



PDF Accessibility

Pre-Export Checklists

This guide provides step-by-step accessibility checklists for the most common applications used to create documents that will be exported or saved as PDFs. Completing these checks before export prevents the most frequent PDF accessibility errors and reduces the need for after-the-fact remediation.

Checklists provided for:

- Microsoft Word
- Microsoft PowerPoint
- Microsoft Excel
- Adobe InDesign
- Canva
- Adobe Acrobat Pro (post-export remediation)



These checklists do not replace a full accessibility audit. Use Pope Tech or Grackle Docs to scan exported PDFs and verify that issues have been resolved.



The single highest-impact habit: fill in the document Title field before you do anything else. Missing titles account for the majority of PDF accessibility errors across all applications.

Microsoft Word

Word has strong built-in accessibility support, but it must be intentionally used. Documents built with manual formatting (bold text sized up to look like a heading, for example) instead of proper styles will not export accessible PDFs.

✓	Checklist Item	Notes / Where to Find It
Document Properties		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Set the document Title	<i>File → Info → Properties (right panel) → Title</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Set the document Language	<i>Review → Language → Set Proofing Language</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Verify the Author field is appropriate for public release	<i>File → Info → Properties</i>
Structure and Headings		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Use built-in Heading styles (Heading 1, Heading 2, etc.) — not manual bold/size	<i>Home → Styles panel</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Heading hierarchy is logical (H1 → H2 → H3, no skipped levels)	<i>View → Navigation Pane to review structure</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Document has exactly one Heading 1 (the document title)	<i>Navigation Pane</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Lists use Word's built-in list formatting, not manual hyphens or typed bullets	<i>Home → Paragraph → List buttons</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Table of contents (if present) uses Word's built-in TOC tool	<i>References → Table of Contents</i>
Images and Visual Elements		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Every meaningful image has alt text written	<i>Right-click image → Edit Alt Text</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Decorative images are marked as decorative	<i>Right-click image → Edit Alt Text → check "Mark as decorative"</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Alt text describes content and function, not appearance ("Chart showing Q3 growth" not "bar chart")	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Images are not inside text boxes (text boxes are not exported accessibly)	<i>Move images inline with text</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Text is not placed inside images (logos with text need alt text)	
Tables		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Tables are used for data, not for layout/formatting	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Tables have a designated header row	<i>Click in table → Table Design → check Header Row</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Header row is marked to repeat across pages	<i>Table Properties → Row → Repeat as header row</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	No merged or split cells (these confuse screen readers)	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Tables have a descriptive caption or title	<i>References → Insert Caption, or use a heading above the table</i>
Color and Contrast		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Color is not the only way information is conveyed (e.g., "items in red are required")	

<input type="checkbox"/>	Text color meets minimum contrast against background (4.5:1 for normal text)	<i>Use WebAIM Contrast Checker at webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Hyperlinks are distinguishable by more than color alone (underline, bold, or other indicator)	
Links		
<input type="checkbox"/>	All hyperlinks have meaningful anchor text ("Read the 2024 report" not "click here" or a raw URL)	
<input type="checkbox"/>	URLs that must appear as text are shortened or accompanied by descriptive text	
Export Settings		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Export via File → Save As → PDF, NOT via Print → Save as PDF	<i>"Save as PDF" preserves tags; "Print to PDF" destroys them</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	"Document structure tags for accessibility" option is checked in export dialog	<i>File → Save As → PDF → Options → check this box</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	"Document properties" option is checked (carries Title/Language metadata)	<i>Same Options dialog</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Run the built-in Accessibility Checker before export	<i>Review → Check Accessibility</i>

Microsoft PowerPoint

PowerPoint exports are among the most commonly inaccessible PDFs because the visual, freeform nature of slide design makes proper structure easy to skip. The Reading Order pane is the most important tool to know.

✓	Checklist Item	Notes / Where to Find It
Document Properties		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Set the Presentation Title	<i>File → Info → Properties → Title</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Set the Language	<i>Review → Language → Set Proofing Language (apply to all slides)</i>
Slide Structure		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Every slide uses a Layout from the Slide Layout panel (not a blank slide with text boxes)	<i>Home → Layout dropdown</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Every slide has a unique, descriptive title	<i>Click the title placeholder on each slide</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Slides that intentionally have no visible title use a hidden title placeholder	<i>Insert → Text Box, size to 1px, add title, drag off-slide — or use Slide Master</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Slide order is logical and follows the intended reading sequence	<i>View → Slide Sorter</i>
Reading Order		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Reading order for each slide has been verified using the Reading Order pane	<i>Home → Arrange → Selection Pane (reading order is bottom-to-top in this panel)</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Text boxes, images, and shapes are ordered so screen readers read them in the intended sequence	<i>Drag items in Selection Pane to reorder</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Decorative shapes/lines that are not content are listed last in reading order or marked as decorative	
Images and Visual Elements		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Every meaningful image, chart, graph, or SmartArt has alt text	<i>Right-click → Edit Alt Text</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Decorative images are marked as decorative	<i>Right-click → Edit Alt Text → Mark as decorative</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Charts and graphs: alt text describes the key takeaway, not just what type of chart it is	<i>"Sales grew 23% in Q3" not "Bar chart"</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	SmartArt is converted to text or given comprehensive alt text	<i>SmartArt tab → Convert to Shapes, then add alt text</i>
Text and Contrast		
<input type="checkbox"/>	All text is in text boxes or placeholders, not embedded in images	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Font size is at least 18pt for body text (readability standard for presentations)	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Text color meets minimum contrast against slide background	<i>webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Color is not the only way to distinguish information	
Tables		

