What makes a document accessible?

If we focus on accessibility at the content level, there are three fundamental principles which, if implemented when documents are created and edited, make content accessible.

These three principles plus a few additional items (listed below) can also be used as a **check-list for manual auditing of document accessibility**. This involves going through the document checking for breaches of accessibility guidelines. The following check list is divided into sections to help provide a framework for checking:

Principle 1: structure

The idea is to use structural elements (tags) such as headings to properly structure documents and therefore identify clearly the various elements which compose the document. These structural elements are often referred to as 'styles' in word processors.

1. Does the document have a title?

2. Are proper Headings (of part, chapter, sessions, subsections, etc.) used and do they impose proper hierarchical order e.g. do Heading 2s define subsections of Heading 1s, Heading 3s define subsections of Heading 2s and so on?

3. Lists: are true numbered and/or bulleted lists used?

4. Is presentation separate from structure? For example, there should be no additional blank lines inserted, whose purpose is to put spaces between paragraphs.

   Set the "space before/after" attribute for paragraphs instead. Also do not insert blank lines to move onto a new page. Insert a page break instead.

5. Similarly, formatting should not be used to mimic headings.

View some Examples of document structure in PDF format.

Principle 2: give alternatives

Every non textual element, such as an image must have a textual alternative. In all cases this alternative needs to take the context into account. For instance, a single picture might have a different description whether it is used in a context or just as decoration. You may find it useful to watch the video from week 1 on 'Video and audio barriers' again.

1. Images: Do all images have an appropriate alternative text? See step 2.12

2. Audio: is there a text transcription containing all the text said in the sound (if any), and all the meaningful other sounds?

3. Videos: Is a text transcription and subtitles available?

Principle 3: identify

1. Is the main language of the document specified?

2. Are there other languages used and are these indicated?

3. Has the document metadata in the document properties been filled in. This includes metadata like title, author, description, etc.

4. Have abstracts for substantial document components like chapters and major sections, been provided?

5. Does link anchor text make sense?

Other Considerations

1. Is there any presentation feature such as colour, bold, italics, alignment, etc. used to provide information that is not present explicitly in the text.

   For example, are there important items in the document highlighted using a colour like red but their significance is not stated in the text.

2. Is the language used clear and simple?

3. Are paragraphs short?

4. Are abbreviations and acronyms expanded at the first occurrence?

5. Are tables simple – Do they have a header row and do they read correctly row by row, column by column?

6. Is the "Repeat headings on each page" option for tables set?

7. Are accents on letters present in both upper and lowercase (when writing in a language that has accents on letters e.g. French and Irish)

8. Improve layout for people with print difficulties?

9. Is font size 12 points used or more?

10. Is a sans serif font used?

11. Is text left aligned, if the language requires reading from left to right?

12. Is there sufficient contrast between background and foreground colours?

13. Is the page background colour a non-white colour e.g. a light pastel colour?

14. Are there any animated effects such as blinking text? Can they be switched off?