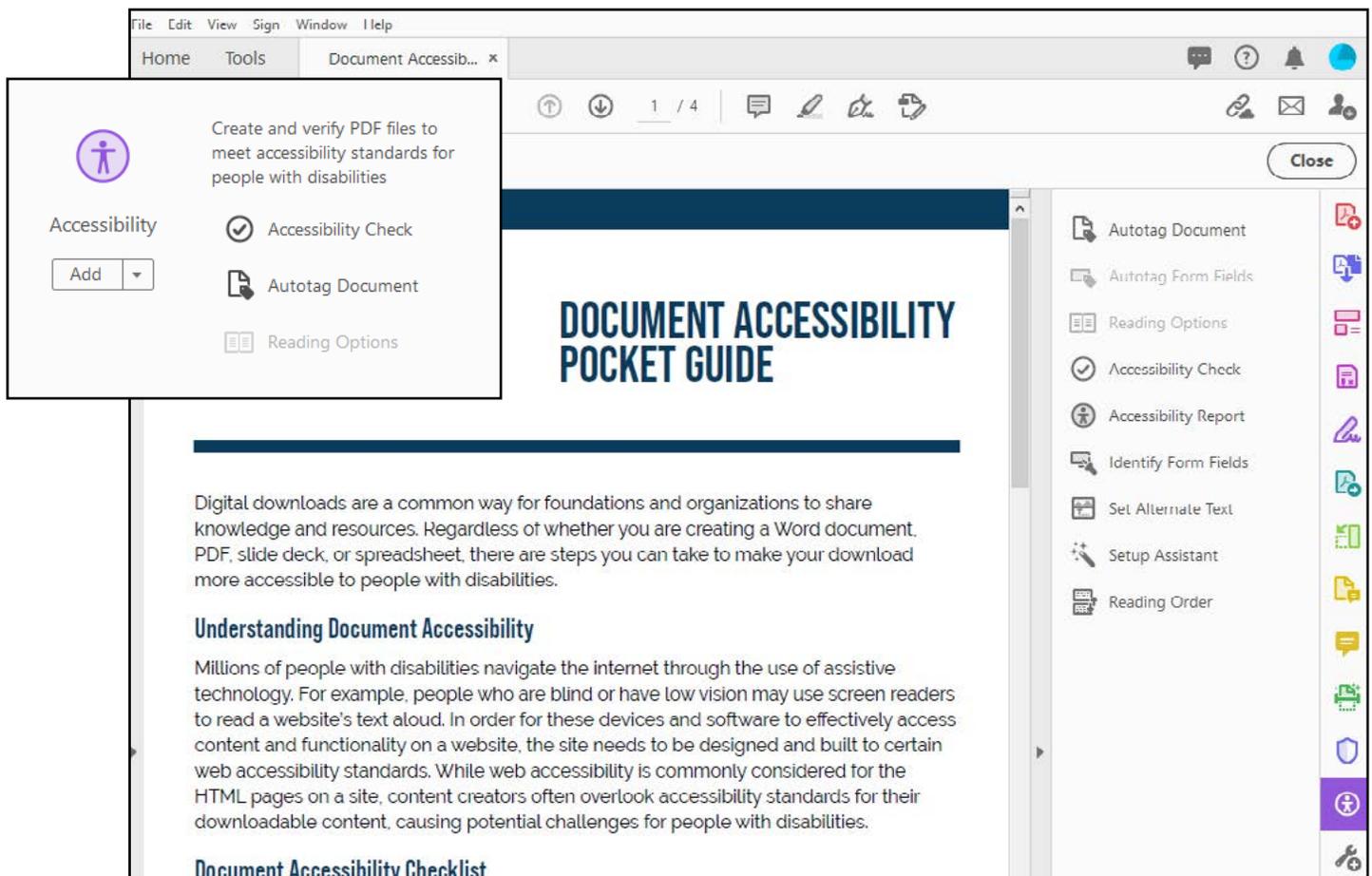
2:1

Caption: This image illustrates four examples of varying color contrast between two colors. As the contrast is reduced, so is the color contrast ratio.

- **Avoid Using Images For Essential Information.** Images are a great way to break up a document or supplement something in your content, but they should not be used as the primary way to share important information. If you want to include an image that conveys information, make sure to include a caption that describes the image for users who aren't able to see the image. If your authoring tool allows for alt text, you can use that instead of a caption. Additionally, make sure that the informational elements of the image have a color contrast ratio of 3:1. Logos are exempt from this, as are purely decorative images.
- **Use List Formatting.** If you are creating a bulleted list or numbered list in your document, then use the list formatting function in your authoring tool. Don't manually number the list or use dashes instead of bullets. When lists are explicitly formatted, assistive technology can understand how content is organized so users can decide whether or not to skip that section.
- **Include Meaningful Links.** If you link to a URL in your document, make sure link text clearly indicates the destination. Also, use the hyperlink function on your authoring tool, so users can simply click the link rather than copy and paste a URL. Links should be shown in a different color from the text and should have at least one other visual indication that they are clickable, such as being underlined or bolded.
- **Identify the Language.** Modern assistive technology is multilingual, so you should identify the language of your document to enable the assistive technology to use the correct language profile. If you include a different language in your content, make sure to identify that too.
- **Use Tables Appropriately.** Only use tables when you need to compare data. Do not use tables to control the layout of your document. Keep tables simple and consider using multiple tables instead of one complex table. This will help assistive technology users as well as users with cognitive and sensory processing disabilities.
- **Give Your File a Clear Name.** Avoid using a string of letters and numbers for your file name. Instead, provide an easy-to-understand name, such as the title of the document and the year or version number. By providing a meaningful name to your file, all users will benefit from being able to easily find and understand what the file is about.

Creating Your Download

- ❑ **PDFs:** If possible, export your PDF as a “tagged” PDF. This will make your PDF accessible because the export will include the format tagging mentioned in the checklist above. Not all authoring tools will allow you to export a tagged PDF. If that’s the case, export your PDF and then use a tool like Adobe Acrobat to add the tags.
- ❑ **Scans:** If possible, try to avoid using a scanned document because there are significantly fewer accessibility options on scans than digitally-created content. However, if a scan is necessary, make sure the quality of your scan is as good as it can be. Avoid cut-off text, dark gutters on the edges, handwritten notes, poor contrast, etc.
- ❑ **Documents, Slides, Spreadsheets, and Other:** Once you’ve applied this checklist to your document’s content, consider using a tool to check its accessibility. Microsoft and Adobe have these built in (see below).



Caption: Programs like Adobe Acrobat DC provide accessibility tools to tag your documents.

Helpful Tools

- [Adobe Acrobat instructions](#) for creating an accessible “tagged” PDF.
- [Adobe Accessibility instructions](#) for creating accessible documents on its full suite of software.
- [Microsoft Accessibility Checker Guide](#) shows you how to use Microsoft's built-in accessibility tool for the Microsoft Office suite, including Word, PowerPoint, Outlook, and Excel.
- [WebAIM Color Contrast Checker](#) lets you check the color contrast ratios of the colors used in your document.
- [The University of Washington's "Creating Accessible Documents"](#) resource provides detailed instructions for converting accessible PDFs from various authoring tools and information on how to generate high quality scans.
- [W3C's Guide to setting the default language on PDFs](#) also provides information about setting language tags for specific parts of the document.

