

Accessible Communication Guide

Coordinated Accessibility Strategy
October 2026

Accessible Communication Guide

Accessible communication means sharing information in a way that people can access, understand, and use.

This guide is for you if you create, edit, or share information at Carleton University. Whether you are staff, faculty, an instructor, or student, the communication choices you make can make information clearer, more inclusive, and easier to use. While this guide focuses mainly on written communication, many of the principles also apply to spoken communication and other ways information is shared.

You can use this guide when you are creating or sharing:

- Documents
- Emails
- Presentations
- Forms and surveys
- Videos and other multimedia
- Web content
- Course materials

This guide will be updated as accessibility practices, tools, and resources evolve. Please send feedback or suggestions to access@carleton.ca.

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Introduction: How to Use This Guide

This guide provides practical guidance for creating accessible communications at Carleton University. It outlines key principles and best practices for writing, designing, reviewing, and sharing content that is clear, inclusive, and usable for a wide range of audiences.

The content is organized into core sections and an appendix with tool-specific guidance:

1. [Understanding Accessible Communication](#) introduces key concepts and explains why accessibility matters.
2. [Choosing Accessible Language](#) focuses on plain language and disability-inclusive language.
3. [Designing Accessible Documents](#) outlines best practices for structure, layout, visuals, and other core design elements.
4. [Sharing Your Accessible Communications](#) provides a practical checklist for reviewing accessibility before sharing content.
5. [Accessing Resources](#) points readers to additional tools, training, and learning opportunities.
6. [Appendix: Creating Accessible Content with Specific Tools](#) provides practical guidance for applying these principles in commonly used tools and platforms, including Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Outlook, Teams and Zoom, PDFs, forms, videos, web content, and Brightspace.

Start with Sections 1, 2, and 3 to learn the core principles. Use Section 4 when reviewing content before sharing it. Turn to Section 5 for additional resources and refer to the Appendix when you are working in a specific platform.

This guide is not a complete or one-size-fits-all accessibility standard. Accessibility is about more than completing a checklist. Access needs vary by person, context, format, and technology. While many practices in this guide will benefit a wide range of users, different access needs may sometimes require different approaches. For example, some audiences may benefit from simplified language, while others may benefit from detailed technical information. Some audiences may benefit from bold formatting and layouts, while others benefit from simple and minimal layouts.

Use this guide as a starting point. Applying these practices can improve the overall accessibility of your communications but does not guarantee that they will be accessible to every person in every context. Accessibility is often iterative: it may involve reviewing, testing, seeking feedback, adjusting, and responding to individual access needs as they arise. Seek additional guidance when your communication involves complex content, specialized tools, or individual access needs.



1 Understanding Accessible Communication

This section explains what accessible communication is, who benefits, and why creating accessible content is a shared responsibility across the university community.

1.1 What Accessible Communication Means

Accessible communication means sharing information that can be accessed, understood, and used by a wide range of people, including persons with disabilities. It includes both written and spoken communication, and can involve different formats, technologies, and methods of sharing information.

Cognitive accessibility is also part of accessible communication. It means reducing cognitive load, supporting focus, and making information easier to navigate and act on.

When communication is accessible, people have more equitable access to information.

Accessible communication:

- Improves comprehension and usability.
- Reduces the need for individual accommodations.
- Supports inclusive participation.
- Is easier to adapt, reuse, and share.

Accessible communication involves:

- Using plain language.
- Organizing content with clear headings and structure.
- Using readable fonts, spacing, and colour contrast.
- Writing descriptive links.
- Making documents, forms, websites, presentation, and meetings easier to navigate.

1.2 Who Benefits and Your Role

People access, understand, and use information in different ways. When information is not designed accessibly, it can create barriers. When it is designed accessibly, it is clearer, easier to navigate, and more usable for a wide range of people.

Accessible communication is especially important for people with disabilities related to vision, hearing, mobility, cognition, learning, mental health, or communication. It will also benefit many others.

Accessible communication supports:

- People who use assistive technologies, such as screen readers or captions.
- People who use braille, large print, or other alternate formats.
- Neurodivergent people who benefit from clear structure and plain language.
- People accessing information on mobile devices or with limited internet connectivity.
- People who need to scan key information quickly.
- People accessing information in a language other than their first language.
- People who are tired, distracted, stressed, or navigating complex information.

Creating accessible communication is a shared responsibility across the university community. Everyone who creates, edits, or shares information plays a role in making communication more accessible.

Accessibility is not only about meeting legal or policy requirements. It is also about identifying, removing, and preventing barriers so that people can access information and participate more fully.

Accessible communication supports accessibility and inclusion by:

- Respecting the dignity of all persons.
- Promoting equitable access to information and participation.
- Supporting autonomy, choice, and meaningful options.

By applying accessible communication practices in our work, we can create a more inclusive campus community for all.

2 Choosing Accessible Language

This section focuses on two important aspects of accessible communication: plain language and disability-inclusive language. Plain language improves clarity and comprehension, while disability-inclusive language ensures communication is respectful and inclusive of people with diverse identities and experiences.

2.1 Plain Language

Communication is in plain language if the wording, structure, and design are clear enough for the intended audience to:

- Find what they need with ease.
- Understand what they find.
- Use that information.

Plain language communication is an important part of accessible communication. Plain language ensures information is clear, accessible, and usable by the widest possible audience.

