Center for Teaching & Learning
PDF Digital Accessibility Basics

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How to make a PDF accessible

Introduction

PDF files are created in a variety of ways, from a variety of applications, and for a variety of purposes. The most common approach to creating PDF documents is to start in Microsoft Word and save the final document as a PDF.   However, you can also create PDFs directly using Adobe Acrobat Pro for FoxIt PDF Editor. Most PDF remediation issues can be resolved by making the document accessible in the authoring software before saving as a PDF. Accessible PDFs are evaluated for compliance against PDF/UA (Universal Accessibility) and compatibility with screen reading software.

USD ITS can provide a licensed version of FoxIt PDF Editor ($26) or Adobe Acrobat Pro ($146) by department request. Please contact the ITS service desk directly. Office 365 can be downloaded for free by logging into office.com with your university credentials.

Guidelines

When posting a digital PDF on a public webpage, student portal, or in an online course, it must be made accessible so the documents function effectively with screen readers and meet Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

In order for the PDF to read back correctly, it must conform to these most basic guidelines at a minimum:
- The page must be text-based and have recognizable text by the software program. This is called Optical Character Recognition (OCR). Scanned PDFs that are saved as images do not work with screen readers. Enabling OCR converts the image to actual text that can be recognized by screen readers.
- Images, graphics, charts, and figures must have descriptions called "Alt Text" attributes.
- The reading order of the elements on the page must be logical and make sense.
- Tables need to have header rows indicated.

- The document must be tagged.
- The title of the document must be set both on the page in the document properties.
- The language of the document must be set.

Basic steps to remediating PDFs in Adobe Acrobat Pro or FoxIt

Adobe Acrobat Pro provides several tools including the "**Make Accessible Menu**" in the Action Wizard mode and the "**Accessibility Checker**" to assist authors in evaluating and fixing issues that can impact accessibility. Accessibility features in Adobe Acrobat Pro fall into two broad categories: 1) features that make the reading of PDF documents more accessible, and 2) features that help create accessible PDF documents.

1. To remediate PDFs after they have been created, you must use Acrobat Acrobat Pro. Open the file using Adobe Acrobat Pro on your computer.
2. To check if OCR is enabled on a PDF, try to select some text on the page and copy it to another document. If the entire document is selected when you click on a single page element, that is an indication it was saved as an image. To add OCR choose Tools > Scan & OCR > Recognize Text > In this file > click "Recognize Text" to start the process.
3. To access the full Accessibility toolset choose Tools > Accessibility. The Accessibility Toolset is displayed in the secondary vertical toolbar.
4. To run the **Accessibility Checker** choose **Accessibility Check** from the toolset submenu and choose **Start Checking**.
5. In the list of issues that appear on the left side of the screen, prioritize resolving the severe items marked with a red circle with a white X in the middle. Right clicking on any item, opens a popup menu with more options including explanations on how to resolve the issue.

Accessing PDF editing software

A license for Adobe Acrobat Pro is $146 and FoxIt PDF Editior is $26/license per year. Both are excellent choices for remediating PDFs and checking them for accessibility compliance. Only departments can purchase a copy from ITS or CTL on behalf of a faculty or staff member. To purchase a license, the department head must contact the USD ITS office directly by emailing servicedesk@usd.edu or submitting an ITS service request.

Tips to create and remediate a PDF form

If you are creating a PDF form, all form fields must be tagged with a form tag and form object element and part of the document structure. In addition, field descriptions (labels) must be provided via the tooltip form field property to provide the user with a label or instructions for a field.

1) To tag form fields, choose Tools > Accessibility > Add Tags To Form Fields. This adds the tags and form object elements to the form fields in the proper location in the Tags panel. This step does not add field descriptions. All form fields must have a text label/description (this is set via the form field's tooltip property).

Get specific steps in the Making Accessible PDF Forms tutorial by the CTL.

If you need assistance with optimizing or enhancing PDFs for accessibility purposes, please contact the CTL Digital Accessibility Team at udl@usd.edu or call 605-677-5411.