

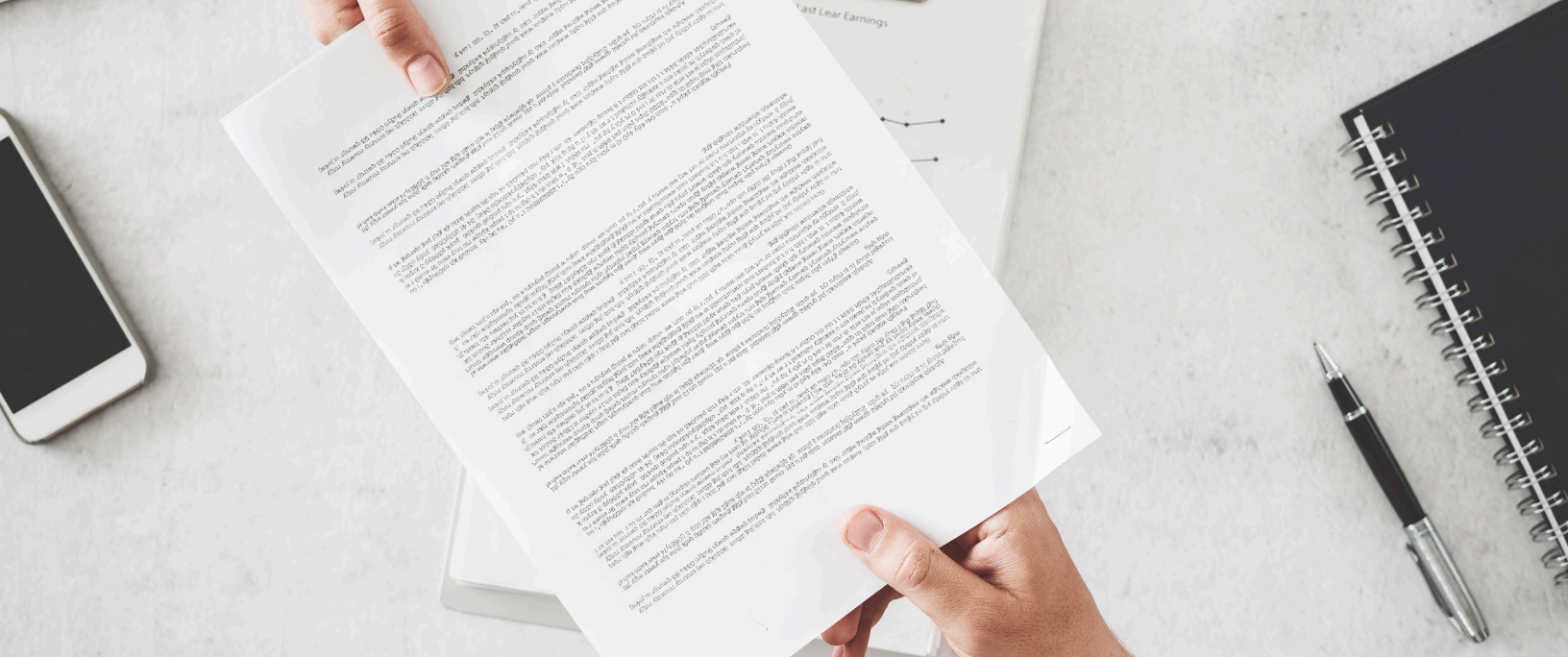


Rural Development
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



How to Make Your Documents Plain Language Compliant and 508 Accessible

Together, America Prospers



Introduction

All federal employees and contractors must create and distribute documents – including notices, regulations, internal and external reports, email messages, and social media content – that meet plain language and Section 508 accessibility requirements. This toolkit will help you avoid common grammar, formatting, and compliance errors found in government writing.

The toolkit is divided into four sections:

1. Making documents plain language compliant
2. Formatting and editing documents
3. Making documents Section 508 compliant
4. Additional resources

Resources include video tutorials on all topics, along with information from plain language, Section 508, Adobe Acrobat, and Microsoft Office subject matter experts.

Many of the tools in this guide were developed by the Plain Language Action and Information Network ([PLAIN](#)), a community of federal employees that offers free plain language training. Additionally, the interagency [Accessibility Community of Practice](#) forum created many of the Section 508 resources we use here.

This version of the guide was abridged by the Office of External Affairs Field Operations and Multimedia branch. It's intended for use by USDA Rural Development's field- and national office-based Public Affairs Specialists, as

well as USDA employees and contractors responsible for crafting public-facing program materials. Originally authored by OEA's Internal Communications branch, the unabridged version is available at tinyurl.com/RD-OEA-IntComms.

With rare exception – such as verbiage required of regulatory or technical documents outside the scope of this guide – publications intended to promote and amplify USDA Rural Development programs must use the Associated Press (AP) style of writing. Information about AP style is available at this link: apstylebook.com/.

A note about website links: For ease of reference, this guide provides links to useful information hosted outside the USDA domain. Federal endorsement of non-USDA programs or activities is neither intended nor implied. Please be aware that, when you access information through a link provided in this document, you must follow the copyright and licensing restrictions of those sites. All links were active as of March 2025. Please email hyperlink errors to rd.multimedia@usda.gov.

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Section 1: Making Your Documents Plain Language Compliant

What is Plain Language?

Plain Language is a writing style that gives readers clear, concise, and easy-to-understand information the first time they read or hear it. Plain Language helps your readers understand and comply with federal laws, successfully complete government forms, and access federal benefits and services. Plain Language isn't just a "suggestion" – it's federal law.



Here is a list of associated regulations:

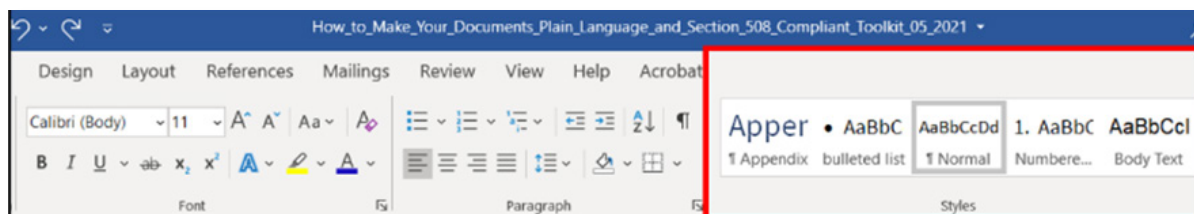
- The [Plain Writing Act of 2010](#) requires agencies to provide the public with clear, concise, well-organized information that follows best practices based on the subject and intended audience.
- [Executive Order 12866: Regulatory Drafting and Review](#) – (PDF) requires agencies to create simple, easy-to-understand regulations, and to provide the public with information written in plain, understandable language.
- [Executive Order 12988: Civil Justice Reform](#) – (PDF) requires agencies to ensure their regulations use clear language.
- [Executive Order 13563: Improving Regulation and Regulatory Review](#) – (PDF) requires agencies to ensure their regulations are accessible, consistent, written in plain language, and easy to understand.
- The [Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995](#) – (PDF) requires agencies to verify that their collection of information is logical, does not use vague or confusing terms, and is written in plain language.

Section 2: Formatting and Editing Your Document

First, watch these videos on using the [Microsoft Word “Styles” tool](#) and using [fonts, font sizes, and line spacing](#). Then, review the information below.

The “Home” tab of the Microsoft Word Menu Bar (shown in Figure 1, below) contains the tools you’ll use to format and modify your document fonts, paragraphs, and so on.

Figure 1: Microsoft Office Menu Bar with “Styles” Tool Highlighted:



Shown in Figure 2 (below), the “Review” tab contains the tools you will use to check spelling, grammar, punctuation, and usage issues. This tab also contains the Edit, Track Changes, Read Aloud, and Check Accessibility tools.

Figure 2: Microsoft Office “Review” Tool Bar with “Track Changes” Highlighted:

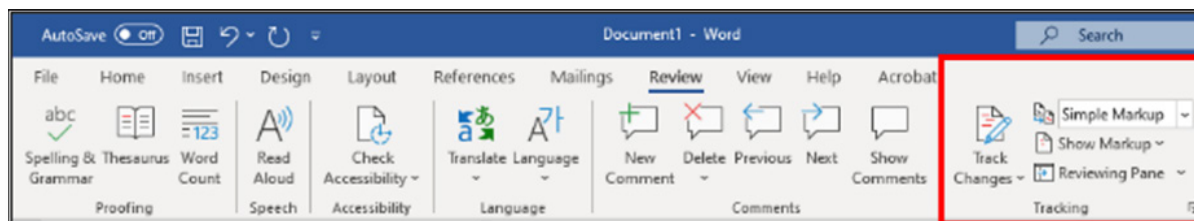


Table 1: Format and Styles Tools, and Best-Practice Descriptions:

Tool	Best Practice Description
Length of document title	Average 20-30 characters that clearly convey the purpose of the document
Fonts	Sans Serif fonts. Examples include the Arial, Calibri, Veranda, and Source Sans Pro font families
Font sizes	Size 12 for copy
Margins	1-inch margins on all sides
Space between sentences	Single space
Space after colon	Single space
Titles, Table of Contents, headings, and page numbers	Use “Styles,” “References,” and “Insert” tools on the Menu Bar to create
Quotation marks	Quoted text, highlighted words and phrases, book titles, and articles, among others
Quotation marks punctuation	Inside. Example: “Open the door.”
Italics	Book titles, citations, reports, publications, newspapers

Note: If you are creating a document for an external federal agency such as the Office of the Federal Register, you must follow that agency’s document formatting guidelines. For more information, please review the federal style manuals in the “Additional Resources” section of this toolkit.

