Checklist: Accessibility in PDF

PDFs are among the most challenging formats to make fully accessible. Whenever possible, consider providing documents in alternative formats, such as Word or HTML, to ensure easier access. Use this checklist to systematically address accessibility issues in PDFs. Items specific to PDFs are marked with \*PDF.

# Open the Accessibility Checker

* Use the **desktop Adobe Acrobat application**, as the web version has limited functionality.
* Open the Accessibility Checker by navigating to **All Tools > Prepare for Accessibility > Check for Accessibility > Start Checking**.

# Accessibility Issues Caught by the Accessibility Checker

* Has **OCR (Optical Character Recognition)** been enabled so text is searchable and selectable?
* Do all tables include:
  + Titles, headers, and captions (alt text)?
  + Unique column headings?
* Do tables avoid using **merged cells**?

# Accessibility Issues Requiring Additional Review

* Does the **reading order** present content logically?
  + **Note:** The checker will confirm tagging but not the sequence or logic of the tags.
* Does the document use a proper **heading structure** (e.g., headings are in order, and no levels are skipped)?
  + **Note:** The checker identifies skipped levels but cannot verify the appropriateness of heading levels.
* Do all images have:
  + Accurate and concise **alt text**, or a **decorative image** designation for non-informative images?
  + **Note:** The checker won’t flag non-descriptive alt text, so manually review all images.
* Are **equivalent alternatives** provided for complex visuals (e.g., graphs, charts)?
  + Include a short description in the alt text and a longer explanation in a caption, in the document, or as a linked resource.

# Accessibility Issues Not Detected by the Checker

* Was the file shared in a format other than PDF, if possible?
* Are **lists** created using the numbered or bulleted list feature?
* Are all URLs embedded in **meaningful text** (e.g., “Learn more about accessibility” instead of “Click here”)?
* Is underlining used **only for hyperlinks** and not for emphasis?
* Is the use of **all capital letters** limited to acronyms and not for emphasis?
* Does the document avoid relying solely on **visual formatting** (e.g., colors, shapes) to convey meaning?
  + Use bold or italics instead for emphasis.
* Is text presented as **editable text**, not as an image of text?
  + Replace images of text with actual text whenever possible.
* Are **sans serif fonts** (e.g., Arial, Verdana, Calibri) used?
* Are **indent and alignment buttons** used instead of tabs or spaces for formatting?
* Are tables used exclusively to **organize data**, rather than as a layout tool?
* Do tables avoid having **empty data cells**?
* Is there **sufficient color contrast**?
  + Use online tools like **WebAIM’s Contrast Checker** to confirm compliance, as Adobe’s checker does not assess this.