Best Practices

- Consider who your readers are, what they need to know, and what they will do with the information.
- Start with the most important information, followed by background information.
- Clearly identify the action, decision, or key takeaway for the reader.
- Organize information in a logical order.
- Break complex information into smaller steps or actions.
- Limit the number of ideas introduced at once.
- Use meaningful headings. This will help readers scan and navigate the document.
- Use bulleted or numbered lists to organize information.

- Use words familiar to your audience, instead of technical jargon.
- Define technical terms or acronyms your readers may not know.
- Spell out acronyms the first time they appear in a document.
 - Include the full term, followed by the acronym in parentheses (e.g., “Coordinated Accessibility Strategy (CAS)”).
 - Do not include periods between the letters (e.g., avoid “C.A.S.”).
- Use examples to clarify complex concepts.
- Use active voice (subject-verb-object).
- Use clear verbs over nouns (e.g., “use” vs. “utilization”).
- Use the pronoun “you” to address the reader. This will help them relate and make the information feel relevant.
- Use short sentences and paragraphs to break up the content and make it easier to read, understand, and act on.
 - Aim for one idea per sentence.
 - Aim for one point per paragraph, containing a maximum of 6 related sentences.
- Use white space between headings, paragraphs, lists, and visual elements.
- Review your communication for plain language.
 - Use Microsoft Word’s [readability statistics tool](#) to flag complex or unclear language.
 - Ask a colleague to review your communication. Their feedback on what feels confusing, unclear, or difficult to read can highlight where revisions are needed.
 - Use online tools such as the [Hemingway App](#) to check readability.
 - Note: some AI tools may appear to rewrite for plain language, but you should still follow the recommendations above.

Resources

“[Get your document's readability and level statistics in Microsoft Word](#)”, Microsoft Support.

“[Hemingway App](#)”, Hemingway Editor.

“[Plain Language Standards CAN-ASC-3.1:2025](#)”, Accessibility Standards Canada.

2.2 Disability-Inclusive Language

Inclusive language acknowledges diversity, promotes equity, and conveys respect for all people. While inclusive language considers many identities and experiences, this section focuses on disability-inclusive language.

Language shapes how people experience belonging and respect. Inappropriate or outdated language can reinforce stigma and exclusion, even when unintentional. Using disability-inclusive language supports inclusive communications and can contribute to accessibility, equity, and belonging.

Using disability-inclusive language involves choosing words thoughtfully, being open to feedback, and adapting as language evolves.

Best Practices

Person-First vs. Identity-First Language

- Person-first language emphasizes the person before the disability.
 - e.g. “person who is blind” or “person with a mobility disability.”
- Identity-first language places the disability first as part of identity.
 - e.g., “autistic person” or “Deaf community.”
- Which should you use?
 - Use the language preferred by the individual or community whenever possible.
 - When preferences are unknown, person-first is commonly used in formal writing.
 - Be respectful, open to feedback, and adjust your language if someone shares a different preference.

Disability-Inclusive Language

Disability-inclusive language helps reduce stigma and supports respectful communication. The examples below provide general guidance on respectful and inclusive language. Language preferences can vary by individual, community, and context, so use the language preferred by the individual or community whenever possible.

Principle	Disability-Inclusive Language	Outdated Language
Use neutral, respectful language.	Person with a disability; Disabled person.	Handicapped; Special needs; Challenged.
Use accurate, non-stigmatizing language.	Accessible format.	Special format.
Use accurate, non-stigmatizing language.	Uses a wheelchair.	Confined to a wheelchair; Wheelchair bound.
Avoid euphemisms for disability.	Person with a disability; Disabled person.	Differently abled; Special abilities; Physically challenged; Handicapable.
Do not frame disability as a tragedy, illness, or problem.	Has a disability.	Suffers from a disability.
Avoid framing disability as inspirational.	She is a leader in her field.	Despite her disability, ... (avoid “brave”, “inspirational”).
Focus on access and barriers, not individuals.	The document is not accessible. (barrier)	They can’t read the document. (limitation)
Avoid assumptions about ability or need.	Please let us know if there’s anything we can provide.	You probably need...

For additional examples and guidance, see the resources below.

Resources

[“A way with words and images: guide for communicating with and about persons with disabilities”](#), Government of Canada.

[“APA Style: Disability”](#), American Psychological Association.

[“Disability Inclusive Language Guidelines”](#), United Nations.

[“Terminology Tips: Using the Appropriate Lexicon”](#), RespectAbility.

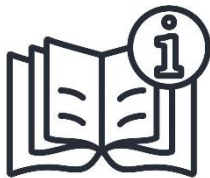
3 Designing Accessible Communications

This section provides practical guidance for designing documents, web content, and other communications that are accessible, clear, and easy to navigate.

The recommendations in this section apply across communication formats, regardless of the tool used. They focus on clear structure, readable design, accessible visuals, and document features that support access and navigation.

This section covers:

- 3.1 [Structuring content](#): document structure and layout.
- 3.2 [Designing accessible text](#): font, layout, and colour contrast.
- 3.3 [Writing descriptive links](#): clear and meaningful link text.
- 3.4 [Creating accessible tables](#): simple structure and clear navigation.
- 3.5 [Writing effective alt text](#): describing images and other visuals.
- 3.6 [Providing alternate formats](#): accessible versions of content.
- 3.7 [Understanding assistive technologies](#): tools used to access content.