Section 3: Writing for Your Audience

When writing for your audience, your goal is to provide your reader with clear, concise, easy-to-understand information. Here are four techniques you can use to connect with your audience:

1

Put yourself in the place of your reader. This will help you focus on your audience's needs. As you draft your text, ask yourself these questions:

- Who is my audience?
- What information do they need?
- Why do they need this information?
- How will they use it?
- What questions will my audience need answered?

2

Write as simply as possible without sacrificing content. Tips:

- Write to inform – rather than impress – your reader.
- Use common, everyday words.
- Know your audience. For instance, if your audience is a group of small business owners, don't write for scientists or attorneys.

3

Organize your document into small, bite-sized bits of information in a manner your reader will quickly understand and follow. Tips:

- Use informative headings and subheadings throughout your document.
- Keep each segment or section relatively short, so you don't overwhelm your reader.
- Use lists, charts, and tables to present complex information.
- Include white space (a minimum of 1.15 between lines of copy is standard) in your document. This helps your readers focus on important information.

4

Write conversationally. Tips:

- Write in the active voice.
- Don't pack too much information into a single sentence.
- Keep your sentences and paragraphs short, simple, and on point.
- Use personal pronouns like "I" and "you."

Section 4: Writing in the Active Voice

Watch this video on [writing in the active voice](#), then review the information that follows below. Active voice sentences use a strong, direct, and clear tone. In an active voice sentence, the person performing the action is the subject of the sentence. The structure of an active voice sentence is subject — verb — object.



Example: You (subject) must submit (verb) Form AD 2-13 (object) with your application.

Passive voice sentences often are vague, and it can be difficult to understand who is performing the action. They can come across as bureaucratic or authoritative. Passive voice sentences contain a form of the verb “to be” – such as are, was, were, could be, must be, should be, or has been – and a verb that ends with the letters “ed” or “en.” The structure of a passive voice sentence is object — verb — subject; the opposite of active voice structure.

Example: Form AD 2016 (object) must be submitted (verb) with your application (subject).

Table 2: Examples of passive versus active voice sentences

Passive voice	Active voice
Administrative Notice (AN) 4604 has been replaced by AN 4683.	Administrative Notice (AN) 4683 replaces AN 4604.
The USDA Rural Development annual report was written by the Office of External Affairs.	The Office of External Affairs wrote the USDA Rural Development annual report.
The completed grant application form was taken to the state office by the business owner.	The business owner took their completed grant application form to their local state office.

Section 5: Using Common Words and Phrases

Watch these videos on using clear, concise words and saying things simply, then review the information below.

Using easy-to-understand words and phrases in your documents is the surest way to get your message across. Complex words and phrases force your reader to spend extra time and effort understanding your message.



Tip: Carefully check your document for phrases that contain prepositions such as “of,” “to,” and “on,” among others. Removing these extra words can help make your sentences easier to read and understand.

Examples: (Unwieldy) The new system enhances the quality of the water and the reliability of the equipment for local residents.

(Simple) The new equipment makes the local water system safe and reliable.

Table 3: Common, versus complex, words and phrases

Complex	Common
advantageous	helpful
afford an opportunity	allow
a number of	several, or a few
assistance	help
at this point in time	now
concur	agree
demonstrate	show
disseminate	issue, share, or send
facilitate	lead
inform	tell
in order to	to
leverage	use
on a monthly basis	monthly
on the grounds that	because
procure or purchase	buy
promulgate	issue or publish
request	ask
terminate	end

Section 6: Avoiding Hidden Verbs

Watch this video on [avoiding hidden verbs](#), then review the information below.

With hidden verbs, the writer inserts a verb in front of the hidden verb to force the hidden verb to explain the action. Hidden verbs end with “-tion,” “-sion,” “-is,” “-ment,” “-ance,” “-ity,” and “-ure.” They also contain extra words like “to,” as in “come to the conclusion,” or an “an,” as in, “make an assessment.”

Examples: (Hidden verb) The agency performed an assessment of the application and came to the conclusion that the applicant did not submit all required documents.

(No hidden verb) The agency assessed the application and concluded the applicant did not submit all required documents.

Table 4: Replacing hidden verbs with common words

Hidden verbs	Common words
came to the realization	realized
come to the conclusion	conclude
conduct an analysis	analyze
gain an understanding	understand
make a determination	determine
made an entrance	entered
perform an examination	examine
provide an assessment	assess
submit an application	apply



Section 7: Avoiding Ambiguous Words

Do not use words like “shall,” “may,” “could,” or “can” in sentences in which you impose a requirement or instruct your reader to perform an action. These words are ambiguous, and give your reader the idea the action is optional. Instead, use words like “must” and “will” when requiring your reader to perform an action.



Examples: (Ambiguous) USDA Rural Development, in consultation with the national conference committee, shall publish a regulation for each program.

(Unambiguous) In consultation with the national conference committee, USDA Rural Development will publish a regulation for each program.

Table 5: Replacing ambiguous words

Ambiguous	Unambiguous
shall	must, or will (requires action)
may (infers an optional action)	can

Section 8: Writing Short Sentences and Paragraphs

Sentence Length Rules

Watch these videos on [writing short sentences and paragraphs](#), and using Microsoft Word's [word count tool](#), then review the information below.

Complex sentences and paragraphs are difficult to read and understand. Keep your sentences short, and break longer sentences into smaller sentences, lists, or tables.



Tips:

- Express only one idea in each sentence.
- Keep the sentence length to 20-25 or fewer words.
- Break long sentences into two or more sentences.
- Convert complicated sentences into smaller sentences, a bulleted list, or tables

Example: Long Sentence

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is expanding its direct mail program to provide filings of USCIS Form 1-800A, Application to Determine Suitability to Adopt a Child from a Convention Country; USCIS Form 1800A Supplement 1, Consent to Disclose Information; and USCIS Form 1-800, Petition to Classify Convention Adoptee as an Immediate Relative.

Example: Long Sentence Converted to List

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) added these forms to its direct mail program:

- **Form I-800A:** Suitability to Adopt a Child from a Convention Country (application)
- **Form I-800A Supplement 1:** Consent to Disclose Information
- **Form I-800:** Petition to Classify Convention Adoptee as an Immediate Relative



Tip: Microsoft Word automatically keeps track of the number of words in your document, and displays this information in the status bar located on the lower left side of the page. To view the number of words in a sentence, highlight the sentence, then view the word count information listed in the status bar.



Paragraph Length Rules

Short paragraphs are easier to read and understand than long paragraphs. It's also important to discuss only one topic in each paragraph.

Here are some additional paragraph development rules:

- Keep the number of words in a paragraph to around 250.
- Keep the number of lines in a paragraph to around five.
- Keep the number of sentences in a paragraph to between three and five.
- Break long, complicated paragraphs up into smaller paragraphs.
- Convert long, complicated paragraphs into lists or tables.

Example: Long paragraph

Notice of a bid advertisement shall be published in at least one local newspaper and in one trade publication at least 30 days in advance of a sale. If applicable, the notice must identify the reservation within which the tracts to be leased are found. Specific descriptions of the tracts shall be available at the office of the superintendent. The complete text of the advertisement shall be mailed to each person listed on the appropriate agency mailing list.

Example: Long paragraph converted into two smaller paragraphs

We will publish a bid advertising notice in at least one local newspaper and one trade publication 30 days before each sale. The notice will identify the reservation location and tract leasing information.

We will mail our bid advertisement to everyone on the agency's mailing list. You can also find this information in the superintendent's office.

Section 9: Using Parallel Structure in your Lists

Watch this video on using [parallel structure in lists](#), then review the information below.

Also called “parallelism,” parallel structure includes words, phrases, or clauses similar in length and grammatical form. In a correctly structured list, the first word in a series keeps the same grammatical form throughout. This means we list nouns with other nouns, words ending with “-ing” with other words ending with “-ing,” and so on.



