Accessibility Checks: Word

In accordance with Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), all digital content must be carefully reviewed to ensure compliance with digital accessibility guidelines. This review requires a two-phase approach: first, complete a manual review to ensure the document is functional for all users, then use Word's automated Accessibility Checker to catch additional technical errors.

The following steps outline which accessibility standards must be checked manually and how to use Word's built-in tools to complete an automated review.

1: Manual Accessibility Checks

Manual checks require users to personally verify that the document's logic, layout, and visual elements meet accessibility standards.

Content headings

Use pre-defined styles to identify titles, subtitles, or heading levels within documents for screen readers. *(This manual check may not apply to simple documents with a few paragraphs.)*
- [ ] Use built-in styles (Heading 1, Heading 2, etc.) in a logical order.
- [ ] For longer documents, ensure the Table of Contents is updated and reflects the logical order of sections identified by predefined heading styles.

Table attributes or merged cells

Table headers, columns, and rows should be identified for screen readers.
- [ ] Use simple table structures (no merged, split, or blank cells).
- [ ] Identify column and row headers clearly.
- [ ] Use the Header Row option and repeat headers on each page.
- [ ] Use table styles in the MDE Templates.

Reading order

Screen readers announce content based on the underlying document structure rather than visual layout. Incorrect reading order can lead to confusion and lost information. *(This manual check may not apply to simple documents with text only.)*

- [ ] Use built-in text and table styles.
- [ ] Avoid text wrap features of "behind text" or "in front of text" for images or text boxes.

Color Contrast

Individuals may struggle to read text if there is insufficient contrast between the text color and the background.

- [ ] If the text or background color deviates from the standard colors of black and white, check the color contrast with a color contrast checker. (A contrast ratio of at least 4.5:1 is required for normal-size text. See the Color Contrast Checker section below for more information on this process.)
- [ ] Avoid using only color to convey meaning.

Text Size and spacing

Text size, line height, and space between paragraphs can impact the legibility of text.

- [ ] Use MDE Templates when possible to guide text size and spacing.
- [ ] Text should be at least 10 pt, and line spacing should be at least 1.0.

Hyperlink text and provide the purpose of the linked text

- [ ] If the resource will be accessed digitally (someone clicks a link to access the webpage), avoid listing the URL. (Ex: "MSIS Resource Library" instead of "https://mdek12.org/msis/msis-resource-library/")
- [ ] Add descriptive link text to URLs. (Ex: "Review our MSIS resources in the MSIS Resource Library" instead of "click here to view more".)
- [ ] Avoid linking directly to a PDF within another document. Instead, link to the website or landing page where that file is located. This gives screen readers essential context about the file (like its size and purpose) before they commit to opening or downloading it.

2: Automated Accessibility Checker

Microsoft Word includes an integrated tool that flags common accessibility barriers. While this accessibility checker efficiently catches technical errors (such as missing alt-text), it cannot interpret context. As a result, the tool's findings often require manual review (completed in phase 1) to ensure the document is fully compliant and easy to navigate.

Step 1: Select **Review** in the ribbon. Click **"Check Accessibility"**.
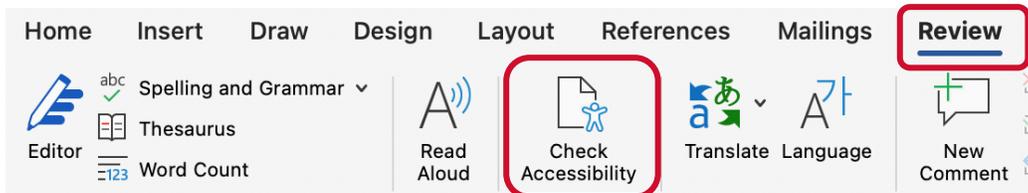
The Accessibility Assistant will automatically check the entire document for:
- **Color and Contrast**
- Media and Illustrations (**alt text**)
- **Tables** (header row, merged/split cells)
- Document structure (**headings**, etc.)
- Document access (default settings should always result in a "pass" for this check)

