Eleven top tips for accessible communications

1. Make sure information and text are clear and easy to read and understand

Write in plain English and use short, succinct sentences. There is guidance on writing information for websites on [GOV.UK Content Design Guidelines](#), which can also help when producing documents.

You need to need to make sure that text is easy to read, it is recommended you:

- use Arial font, size 12;
- don't underline words, use *italics* or write in CAPITALS;
- don't use complicated words or figures of speech;
- use 'paste special' and 'unformatted' when copying text from other sources.

2. Make sure hyperlinks are clear

When you hyperlink to something, make sure the group of words in the link accurately describe the destination and make sense as a standalone phrase.

People who use screen readers have the facility to access a list of all the links in a document and use these to navigate to something else.

An example of a good link would be, 'You can [follow GDS on Twitter](#) for updates'.

Whereas '[Click here](#) to follow GDS on Twitter' is not helpful because the link does not describe where they are going to when pressing click.

3. Check that the layout is easy to follow

Avoid large blocks of text, because this can be hard to follow. Use left-aligned text with a short line width and don't justify text, because it can be more difficult to read extra space between words.

Returns – Repeated use of the 'return' key to create white space is not recommended. If somebody was using a screen reader, such as JAWS, the returns would be read to them as 'click' 'click' 'click'; or 'space' 'space' 'space'; or 'blank' blank' 'blank', depending on the software settings. If you need to create space in the document, you can insert a section or page break, or use paragraph spacing, to be more accessible.

Bullets - Always ensure you use the bulleted list option within Word and use the standard bullets. Ideally you should not go below two levels of bullets. Colleagues using screen readers may miss important information if there is a large amount of white space from the edge of the page to the beginning of the text. Therefore, you need to ensure that:

- bullets are aligned throughout the document;
- the spacing of the bullets and text is indented to the following spacings:
  - Level 1 – bullet/number aligned at 0cm; text indented to 0.5cm;
  - Level 2 – bullet/number aligned at 0.5cm; text indented to 1cm;
  - Level 3 – bullet/number aligned at 1cm; text indented to 1.5cm.

Text boxes - These cannot be read properly by screen reader software and if you use them in your document it may result in a user missing the information being conveyed.

In an ideal world we would probably not use text boxes. However, sometimes it is the best way to get the information across. Instead of using a text box you can use a table that just has one cell.

To do this you would insert a table as normal, but in that you only want one column and one row.

4. Use the right headings and style

When writing in Microsoft Word it's important to use styles to help structure your product, instead of bold or underlined text. This enables screen reader users to navigate a document in the right order. For example, you should only use the style Title once and make sure the headings are used in the right way, in the right order. There are styles called Heading 1, Heading 2 and Heading 3, which will help to provide structure.

5. Describe images

If you're using images, make sure you provide alternative text that describes the image. You can right-click on an image, then select Alt Text to add a description that helps people who can't see the screen or document understand what's important in the image or visuals.

If you're using a graph, make sure this information is provided as written content too. And if you're using a photograph or other image to demonstrate or reinforce a point, then make sure you use alternative text to describe this image.

6. Ensure tables make sense

You need to ensure that a table follows a logical layout. Having clear column headings can provide context and assist navigation of the table's contents.

Your table should not go over more than one page, not contain split/merged cells, nested tables, or completely blank rows or columns.

Screen readers usually read tables from top to bottom in column order. If there is a merged cell this could affect how the information is conveyed.

7. Consider your use of colours

Colours can make text images and text easier to understand but, if you use a poor choice of colour contrast, this can make the text difficult to read. You can find out which colours are accessible by using the [Web Aim Contrast Checker](#).

It is also important to remember that some people can't distinguish colours, so don't rely on colour to communicate information.

8. Provide captions and transcript for video

If you are using video content you need to provide captions that accurately reflect the content.

If you upload video content from YouTube it automatically provides captions. You will need to check that these are accurate and, if not, manually update them afterwards.

How to use the YouTube captions editor:

- go to your Video Manager;
- next to the video you want to **edit captions** for, click **Edit** > **Subtitles** and CC;
- click on the caption track you want to **edit**;
- select a specific line in the caption track panel: on your keyboard, press the up or down arrow to adjust timing;
- click **Save changes**.

You should provide a full written transcript of the video content. As well as being useful for screen reader users, this also means that people can access the content if the video does not load, due to a slow internet connection or firewall issues, for example.

9. Be careful when using PDF

PDF documents can be difficult to customise and, therefore, make accessible. An easy way of making PDF documents accessible is to start with a Microsoft Word document and then save as a PDF.

Government Digital Service have developed the following guidance on [how to make PDFs more accessible](#).

10. Use an accessibility checker or seek guidance

Some software packages such as Microsoft Office have built-in accessibility checkers that you can use to check accessibility?

To access these in Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, select **File> Check for issues> Check Accessibility**.

 For PDFs, you can use the Acrobat accessibility checker.

11. Tap into customer insight

It is also good practice to test documents for accessibility with disabled users in the live environment before publishing.

There's nothing better than actually watching people in action. Observing user research and seeing people accessing or trying to access content will give you a real understanding of the sort of accessibility issues experienced by users.

There are more than 700 people in the Cross-Government Accessibility Community. The community shares advice, best practice and ways of working.

If you have a question about accessibility or accessible content you can join the [accessibility community](#) and ask them.