Example: List with no parallel construction

Here is a list of national office responsibilities:

- It must allocate national reserve funds
- If a state exceeds its delegated loan authority, it can approve the loan
- Give the field office directions and guidance

Example: List with parallel construction

National office responsibilities include:

- Distributing national reserve funds
- Approving loans that exceed a state’s approval authority
- Directing and guiding field offices
- Providing policy directives and regulatory updates to state offices
- Ensuring field offices meet program objectives

Note: Don’t use semicolons in your lists. In the example below, semicolons turned the list into a 40-word sentence, breaking our plain language sentence length rules.

Example: List with parallel construction and semicolons

National office responsibilities include:

- Distributing national reserve funds;
- Approving loans that exceed a state’s approval authority;
- Directing and guiding field offices;
- Providing policy directives and regulatory updates to state offices;
- Ensuring field offices meet program objectives.

Section 10: Using Tables to Convey Your Message

Watch this video on [using tables](#), then review the information below.

Using tables in your document is a great way to share complex instructions. Tables help reduce the number of words necessary to convey your message. They also improve structure and logic, and make it easier to locate specific information.

Example: Statement without a table

If the agency superintendent made a decision on your request, you can appeal the decision to the area director. If the area director made a decision on your request, you can appeal the decision to the commissioner. If the commissioner made a decision on your request, the decision is final, and you have no additional appeal options available to you.

Example: Statement using a table

Table: Here are the steps for appealing a decision:

If	Then
The agency superintendent made the decision on your request	You can appeal the decision to the area director
The area director made the decision on your request	You can appeal the decision to the commissioner
The commissioner made the decision on your request	The decision is final, and there are no additional appeal options



Section 11: Capitalization, Articles, Latin Terms, Numbers, and Pronouns

Capitalization

► Is it “Fiscal Year,” or “fiscal year?”

- Do not capitalize “fiscal year” if you are using the Associated Press writing style.

Example: In fiscal year 2019, USDA Rural Development obligated \$38.6 billion in loan guarantees.

- If you are not using the Associated Press writing style, capitalize the words “Fiscal Year” the first time you use the term in your document. Thereafter, you can use the abbreviation “FY,” followed by the year.

Example: The Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 discretionary budget is \$4.5 billion; a \$16 million decrease over the FY 2018 discretionary budget.

► Is it “Federal,” or “federal?”

- Capitalize the word “federal” at the start of a sentence, or when you use it in the formal name of a federal department, agency, act, program, or some other proper noun.

Examples:

- Federal Bureau of Investigation
 - Office of the Federal Register
 - Federal Water Pollution Control Act
- Capitalize the word “federal” when referring to the U.S. Federal Government in its official capacity.

Examples:

- The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Length of Service Program recognizes full- and part-time employees for their length of service with the Federal Government.
 - The three branches of the Federal Government that receive their authority from the U.S. Constitution are the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.
- Do not capitalize the word “federal” when using it as a general term.

Examples:

- Once a year, federal employees have an opportunity to choose a different health care provider.
- There are many issues we address each day that are subject to federal, state, and local laws.
- The Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN) is a community of federal government employees who promote the use of plain language.

Indefinite Articles

► Is it “a,” or “an?”

Use “a” before words beginning with a consonant sound, and “an” before words beginning with a vowel sound.



Tip: The letter **sound** – not the letter itself – determines whether you use “a” or “an.”

Table 6: Words that start with consonants, versus words that start with consonant sounds

Words that start with a consonant	Words that start with a consonant sound
“a” car	“a” one-of-a-kind antique
“a” beach	“a” unique opportunity
“a” loan applicant	“a” university
“a” vacation	“a” USDA directive
“a” historic event (AP writing style)	

Table 7: Words that start with a vowel, versus words that start with a vowel sound

Words that start with a vowel	Words that start with a vowel sound
“an” apple	“an” honorable person
“an” Emmy	“an” honor
“an” initiative	“an” MBA
“an” opportunity	“an” NGO

Latin Terms and Abbreviations

Avoid using Latin terms or abbreviations. They make your writing less clear.

Table 8: Latin terms and abbreviations, and examples of English substitutions

Latin term	English option
ad hoc	“when necessary,” or, “as needed”
bona fide	“genuine,” or “real”
e.g.	for example
et al.	and other
etc.	“and so on,” or, “and so forth”
i.e.	“in other words,” or, “that is”
via	“using,” “through,” or “by way of”

Numbers

Watch this video on AP writing style [numbers, capital letters, and quotation](#) marks, then review the information below.

Cardinal numbers denote quantity (1, 2, 3, 100, and so on). Ordinal numbers denote rank or order (first, second, third, fourth, and so on).

Rules when writing numbers or using numerical systems:

- Spell out numbers one through nine.
- Use numerical symbols for numbers 10 and higher.
- Spell out numbers at the beginning of a sentence.
- Spell out ordinal numbers when using in a sentence.
- Use numerals to reference dollar amounts (\$3.5 million), percentages (3 percent), age (13-years-old), measurements (6-feet tall), and dates (fiscal year 2021).
- Hyphenate a number if it is the first part of a compound adjective (10-minute delay).

Using Pronouns

Watch this video on [using pronouns](#), then review the information below.

Though it's likely many people will read your document, remember – you are speaking to just one reader at a time. Using pronouns such as “you” and “we” helps engage your reader, making them feel they are part of the discussion. Pronouns also can help your reader understand their role or responsibility.

Example: statement without pronouns

The hiring manager reviews the highest-qualified applications and selects applicants to interview based on agency policy. The candidate is selected and contacted to start the job offer process. At this time, a tentative job offer will be extended. After the tentative job offer is accepted, the agency will start the background investigation. Once the background investigation is successfully completed, a final job offer will be extended to the candidate, along with a start date.

Example: statement using pronouns

Based on our agency's policies, our hiring manager reviews all applications, and then interviews the highest-qualified candidates. If you are selected, we will begin the hiring process by sending you a tentative job offer. If you accept our offer, we will then begin a background investigation. Once you have successfully completed that investigation, we'll contact you with a final job offer, and then negotiate your start date.



Section 12: Using Hyphens, En Dashes, and Em Dashes

Watch this video on using [hyphens and dashes](#) in Microsoft Word, then review the information below.

The three types of dashes we routinely use in our documents are hyphens (-), en dashes (–), and em dashes (—). Each is different in length, and has a distinct use.

Hyphens

A hyphen (-) connects two words to make a single word, prefix word, compound word, unit, or value.



Tip: If a compound adjective describes – or comes before – a noun, hyphenate the compound adjective.

Example: The agency must provide up-to-date information.

Example: Our step-by-step instruction booklet will guide you through the process.

If the compound adjective does **not** describe a noun – or comes after a noun – the compound adjective is **not** hyphenated.

Example: The agency's information is up to date.

Example: I will explain the requirements to you step by step.

Table 9: A look at hyphenated words

Adverbs, Adjectives	Compound Words	Units, Fractions	Linked Prefixes
community-based	back-to-back	twenty-one	anti-intellectual
long-term	up-to-date	two-thirds	re-create
toll-free	step-by-step	three-fifths	ex-partner

En Dashes

An en dash (–) means “to,” or “through.” It connects items related to one another by distance, value, or range. An en dash can also connect compound adjectives or last names.

Table 10: Examples of en dash words

Time Period	Names	Ranges
May – September	Myers–Briggs	Pages 47 – 51
January 1 – 7, 2022	Mercedes–Benz	11 a.m. – 1 p.m.

Em Dashes

An em dash (—) can replace commas, parentheses, colons, or missing text. You can use an em dash with – or without – a space on either side. The AP writing style includes a space before and after the em dash.

Example: There are a lot of changes going on right now — mostly for the worse.

Example: When negotiations begin, be sure to listen to all sides of the issue — especially the views of our employees.

Section 13: Using Abbreviations, Acronyms, and Initialisms

Watch these videos on [abbreviations, acronyms, and initialisms](#), and on [using acronyms](#), then review the information below.

Abbreviations are shortened forms of words or phrases, such as “Dr.” for “Doctor,” “Ave.” for “Avenue,” “info” for “information,” and so on. Acronyms and initialisms are abbreviations formed by combining the first letters of each word in the title or phrase into a word or group of initials. To distinguish acronyms and initialisms, we write the abbreviations in all capital letters. Acronyms use the first letters of a person’s title, an organization’s name, or processing system to form a new, pronounceable word. Acronyms are pronounced as a single word, not as a series of letters.

Table 11: Examples of acronyms

Type	Full phrase	Acronym
title	President of the United States	POTUS
organization name	Federal Emergency Management Agency	FEMA
program name	Rural Energy for America Program	REAP
eligibility system	System for Award Management	SAM
employee program	Agricultural Learning System	AgLearn
processing system	Financial Management Modernization Initiative	FMMI
classification system	North American Industry Classification System	NAICS

Initialisms use the first letters of an organization’s name, agency directive, government form, or processing system to form an abbreviated word. We pronounce initialisms as a series of letters.