The Accessibility Assistant panel will appear on the right side of the Microsoft Word document window.
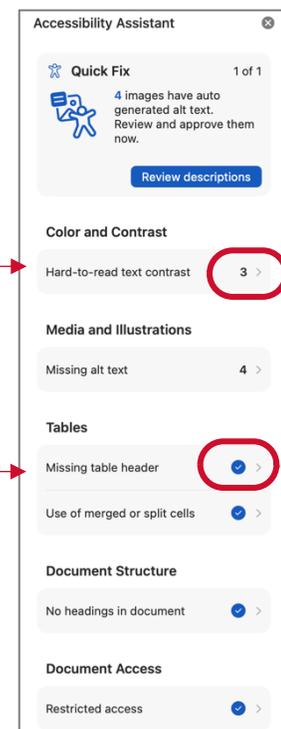
Accessibility checks with compliance issues will be indicated by the number of issues.

Accessibility checks with no compliance issues will show a check mark.

Step 2: Resolve any **Color and Contrast** compliance issues.
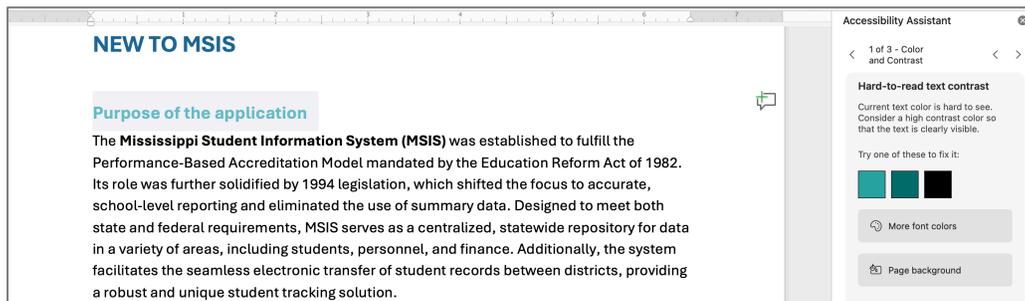
1. If Color and Contrast issues exist, click the arrow next to the number.

   The Accessibility Assistant window will display the first compliance issue in the document. The corresponding object in the document affected by the issue will be highlighted.
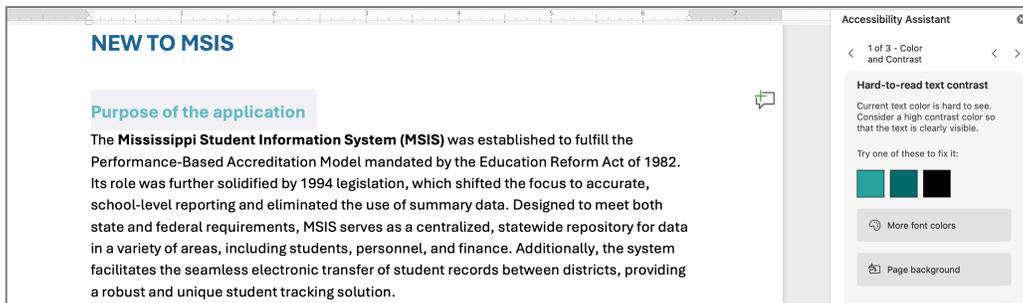

   The Accessibility Assistant will provide alternative colors that meet color contrast requirements.

