BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

Document & File Accessibility Compliance Guide

Word Documents, Excel Spreadsheets, and PowerPoint Presentations | Effective date: April 24, 2026

Section 1: Purpose and Scope

This guide covers how to create accessible Microsoft Word documents, Excel spreadsheets, and PowerPoint presentations. These are the three file types the ADA Title II rule classifies as "conventional electronic documents" and they are among the most commonly posted files on bsu.edu.

Under the rule, conventional electronic documents posted on or after Ball State's compliance deadline of April 24, 2026, must meet WCAG 2.1 Level AA. Documents posted before that date are generally covered by the preexisting documents exception—**unless** the document is currently used to apply for, gain access to, or participate in the university's services, programs, or activities (applications, registration forms, current handbooks, course materials, etc.). Those must comply regardless of when they were posted.

The Most Efficient Approach

Build accessibility into the document from the start. Fixing an inaccessible document after the fact takes significantly more time than creating it correctly in the first place. The guidance in this document is structured as "do this while you're creating the file"—not "fix this after you're done."

Section 2: How Assistive Technology Reads Documents

Understanding how a screen reader interacts with your document changes how you think about structure. Here is what happens:

- **Structure is everything.** A screen reader does not see your formatting. It reads the document's underlying structure—heading tags, list tags, table tags, alt text tags. If you make text look like a heading by making it bold and large but do not apply a heading style, the screen reader treats it as regular paragraph text. The user has no way to navigate to that section or understand the document's organization.
- **Reading order follows the structure.** In Word, reading order follows the heading hierarchy and paragraph sequence. In PowerPoint, reading order is determined by the Selection Pane (bottom to top). In Excel, screen readers start at cell A1 and move left to right, top to bottom. If any of these orders are wrong, the user hears content in an incomprehensible sequence.
- **Tables are read cell by cell.** A screen reader announces each cell's content along with its row and column header (if headers are defined). Without defined headers, the user hears data with no context—just numbers and text floating in space. Merged cells break the screen reader's cell count entirely, making the rest of the table unreadable.

- **Images are either described or invisible.** A screen reader looks for alt text on every image. If alt text exists, it reads it. If not, the image is skipped or the filename is read. (See the **Alt Text Guidelines** for detailed guidance on what to write.)
- **The Accessibility Checker catches many—but not all—issues.** Microsoft's built-in checker is useful but not comprehensive. It cannot judge whether your alt text is meaningful, whether your heading hierarchy is logical, or whether your reading order makes sense. It catches structural problems. Human judgment catches everything else.

Section 3: Requirements That Apply to All Three File Types

Before diving into application-specific guidance, these requirements apply universally to Word, Excel, and PowerPoint:

Requirement	What to Do	Where in the Application
Document title	Set a meaningful title in File → Properties (not just the filename). This is what screen readers announce when the file is opened.	File → Info → Properties → Title
Language	Set the document language so screen readers pronounce words correctly.	Review → Language → Set Proofing Language
Alt text on images	Every informational image needs alt text. Decorative images should be marked as decorative. Right-click the image → Edit Alt Text or go to the Picture Format tab → Alt Text	Right-click image → Edit Alt Text (or View Alt Text)
Color contrast	All text must meet 4.5:1 contrast (3:1 for large text). Do not use color alone to convey information. See the Color Use & Contrast Guidelines.	Check with WebAIM Contrast Checker
Descriptive link text	Hyperlinks must describe the destination. No “click here” or bare URLs. Right-click a link to edit the display text.	Select text → Ctrl+K (or right-click → Link) → Text to Display field
Font and readability	Use sans-serif fonts (Arial, Calibri, Verdana). Minimum 11pt for body text. Left-align paragraphs. Avoid all-caps for more than a few words.	Home → Font and Paragraph settings
Run the Accessibility Checker	Before saving or posting, run the checker and resolve all errors. Review warnings and manual check items.	Review → Check Accessibility
Saving as PDF	Use File → Save As → PDF (not Print to PDF, which strips tags). In the Options dialog, ensure “Document structure tags for accessibility” is checked.	File → Save As → PDF → Options → check accessibility tags

Never Use Print to PDF

File → Print → “Microsoft Print to PDF” and File → Export → Create PDF both produce PDFs that strip accessibility tags. All the structural work you did in the source file is lost. Always use File →

Save As → PDF with the accessibility tags option checked. If you have Adobe Acrobat installed, use the Acrobat tab → Create PDF for the best results.

Section 4: Microsoft Word

Word documents are the most commonly posted file type on bsu.edu. The good news is that Word has strong built-in accessibility features—if you use them.