Table 12: Examples of initialisms

Category	Full Description	Initialism
agency name	Rural Development	RD
agency regulation	Departmental Regulation 4330-002	DR 4330-002
commonly used term	Automated Teller Machine	ATM
commonly used term	Frequently Asked Questions	FAQ
employee program	Individual Development Plan	IDP
government form	Standard Form 113-G	SF 113-G
organization name	Internal Revenue Service	IRS
organization name	U.S. Department of Agriculture	USDA

Here are some rules for using acronyms and initialisms in your documents:

- Don’t use acronyms or initialisms in document titles or headings.
- Fully define your acronyms and initialisms on first use.
- Don’t begin sentences with acronyms, initialisms, or abbreviations unless you have already identified the subject on first reference.
- Use only official acronyms and initialisms. Don’t make up your own.
- Don’t assume your reader is familiar with your agency’s acronyms.

Section 14: Inserting Hyperlinks

Watch these videos on [creating external hyperlinks](#) and [inserting hyperlinks](#), then review the information below.

The abbreviation “URL” stands for “Uniform Resource Locator,” and identifies the location or address of a website.

Here are some guidelines to follow when inserting URLs or email addresses into your documents:

- In Microsoft programs, simply type the address directly into the document. The Microsoft program will automatically underline and highlight the information in blue, and then link it to the webpage or email address you inserted.

Example: You can learn more about our programs at this link: [rd.usda.gov](#). You can also reach us by emailing RDInfo@usda.gov.

To hyperlink text in your document to a webpage, SharePoint site, location within your document, or file location, follow the instructions in the video tutorials provided above.

Example: You can use this list of [all USDA Rural Development programs](#) to help narrow your search.

In this example, we replaced the full, visible URL address (<https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/all-programs>) with the linked text “[all USDA Rural Development programs](#).” Using hyperlinked text** in place of long URL addresses makes your (**electronic-only; not intended for print) documents more visually appealing.

Note: If there is a chance your document might be printed – whether professionally, or by a customer using a copy machine – the URL link must be fully visible, either in the copy itself, or in an appendix. If your URL is lengthy, you can use [tinyurl.com](#) to create a uniformly shortened link.

If your document contains a web address, a linked URL address, or an email address, don’t underline any other text in your document. Assistive technology such as screen readers often cannot distinguish underlined text from a URL or email address. If you want to emphasize your text, use **bold font** instead of underlining or using italics.

Important: When you initially build a URL, you must include the https:// portion in order to ensure the link functions properly. However, once the link is established, you can remove the https:// from the visible, front-end of it, as illustrated in the column “Text with visible, shortened URLs” below.

Table 13: Spelled-out URL addresses (for printable documents) versus hyperlinked text (for electronic-only documents)

Text with visible, shortened URLs	Hyperlinked URLs
Title VII (7) of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (available at this link: tinyurl.com/CR-Title7) and USDA’s Civil Rights nondiscrimination statement (available at this link: tinyurl.com/USDA-CR-ND) prohibit employment and program discrimination based on race, color, religion, national origin, or age, among other categories. You can learn more about USDA Rural Development programs at this link: tinyurl.com/RD-AllProgs .	Title VII (7) of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Civil Rights nondiscrimination statement prohibit employment and program discrimination based on race, color, religion, national origin, or age, among other categories. You can learn more about USDA Rural Development programs on our Programs and Services webpage.

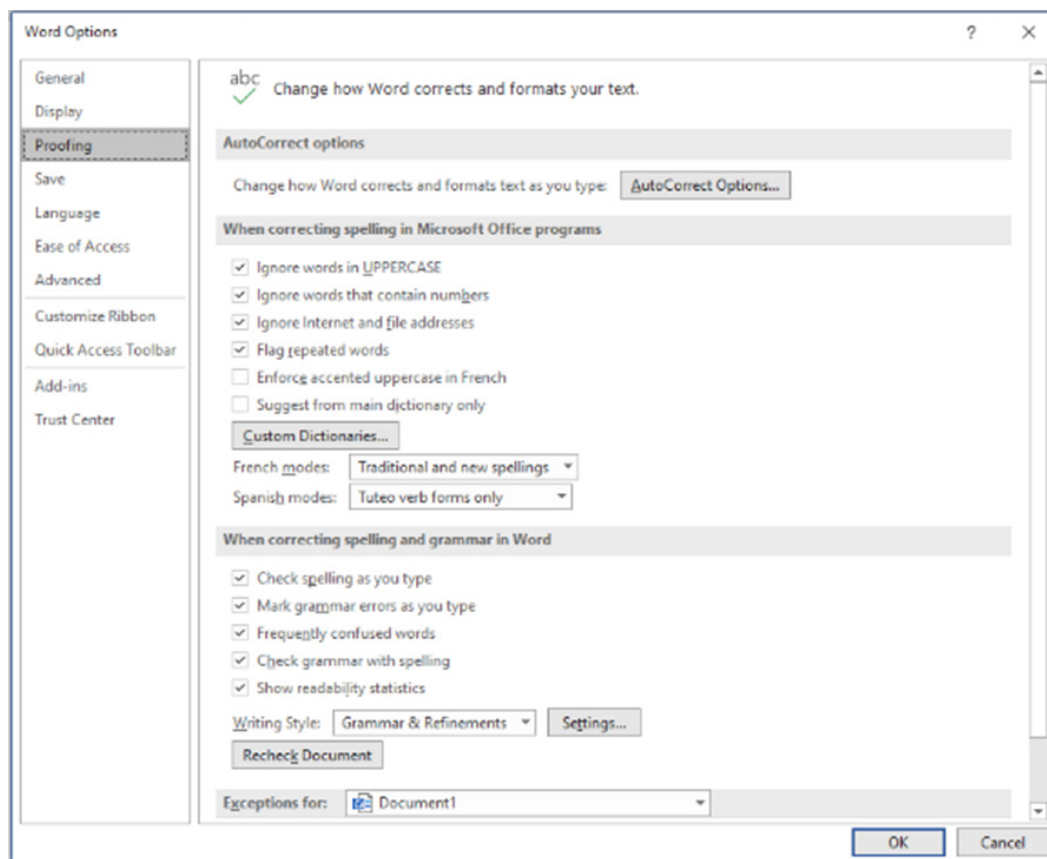
Section 15: Configuring, Proofreading, and Editing

Configuring Your Document

Watch this video on setting up your [Microsoft proofing tool](#), then follow the steps below to configure how Microsoft Word proofreads and corrects your work. Be aware that instructions will vary depending on your software version.

1. Click the “File” tab, then click the “Options” button located on the lower left side of the page.
2. In the pop-up window, select the “Proofing” option (see Figure 3, below).
3. Under the box labeled, “When correcting spelling and grammar in Word,” put a check mark in all the boxes.
4. In the box labeled “Writing Style,” select “Grammar and Refinements.”
5. Click the “Settings” box.
6. Under the “Grammar Settings” window, put a check mark in all the boxes.
7. Under the “Clarity and Conciseness” heading, put a check mark in the “Passive Voice,” “Wordiness,” and “Sentence Structure” boxes.
8. Under the “Punctuation Conventions” heading, select “inside punctuation,” and “one space between sentences.”
9. Click “OK” to save your settings, then exit the dialogue box.

Figure 3: Document proofreading configuration tool



Proofreading Your Document

Watch these videos on [proofreading](#) and [tracking changes](#) to your documents, then review the information below.

Don't rely solely on Microsoft proofing tools. You must always manually proofread your document, as well. Here are some tips to help you accomplish manual proofreading:

1. Read your document aloud, or use Microsoft's "Read Aloud" tool, (shown in Figure 4, below). Your ears will catch errors your eyes might miss.
2. Use the "Track Changes" tool (shown in Figure 5, below) to document your suggested edits. Track Changes lets you keep a record of all revisions you have made to a document, and allows the document owner to consider, choose, or reject your edits.

