How to make your publications accessible

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Accessible design is good design. A document that can be accessed by everyone is more likely to have a greater impact, will be discoverable in key platforms and supports the Open Access ethos. The following simple steps will help to maximise your impact by maximising your audience. The basic principles are the same for the main content creation platforms.

1. Make sure the text is accessible to other applications.

Why this matters:

Text that is selectable and accessible to other applications adds significant value to users relying on a wide range of support tools from referencing software to text-to-speech and screen readers. For text to speech and screen readers, the reading order may need to be tagged and non-essential repeat information (such as headers or footers) removed from the reading order. Otherwise sentences across page breaks will be scrambled by the insertion of footer or header text.

What this involves:

- Check your text can be selected and copied to another program – this helps with a range of study activities (e.g. making notes, checking definitions and translations, reading aloud text).
- This should include any content that will be read by the reader. Consider also text in images and equations.
2. Structure your text with style sheets/semantic tags

Why this matters:

Navigable headings, sub-headings and bookmarks benefit all users, especially people with print impairments. Content can be rapidly skimmed. Hierarchies of ideas can be more readily assimilated.

What this involves:
- Tag navigable headings, sub-headings and bookmarks.
- Include navigational elements, such as table of contents and page numbers.
- Use recognised rather than 'unofficial' formatting when making lists (eg standard formatting bullet points and numbered lists rather than spaces, dashes).
- Use meaningful hyperlinks.
- Ensure tables are accessible.

3. Ensure text can be personalised and reflows when magnified

Why this matters:

This aids those reading on small screens, people with visual impairments or people reading for different purposes (eg low magnification for skimming versus. higher magnification for close reading).

What this involves:
- Text reflows to fit the screen when the size is altered and the reading order is maintained.
- Ensure that colour contrast between text and background is sufficient and can be personalised.

4. Use short image descriptions known as alt-tags

Why this matters:

If images have no alt tag, screen reader software will automatically read the file name. This is distracting and confusing. If you can give a 'null alt tag' (alt="") the screen reader remains silent. This is helpful for 'eye candy' images but makes other more meaningful images invisible to the screen reader user. We advise that, as a minimum, significant images should have a simple alternative text descriptions (alt tags) to act as a signpost to content they might otherwise miss.

What this involves:
- Include the title of the diagram or keywords to allow screen reader to recognise the existence of the image and understand the context
- Convey important information about images, graphs and tables within captions or associated text
Avoid empty (i.e. blank) alt-tags at all costs to stop the file name being read out.

Use null tags (double speech marks - “”) for imagery that does not provide significant information such as ‘eye candy’ that is there only for aesthetic value.

Produce accessible equations, symbols, graphs and tables (e.g. following Benetech Diagram Guidelines).

5. Give preference to multimedia with captions, transcripts and/or audio descriptions

Why this matters:

Video and audio content that lacks text alternatives creates barriers for all users. It can be difficult to navigate to specific information, to have confidence about the spelling of key content or to quote content accurately and efficiently. It can create particular barriers for readers with sensory impairments.

What this involves:

- As a minimum, video and audio resources should have text summaries of the key information
- Preference should be given to resources with full transcripts (audio/video) or captioning (video).
- Audio description will be important for some contexts.
- Scene description is a complex and skilled process better done by the learning provider.
- Useful guidance is available from WebAim covering captions, transcripts, and audio descriptions.

6. More information

- You can convert most document types into a more accessible format using Sensus Access.
- Basic principles of accessible communications.
- How to make your publications accessible (PDF)
- To find out more about accessible information and technology at Kent contact Student Support and Wellbeing.