Element	How to Do It	Why It Matters
Heading styles	Home tab → Styles group. Select your text and apply Heading 1, Heading 2, or Heading 3 from the Styles gallery. Do not just make text bold and large—that is visual formatting, not structure.	Screen readers use heading tags to navigate and understand document structure. Users can jump between headings to scan the document, just as sighted users scan visually for section titles.
Heading hierarchy	Use Heading 1 for the document title. Use Heading 2 for major sections. Use Heading 3 for subsections of Heading 2. Never skip levels (e.g., H1 to H3). Verify in the Navigation Pane: View → Navigation Pane.	Skipped heading levels confuse screen reader users about the document's structure. The Navigation Pane shows your outline and makes hierarchy problems immediately visible.
Built-in lists	Home tab → Paragraph group → Bullets or Numbering buttons. Do not create lists manually with dashes, asterisks, or tabs.	Built-in lists create proper list tags that screen readers announce as "list of 5 items." Manual dashes produce unstructured paragraphs that lose their list meaning.
Tables	Insert → Table. Keep tables simple—no merged or split cells. Select the header row → go to the Table Design tab → check Header Row. Alternatively, select the header row → right-click → Table Properties → Row tab → check "Repeat as header row at the top of each page."	Screen readers read tables cell by cell and use header rows to announce context. Without a designated header row, users hear data with no column labels. Merged cells break the cell count.
Columns	Layout tab (or Page Layout tab) → Columns. Do not use tabs, spaces, or tables to simulate columns.	The built-in columns feature ensures content reads in the correct order (down column 1, then down column 2). Fake columns created with tabs or tables produce garbled reading order.
Text boxes	Avoid text boxes when possible. If you must use one, set its wrapping to "In Line with Text": right-click → Wrap Text → In Line with Text **or** select the text box → go to the Shape Format tab → Wrap Text → In Line with Text	Floating text boxes are read at unpredictable points in the document. Inline text boxes are read in sequence with the surrounding content.
Headers and footers	Insert → Header or Footer. Use this feature for repeating information like page numbers or document titles—not for content the reader needs.	Screen readers typically skip headers and footers. Any information critical to understanding the document should be in the body, not in a header or footer.

Table of Contents	References tab → Table of Contents. This auto-generates from your heading structure.	A TOC provides another navigation method. It also validates your heading hierarchy—if the TOC looks wrong, your headings are wrong.

Section 5: Microsoft Excel

Excel is the most challenging Microsoft Office application for screen reader accessibility. Spreadsheets are inherently grid-based, and screen readers navigate them cell by cell. The structure you provide—sheet names, cell A1 content, table headers, named ranges—is the difference between a usable spreadsheet and an incomprehensible grid of numbers.

Element	How to Do It	Why It Matters
Sheet names	Right-click each sheet tab at the bottom → Rename. Give every sheet a unique, descriptive name (e.g., “Q1 Sales Data” instead of “Sheet1”). Delete blank unused sheets.	Screen readers announce the sheet name when a user navigates between sheets. Default names like “Sheet1” provide no context. Blank sheets cause confusion.
Cell A1	Always put meaningful content in cell A1 of every sheet. If the data does not start at A1, use A1 for a summary or instructions (e.g., “This sheet contains Q1 2026 enrollment data. Data begins in row 3.”).	Screen readers start reading at A1. If A1 is blank, the user thinks the sheet is empty. If it contains useful orientation information, the user knows what they’re working with.
Format as Table	Select your data range → Home tab → Format as Table. In the dialog, check “My table has headers.” Give the table a descriptive name on the Table Design tab → Table Name field (top left).	The Format as Table feature defines the header row structurally, not just visually. Screen readers announce column headers as the user navigates data cells. Without this, users hear data with no context.
Avoid merged cells	Never merge cells. If you need to center a title across columns, use Format Cells → Alignment → Horizontal → Center Across Selection instead.	Merged cells break the screen reader’s cell count. After encountering a merged cell, the reader cannot reliably associate data with its row and column headers for the rest of the table.
Avoid blank cells, rows, and columns	Do not use blank rows or columns for visual spacing. Adjust row height or column width instead. If a cell has no data, enter “N/A” or “Intentionally Blank.”	A screen reader encountering a blank cell may interpret it as the end of the data range. The user stops reading, thinking there is no more data, when the actual data continues below or to the right.
Named ranges	Select a data range → Formulas tab → Define Name. Enter a descriptive name (e.g., “Q1_Enrollment”). Users can then jump to the range using the Name Box dropdown.	Named ranges provide navigation landmarks. A screen reader user can jump directly to a named range instead of scrolling through hundreds of cells to find data.
Charts and graphs	Every chart must have alt text: right-click the chart → Edit Alt Text. Describe the data and the key takeaway, not just “chart.” For complex charts, add a text description in an adjacent cell.	Screen readers cannot interpret visual chart elements. The alt text is the only way a blind user knows what the chart shows. Also ensure chart colors meet contrast requirements and use patterns in addition to color.