Figure 4: Microsoft Office spelling and grammar tools

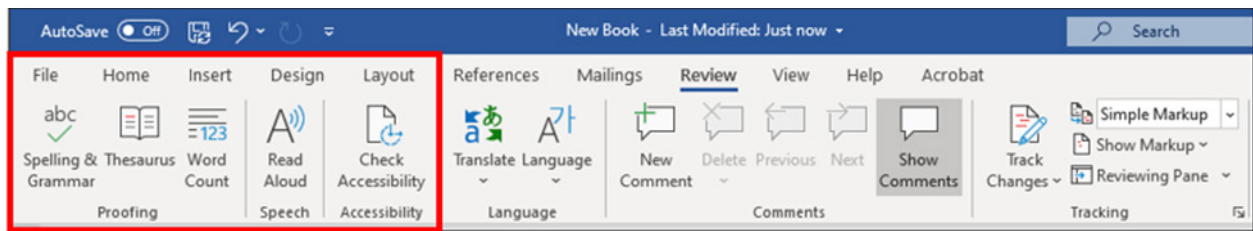
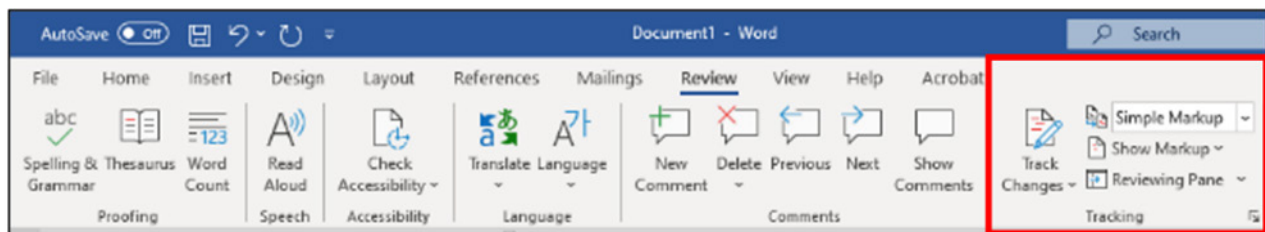
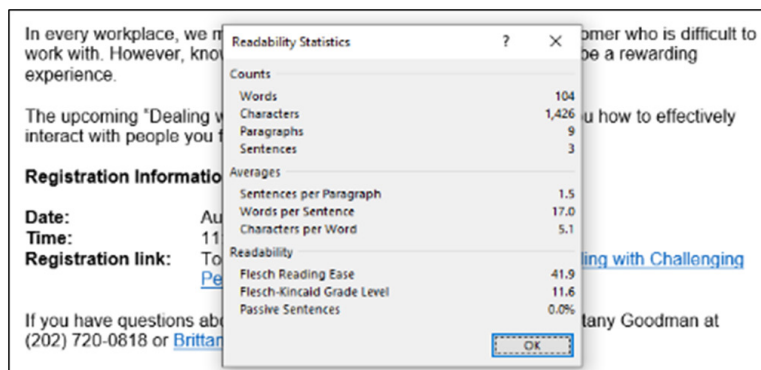


Figure 5: Microsoft Office track changes and associated tools



3. Check everything: spelling, grammar, punctuation, hyperlinks, margins, fonts, formatting, and so on.
4. To use Microsoft's "Spelling and Grammar" tool:
 - a. From the Menu Bar, click the "Review" tab.
 - b. From the Formatting Tool Bar, click the "Spelling and Grammar" button located on the left side of the ribbon.
 - c. Correct any spelling, grammar, punctuation, or usage errors that appear in the "Editor" report located on the right side of the page.
 - d. Review the information in the "Readability Statistics Pop-up Report" (shown in Figure 6, below). Ensure your "passive sentence" score is 0.0 percent. If it isn't, manually check your document for passive voice sentences and replace with active voice sentences.

Figure 6: Microsoft Office Readability Statistics Report



Editing Your Document

Editing is a crucial part of the writing process. It requires you to apply your institutional knowledge and writing skills to make your document plain language compliant and 508 accessible. All documents require editing. The best writers in the world are edited, and it's important to remember that being edited is not personal.



Some tips:

1

Check for content and clarity:

- a. Is your information clearly stated, and easy to read and understand?
- b. Does the information address your readers' needs?
- c. Is your information accurate, consistent, and supported with evidence?

2

Check structure:

- a. Is the information arranged logically and sequentially?
- b. Is the document layout and formatting consistent and helpful to your reader?
- c. Is your document plain language compliant and 508 accessible?

3

Check for spelling, grammar, and usage errors:

- a. Did you use "track changes" to document suggested revisions?
- b. Do your edits function well, without changing the intended meaning of edited sentences?
- c. In addition to using Microsoft proofing tools, did you also run a manual check?
- d. Did you work with the document author to resolve any questions you have regarding the document?

Your responsibilities as a document reviewer and editor are to help the document author successfully communicate information. Here are some things to keep in mind when reviewing someone else's work:

- Always use "track changes" – or, if you're working in Adobe PDF, the "comments" tool function – to document your suggested revisions.
- Work with the document owner to address any questions you have about content or the way it's presented.
- When editing someone else's document, be sensitive to the hard work and effort they put into it. Stay professional.
- Resist the urge to rewrite solely because of a difference in writing style between the author and you, as the reviewer. If the information is presented accurately and clearly, and is in the general framework expected by the Office of External Affairs, correct material inaccuracies only.
- Do not take credit for someone else's work.

Section 16: Making Your Microsoft Office Documents Accessible

What is Section 508?

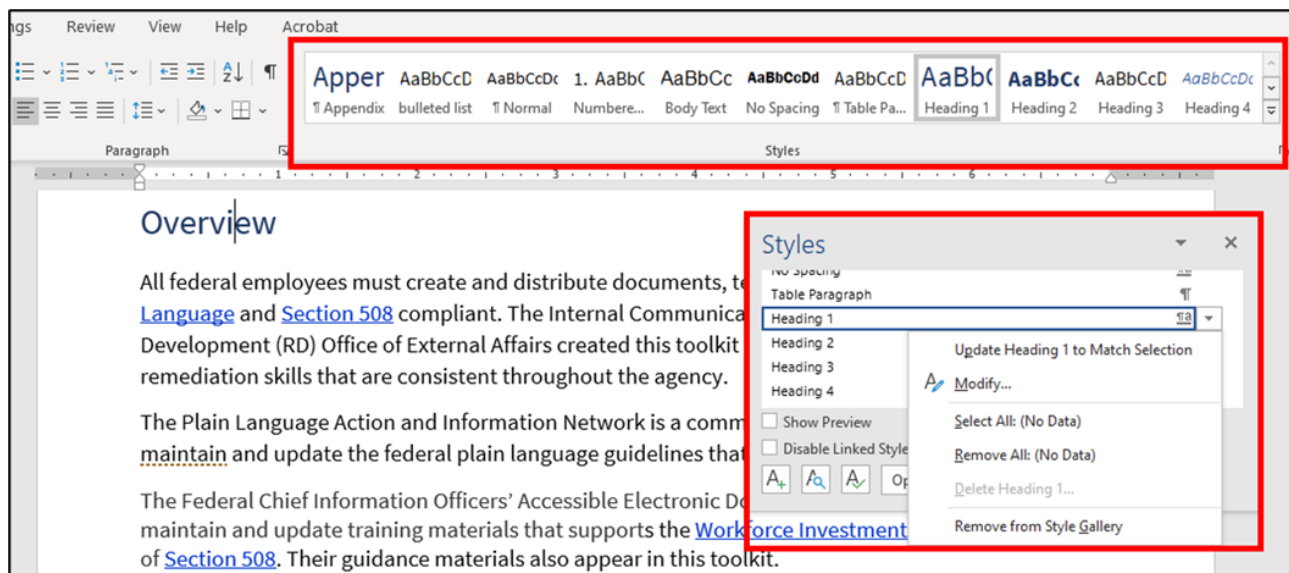
As part of the Rehabilitation Act, Section 508 (available at this link: tinyurl.com/PL-105-220-Sec508 - PDF) requires federal employees and agencies to make their electronic, internal and external documents, website content, and email messages accessible to people who use assistive technology (AT) such as screen readers, magnifiers, and listening devices, among others. You can learn more about how USDA approaches assistive technology by visiting the Technology and Accessible Resources Give Employment Today (TARGET) Center webpage at this link: tinyurl.com/USDA-TARGET.

Document Format and Layout

Watch these videos on how to create [customized headings](#) and [adjusting line spacing](#) in Microsoft Word, then review the information below.

Use the Microsoft “Styles” tool (shown in Figure 7, below) to set parameters for your titles, headings, fonts, spacing formatting, and layout.

Figure 7: Microsoft Styles Tool

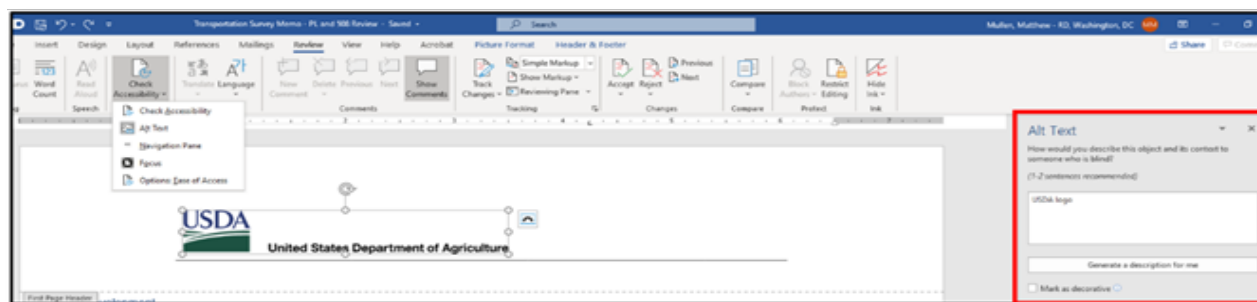


Adding Alternative Text to Images, Charts, Diagrams, and Tables

Watch this video on [adding alternative \(alt\) text to images and tables](#), then review the information below.