Begin with this section before you consult the appendix. It explains the core principles you can apply across formats and platforms. The appendix then provides tool-specific guidance for applying these principles in software such as Word, PowerPoint, and Excel.

3.1 Structuring Content: Headings, Lists, and Organization

Clear structure helps readers understand and navigate your content. Logical organization, meaningful headings, and properly formatted lists make information easier to scan, understand, and use (especially when using screen readers and other assistive technologies). Thoughtful structure benefits more readers and ensures your content is more accessible in multiple formats.

Best Practices

Overall Structure

- Choose a clear document title and [set it in the document properties](#) (title, author, tags).
 - The document title is different from the file name and is used by screen readers to identify the document.
 - Tags improve searchability, and including the author supports organization and version control.
- Organize content in a logical and intuitive way, using clear headings and subheadings.
 - This helps readers navigate the document, whether they are using a screen reader or scanning the document visually.
 - Keep layouts and formatting consistent within documents, and across similar documents.
- Present the most important information first.
- Group related information together and organize content into short sections, with each section focused on a clear topic, task, or purpose.

Headings

Headings act as signposts in a document. They help readers scan, navigate, and understand content.

Simply making text larger, bold, or coloured does not create accessible headings. While this may make text look like a heading visually, it will not be recognized by assistive technologies such as screen readers.

Instead, use built-in heading styles. These predefined styles create a clear document structure, support navigation tools, and work with the table of contents.

- Use built-in heading styles. This will:
 - Help readers navigate the document, whether visually or with a screen reader.
 - Make the document easier to convert into alternate formats, such as braille.
- Use meaningful headings to clearly describe the content that follows.
 - Avoid vague headings such as “Information,” “Details,” or “Other” when more specific wording could help readers scan and navigate the document.
- Include subheadings to organize information within sections.
- Follow a consistent and meaningful heading order (H1 → H2 → H3). Do not skip heading levels.
 - If your document has a title, consider using an H1 heading for the title and H2 headings for the main sections.
- To customize heading colour, font, or spacing, [modify the style](#) itself. This ensures changes are applied consistently to all headings at that level.

Lists

Lists can make information easier to scan and understand. They often present information more clearly than longer paragraphs.

- Introduce lists with a clear sentence or phrase. This helps readers understand the purpose of the list before reading the items.
- Use bulleted or numbered lists where appropriate.
 - Use numbered lists when order matters (e.g., steps or instructions).
 - Use bulleted lists when order does not matter (e.g., options or features).
- Use built-in list tools rather than manual formatting.
 - Avoid creating lists by typing hyphens, asterisks, or numbers manually.
- Keep list items consistent in structure (e.g., begin each item with a noun or verb).
- Keep list items short (no more than 2-3 lines).
- Provide white space between list items by [adjusting paragraph spacing](#).

Reader Perspectives

[“Justin Demonstrates Document Screen Reader Accessibility with Headings, Tables and Images”](#), Justin Harford (Video).

[“Screen Reader: Document Without Headings”](#), Colorado State University (Video).

Resources

[“Change line spacing between bullets in a list in Word”](#), Microsoft Support.

[“Customize or create new styles”](#), Microsoft Support (Text and video).

[“Use built-in title, subtitle, and heading styles”](#), Microsoft Support.

[“View or change the properties for an Office file”](#), Microsoft Support.

3.2 Designing Accessible Text: Font, Layout, and Colour Contrast

Visual design choices impact readability and accessibility. Font, layout, and use of colour can either support understanding or create barriers. Thoughtful design benefits more people by making content easier to read, navigate, and understand.

Best Practices

Font

- Choose a sans serif font (e.g., Arial, Calibri, Helvetica Now, Verdana).
 - Avoid decorative fonts (e.g., Brush Script, Papyrus), which can reduce readability.
- Use only one or two fonts, where possible.
- Use a font size of at least 12 point for documents, and at least 24 point for PowerPoint presentations.
- Use emphasis sparingly.
 - Use bold and italics sparingly, as overuse can increase cognitive load and reduce readability.
 - In Microsoft Word, use the built-in **Strong** or *Emphasis* styles, as these are better recognized by assistive technologies than manually applied bold or italic formatting.
 - Do not use underline for emphasis (only hyperlinks should be underlined).
 - Avoid using ALL CAPS, except for acronyms.
 - Use signal words such as “Note” or “Important” to highlight important information.
- Use CamelCase for hashtags.
 - CamelCase capitalizes the first letter of each word in a hashtag (e.g., #AccessibleCommunicationGuide).
- Use emojis thoughtfully and sparingly. 🗨️
 - Emojis should support, not replace, written information.
 - Avoid using emojis as bullets or relying on them alone to convey meaning, as they may be distracting or may be read inconsistently by assistive technologies.

Layout

- Use 1.5-line spacing. If document length is a concern, use a minimum of 1.15.
- Align text to the left. Avoid centred text.
 - Many readers rely on a consistent left edge of text to track from line to line.
- Avoid fully justified text (text stretches to left and right).
 - This creates uneven spacing between words and can reduce readability.
- Use white space between sections, paragraphs, and bullet points.
 - Use [paragraph spacing](#) rather than inserting multiple blank lines.
- Avoid cluttered or distracting design elements.
- Avoid using text boxes for visual formatting. Instead, [add a border to the text](#).
 - Accessibility checkers may not flag text boxes; screen readers may skip them.