Multiple data sets	Place each distinct data table on its own sheet. If you must put multiple tables on one sheet, separate them with at least one blank row and column, and describe the layout in cell A1.	Separate sheets are the clearest way for screen reader users to navigate between data sets. Multiple tables on one sheet are confusing even for sighted users.
Comments and notes	Avoid using cell comments for important information. Screen readers may not read them. Place the information in a cell instead.	Cell comments are not reliably accessible across all screen readers and Excel versions. Critical data should always be in cells, not comments.

Excel-Specific Limitation

Excel's Accessibility Checker is less comprehensive than Word's. It catches missing alt text on charts and merged cells, but it cannot verify that your table headers are correctly defined, that named ranges are properly set up, or that your sheet names are meaningful. Manual review is essential for Excel files.

Section 6: Microsoft PowerPoint

PowerPoint has a unique accessibility challenge that Word and Excel do not: reading order is not automatically determined by the visual layout. Every element on a slide is an independent object, and the order in which those objects are read by a screen reader depends on the Selection Pane, not on where they appear visually on the slide.

Element	How to Do It	Why It Matters
Slide layouts	Always use built-in slide layouts (Home → New Slide → select a layout). Never start with a blank slide and add text boxes manually.	Built-in layouts include properly structured title and content placeholders with correct reading order. Starting from blank produces an unstructured slide where reading order is determined by the order you added objects—which is usually wrong.
Unique slide titles	Every slide must have a unique, descriptive title using the title placeholder. If you don't want the title visible, drag it off the visible slide area—screen readers will still read it.	Screen readers use slide titles to navigate presentations, just as headings navigate documents. Duplicate titles ("Overview" on three slides) make navigation impossible. Use modifiers: "Overview – Part 1," "Overview – Part 2."
Verify in Outline View	View → Outline View. Every slide should show a title next to its number. If a title is missing, the slide either has no title or lacks a title placeholder.	Outline View is the fastest way to confirm every slide has a title. It also shows the text hierarchy of each slide at a glance.
Reading order	Home → Arrange → Selection Pane. Or: Review → Check Accessibility → open the Reading Order Pane from the accessibility panel. Objects are read in the order shown in the Selection Pane, starting from the bottom of the list (read first) to the top (read last).Drag items to reorder.	The reading order determines the sequence in which a screen reader announces slide content. If the title is not at the bottom of the Selection Pane list (meaning it is read first), the user hears body content before knowing what the slide is about.
Text in placeholders	Put text in the content placeholders ("Click to add text"). Avoid adding free-floating text boxes outside of placeholders.	Text in placeholders is automatically included in the slide's structure and reading order. Free-floating text boxes must be manually ordered in the Selection Pane and are easy to overlook.
Tables	Insert → Table. On the Table Design tab, check "Header Row." Keep tables simple—no merged cells. Right-click the table → Edit Alt Text or go to the Format tab → Alt Text to add a summary.	Same principles as Word tables: screen readers need defined headers to provide context for data cells. Merged cells break cell navigation.

Slide transitions and animations	Use animations sparingly. Avoid flashing or strobing effects. If animations convey information, ensure the same information is available without the animation.	Animations can trigger seizures in people with photosensitive epilepsy (WCAG 2.3.1). They can also confuse screen readers if content appears in a sequence the reading order does not reflect.
Embedded video	If your slide includes a video, ensure it has captions. Provide a transcript link in the speaker notes or on the slide. See the Video Accessibility Guide.	The same video accessibility requirements that apply to web video apply to video embedded in presentations.
Speaker notes	Use the Notes pane to add supplementary descriptions of complex visuals, context for data, or audio descriptions of visual content for slides with significant imagery.	Speaker notes are accessible to screen readers and provide a place to include detailed descriptions that would not fit in alt text. They are also useful when distributing the presentation as a file rather than presenting live.

The Blank Slide Trap

The single most common PowerPoint accessibility failure is starting with a blank slide layout and adding content manually. This produces slides with no title placeholder, unpredictable reading order, and text in free-floating boxes that screen readers may miss entirely. Always start from a built-in layout. If your template doesn't have the layout you need, create a custom layout in the Slide Master—never start from blank.

Section 7: Using the Microsoft Accessibility Checker

All three applications share the same Accessibility Checker. It is your first line of defense, but it is not comprehensive. Here is how to use it and what to do with the results.

How to Run It

1. Go to the **Review** tab on the ribbon.
2. Click **Check Accessibility**. The Accessibility panel opens on the right side.
3. Review the results, which are organized into three categories: Errors (must fix), Warnings (should fix), and Tips (consider fixing).
4. Click any item to see an explanation of the issue, why it matters, and how to fix it.
5. For many items, you can right-click and select **Fix** for an automatic correction.