You must use Microsoft's Alternative Text (Alt Text) tool (shown in Figure 8, below) to describe images, tables, and so on, to your readers. This allows people who rely on assistive technology to identify all items in your document.

Figure 8: Alt Text Box



Here's how to add Alt Text to your images, charts, tables, and other material:

1. Right click the image and select "Edit Alt Text" from the menu.
2. Type a description into the text box that appears on the right side of the page.
3. Describe the image as you would if describing it to a friend over the phone.
4. Use "Mark as Decorative" for nonfunctioning images such as lines or borders.
5. Do not use "Mark as Decorative" if the image has a function, such as an arrow.

Tables

Here are some 508 accessibility requirements for using tables in your documents:

- Make sure your table is structured with both rows and columns.
- Make sure your table reading order goes from left to right, and from top to bottom.
- Do not use merged cells in your table.
- Be certain all cells in your table contain data.
- Use the "Table Properties" tool to designate the first row of your table as the "Header Row."
- Use the "Table Properties" tool to add Alt Text to your table.
- Insert a caption above your table.



Using the “Check Accessibility” Tool

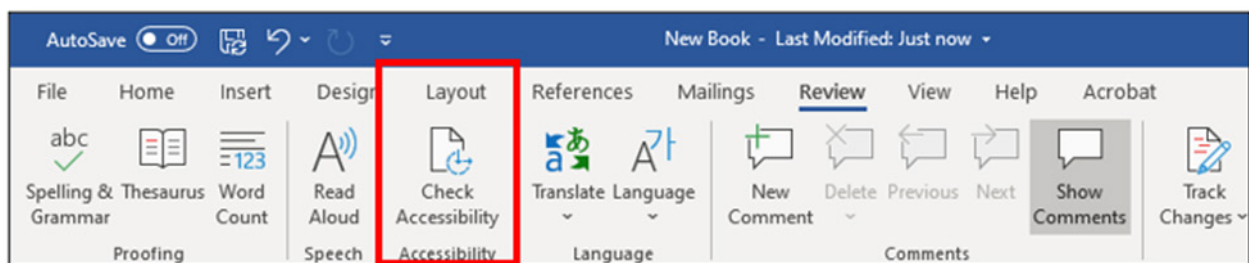
Watch these videos on [creating accessible Microsoft Word documents](#) and on how to use the [Microsoft Check Accessibility tool](#), then review the information below.

Located under the “Review” tab in Microsoft Word, the “Check Accessibility” tool will help you identify any accessibility errors in your document. Note: The checker will not catch errors such as underlined text not associated with a hyperlink, text written in all capital letters, or inaccurate Alt Text that Microsoft automatically applies to an image in your document. You must manually check and correct such issues.

To run the Check Accessibility tool (shown in Figure 9, below):

1. From the Menu Bar, click the Review tab.
2. From the Formatting Tool Bar, click the “Check Accessibility” button. An accessibility report will appear, along with a list of items you must correct.
3. Click on each item in the list and complete the recommended corrections.

Figure 9: Check Accessibility Tool



Checking Color Contrast and Accessibility

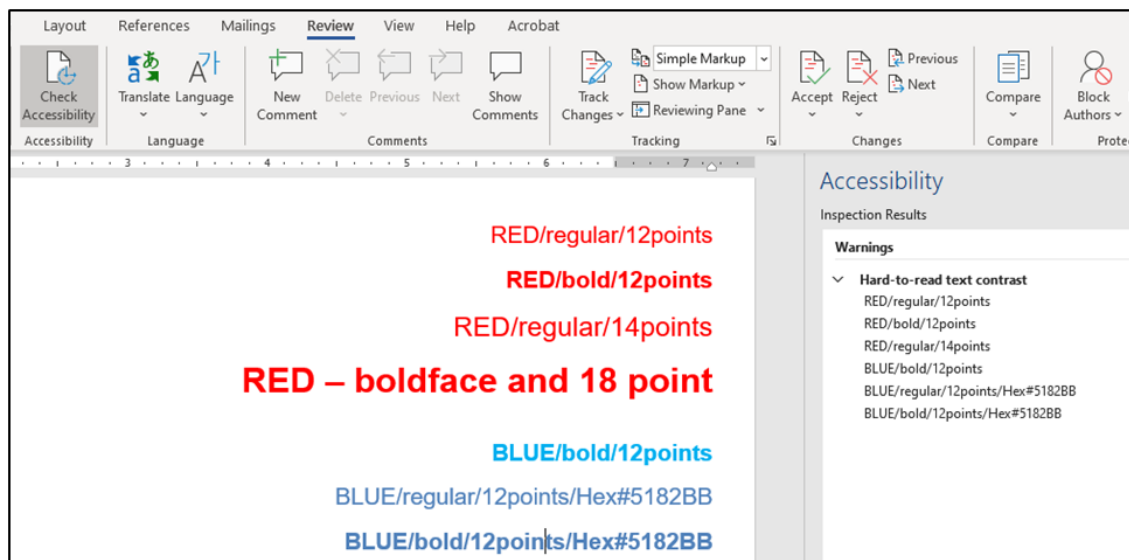
Watch these videos on using the [Microsoft Color Redundancy tool](#), on checking your [Adobe PDF document's color contrast](#), and on how to [manually check color contrast in Adobe PDF](#), then review the information below.

People who are color blind have difficulty identifying reds, greens, yellows, and blues. This impacts an estimated 5 – 10 percent of the U.S. population. You must take color and contrast into consideration when creating documents that contain colored text, images, tables, or diagrams. Your documents must also be accessible to those who use assistive technology.

WebAIM [web content accessibility guidelines](#) (WCAG2) define “luminance” or “brightness” as the color contrast ratio accessibility standard you must build into your documents.

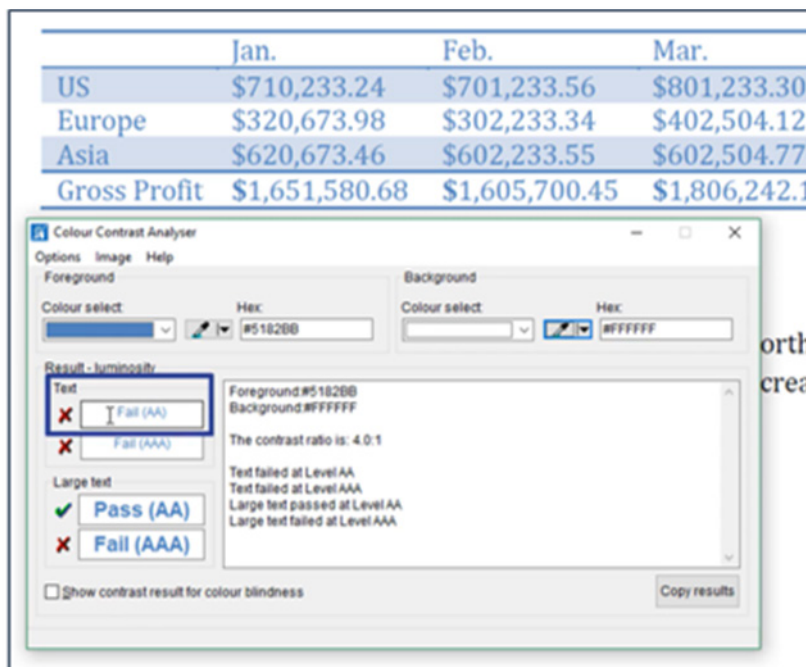
The Microsoft Accessibility Checker Tool (shown in Figure 10, below) will identify most color contrast issues and label them as “Hard to Read Text Contrast.” If you receive this warning, you must change the text color to black, or increase the font size of your text to 14 or more points.

Figure 10: Microsoft Accessibility Check for “Hard-to-Read” Text Contrast



A color contrast analyzer tool (such as the one shown in Figure 11, below) or TPGI's version (available at this link: tpgi.com/color-contrast-checker/) can check the contrast of your document. This is the most reliable way to ensure your document is accessible to readers with visual impairments.