2. Click on one of the provided colors to apply it to the non-compliant text. (See the **MDE Brand Guidelines** for the hex codes of approved colors.)
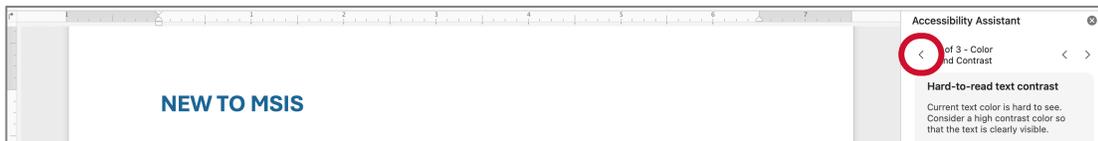
3. Alternatively, click "More Font Colors" to view theme colors that are compliant. Click a color swatch to apply it to non-compliant text. (See the MDE Brand Guidelines for the hex codes of approved colors.)
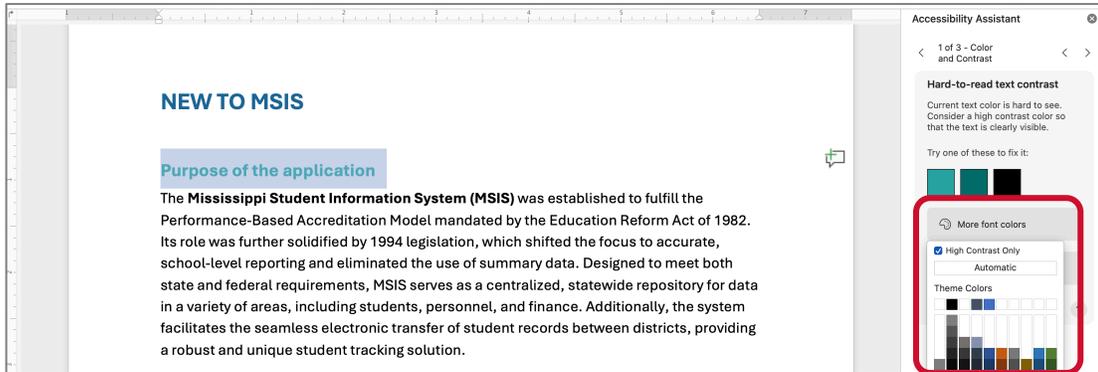
4. Use the arrows to navigate through all compliance issues. Resolve each issue as needed.

5. Use the back arrow to return to the complete list of accessibility checks.

Step 3: Resolve any **Media and Illustration** compliance issues**:**

The Accessibility Assistant window will display the first compliance issue found in the document.

1. If Media and Illustration issues exist, click the arrow next to the number.

The Accessibility Assistant window will display the first compliance issue in the document. The corresponding object in the document affected by the issue will be highlighted.


The Accessibility Assistant may auto-generate alt text for the image, or the alt text window may be blank.
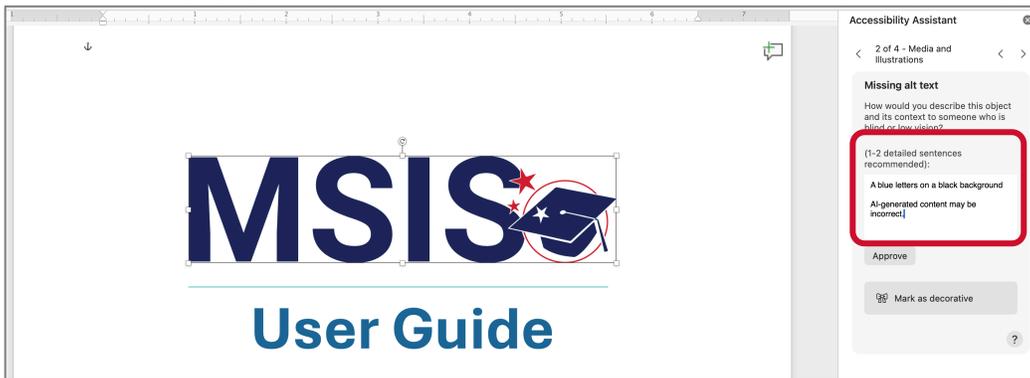
2. Carefully review the generated alt text for appropriateness. (See Accessibility: Alt Text for more information on writing appropriate alt text.) Rewrite the alt text as needed or click "Approve" if the text is acceptable.