Colour Contrast

Colour contrast is the difference between text and its background. Good colour contrast is essential for readers with low vision and can also benefit other readers.

- Use high-contrast colours for text and background.
 - High contrast examples: black text on white, **white text on black.**
 - Low contrast examples: light grey text on white, light blue text on medium blue.
- Test your colour combinations using a [colour contrast checker tool](#).
 - Meet WCAG AA standards but aim for WCAG AAA where possible.
- Avoid placing text over images.
 - If necessary, use strong contrast and place text in a plain area of the image.
- Do not rely on colour alone to convey information.
 - Use patterns, textures, or labels in addition to colour to distinguish between elements.
 - Ensure the communication is understandable if printed in greyscale.
 - A colour blindness simulator can help test this.

Resources

[“Add a border to some text in Word”](#), Microsoft Support.

[“Change spacing between paragraphs”](#), Microsoft Support.

[“Contrast Checker”](#), WebAIM.

3.3 Writing Descriptive Links

Links connect readers to websites, documents, email addresses, or actions within a document. Clear, descriptive link text improves accessibility by showing where a link leads or what it will do, supporting screen reader navigation, and making content easier for a wide range of people to understand.

Best Practices

- Describe the destination or action.
 - Use link text that tells readers where the link leads or what action it will take.
 - Accessible: [“Explore accessibility resources for instructors.”](#)
 - Less accessible: [“Click here.”](#)
- Make link text meaningful on its own.
 - Link text should make sense even when it is read without the surrounding sentence.
 - Screen reader users may navigate from link to link, or review links as a list.
 - Accessible: [“Microsoft accessibility skilling and resources.”](#)
 - Less accessible: [“resources.”](#)
- Use specific link text for each destination.
 - Accessible: [“McMaster University Accessibility Resources”](#), [“Toronto Metropolitan University Accessibility Resources.”](#)
 - Less accessible: multiple links labelled “University Accessibility Resources.”
- Display the full URL (e.g., [https://...com](#)) only when necessary.
 - For example, if the document will be printed.
 - In most digital documents, use meaningful text instead of pasting a full URL.
- Ensure links are visually clear and easy to identify.
 - Use your platform’s default hyperlink styling where possible.
 - Avoid relying on colour alone to show that text is a link.

Resources

[“Create or edit a hyperlink”](#), Microsoft Support.

[“Links”](#), Toronto Metropolitan University.

3.4 Creating Accessible Tables

Tables can present a lot of information in a small space. Consider how readers may approach that information. Some people use screen readers to navigate tables, so clear structure is essential.

Best Practices

- Before you use a table, consider whether a list could present the information more clearly.
- Use tables only for data, not for layout.
- Include white space before and after each table.
- Keep tables simple and use the simplest possible structure.
- Provide a descriptive title outside the table.
- Identify header rows and columns.
- Ensure sufficient colour contrast between header text and background.
- Ensure each cell has content, avoiding blank rows or columns.
 - If a cell does not contain data, use "0" or "no data" instead of leaving it blank.
- Avoid merged cells and complex or nested tables (one table placed inside another), as these can affect reading order.
- Provide alt text for complex tables or explain the information in the surrounding text.
- Use the built-in accessibility checker to review tables before sharing.

Resources

“[Accessible Tables](#)”, Accessible Digital Content Training, eCampusOntario Pressbooks.

“[Create accessible tables in Word](#)”, Microsoft Support.

“[Set up your header row](#)”, Microsoft Support (Text and video).

3.5 Writing Effective Alt Text

Alternative text (alt text) describes the meaning or purpose of a visual element, such as a picture, chart, diagram, or complex table.

Who uses alt text and why?

- Screen reader users rely on alt text to access information in visuals.
- Some readers switch off images to reduce distraction and overwhelm.
- Some readers use alt text to understand what a visual conveys.
- Readers with limited internet access may view files without images displayed.

Best Practices

- Decide whether the visual adds meaning your reader needs to understand the content.
 - If the visual adds important meaning, write alt text that explains that meaning.
 - If it is decorative and does not add meaning, mark it as “decorative.”
 - Images of people should have alt text when the person, action, or context is important to the content.
- [Add alt text](#) using built-in tools in Microsoft documents.
- Provide alt text that explains the purpose or meaning of the visual.
- Keep alt text brief and relevant.
 - If the alt-text description is long (more than two sentences), consider adding it as text to the content itself.
- Avoid phrases like “image of” or “picture of.”
- Every visual should either have alt text or be marked as decorative. Built-in accessibility checkers can help with this.

Reader Perspective

[“Screen Reader: Image without Alt Text”](#), Colorado State University (Video).

Resources

[“Add alternative text to a shape, picture, chart, SmartArt graphic, or other object”](#), Microsoft Support.

[“Alt text should appear on some images”](#), Web Services, Carleton University.

[“Alternative Text”](#), WebAIM.

[“Free AI Image Alt Text Generator”](#), ahrefs.

3.6 Providing Alternate Formats

Alternate formats (sometimes called accessible formats) are versions of content designed to meet different access needs. Examples include large print, braille, audio, and electronic formats.

