

Accessible Electronic Documents

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Electronic delivery of information is becoming increasingly important and there is an expectation that individuals will access information through this medium. However, for those who have a print disability and have difficulty accessing standard print material, much of the available electronic information is inaccessible.

Following are some techniques and guidelines that can be applied to make electronic documents more accessible so that you reach the widest possible audience to achieve the best communication result.

Preparing Accessible Word documents

Word's style sheets Style sheets should be used for titles, headings and paragraphs of text to provide structure to a document. Styles allow you to pre set all formatting options such as the font, spacing bold and italics. Once the file is exported to a Rich text Format (RTF) it will then be accessible to screen readers.

Table of contents Create a table of contents to provide orientation and quick navigation to sections of a document.

Avoid text boxes Text boxes are inaccessible to screen readers.

Create linear tables Table layouts should only be used if they make sense when linearised and when headings are used for columns and rows. This is because screen readers read across the page a line at a time.

Avoid multi-column layout Columns are difficult for cognitive impaired and screen-magnifier users to navigate.

Use Footnotes Use footnotes rather than endnotes.

Provide Alternative Text Add a text equivalent to all graphs, diagrams and images. Use relative positioning to ensure that they stay with the appropriate heading/paragraph if the text is resized.

Marked up Portable Document Format (PDF)

PDF files are read only and can be viewed in Adobe Reader. PDF's preserve fonts, images, graphics and layout of any source document and are ideal for printing exactly as the author intended.

It is only possible to make documents accessible in Acrobat 5 and 6. Documents of a complex nature are better off being created in HTML as less work is required.

Documents are not automatically accessible to screen readers and require conversion tools. To make the content in the PDF accessible provide a HTML version or a word version. If this isn't possible create a tagged PDF file. (Adobe has built in support for converting properly structured Microsoft Office documents directly into tagged PDF format.) Secondly, mark up the document for accessibility. This means applying the structural elements as listed above such as style sheets.

Rich Text Format (RTF)

RTF also allows you to exchange text files without losing the format of the source document. It is usually the preferred file format as files can be transferred between different desktop publishing programs and operating systems. Unlike PDF, the receiver doesn't need specialised software to view and edit the file.

More Information

For more information please contact

Tony Clark
Telephone (03) 9864 9702
or email: tony.clark@nils.org.au

Jacky Davidson
Telephone (02) 9334 3556
or email: jacky.davidson@nils.org.au

The logo for the National Information Library Service (NILS) is displayed in a white box on a blue background. The text is arranged in four lines: "National", "Information", "Library", and "Service". The "N" in "National" is a larger, bold, purple letter, and the "S" in "Service" is also a larger, bold, purple letter. The other letters are in a smaller, grey font.

* The National Information and Library Service (NILS) has been established to improve access to published information for Australians with a print disability. Services available from NILS include a lending library of audio and Braille books, an accessible format production capability and consulting in both web accessibility and accessibility of published information. NILS is a joint venture of Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, Royal Blind Society NSW and Vision Australia Foundation.