10 Tips for more accessible documents

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We hear it all the time. Accessibility is too hard! You have to be an expert! The truth is there are lots of things you can do to improve the accessibility of your document and digital content as you design them. Accessibility starts in the design phase. Use these 10 guidelines and tips to make the job easier in the end.

1 Headings organize content into blocks
Headings help screen readers and other assistive technologies navigate a document efficiently by dividing content into logical sections. Properly structured headings improve readability for all users by creating a clear hierarchy of information.

2 Headings are not just based on size
Simply enlarging text doesn't make it a heading—headings need specific tags in the document structure. This ensures that screen readers interpret them correctly as navigational markers, rather than just visually styled text.

3 True Lists declare how many items
Marking lists with appropriate list tags communicates the number of items, providing essential context for users with disabilities. This allows users to better understand the document's structure and content relationships.

4 Not all bullets sound the same
Screen readers may interpret different types of bullets or symbols in varied ways, sometimes as unintended symbols or words. Using standardized list structures ensures clarity and consistency in what screen readers convey.

5 Ligatures are okay if you test them (but I just avoid them)
Some screen readers might misinterpret ligatures (like "fi" for "fi"), so test if they're essential, or avoid them to reduce readability issues. Avoiding ligatures helps prevent any risk of screen reader errors in recognizing characters.

6 Never use drop caps unless you fix them in the PDF
Drop caps, if not managed correctly in PDFs, can disrupt reading flow for screen reader users. Setting them to read correctly ensures that users won't hear a letter isolated at the start of a paragraph, which can be confusing.

7 Tables with merged entire rows will require extra work
Merged rows in tables complicate the document structure, making navigation difficult for screen readers. They often require extra tagging or splitting to provide accurate reading order and context for accessible navigation.

8 Passing the checker is a good start... but that's it
Automated accessibility checkers only identify certain structural issues and can miss usability problems. A manual review is crucial to catch elements like reading order, alt text appropriateness, and logical flow.

9 Accessibility requires manual review (and always will)
Automated tools can't fully assess the user experience or reading accuracy, making a manual check indispensable. Reviewing with assistive technologies ensures the document is fully usable for all audiences.

10 Testing with a screen reader will reveal hidden flaws
Screen reader testing allows you to experience the document from a user's perspective, exposing issues like poor navigation, incorrect tag reading, or confusing structure that might be missed in a visual review.

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