> **Keep It Running While You Work**
> In the Accessibility Checker pane, check the box labeled “Keep accessibility checker running while I work.” This provides real-time feedback as you create content—catching issues as they occur rather than after you’ve finished the entire document.

What the Checker Cannot Catch

The Accessibility Checker is useful but has blind spots. You still need to manually verify:

- **Is the heading hierarchy logical?** The checker confirms headings exist but does not judge whether H1 → H2 → H3 makes sense for your content.
- **Is the alt text meaningful?** The checker confirms alt text exists but cannot judge whether “chart” is a useful description of a complex data visualization.
- **Is the reading order correct?** In PowerPoint, the checker flags reading order issues but cannot determine whether the order makes logical sense for your content.
- **Are links descriptive?** The checker does not flag “click here” or “learn more” as problems, even though they fail WCAG 2.4.4.
- **Does the color contrast meet requirements?** The checker may flag some contrast issues but does not check all text/background combinations. Use a contrast checker tool for verification.

Section 8: Pre-Publish Checklists

Word Document Checklist

✓	Check
☐	All headings use built-in heading styles (Heading 1, 2, 3)—not bold/large text. Hierarchy is logical with no skipped levels.
☐	All lists use built-in bullet or numbering tools—not manual dashes, asterisks, or tabs.
☐	All images have meaningful alt text or are marked as decorative.
☐	All tables have a designated header row with “Repeat as header row” enabled. No merged or split cells.
☐	Multi-column layouts use the built-in Columns feature, not tabs or tables.
☐	All hyperlinks have descriptive display text (no “click here” or bare URLs).
☐	Document title is set in File → Info → Properties.
☐	Document language is set (Review → Language).
☐	Text meets color contrast requirements. Color is not the sole means of conveying information.
☐	Text boxes (if used) are set to “In Line with Text” wrapping.
☐	The Accessibility Checker has been run and all errors resolved.
☐	If saving as PDF: used Save As (not Print to PDF) with “Document structure tags for accessibility” checked.

Excel Spreadsheet Checklist

✓	Check
☐	Every sheet has a unique, descriptive name. All blank unused sheets have been deleted.
☐	Cell A1 on every sheet contains meaningful content (title, summary, or instructions).
☐	Data ranges are formatted as tables (Home → Format as Table) with “My table has headers” checked.
☐	Tables have descriptive names (Table Design tab → Table Name).
☐	No merged cells anywhere in the workbook.
☐	No blank rows or columns used for visual spacing. Blank cells contain “N/A” or “Intentionally Blank.”
☐	All charts and images have meaningful alt text.

☐	All hyperlinks have descriptive display text.
☐	Color is not the sole means of conveying information in any chart or data display.
☐	The Accessibility Checker has been run and all errors resolved.

PowerPoint Presentation Checklist

✓	Check
☐	Every slide uses a built-in layout with a title placeholder (no blank slide layouts).
☐	Every slide has a unique, descriptive title (verified in View → Outline View).
☐	Reading order has been verified in the Selection Pane or Reading Order Pane for every slide. Title is read first.
☐	All images, shapes, charts, and SmartArt have meaningful alt text or are marked as decorative.
☐	All tables have a designated header row (Table Design → Header Row checkbox). No merged cells.
☐	All hyperlinks have descriptive display text and ScreenTips.
☐	No flashing or strobing animations. Animations do not exceed three flashes per second.
☐	Embedded videos have captions. Transcript links are provided in speaker notes or on the slide.
☐	Complex visuals are described in speaker notes.
☐	Text meets color contrast requirements. Color is not the sole means of conveying information.
☐	The Accessibility Checker has been run and all errors resolved.
☐	If saving as PDF: used Save As (not Print to PDF) with accessibility tags option checked.

Section 9: Compliance Authority

Accessibility compliance is the responsibility of any individual creating content for use on behalf of Ball State University.

This guide is issued under the requirements of the ADA Title II final rule (28 CFR Part 35, Subpart H), published April 24, 2024, which adopts WCAG 2.1 Level AA as the technical standard for all web content provided by public universities, including conventional electronic documents (Word, Excel, and PowerPoint files) posted on university websites and mobile apps. Ball State University's compliance deadline is April 24, 2026.

Under the preexisting conventional electronic documents exception, files posted before the compliance deadline do not need to meet WCAG 2.1—unless they are currently used to apply for, gain access to, or participate in the university's services, programs, or activities. Applications, registration forms, course materials, current handbooks, and similar active documents must comply regardless of when they were posted.

For related guidance, see the **Alt Text Guidelines**, the **Color Use & Contrast Guidelines**, the **PDF Accessibility Remediation Guide** (for fixing PDFs already posted), the **Video Accessibility Guide** (for embedded video in presentations), and the **Social Media Accessibility Compliance Guide**.

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