

Webinar: Creating Accessible Documents

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Participant Questions: Accessible Word Documents Webinar

1. **Is there a way to make the accessibility checker turn on as a default each time you open Word?**

Answer: Not quite as a default that turns on automatically every time, but the next best thing to turn it on and then under Settings, make sure the “Show accessibility status for the Accessibility Assistant in the Status Bar” and “Show accessibility status inline with the document” checkboxes are checked, and then use the small indicator in the status bar at the bottom of your Word window. It won't turn itself back on after you close and reopen Word.

2. **It was mentioned to avoid using merged or split cells in a table. Can you please expand on this more?**

Answer: Merged and split cells break the logical structure that screen readers rely on to make sense of a table. When a screen reader navigates a table, it moves cell by cell and announces the column header before each piece of data, so a listener hears something like "Q3 revenue: \$42,000." That only works when the table has a clean, consistent grid structure.

When cells are merged, the relationship between the header and the data underneath it becomes ambiguous. The screen reader either skips content, reads it out of order, or loses track of which column it's in entirely. The experience for the person listening can be genuinely confusing. Imagine hearing numbers read aloud with no context for what they represent. If you need to show that a value spans multiple categories, it's better to restructure the data or use a note below the table rather than merging cells to create the visual effect.

3. **I was told that no tables are screen reader friendly. Can you go into more detail into how to make these accessible and what this would sound like for a person using a screen reader?**

Answer: Poorly structured tables aren't screen reader friendly, but a well-built table absolutely can be. When you create a table using Word's built-in Insert → Table tool, mark the first row as a header row, keep the structure simple and consistent, and avoid merged cells, a screen reader handles it well.

Here's roughly what the experience sounds like for someone using a screen reader navigating a simple three-column table with headers: they'd hear "table with 3 columns and 5 rows," then as they move through each cell they'd hear the column header announced before the data – "Month: January, Revenue: \$38,000, Change: plus 4%." That information is useful when it's delivered in a logical sequence.

What breaks that experience is complexity like merged cells, empty header rows, tables used for layout rather than data. Keep it simple, use the built-in tools, and tables are very workable for screen reader users.

4. **Can you please explain when to use the title style vs. H1 and how to use these correctly in Word?**

Answer: The Title style is intended for the title of the document itself – the name of the report, the policy, the guide – and it typically appears once, at the very top of the first page.

Heading 1 is for the first level of structure within the document – the major sections. So if you were writing an annual report called "2025 Community Impact Report," that title would use the Title style. The first major section heading – say, "About Our Organization" – would be Heading 1.

The distinction matters for screen reader navigation because assistive technologies treat the document title differently from navigational headings. In practice, many organizations skip the Title style and just use Heading 1 for everything, which isn't the end of the world, but using Title correctly gives the document a cleaner structure and a clearer starting point for anyone navigating it with assistive technology.

5. **We use a footer with our organization's core values along the bottom of our documents. Would it be better to insert that as an image vs. text and create alt text, so it does not appear to be part of the main document, or will the screen reader recognize that it is in the footer and treat it differently?**

Answer: Screen readers do recognize footers as distinct from the main body content. Most will announce "footer" before reading what's in it, so listeners know they've moved into a different part of the document. That means your core values text in a footer is actually in decent shape as text, because it will be read in context rather than interrupting the main content.

Keeping it as real text is the better choice. Text in a footer is searchable, scalable, and doesn't require alt text. If you put it in as an image instead, you'd need to write alt text that captures the full content of the values, which is more work and less reliable. The one thing to be mindful of is length – if the footer text is very long, some screen reader users may find it repetitive on every page. A short, clean values statement is fine.

6. **If you have a table cell with no data, how would you present that rather than leave it blank? Can you put a "-" to indicate there is no data or is it best to write "no data" or "not applicable"?**

Answer: General guidance is to avoid leaving cells completely blank and avoid using a dash on its own. A dash is read by some screen readers as "dash" and by others as silence – neither is particularly clear. Writing out "no data," "not applicable," or "N/A" is better because it's clearer. "N/A" is widely understood and concise. "No data" is clearer for audiences who may not be familiar with abbreviations.

If your organization has a style guide, it's worth adding a standard for this so the document is consistent. The principle is the same as with any accessibility decision – ask yourself what a person listening to this table being read aloud would need to hear to understand what the cell means.

7. How do screen readers handle headers and footers? Do they read this text or consider it as decorative elements on the page?

Answer: Screen readers read headers and footers. They are not treated as decorative. Most screen readers announce when they enter a header or footer region, so the listener knows the context has shifted. In practice this means your page numbers, document titles, dates, and any other information in your header or footer will be read aloud.

The main consideration is keeping headers and footers simple and purposeful. Content that needs to be there, like page numbers, document title, organization name, belong there. Decorative elements like purely visual divider lines or background images in the header area should be marked as decorative so they don't add noise for screen reader users.

8. How do you know when to mark a graphic as decorative text and not include an alt text description?

Answer: Think about it this way: if you removed the image entirely, would anyone reading the document miss any information? If the answer is no, then it's purely visual, it reinforces the tone or appearance but doesn't communicate anything that isn't already in the text, so it's decorative. Common examples are background textures, stylistic dividers, stock photos used for visual interest, and logos that appear alongside the organization's name written out in text.

If the image conveys information that isn't available anywhere else in the document – a chart showing data, a diagram explaining a process, a photograph that is itself the subject of discussion, then it needs descriptive alt text. When in

doubt, err on the side of writing alt text. A little extra description never hurts anyone. Missing information can.

9. **I was told selecting decorative only for image alt text is not Manitoba accessibility standards acceptable. Is this true?**

Answer: What I can say generally is that the decorative designation, when it's applied correctly, is recognized and accepted under WCAG 2.1, the international web content accessibility guidelines that most Canadian accessibility standards are built on. The decorative designation is sometimes overused or misapplied, marking informational images as decorative to avoid writing alt text.

10. **Can you please provide the link to the free resource available for download?**

Answer: The Accessible Word Documents quick-reference checklist is available for free download at <https://learn.squarelyaccessible.com/checklist>.

No sign-up required – just click and it's yours. And if you'd like to keep getting practical accessibility tips for communicators and document creators, you can also sign up for our newsletter, Squarely to Your Inbox, on the same page.

If you have any other questions, please reach out to kelly@squarelyaccessible.com or the Manitoba Accessibility Office at MAO@gov.mb.ca