Preparing accessible Word files

An accessible PDF is only as good as the Word file behind it. Six habits in Word decide most of the result.

Build it with structure

Headings	Use Heading 1, 2 and 3 from the Styles gallery, in order, without skipping a level. **Not:** bold or larger text that only looks like a heading.
Lists	Use the bullet and numbering buttons, so a list is recognised as a list. **Not:** typed hyphens, numbers or tabs.
Tables	Real tables with one header row, set to repeat at the top of each page. **Avoid:** merged cells, empty rows for spacing, tables for layout.
Images	Alt text for every image that carries meaning, decorative ones marked as decorative. Place images in line with text. **Not:** floating images or text boxes. They break the reading order.
Links	Link text that says where the link goes. **Not:** “click here” or a long bare address.
Spacing	Space before and after paragraphs set in the styles. Insert, Page Break for a new page. **Not:** empty paragraphs, repeated spaces or tabs.

Three more details

Footnotes	References, Insert Footnote. Not typed superscript numbers and notes.
Columns	Layout, Columns. Not text boxes placed side by side.
Page numbers	In the header or footer, where they belong. Not typed into the body text.

Before you send it

Set the title	File, Info, Properties, Title. A screen reader announces it.
Mark other languages	Select text in another language, then Review, Language. It is then read with the right voice.
Not colour alone	Where colour carries meaning, add a word or a label as well.
Run the checker	Review, Check Accessibility. It finds many problems, though not all of them.
Send the Word file	The DOCX itself, not a PDF export, plus the data or one sentence for each chart.

What remediation adds	Every exported PDF still needs tags, reading order and a screen reader check. A clean source makes that faster.

Fix the template once

Set up the styles of your Word template once. Every future document then starts with the right structure.

Unsure about your template?

Send a sample file for a free first look.

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