<input type="checkbox"/>	Tables are built using PowerPoint's Insert Table, not drawn with lines	<i>Insert → Table</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Tables have a designated header row	<i>Table Design → check Header Row</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Tables are simple (no merged cells)	
Animations and Transitions		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Any content conveyed through animation is also available in a static, accessible form	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Auto-advance timing is not used (or a non-timed version is provided as the accessible PDF)	
Export Settings		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Export via File → Save As → PDF (not Print → Save as PDF)	
<input type="checkbox"/>	"Document structure tags for accessibility" is checked in Options	<i>File → Save As → PDF → Options</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	"Document properties" is checked	<i>Same Options dialog</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Run built-in Accessibility Checker before export	<i>Review → Check Accessibility</i>

Microsoft Excel

Excel-derived PDFs are common for reports, data tables, and financial documents. The primary concerns are table structure, chart accessibility, and sheet naming. Complex multi-sheet workbooks often need individual attention per sheet.

✓	Checklist Item	Notes / Where to Find It
Document Properties		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Set the Workbook Title	<i>File → Info → Properties → Title</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Set the Language	<i>Review → Language → Set Proofing Language</i>
Worksheet Structure		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Each worksheet has a meaningful, descriptive tab name (not Sheet1, Sheet2)	<i>Double-click the tab to rename</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Data begins in cell A1 (no blank rows/columns used as spacing)	
<input type="checkbox"/>	No blank rows or columns used as visual separators within data	<i>Use cell formatting for visual spacing instead</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Only one data table per worksheet (when possible)	<i>Multiple tables on one sheet cause structural issues</i>
Table Formatting		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Data ranges are formatted as Excel Tables (not just styled cells)	<i>Select data → Insert → Table → check "My table has headers"</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Table has a clear, descriptive header row in the first row	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Column headers are descriptive ("Department Name" not "Col A")	
<input type="checkbox"/>	No merged cells in header row	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Table has a name that describes its contents	<i>Table Design → Table Name field</i>
Charts and Graphs		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Every chart has a meaningful title	<i>Click chart → Chart Elements → Chart Title</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Every chart has alt text describing the key data insight	<i>Right-click chart → Format Chart Area → Alt Text (Size & Properties → Alt Text)</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Axis labels are present and descriptive	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Data labels are used where possible so values don't rely on color alone	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Chart colors meet contrast requirements	<i>Avoid light yellow or light gray data series</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	A data table is included below or alongside complex charts	<i>Chart Tools → Design → Add Chart Element → Data Table</i>
Color and Contrast		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Cells do not use color as the only indicator of meaning	<i>"Overdue" label + red fill, not red fill alone</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Conditional formatting rules are accompanied by text indicators	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Text in colored cells meets 4.5:1 contrast ratio	<i>webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker</i>

Print and Export Settings		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Print area is defined to include only the relevant data	<i>Page Layout → Print Area → Set Print Area</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Column and row headers are set to repeat on each printed page	<i>Page Layout → Print Titles</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Export via File → Save As → PDF	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Run built-in Accessibility Checker before export	<i>Review → Check Accessibility</i>

Adobe InDesign

InDesign has the most robust PDF accessibility export of any design tool — but only when documents are built with structured styles and the Articles panel is used. InDesign files built with manual formatting instead of paragraph styles will require significant remediation regardless of export settings.


⚠ InDesign accessibility requires intentional setup during document creation. There is no shortcut for a document built without paragraph styles — the structure must be added before export will produce usable tags.