In some cases, an alternate format may be requested and arranged through Library Accessibility Services. If the source document was designed with accessibility in mind (e.g., using heading styles), the process of creating alternate formats will be much easier.

Different readers may have different needs and preferences. Whenever possible, offer your content in more than one format to make your communications accessible to a wider range of readers.

Best Practices

- Consider offering more than one format. This allows your audience to use the format that works best for them. For example:
 - Provide optional paper handouts during a slideshow presentation.
 - Offer a text-only version of your website or document.
 - Provide audio descriptions or transcripts for videos and podcasts.
 - Provide accessible PDFs, as well as Word documents (which are preferred by some screen reader users).
 - Offer braille or large print versions of printed materials.
- Consider presenting information in multiple ways, such as text, graphics, tables, and lists. This allows readers to engage with the format that works best for them.
- Presenting more than one format can also improve understanding and retention.
- When designing a document or presentation, ensure it is compatible with screen readers. Use built-in heading styles and run the built-in accessibility checker.

Resource

[“Alternate Formats”](#), Library Accessibility Services, Carleton University.

3.7 Understanding Assistive Technologies

Assistive technologies help people with disabilities access digital information. Examples include screen readers, captions, and audio descriptions. A screen reader, for example, reads digital text aloud and allows users to navigate documents using headings, links, and other structural elements.

Many of the best practices already discussed (e.g., heading styles, descriptive links, table structures, and alt text) help make documents accessible to people who use assistive technologies. When content is structured properly, assistive technologies are better able to present the information in ways that support navigation, comprehension, and independence.

You can also test content using assistive technologies to check that it is accessible to a wide range of users.

Best Practices

- When writing and editing, [use the navigation pane](#) in Microsoft Word.
 - This displays all headings in one place and helps confirm that heading styles have been correctly applied.
- Use built-in accessibility checkers.
 - Be aware that accessibility checkers may miss some issues. For example, text boxes are generally inaccessible and may not be flagged in the accessibility check. They may also miss issues related to cognitive accessibility, such as whether content is clear and easy to follow.
- Where possible, test content with a screen reader or text-to-speech tool.
 - Screen readers allow users to navigate and control their entire device by announcing content, controls, and actions aloud. Examples include built-in tools such as [Narrator \(for Windows\)](#) and [VoiceOver \(for Mac\)](#), or software such as [NVDA](#), (free) and JAWS (paid).
 - Text-to-speech (TTS) tools allow users to listen to written content within a specific document, app, or webpage. Examples include the built-in [Microsoft Read Aloud](#) and [Apple's Spoken Content tools](#).

Reader Perspective

[“Justin Demonstrates Document Screen Reader Accessibility with Headings, Tables and Images”](#), Justin Harford (Video).

Resources

[“Accessibility for Apple devices”](#), Apple.

[“An introduction to screen readers”](#), AbilityNet.

[“Get started with VoiceOver on Mac”](#), Apple Support.

[“Hear text out loud with Narrator”](#), Microsoft.

[“How screen readers read special characters”](#), Eleven Ways.

[“Listen to your Word documents”](#), Microsoft Support.

[“NVDA”](#), NV Access.

[“Screen readers and text to speech software”](#), The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association.

[“Use the Navigation pane in Word”](#), Microsoft Support.

4 Sharing Your Accessible Communications

Before you share content, review it for accessibility. Even small issues (e.g., missing alt text, unclear link text, or improper heading styles) can create barriers for readers.

Use this overview and checklist to help make sure your communication is clearer, more accessible, and ready to share.

Best Practices

1. Use technology to check accessibility before sharing.
 - Use built-in accessibility checkers to identify and fix issues (e.g., the built-in [accessibility checker](#) in Microsoft Word).
 - Use third-party accessibility checkers such as [WebAIM's WAVE tool](#) or [AChecker](#) to check the accessibility of documents or websites.
2. Use human review to supplement automated checks.
 - Where possible, invite others to review your communication.
 - Automated tools may not identify issues related to clarity, plain language, or inclusive tone. Reader feedback can provide valuable insight.
3. Review and address flagged issues.
4. Repeat technology review (step 1) and human review (step 2) to ensure issues are fixed.
5. Share your content.

Before You Share: Accessibility Quick Check

Before you share your content, confirm the following. Accessibility is more than completing a checklist; it involves considering people, context, and how the content may be accessed. This quick check helps you apply key practices that create a strong accessibility baseline, making your content easier for more people to access, understand, and use.

Structure

- ☐ Headings use built-in heading styles.
- ☐ Lists are created using built-in list tools.
- ☐ Information is organized logically.

Clarity and Cognitive Load

- ☐ The most important information appears first.
- ☐ Complex information is broken into smaller steps or sections.
- ☐ Key actions, decisions, or information are easy to find.
- ☐ Someone has reviewed the document for clarity and ease of use.

Text and Layout

- ☐ Font is readable (sans serif, minimum 12 pt).
- ☐ Line spacing and white space support readability.
- ☐ Colour contrast is sufficient.

Links and Tables

- ☐ Links use descriptive text.
- ☐ Tables are simple and include header rows.
- ☐ All table cells have content.
- ☐ If a cell does not contain data, use "0" or "no data" instead of leaving it blank.

Images and Visuals

- ☐ Images include alt text or are marked decorative.
- ☐ Charts or diagrams are explained in the surrounding text.

