

# Accessibility Guide for Theses and Dissertations

In line with Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which requires public entities like our university to make their programs and services accessible to individuals with differing abilities, we have developed this resource to help you create accessible theses and dissertations.

Creating an accessible thesis or dissertation ensures that your work can be read, understood, and navigated by all audiences, including individuals using assistive technologies such as screen readers. It ensures your research reaches a broader audience and aligns with institutional and legal expectations.

Below is a list of key elements to focus on:

## Document Structure

Use a clear and consistent structure throughout your document. Screen readers rely on structured headings to help users navigate your document efficiently.

- Apply built-in heading styles (e.g., Heading 1, Heading 2, Heading 3) instead of manually formatting text to look like headings.
- Organize content hierarchically (e.g., Chapter → Section → Subsection).
- Avoid skipping heading levels.

## Fonts and Text Formatting

Use readable fonts (e.g., Arial, Calibri, Times New Roman) and maintain a minimum font size of 12 pt for body text. Also, ensure sufficient contrast between text and background (e.g., black text on white background).

Avoid the following:

- Using color alone to convey meaning.
- Decorative or script fonts
- Excessive use of bold, italics, or ALL CAPS

## Alternative Text for Images

Provide alternative (alt) text for all meaningful images, charts, graphs, and figures and describe the purpose and key information of the image. It is important to keep descriptions concise but informative. Example: Instead of “Chart showing results”, use “Bar chart comparing student performance across three assessment types, showing highest scores in project-based assessments.”

## Tables

Tables should be used only for data and not for layout. Tables can be classified as simple or complex. Simple tables are the easiest for assistive technology to interpret and generally have one header column and/or one header row. Complex tables are those with multiple header rows and header columns, including merged and split cells. They are harder to read and present significant accessibility challenges for screen readers.

- Identify tables by captions or headings that are separate from the table content.
- All cells should contain data (e.g., 0 or NA or "blank") rather than simply being left empty

## Lists

When using lists in your content, it is essential that they are properly formatted to ensure consistent understanding across operating platforms and assistive devices. Assistive technologies recognize true lists and announce them properly, helping users understand how information is grouped.

Use built-in bulleted or numbered list tools instead of manually typing dashes or numbers.

Avoid the following:

- Using symbols (e.g., \*, -, →) to mimic lists
- Mixing multiple list styles without clear purpose

## Hyperlinks

It's crucial for links to have a distinct appearance, for users to understand where the link is going to take them. Links should be clearly and consistently labeled throughout your thesis so that users can predict what action they will trigger.

Consider these guidelines when writing link text:

- Avoid link text like "Click Here," "More," and "Read More." These kinds of links can be confusing when a screen reader reads them out of context.
- Use unique link text where possible. Speech recognition software users may have a bad experience with duplicated link text.
- It is OK to link a full sentence but avoid longer.
- Use judgment when linking full URLs as they pose a challenge for screen readers.

## Color and Contrast

Ensure that text has a sufficient contrast against the background to ensure readability for individuals with low vision, and do not rely on color alone to convey meaning (e.g., "items in red are important"). Use additional indicators like text labels and/or patterns to ensure that your content is understandable by individuals with color vision deficiencies.

## Equations and Mathematical Content

Use equation editors (e.g., MathType, built-in equation tools) instead of images and ensure equations are readable by screen readers.

## File Naming and Exporting

Consider these guidelines:

- Use clear, descriptive file names (e.g., “Lastname\_Dissertation\_Final.pdf”).
- When exporting to PDF, enable “tagged PDF” or “document structure tags.”
- This resource will guide you on [How to Create Accessible PDF in Word and Acrobat Pro](#)

## Accessibility Checkers

Before submitting your document:

- Use built-in accessibility checkers
  - [Microsoft Word Accessibility Checker](#)
  - [Adobe Acrobat Pro Accessibility Checker](#)
    - Download and install [Adobe Acrobat Pro](#)
- Address all flagged issues.

## Final Accessibility Checklist

Before submission, confirm that your document:

- Uses proper heading styles
- Includes alt text for all meaningful visuals
- Contains accessible tables and lists
- Uses descriptive hyperlinks
- Meets color contrast requirements
- Passes an accessibility checker