✓	Checklist Item	Notes / Where to Find It
Document Setup		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Document has a Title set in File → Document Properties	<i>File → Document Properties → Description</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Document language is set	<i>Edit → Preferences → Dictionary → Language</i>
Paragraph and Character Styles		
<input type="checkbox"/>	All body text uses a named Paragraph Style (not "No Paragraph Style")	<i>Window → Styles → Paragraph Styles</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	All headings use dedicated Heading styles (Heading 1, Heading 2, etc.)	<i>Paragraph Styles panel</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Heading styles are mapped to PDF export tags (H1, H2, H3)	<i>Paragraph Styles → Edit Style → Export Tagging → PDF Tag</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Body text style is mapped to the <P> export tag	<i>Same — Edit Style → Export Tagging</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	List styles are mapped to <L>, , <LBody> export tags	<i>Edit Style → Export Tagging for each list style</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	No text is formatted manually without a style (no ad-hoc bold used as a heading)	
Images and Figures		
<input type="checkbox"/>	All meaningful images have alt text set	<i>Select image → Object → Object Export Options → Alt Text tab</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Alt text source is set to "Custom" and meaningful text is entered	<i>Object Export Options → Alt Text → Custom</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Decorative images are marked as artifacts	<i>Object Export Options → Tagged PDF tab → Apply Tag: Artifact</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Image frames are not stacked in a way that creates false reading order	
Reading Order (Articles Panel)		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Articles panel is open and in use	<i>Window → Articles</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	All content (text frames, images) is added to one or more Articles in reading order	<i>Drag frames into Articles panel in sequence</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Decorative elements are excluded from Articles (or tagged as Artifact)	
<input type="checkbox"/>	"Use for Reading Order in Tagged PDF" is checked in Articles panel options	<i>Articles panel menu → Panel Options</i>
Tables		

<input type="checkbox"/>	Tables are created with InDesign's Table tool, not manually drawn lines	<i>Table → Insert Table</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Header rows are designated using Table → Cell Options → Rows and Columns → Row Type: Header	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Tables are not used for layout (use text frames in a grid instead)	
Hyperlinks		
<input type="checkbox"/>	All hyperlinks have descriptive text (not bare URLs)	<i>Window → Interactive → Hyperlinks</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Hyperlinks are active links, not just styled text	<i>Hyperlinks panel shows the link</i>
Export Settings		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Export via File → Export → PDF (not File → Print → Save as PDF)	
<input type="checkbox"/>	PDF Export Preset is set to PDF/UA or Accessibility-focused preset	<i>Or configure settings manually in the Interactive/Print dialog</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	"Create Tagged PDF" is checked	<i>Export dialog → General tab</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	"Use Structure for Tab Order" is checked	<i>Export dialog → Interactive PDF settings</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	"Create Acrobat Layers" is unchecked (layers complicate accessibility)	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Hyperlinks and Bookmarks are included in export	<i>Export dialog → General tab → Include options</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	View PDF After Export to spot-check reading order in Acrobat	

Canva

Canva is a popular design tool with significant accessibility limitations. It does not support document structure tagging, heading hierarchy, or reading order control in its PDF export. PDFs exported from Canva will almost always require remediation in Acrobat Pro before they meet accessibility standards.

 **Canva PDFs are not natively accessible. There is no way to export a fully tagged, structured PDF from Canva. Treat every Canva PDF export as requiring post-export remediation in Acrobat Pro. For long documents or content that must meet compliance requirements, consider building in Word or InDesign instead.**

That said, following these practices in Canva will minimize remediation time:

✓	Checklist Item	Notes / Where to Find It
Before You Design		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Consider whether Canva is the right tool — for long text documents, Word produces far more accessible PDFs with less effort	
<input type="checkbox"/>	If using Canva for a one-page flyer or certificate, plan on opening the exported PDF in Acrobat Pro for remediation	
Text and Readability		
<input type="checkbox"/>	All meaningful text is actual text (not an image of text)	<i>Canva will export typed text as selectable text if not flattened</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Text color meets 4.5:1 contrast against its background	<i>Use WebAIM Contrast Checker or Canva's built-in color picker to verify</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Font size is at least 12pt for body content	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Text is not overlaid on busy or photographic backgrounds without sufficient contrast	<i>Add a semi-transparent overlay or text shadow if needed</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Avoid text placed inside images or rendered as part of a graphic element	<i>Text in downloaded image files cannot be read by screen readers</i>
Images		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Make a list of all meaningful images in your design before exporting — you will need to add alt text in Acrobat	<i>Canva does not support alt text in its editor</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Note which images are decorative vs. meaningful so you can mark them correctly in Acrobat	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Avoid placing images in Canva's background layer if they convey meaning (background images are often treated as artifacts)	
Color and Design		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Information is not conveyed by color alone	<i>"Required fields marked in red" must also have another indicator</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Charts and graphs include data labels so values are readable without color	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sufficient white space is used so the visual hierarchy is clear (this makes remediation easier)	
Export Settings		

<input type="checkbox"/>	Export as PDF Standard (not PDF Print) to reduce file size issues	<i>Share → Download → PDF Standard</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	After export, open immediately in Acrobat Pro and run Accessibility Checker before distribution	<i>See the Acrobat Pro checklist on the following page</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Add document title and language in Acrobat Pro after export (Canva does not set these)	<i>File → Document Properties in Acrobat</i>



For Canva documents you export regularly (a monthly newsletter template, for example), consider building a remediation "action" in Acrobat Pro that handles the repetitive fixes automatically each time.