Accessibility Tools

- ☐ The accessibility checker has been run.
- ☐ The document title and file properties are set.

5 Accessing Resources

This section brings together recommended online resources to support your accessible communication practices. Many of these resources are also listed at the end of relevant sections, so you can find support as you work through specific topics. Full URLs are included here to support printing, sharing, and offline reference.

Choosing Accessible Language

Plain Language

“[Get your document's readability and level statistics in Microsoft Word](https://support.microsoft.com/en-US/Word/get-your-document-s-readability-and-level-statistics-in-microsoft-word)”, Microsoft Support. <https://support.microsoft.com/en-US/Word/get-your-document-s-readability-and-level-statistics-in-microsoft-word>

“[Hemingway App](https://hemingwayapp.com/)”, Hemingway Editor. <https://hemingwayapp.com/>

“[Plain Language Standards CAN-ASC-3.1:2025](https://accessible.canada.ca/creating-accessibility-standards/can-asc-312025-plain-language)”, Accessibility Standards Canada. <https://accessible.canada.ca/creating-accessibility-standards/can-asc-312025-plain-language>

Disability-Inclusive Language

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“[Screen Reader: Document Without Headings](#)”, Colorado State University (Video).

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“[Use the Navigation pane in Word](#)”, Microsoft Support. <https://support.microsoft.com/en-US/Word/use-the-navigation-pane-in-word>

Creating Accessible Content with Specific Tools

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[“Insert a table of contents”](https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/word/training/insert-a-table-of-contents), Microsoft Support. <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/word/training/insert-a-table-of-contents>

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<https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/accessibility/office-accessibility/improve-accessibility-with-the-accessibility-checker>

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<https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/accessibility/office-accessibility/improve-accessibility-with-the-accessibility-checker>

“[Make your Outlook email accessible to people with disabilities](#)”, Microsoft Support.

<https://support.microsoft.com/en-US/accessibility/outlook/make-your-outlook-email-accessible-to-people-with-disabilities>

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<https://carleton.ca/kaltura/embed-media-into-brightspace/>

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“[Accessible Digital Content Training](https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/accessibledigitalcontenttraining/)”, Accessible Digital Content Training, eCampusOntario Pressbooks. <https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/accessibledigitalcontenttraining/>

Appendix: Creating Accessible Content with Specific Tools

This appendix builds on the principles outlined in earlier sections and applies them to commonly used software tools and platforms. While accessible communication begins with clear language and thoughtful design, it also needs to be implemented correctly in the software used to create and share content.

The following sections provide practical guidance for applying accessible communication principles in tools such as Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Outlook, Teams & Zoom, PDFs, forms, videos, web content, and Brightspace. These recommendations help confirm that accessibility features are used effectively and preserved when content is shared.



Use this appendix after reading Section 3 ([Designing Accessible Documents](#)), which introduces the core principles that apply across formats and platforms. The sections below provide tool-specific guidance for applying those principles.

Accessible Documents (Word)

When you create Word documents, apply the core principles from Sections 2 and 3. The following practices support accessible structure, formatting, and navigation in Word.

Best Practices

- Use built-in styles and tools rather than manual formatting.
 - Use heading styles, list tools, table features, and hyperlink tools to create accessible structure.
- Review key accessibility features from Section 3, especially:
 - Heading styles
 - Alt text for visuals
 - Accessible tables
 - Accessible fonts
 - Descriptive link text
- Include page numbers for easier navigation. Use the built-in page number feature.
- [Insert a table of contents](#) for longer documents.
- Use the Navigation Pane to review the document structure.
 - Select “View” (from top menu), and check “Navigation Pane” (from “Show” section).
- Use the built-in [accessibility checker](#).
- Use meaningful file names and update the [document title and file properties](#) (author and tags) before sharing.

Resources

[“Improve accessibility with the Accessibility Checker”](#), Microsoft Support.

[“Insert a table of contents”](#), Microsoft Support.

[“Make your Word documents accessible to people with disabilities”](#), Microsoft Support.

[“View or change the properties for an Office file”](#), Microsoft Support.

Accessible Presentations (PowerPoint)

When you create PowerPoint presentations, apply the core principles from Sections 2 and 3, including clear structure, readable text, and meaningful visuals. The following practices help with the creation of slides that are easy to follow and accessible to more people.

Best Practices

- Use built-in slide layouts and templates.
- Give every slide a unique title. Use “continued” when a topic carries over to another slide.
- Include slide numbers for easier navigation.
- For longer presentations, use overview and section slides to organize content.
- Keep slides simple: present one idea per slide and avoid complex layouts.
- Use bullet points to make information concise and easy to scan. Each bullet should be a short sentence or phrase, not a paragraph.
- Use readable font sizes with strong colour contrast. Aim for 24 to 32 point, with 18 point as the minimum.
- Add alt text to meaningful visuals or mark decorative visuals as decorative.
- Describe charts and other visual elements aloud during the presentation and, where helpful, in speaker notes.
- Provide captions and transcripts for multimedia content.
- Limit animations and transitions. Use simple effects sparingly.
- [Use the Reading Order Pane](#) to ensure screen readers will read slide elements in a logical order.
- Run the built-in [accessibility checker](#) before sharing.
- Update the [document title and file properties](#) before sharing.