   If no text is generated, write appropriate alt text, then click "Approve".
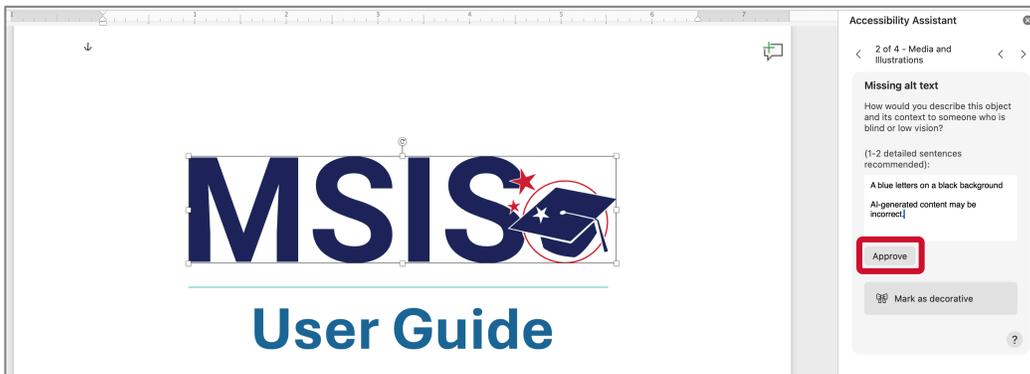
3. If the image is not informational or functional, choose "**Mark as decorative**" so that screen readers will skip it.
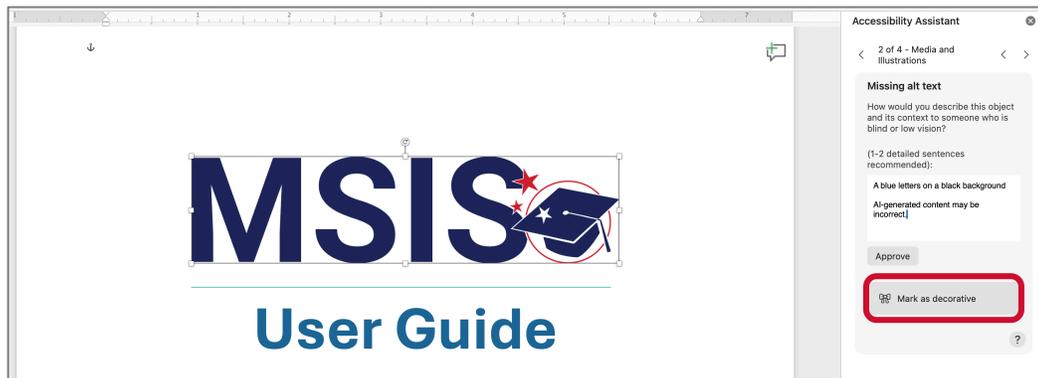
4. Use the arrows to navigate through all compliance issues. Resolve each issue as needed.

5. Use the back arrow to return to the complete list of accessibility checks.

Step 4: Resolve any **Tables** compliance issues. If no issues are detected, **manually confirm** the Tables compliance checks, as the automatic checker does not always correctly detect table headers or merged/split cells. (This corresponds to Table Attributes or Merged Cells in the Manual Checks section.)

Step 5: Resolve any **Document Structure** compliance issues. If no issues are detected, **manually confirm** Document Structure compliance checks, as the automatic checker does not always correctly detect headings and heading order. (This corresponds to Content Headings in the Manual Checks section.)

Step 6: Resolve any **Document Access** compliance issues. (Document Access should always return a compliant check unless the document's default settings have been changed.)

3: Save as an Accessible PDF

If the document will be shared as a PDF, use the Create PDF feature to generate an accessible PDF.

Step 1: Select **Acrobat** in the ribbon. Click **"Create PDF"**.
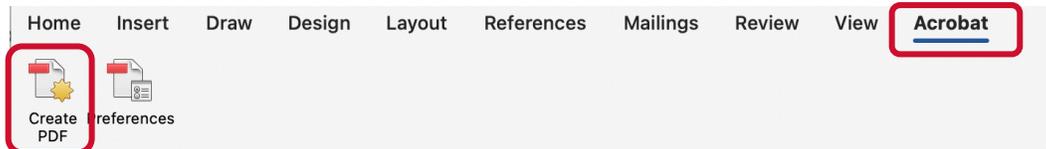
Step 2: Check the PDF's accessibility in Adobe Acrobat. (See Accessibility Checks: Acrobat.)