Adobe Acrobat Pro — Post-Export Remediation

Use this checklist after receiving a PDF from any source — either your own export or a document received from a third party — before publishing it to a public-facing website. This is also the primary remediation tool for legacy PDFs and Canva exports.



Run the Accessibility Checker first (All Tools → Prepare for Accessibility → Check for Accessibility Issues). Use its report as your issue list, then work through the fixes below. Re-run the checker after each major fix to confirm issues are resolved.

✓	Checklist Item	Notes / Where to Find It
Document Properties (Always Fix First)		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Document Title is set and descriptive	<i>File → Document Properties → Description tab → Title field</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	"Show: Document Title" is set in Initial View (not File Name)	<i>Document Properties → Initial View tab → Show dropdown</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Document Language is set	<i>Document Properties → Advanced tab → Reading Options → Language</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Document Author is appropriate for public release	<i>Document Properties → Description tab</i>
Tagging		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Document is tagged (PDF has structural tags)	<i>Accessibility Checker will flag this; File → Document Properties → Description → "Tagged PDF: Yes"</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	If untagged: run Auto-Tagger as a starting point	<i>All Tools → Prepare for Accessibility → Automatically Tag PDF</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Tag tree has been reviewed for accuracy in the Tags panel	<i>View → Show/Hide → Navigation Panels → Tags</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Decorative elements (rules, borders, background shapes) are marked as Artifacts	<i>All Tools → Prepare for Accessibility → Reading Order → select element → Background/Artifact</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	"Path object not tagged" errors are resolved by marking paths as Artifacts	<i>Same Reading Order tool</i>
Headings		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Document has exactly one H1 (the document title)	<i>Tags panel</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Heading levels do not skip (H1 → H2 → H3, never H1 → H3)	<i>Tags panel — right-click a tag to change its type</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Text that is visually a heading is tagged as a heading (not a <P>)	<i>Tags panel → right-click → Properties → change tag</i>
Alternative Text		
<input type="checkbox"/>	All meaningful images have alt text	<i>All Tools → Prepare for Accessibility → Set Alternate Text</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Decorative images are marked as decorative figures	<i>Set Alternate Text → check "Decorative Figure" checkbox</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Alt text describes content and function, not appearance	<i>"Q3 sales bar chart showing 23% growth" not "chart image"</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Alt text for annotations (form fields, links) is meaningful	<i>Tags panel → <Link> or <Form> elements → Properties → Alternate Text</i>
Reading Order		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Reading order has been verified using Read Out Loud or an actual screen reader	<i>View → Read Out Loud → Read This Page Only</i>

<input type="checkbox"/>	Multi-column layouts read in the correct column order (left column, then right)	<i>Reading Order tool can be used to fix column sequence</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Page headers/footers are tagged as Artifacts (not read as content)	<i>Tags panel or Reading Order tool</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Page numbers are tagged as Artifacts	<i>Same as above</i>
Tables		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Tables are tagged with <Table>, <TR>, <TH>, and <TD> tags	<i>Tags panel</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Header cells use <TH> tags (not <TD>)	<i>Right-click in Tags panel → Properties → change to TH</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Table cells have appropriate scope attributes (Column/Row)	<i>Right-click TH in Tags panel → Properties → Attribute → Scope **</i>
Links and Hyperlinks		
<input type="checkbox"/>	All hyperlinks have descriptive alternate text or are embedded in descriptive anchor text	<i>Tags panel → <Link> elements → Properties → Alternate Text</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Bare URLs are given a descriptive label in the tag's alternate text	
Color Contrast		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Text color meets minimum contrast requirements against background	<i>Use WebAIM Contrast Checker — PDF colors can be sampled with Acrobat's color tools</i>
Final Validation		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Accessibility Checker passes with no Errors (Warnings may remain)	<i>All Tools → Prepare for Accessibility → Check for Accessibility Issues</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Document has been validated with PAC 2024 (free third-party checker)	<i>Download at pac.pdf-accessibility.org</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Document has been tested with Read Out Loud or a screen reader	<i>View → Read Out Loud in Acrobat</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	File has been saved after all changes	<i>File → Save (not Save As, unless creating a new version)</i>

Additional Resources

WebAIM Contrast Checker: webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker

PAC 2024 PDF Checker: pac.pdf-accessibility.org

WebAIM PDF Accessibility Guide: webaim.org/techniques/acrobat

Grackle Docs (Google Docs accessibility): grackledocs.com

**NOTE Depending on your version of Acrobat, you may need to open the Table Editor from the Tags panel, select the TH you want to edit, then go to Cell Properties before you can select the Scope