Resources

[“Improve accessibility with the Accessibility Checker”](#), Microsoft Support.

[“Make your PowerPoint presentations accessible to people with disabilities”](#), Microsoft Support.

Accessible Spreadsheets (Excel)

When you create spreadsheets, apply the core principles from Sections 2 and 3, including clear organization, simple tables, and accessible formatting. The following practices help to make spreadsheet data more interpretable and navigable by a wide range of users.

Best Practices

- Label worksheets clearly with descriptive names and remove blank worksheets.
- Use a simple and consistent table structure.
 - Use clear, descriptive column headers and format them using the built-in table feature.
 - Avoid blank rows, merged cells, and complex formatting.
- Add text to cell A1 (screen readers start reading in this cell).
 - This can be a helpful location to share brief instructions on how to interpret or use the information.
- Use built-in number formatting for values such as currency, percentages, and dates.
- Add alt text to visuals.
- Use sufficient colour contrast and do not rely on colour alone to convey meaning.
- Keep related data in a single table per worksheet, where possible. Avoid multiple tables per worksheet.
- Use the built-in [accessibility checker](#).
- Update the [document title and file properties](#) (author and tags) before sharing.

Resources

[“Accessibility best practices with Excel spreadsheets”](#), Microsoft Support.

[“Accessible Microsoft Excel”](#), Accessible Digital Content Training, eCampusOntario Pressbooks.

[“Improve accessibility with the Accessibility Checker”](#), Microsoft Support.

Accessible Emails (Outlook)

When you write emails, apply the core principles from Sections 2 and 3, including plain language, clear structure, and accessible formatting. The following practices help make email messages easier to read and navigate for more people.

Best Practices

- Use a clear subject line.
- Apply plain language principles, especially starting with the most important information first.
- Use heading styles. This supports clear formatting and easier navigation.
- Choose an accessible font (sans serif, at least 12 pt).
- Avoid using colour alone to highlight key information.
 - For example, do not rely on red text alone to indicate an important action or deadline.
- Use meaningful link text rather than pasting full URLs.
- Use lists to organize information where helpful.
- Avoid using tables for layout.
 - If a table is necessary, keep it simple and use it only for data.
- Use an accessible signature.
 - Use real text, not images (e.g., type your signature directly, rather than uploading an image).
 - Add alt text to logos.
- Ensure attached files are accessible, with clear and descriptive names.
- Use the built-in [accessibility checker](#).

Resources

[“Improve accessibility with the Accessibility Checker”](#), Microsoft Support.

[“Make your Outlook email accessible to people with disabilities”](#), Microsoft Support.

Accessible Meetings (Teams and Zoom)

When you plan or host meetings, apply the core principles from Sections 2 and 3, including clear language, accessible visuals, and inclusive communication practices. The following practices help make meetings more accessible and inclusive for all attendees.

Best Practices

- Share slides and materials in advance.
- Enable live captions and transcripts.
- Use clear spoken communication.
 - Speak slowly and clearly.
 - Pause between slides.
- Describe visual elements (e.g., images, charts, graphs).
- Encourage turn taking and identify speakers.
- Repeat participant questions before responding.
- Support participation throughout the meeting.
 - Explain how participants can ask questions, use chat, or request clarification.
 - Build in pauses so participants can follow along and contribute.
- Minimize text and focus on one idea per slide.
- Use at least 24-point sans serif font and high-contrast colours.
- Provide captions or transcripts for audio and video content.
- Provide notes or a transcript afterwards.

Resources

[“Accessibility tools for Microsoft Teams”](#), Microsoft Support.

[“Accessible Meeting and Event Guide”](#), Accessibility Institute, Carleton University.

[“Zoom Accessibility”](#), Zoom at Carleton, Carleton University.

Accessible PDFs

Accessible PDFs depend on applying the core principles from Section 3 in the source document, including headings, alt text, and document structure. The following practices help preserve those features when exporting and sharing PDFs.

Best Practices

- Start with an accessible source document.
 - For example, in Microsoft Word, use built-in heading styles and add alt text for images.
- Run the built-in accessibility checker before creating the PDF.
- Keep accessibility features when creating the PDF.
 - ‘Export to PDF’ rather than ‘Print to PDF’.
 - In the “Create PDF/XPS Document” (or similar) “Options” menu, ensure the following are selected:
 - “Create bookmarks using: headings” (preserves headings for navigation).
 - “Document structure tags for accessibility” (preserves alt text and document structure).
- Run a PDF accessibility checker to identify any issues.
- Fix issues in the source document (e.g., in Microsoft Word).
 - This helps ensure that small updates to the source document do not affect the accessibility of future PDF versions.
- After making changes, export to PDF again and repeat the accessibility check.

Resources

[“Create accessible PDFs”](#), Microsoft Support.

[“What is an accessible PDF?”](#), Accessible Digital Content Training, eCampusOntario Pressbooks.

[“Yes it’s portable, but is it accessible? PDFs and a11y”](#), Web Services, Carleton University.

Accessible Forms and Surveys

When you create forms and surveys, apply the core principles from Sections 2 and 3, including clear instructions, logical structure, and accessible formatting. The following practices help make forms and surveys easier for more people to complete independently.