Figure 11: Color Contrast Analyzer



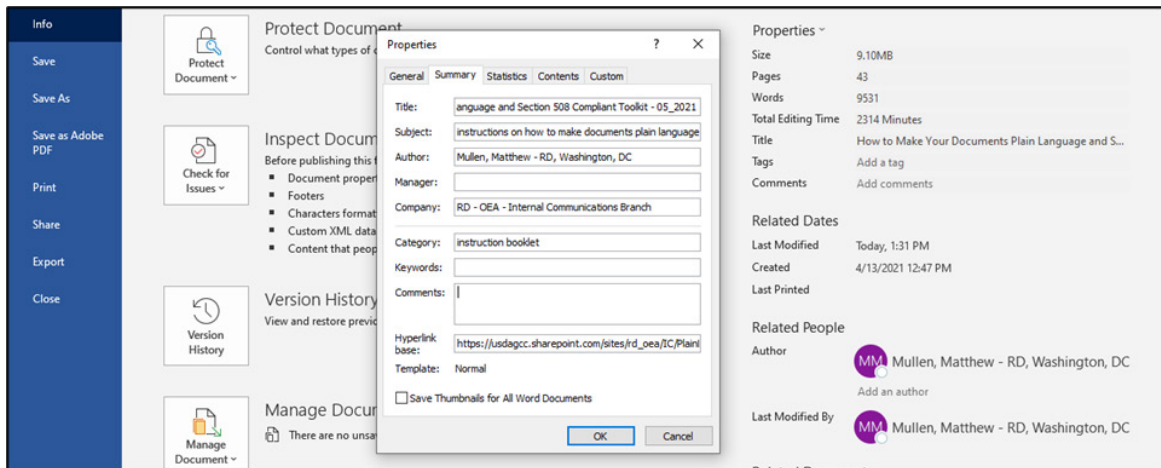
- For reference, the foreground color of text and images smaller than 14 points and bold must have a color contrast ratio of 4.5 to 1 when compared with the background (page) color.
- The foreground color of text that is 14 points or larger and bold, or 18 points or larger, and regular, must have a color contrast ratio of 3 to 1 when compared with the background (page) color.

Saving Your Document

Now that you've reviewed your document for plain language and Section 508 accessibility compliance, it's time to save it. Follow these steps:

1. Click the "File" tab, select "Save As," then give your document a concise title that clearly conveys its purpose.
2. Click the "Info" tab, then click the "Properties" button, then click the "Advanced Properties" button. A fillable pop-up window (such as the one in Figure 12, below), will appear.
3. Complete the information in the pop-up window. Be certain the words in the title section match the name of your document.
4. Click "OK" to close the window, then save and close your document.

Figure 12: Advanced Properties Pop-up Window



Additional Tools and Tips

- Use the Microsoft Word "Table of Contents" tool to create your table of contents.
- Use the "Styles" tools to standardize your titles, headings, and other document elements.
- Use the "Page Number" tool to create page numbers. Don't manually insert them.
- Don't use white or empty bullet points in your documents. Assistive technology such as screen readers can interpret this as the letter "o" or numeral "0."
- Do not use Wingdings in your document. For instance, these symbols are not 508 compliant: ☐ ☑ ☒ ☓
- Do not use all capital letters throughout your entire document. This can be interpreted by screen readers as someone shouting.
- Do not use color to emphasize information of importance. Red font, in particular, must not be used.



To learn more about creating accessible digital products, visit the Government Service Agency's (GSA) Section 508 webpage: section508.gov/create/.

Section 17: Making Excel and PowerPoint Documents Accessible

Watch these videos on creating accessible [PowerPoint](#) and [Excel](#) documents, then review the information below.



Follow these steps to use the Microsoft Check Accessibility tool:

1. From the Menu Bar, click the “Review” tab.
2. From the Formatting Tool Bar, click the “Check Accessibility” button. An accessibility report will appear on the right side of the page, along with a list of any items you must correct.
3. Click on each item, and make the necessary correction.

Section 18: Making Your Email Messages Accessible

Watch this video on [creating accessible emails](#), then review the information below.

To check your Microsoft Outlook email messages for Section 508 compliance:

1. Click the “Review” tab
2. Click the “Check Accessibility” tab. An “accessibility report” will appear.
3. If you inserted images into your email, and you get an error message that reads, “Missing Alternative Text,” right click on the image and add Alt Text.
4. If you used text in any color other than black, and you get an error message that reads “Hard to Read Text Content,” change the color to black or increase your text font size to 14 or more points.

Note: Microsoft, Excel, PowerPoint, and Outlook use many of the same document accessibility tools listed in Section 16.



Section 19: Making Microsoft Publisher Documents Accessible

Watch this video on [making accessible Microsoft Publisher documents](#), then review the information below.

Unlike other Microsoft Office applications, Publisher doesn't offer a "check accessibility" tool. You must manually check your document. Here's how:

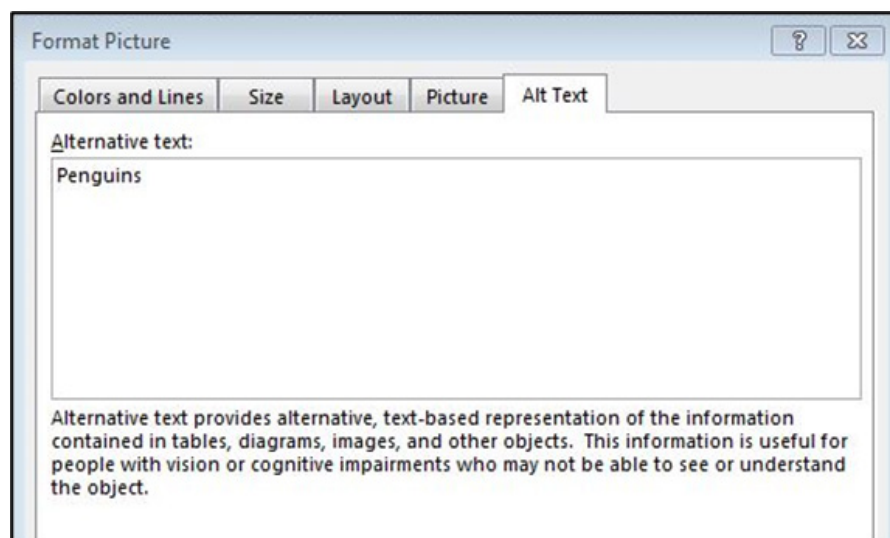
1. Review your document for plain language compliance. Include spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
2. Make sure your document doesn't include both hyperlinks **and** underlined text. This can create confusion for screen readers.
3. Add Alt Text to all images, tables, graphs, and charts.
4. Fill out the document information under the "Publication Properties" section.
5. Be sure to save your document.

Adding Alternative Text to Images in Publisher

Reminder: When describing an image, table, graph, or chart, use the same words you would use to describe the item while speaking to a friend over the phone.

1. Right click the image.
2. From the drop-down menu, select "Format Picture."
3. Select the "Alt Text" tab (shown in Figure 13, below) and in the "Alternative Text" dialogue box, enter your descriptive text.
4. Select "OK."

Figure 13: Alt Text Dialogue Box





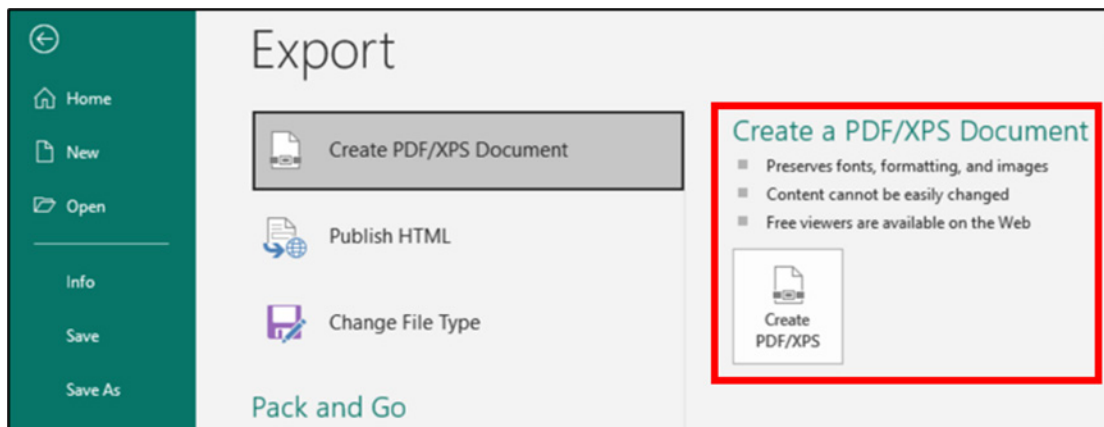
Section 20: Converting Your Documents to Adobe Acrobat

An Adobe Acrobat Portable Document Format (PDF) displays the text, links, and images of your source document in a compact format. In general, PDFs are about 15 percent smaller than the original document. This makes them easier to upload to a website or send by email. A PDF is primarily meant for viewing, not editing. It can be password protected, and maintains all the visual content of the source document.

Converting Word, Excel, and PowerPoint Documents to PDF

1. From the Menu Bar, click the “Acrobat” tab.
2. From the Formatting Tool Bar (shown in Figure 14, below), click the “Create PDF” button.

