



# I. T. Accessibility Toolkit

## Developing Alternative Formats

Version 1.0

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### Introduction

Electronic documents often do not need alternative formats if they themselves are accessible. For example, HTML has features that make the document 100% accessible such as the ability to provide alternative text for images. However there may be occasion to use an alternative format if the original document is not accessible.

### HTML

[Hypertext Markup Language](#) (HTML) is the format that makes up the majority of the content on the web today. HTML contains many accessibility features such as the ability to provide [“alt” text](#) for images, document structure that can make navigating and understanding a page easier, and organizing tables in a manner that screen readers can interpret and present in a comprehensible manner to the user. In terms of electronic documents, HTML is the most accessible and often the “alternative” format of choice when a more proprietary format is not accessible. In addition, inaccessible HTML pages (for example if the images do not have equivalent text) can be corrected easily.

### PDF files

The newest [portable document format](#) (PDF) and authoring tools have many more accessibility features than PDF's of just a few years ago. Today it is possible to make a PDF file as accessible as an HTML file; however, much more effort is generally required to create an accessible PDF file. Creating an accessible PDF file can be very labor intensive if the originating source documents are not available. Organizations that are faced with a large quantity of inaccessible legacy PDF documents may find it easier and more cost effective to convert the PDF files to other formats such as HTML and then to use the new authoring tools and accessibility procedures to make future PDF files accessible. When it is essential that the PDF format be retained, however, it is possible to make the PDF file accessible; it just takes understanding of PDF accessibility features and abilities, the right authoring tool, and time.

### Microsoft Word

[Word files](#) are mostly accessible, especially so if they contain only text. However graphics in the files do need to have descriptions. Word does not have an “alt” tag feature that allows a graphic to be linked to descriptive text that can be directly accessed and read by assistive technology. For that reason, the text equivalent must be otherwise included, such as by using a caption. If the Word document contains many images where adding descriptions via captions or other text is not acceptable, then converting the file to some other format, such as HTML should be considered.

If the Word file is a form, and is both presenting and collecting data, care should be taken to ensure that the form works with assistive technology, particularly screen readers. Accessible forms can be made in Word. If the agency has many old inaccessible forms it may be easier, cheaper and more user-friendly to consider an alternative method of presenting and collecting the data, such as by using a web interface and HTML-based form.

If the file is available to the public, such as via a Website, the proprietary nature of the Word format should be considered. Users who are not using Microsoft Word may not be able to read the document. To ensure maximum availability to as many users as possible, creating and making available alternative documents in other formats such as HTML should be considered.

### Microsoft Excel Spreadsheets

To improve the accessibility of data, provide the data in PDF and rich text ([RTE](#)) formats as well as in [Excel](#), an easy process that also provides access for users who do not have Excel. Many free downloadable viewers for Microsoft Office files are not in themselves accessible; thus,

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assuming that a user can download and install a viewer in lieu of the actual full application is not a safe assumption.

### Microsoft PowerPoint

[PowerPoint](#) presentations are not accessible. While screen reader vendors have strived to make PowerPoint accessible and usable, the project is far from complete at this time. If the PowerPoint document needs to be accessible, alternatives should be considered. Alternatives include transforming the document into HTML using some commercially available software, or creating a text transcript of the slides if they are generally textual in nature.

### Large Print

Low-vision readers can often make use of large print paper handouts, an easy solution to implement as the text can easily be enlarged and printed.

### Braille

In situations where printed materials are used or are most convenient, a [Braille](#) reader needs Braille copies of the materials. Braille is a complex system that is more than just dots on a page. Formatting, correct contractions, and other grammatical elements are very important for clarity and for helping the reader understand and use the Braille document effectively.

Commercial software packages and Braille printers seemingly make the transcription process easy. However, this is often not the case, especially if the document is complex, i.e., contains tables, charts or illustrations. A Braille transcriptionist should be employed to produce a quality, usable Braille document.