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Georgia Tech Research on
Accessible Distance Education

Factsheet
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Creating an Accessible Word Document

Microsoft Word is one of the most widely used word processing programs for both home and office use. In distance education, Microsoft Word documents are commonly used to transmit information to students. Faculty members at institutions of higher learning routinely use Microsoft Word to manipulate digital text, but Word documents can also be used to deliver images, movies, charts, graphs, and other information.

Because Word is part of the powerful Microsoft Office group of programs, faculty members often use it to structure other types of documents, such as HTML web pages, PowerPoint presentations and Adobe Acrobat files. However, when instructors use Word to create documents, they should be aware of the common accessibility problems that students with disabilities may encounter in reading those documents.

Educators that use the accessibility features within Word can create course materials usable to the greatest number of students without the need to revisit and retrofit for specific student disabilities afterwards.

Potential Accessibility Issues and Solutions

The most common accessibility issues encountered within a Word document involve poor text formatting, badly defined lists, tables and embedded images. Avoiding these potential problems will result in more flexible documents for people with certain disabilities, such as a visually impaired student using a screen-reader.

Why Organization is Important: Most users can visually scan a page to get an idea of the content and organization. Users who are blind or have a visual impairment may use voice-output screen readers that scan the page looking for section headings. The screen reader builds an outline of the page that can be transmitted to the user.

- **Content Headings.** Instructors can create headings in documents using any type of font, sizing and color options desired. However, a document with unorganized formatting can be a jumble of mismatched styles and headings. Using the "Style" tool in Microsoft Word to format headings results in more readable and accessible, documents.

  How to Correctly Format: Microsoft Word features a drop-down formatting palette containing a list of pre-defined heading levels. To implement a style, select the text that should be used for a heading and choose the appropriate heading level from the formatting palette. Changing the style of a heading level changes all headings assigned to that style level automatically.

- **Lists and Tables.** These common formatting elements require certain oversight to guarantee usability. Documents containing poorly formatted lists and tables may pose reading-order and display problems for users with screen-readers.

  How to Correctly Format: For lists, select the appropriate button on the toolbar, or choose "Bullets and Numbering" from the Format menu. Decide whether a numbered or bulleted list will best list the information, and select the appropriate option.

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Creating an Accessible Word Document - *continued*

Tables must be relatively sized to fit dynamically onto computer screens with low resolution or screen magnification. To do this, select the table and right-click to choose "Table Properties." Inside the Properties window, select the "Columns" tab and choose "percent" from the drop-down box for units.

Embedded Images. Although many Word documents are text-only, users can add and manipulate images within documents. Users who are blind or have low vision may have difficulty understanding these images, unless alternative or "alt" text is added for screen-reader recognition.

How to Correctly Format: Select the image, and choose "Picture…" from the Format menu. From inside the Picture window, select the "Web" tab and enter the alternative text into the box. When deciding what is sufficient for "alt" text, keep in mind that the content should be brief but thorough. It is not necessary to begin your "alt" text with "Image of ..." or "Picture of ..." because screen readers preface the "alt" text with "Image:" and browsers with images turned off display an image placeholder next to the text.

Additional Resources

For more information on Word document accessibility, visit **www.accesselearning.net** for a comprehensive list of accessibility considerations. Additionally, the following links may be helpful:

W3C WAI specification
http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10-HTML-TECHS/#document-headers

Microsoft Office HTML Filter
http://office.microsoft.com/downloads/2000/Msohtmf2.aspx

WebAim "Microsoft Word Accessibility Techniques" tutorial
http://www.webaim.org/techniques/word/

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