

Making Your PDFs Accessible

A step-by-step checklist to support WCAG 2.1 Level AA conformance

What this is: A plain-language guide to checking and fixing the most common accessibility problems in a PDF, so it works for people using screen readers and other assistive technology.

What this is not: Completing this checklist supports — but does not by itself guarantee — WCAG 2.1 AA conformance or legal compliance. PDF/UA (ISO 14289) is the technical standard for accessible PDFs; WCAG 2.1 AA is the standard that ADA Title II points to. Automated tools only catch part of what matters, so a human review is always required.

The most important thing to know first: The easiest and most reliable way to get an accessible PDF is to fix the original source document (for example, the Word file) and export a fresh tagged PDF — not to repair a finished PDF after the fact. Repairing an existing “flat” PDF is much harder, generally requires Adobe Acrobat Pro, and complex or scanned files often need professional help. If you still have the source file, start there (see the companion Word checklist) and you may be able to skip most of the steps below.

Before You Start

- To inspect and fix PDF tags directly, you will need Adobe Acrobat Pro — not the free Acrobat Reader. Free alternatives exist (see “Choosing a Tool” below) but come with limits.
- Save a copy before you begin. Editing PDFs can have unpredictable results, so keep multiple versions as you work.

Step 1 — Is It a Real Document or a Scanned Image?

- Try to select text with your cursor. If you cannot select any text, the page is a scanned image and a screen reader cannot read it at all.
- If it is scanned, run text recognition (OCR) first. In Acrobat: Scan & OCR, then Recognize Text. Everything else depends on this step.

Step 2 — Check Whether the PDF Is Tagged

- Tags are the hidden structure that screen readers rely on. Check File, then Properties, and look at the “Tagged PDF” value at the bottom of the dialog.
- If it is not tagged, the document needs tags added before it can be made accessible.

Step 3 — Run the Accessibility Checker

- In Acrobat Pro: All tools, then Prepare for accessibility, then Check for accessibility, then Start Checking.
- Review the report. Issues are grouped into categories such as Document, Page Content, Forms, Alternate Text, Tables, Lists, and Headings. A few items (Tagged PDF, Language, Title, Tab Order) can be fixed automatically by right-clicking and choosing Fix; most need manual review.
- Checking-only free alternatives: PAC (Windows) or axesCheck (online, Mac-friendly). They tell you what is wrong, but you fix it in another tool.

Step 4 — Add and Review Tags

- If the document is untagged, use Prepare for accessibility, then Automatically tag PDF.
- Treat auto-tagging as a starting point, not a finished result. It is frequently wrong, especially with columns, tables, and complex layouts, and must be reviewed and corrected by a person.

Step 5 — Fix the Reading Order

- Use Prepare for accessibility, then Fix reading order, to confirm content is read in the order a sighted reader would follow.
- Watch for sidebars, pull quotes, captions, and headers or footers landing in the wrong place in the sequence.

Step 6 — Check Heading Tags

- Confirm headings are tagged as H1, H2, H3, and so on, in logical order, without skipping levels (for example, do not jump from H1 to H3).

Step 7 — Alternative Text for Images

- Meaningful images need a short, useful description.
- Decorative images that add no information should be marked as artifacts so screen readers skip them.

Step 8 — Tag Tables Properly

- Data tables need tagged header cells so a screen reader can connect each cell to its column and row.
- Do not use tables purely for visual layout.

Step 9 — Tag Lists and Links

- Lists should be tagged as lists, not as loose paragraphs.

- Links should be tagged and use meaningful text that describes the destination, not a bare web address.

Step 10 — Document Title and Language

- Set a real document title in the file properties, and set the document to display the title (rather than the filename) in the window title bar.
- Set the document language so screen readers pronounce text correctly.

Step 11 — Color and Contrast

- Text should have a contrast ratio of at least 4.5 to 1 against its background (3 to 1 for large text).
- Do not use color alone to convey meaning; add a label, symbol, or other cue.

Step 12 — Forms (If Any)

- Every form field needs a label or tooltip and a sensible tab order, so it can be completed with a keyboard and a screen reader.

Step 13 — Validate and Do a Human Pass

- Re-run the Acrobat checker, then validate with a free tool — PAC (Windows) or axesCheck (online, for Mac). These verify the machine-checkable PDF/UA and WCAG requirements.
- A person still needs to confirm that the reading order is correct, that alt text is meaningful, and that the tags match what is visually on the page.

A Note on What You May Not Have to Remediate

Under the DOJ's ADA Title II rule, certain content has limited exceptions — for example, some archived content and certain pre-existing documents. These exceptions are narrow and conditional, not a blanket pass. Confirm any document against the current rule, and with your own legal counsel, before deciding it is out of scope.

Who Is Responsible for What

- **Content layer (your responsibility):** tags, reading order, alt text, table structure, link text, and the document title and language — the steps in this checklist.
- **Platform layer (your website or hosting setup):** how the PDF is linked and delivered. Often the stronger long-term move is to publish the information as an accessible web page (HTML) instead of a PDF, which avoids PDF remediation altogether.

Choosing a Tool

- **Best path — fix the source and re-export tagged.** Free if you already have the original Word file. Avoid creating flat PDFs in the first place.
- **Checking only (free):** PAC (Windows, runs offline) and axesCheck (online, works on Mac and any device).
- **Remediating an existing PDF:** Adobe Acrobat Pro is the paid standard tool. PAVE is free for personal use (web-based, 5 MB file limit, files held up to three weeks), which suits occasional small files but is not licensed or sized for bulk municipal work. For large volumes, complex layouts, or scanned archives, a professional remediation service is usually the realistic choice.

Verified Sources

[Adobe — Create and verify PDF accessibility, Acrobat Pro](https://helpx.adobe.com/acrobat/using/create-verify-pdf-accessibility.html)

<https://helpx.adobe.com/acrobat/using/create-verify-pdf-accessibility.html>

[Adobe — Creating accessible PDFs](https://helpx.adobe.com/acrobat/using/creating-accessible-pdfs.html)

<https://helpx.adobe.com/acrobat/using/creating-accessible-pdfs.html>

[W3C — Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) 2.1](https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG21/)

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[PAC — PDF Accessibility Checker \(free, Windows; runs offline\)](https://pac.pdf-accessibility.org/en)

<https://pac.pdf-accessibility.org/en>

[axesCheck — free online PDF accessibility checker \(works on Mac and any device\)](https://check.axes4.com/en)

<https://check.axes4.com/en>

[PAVE — PDF Accessibility Validation Engine \(free for personal use; ZHAW\)](https://pave-pdf.org)

<https://pave-pdf.org>

Menu paths and tool names vary by Acrobat version and change over time; verify against the current Adobe documentation above before relying on exact wording in training materials.