Best Practices

- Provide clear instructions for filling out the form.
 - Explain what information is required and how responses will be used.
- Organize questions in a logical order.
 - Group related questions together, where possible.
- Use clear labels for form fields and controls.
- Clearly identify required fields.
- Provide clear error messages that explain errors and how to fix them.
- Avoid unnecessary time limits.
 - If a time limit is required, tell users in advance and offer flexibility where possible.
- Use good colour contrast and avoid busy backgrounds.
- Ensure visuals have alt text.
- Test the form using keyboard navigation.
 - Users should be able to navigate through the form fields using the Tab key.
- Provide enough space for responses.
 - Use “Long answer” text boxes when detailed responses may be needed.
- Preview and test the form before sharing.

Resources

[“Creating Accessible Forms”](#), WebAIM.

[“Forms Tutorial”](#), Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI).

[“Survey Accessibility”](#), Qualtrics.

Accessible Videos

Videos should apply the core principles from Sections 2 and 3, including clear language, meaningful visuals, and multiple ways to access content. The following practices help make video content easier to access, understand, and use. At Carleton, [Kaltura MediaSpace](#) supports accessible video practices.

Best Practices

- Use an accessible video player (such as Kaltura) that supports screen readers, keyboard navigation, and other assistive technologies. It should also include playback, caption, and display controls.
- Provide synchronized captions and a transcript. Transcripts should include dialogue, narration, important sounds, and relevant on-screen text or actions.
 - This supports viewers with auditory or cognitive considerations.
 - Ensure captions are not hard-coded onto the video, so viewers can control how captions are displayed.
- Review and edit machine-generated captions before using them as closed captions.
- Do not rely on visuals alone. Describe important visual information in the narration, transcript, or audio description.
- Ensure high sound quality.
 - Audio should be clear and free from distracting background noise.
 - Audio should be loud enough to hear when playback volume is set to medium.
- Use video quality that is high enough to show important details, while keeping the file size small enough to load easily.
- When recording a PowerPoint presentation, leave space at the bottom of slides so captions do not block important content.

Resources

[“Captions”](#), Kaltura, Carleton University.

[“Creating Accessible Lecture Videos”](#), Kaltura, Carleton University.

[“Introduction to accessibility requirements for audio-video”](#), Government of Canada.

Accessible Web Content

When you create web content, apply the core principles from Sections 2 and 3, including plain language, clear structure, descriptive links, and accessible visual design. It should also align with the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\)](#), the international standards for accessible web content. The following practices apply these principles online and can also make web content easier to use, navigate, and find.

Best Practices

- Organize pages with a clear and consistent structure.
- Use headings and subheadings to break up content and support navigation.
- Use real heading styles rather than bolding text to look like a heading.
- Write clear, concise, and scannable text.
 - Keep sentences and paragraphs short.
 - Use bulleted or numbered lists where helpful.
- Use descriptive hyperlink text.
 - Link text should make sense on its own.
 - Avoid vague wording such as “click here.”
- Add alt text to meaningful images and mark decorative images appropriately.
- Do not rely on images alone to communicate information.
 - For complex visuals, provide captions or descriptions in the surrounding text.
- Ensure sufficient colour contrast and do not rely on colour alone to convey meaning.
- Use tables only for data, not for layout.

Resources

[“Accessibility Fundamentals Overview”](#), Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI).

[“Web Accessibility”](#), Web Services, Carleton University.

Accessible Brightspace

When you create Brightspace content, apply the core principles from Sections 2 and 3, including plain language, clear structure, and accessible formatting. The following practices help ensure course materials can be accessed, navigated, and understood by all learners.

Best Practices

- Organize course content into clear modules and sub-modules.
 - Group related materials by week, unit, or topic to support navigation and understanding. Consider adding dates to help show when materials will be available.
- [Use Brightspace's built-in HTML editor tools](#) to create accessible content. The HTML editor is available in any area that allows text-input.
- Use headings to organize content clearly and support screen reader navigation.
- Apply heading levels in a logical order. When creating webpages, use H2 as the main heading, followed by H3, H4, and so on, in a meaningful order.
- Check colour contrast when formatting text.
 - Using the colour selector in the HTML editor rather than choosing colours by sight.
- Add alt text to meaningful images and mark decorative images as decorative.
- Run Brightspace's built-in accessibility checker and spell checker before publishing content.
 - These tools can help identify issues such as missing alt text, low colour contrast, missing heading levels, and spelling errors.
- Use accessible video practices:
 - Always upload videos to Kaltura Mediaspace first, then [embed the media using the HTML editor](#) to support captions, transcripts, playback controls, and smoother loading for participants.
 - Keep videos short where possible to support learners with lower bandwidth.
- Use clear, descriptive titles for embedded videos and course materials.

Resources

[“Accessibility in Brightspace”](#), Brightspace Instructor Support, Carleton University.

[“Embed Kaltura Media into Brightspace”](#), Brightspace Instructor Support, Carleton University.

Conclusion

Accessible communication helps remove barriers and make information easier for a wider range of people to access, understand, and use. By applying the practices in this guide, we can make Carleton communications clearer, more inclusive, and more accessible.

Accessibility is a shared responsibility, and small choices in writing, design, and formatting can make a meaningful difference. We encourage you to continue building your knowledge, use the resources in this guide, and keep accessibility in mind in all communications.

Together, we can help ensure Carleton University communications are as accessible and inclusive as possible. If you have any questions or feedback, please contact access@carleton.ca.



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