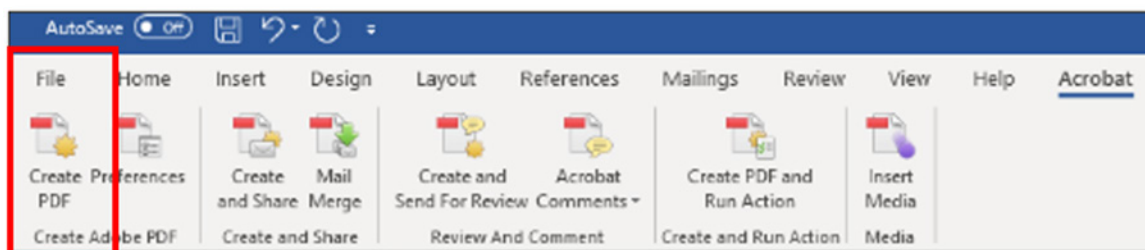
Figure 14: Microsoft Office’s “Create PDF” Button



Note: The current version of Publisher does not include a “Create PDF” tool. Here are the steps you must take:

1. Click “File,” then click “Export.”
2. Click “Create PDF/XPS” (shown in Figure 15, below).
3. In the “Publish as PDF or XPS” pop-up window, select “PDF.”
4. Click “Options” to choose the best publishing option (online viewing versus print publication).
 - a. Choose “Standard” if you plan to distribute only by email.
 - b. Choose “High Quality” or “Commercial” for high-quality printing.
5. Click “OK.”

Figure 15: Microsoft Publisher’s “Create PDF” button



Section 21: Making Your Acrobat Document 508 Compliant

Watch these videos on using the [Acrobat Accessibility Checker](#) and the [Adobe Acrobat Pro Make Accessible Wizard](#), then review the information below.

Note: Once you convert a Microsoft Office document to PDF, you must also ensure your PDF is Section 508 compliant.

Performing an Accessibility Check on Your PDF Document

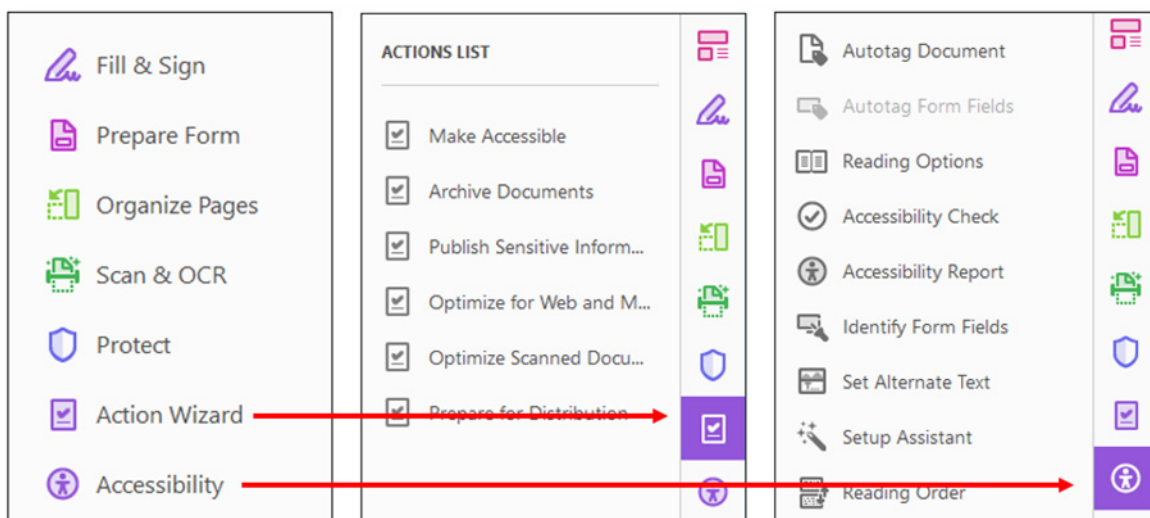
To review your PDF using the Accessibility Checker tool:

1. Click on "All Tools" and then click the "Accessibility" icon (shown in Figure 16, below).
2. Click "Accessibility Check" and follow the instructions in the pop-up window.
3. Correct all errors that appear in the report.
4. Save your document.

To perform an accessibility check using the Action Wizard tool:

1. Click the "Action Wizard" icon (shown in Figure 16, below).
2. Click "Make Accessible."
3. Click the blue "Start" button, then follow the instructions in all pop-up windows.
4. Correct all errors that appear in the report.
5. Save your document.

Figure 16: Adobe Accessibility Checker and Action Wizard Icons





Adobe Acrobat Video Tutorials

The videos below will show you how to fix certain PDF accessibility issues you might encounter during your accessibility review.

Table 14: Adobe Acrobat Accessibility Tutorial Video Links

Video Number	Topic addressed
1	Acrobat DC video tutorials – landing page
2	GSA Section 508 tutorials – all digital content types
3	GSA Section 508 video tutorial – PDFs
4	Field description failed – video
5	Heading issues – video
6	List failed – video
7	How to manually check the logical reading order – video
8	How to manually check color contrast – version 1 – video
9	How to manually check color contrast – version 2 – video
10	Tagged annotations failed – video
11	Tagged content failed – video
12	Nested alternate text failed – video
13	Table headers failed – video
14	Table regularity failed – video
15	Tagged form fields failed – video

Contacts

Federal Plain Language and Section 508 Accessibility Compliance

Email rd.multimedia@usda.gov

Plain Language Resources

Tutorials

- AgLearn: Writing in Plain Language: go.usa.gov/xzXY9 (This course requires USDA access.)
- Abbreviations, Acronyms, and Initialisms:
 - youtube.com/watch?v=etFtJNNAnqY – video
 - youtube.com/watch?v=lwHr4Bico2M&list=PLADE80C67FDB39352&index=7 – video
- Active Voice: youtube.com/watch?v=Fs78WBOgxs0 – video
- Common Words and Phrases (1 of 2): youtube.com/watch?v=bAvW1A7UiYM
- Common Words and Phrases (2 of 2): youtube.com/watch?v=mNqYUPISm1c
- Create Accessible Digital Products (GSA): section508.gov/create/
- Creating Tables: youtube.com/watch?v=7JNVaEMgHbw
- Hidden Verbs: youtube.com/watch?v=a5i631kSISw
- Hyphens, En- and Em Dashes: youtube.com/watch?v=ZfPxumi-FsU
- Parallel Structure: youtube.com/watch?v=qvDNvS2M3QA
- Pronouns, using: youtube.com/watch?v=N8G95W8Bwhc
- Proofreading: youtube.com/watch?v=OkxsVtOviE0&list=PLADE80C67FDB39352&index=5
- Track Changes, using: youtube.com/watch?v=m-K0FIZPwCM
- Word Count | Microsoft Word: youtube.com/watch?v=pqMufg176ts
- Styles, using | Microsoft Word: youtube.com/watch?v=UOVU6qQ2iOM
- Writing succinctly: youtube.com/watch?v=mBtMgnnJ948

Plain Language Style Guides

- Plain Language Network | Federal Plain Language Guidelines
 - go.usa.gov/xzX4C (PDF)
- National Archives | Document Drafting Handbook (regulatory focus)
 - go.usa.gov/xzX44 (PDF)
- GPO Style Manual | (formal and regulatory focus)
 - go.usa.gov/xzX4E (PDF)

Section 508 Resources

Adobe Acrobat:

- Accessible PDFs, creating: section508.gov/create/pdfs/
- Action Wizard Tool 2: youtube.com/watch?v=dE0TdgovqBE
- Acrobat tutorials landing page: adobe.com/acrobat/tutorials.html
- Appropriate Nesting | failed: youtube.com/watch?v=kIMuMiRWPJU
- Color Contrast | manual check: youtube.com/watch?v=88mSJPntD50
- Field Description | failed: youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=IPCwPx1iAE
- Logical Reading Order | manual check: youtube.com/watch?v=-PIS7kiCNO0
- Nested Alternate Text | failed: youtube.com/watch?v=OdZZm93wS5Y
- Table Header | failed: youtube.com/watch?v=X23NKhBzVgs
- Table Regularity | failed: youtube.com/watch?v=y6mycfi-3lQ
- Tagged Annotations | failed: youtube.com/watch?v=yPRKMdw5oe0
- Tagged Form Fields | failed: youtube.com/watch?v=YpnWef7fzv0
- WebAIM | Contrast and Color Accessibility: webaim.org/articles/contrast/

Microsoft Office:

- Accessible Fonts, Font Sizes, and Line Spacing:
 - youtube.com/watch?v=AayVlfVRiyg
- Alt Text, Adding to Images and Tables:
 - youtube.com/watch?v=V2ojLTX5cNw
- Excel Spreadsheets, Creating Accessible: go.usa.gov/xzXT2
- PowerPoint Slides, Creating Accessible:
 - youtube.com/watch?v=G2BZt-xmP4A
- Publisher Documents, Creating Accessible:
 - youtube.com/watch?v=a_sfv-diwQE
- U.S. General Services Administration | Electronic Document Accessibility Test
 - section508.gov/test/documents/
- Word Documents, Creating Accessible:
 - youtube.com/watch?v=ZPSaqd-TWMU

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3. Fax: (202) 690-7442