Accessible Documents

# What are Accessible Documents and Section 508?

Accessible documents are designed to ensure that everyone, including people with disabilities, can access and use information efficiently and effectively. This concept is critical because it fosters inclusivity and equal opportunity in accessing digital content. An accessible document is typically structured in a way that assistive technologies, such as screen readers, can easily interpret. This means using clear headings, descriptive links, meaningful alt text for images, and simple, navigable layouts. The design also considers users who navigate documents using keyboards instead of a mouse, ensuring that all interactive elements are reachable and operable in this manner.

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 represents a pivotal development in accessible technology. Amended in 1998 to strengthen its provisions, Section 508 mandates that all electronic and information technology (EIT) developed, procured, maintained, or used by the federal government must be accessible to people with disabilities. This includes not only federal employees but also members of the public who interact with federal agencies, such as through websites or digital documents. The aim is to provide all individuals equal access to and use of information and data, mirroring the access available to those without disabilities.

To comply with Section 508, documents must meet specific standards which are part of the broader 508 Standards. These standards are organized around various technical criteria and performance-based requirements, which cover a range of technologies and digital content types. For documents, these criteria might include features like text alternatives for non-text content, captions for videos, and ensuring compatibility with assistive technologies. The standards are periodically updated to keep pace with technological advances and evolving accessibility needs.

Creating accessible documents and adhering to Section 508 standards not only fulfills legal requirements but also benefits organizations by enhancing the usability of their documents for a wider audience. This increased accessibility can lead to better customer satisfaction, a broader user base, and improved engagement with content. It also promotes best practices in digital content creation that can benefit all users, including those with temporary disabilities or those operating in less-than-ideal circumstances, like bright sunlight or noisy environments.

# Why are Accessible Documents and Section 508 Important?

Accessible documents and Section 508 are important for several reasons:

* They promote equal access and opportunity for people with disabilities, who have the right to access the same information and services as everyone else.
* They enhance the usability and quality of documents for all users, not just people with disabilities, by making them more clear, organized, and consistent.
* They comply with the legal and ethical obligations of federal agencies and other entities that are subject to Section 508, and avoid the risk of lawsuits, complaints, or penalties for non-compliance.
* They support the mission and goals of federal agencies and other entities that create or use documents, by reaching a wider and more diverse audience, improving customer satisfaction, and increasing efficiency and productivity.

# How to Create Accessible Documents and Section 508 Compliance?

Creating accessible documents and Section 508 compliance is not difficult, but it requires some planning, awareness, and tools. Here are some general steps and tips for creating accessible documents:

* Plan ahead and design your document with accessibility in mind. Consider the purpose, audience, and format of your document, and choose the appropriate software and template to create it.
* Use the built-in features and functions of your software to add accessibility elements to your document, such as headings, lists, tables, images, links, and color contrast. Do not rely on visual formatting or manual methods to create these elements, as they may not be recognized by assistive technologies.
* Check your document for accessibility issues and errors and fix them before you share or publish your document. You can use the accessibility checker tool that is available in most software, such as Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, or Adobe Acrobat. You can also use external tools, such as WebAIM's WAVE or PAC 3, to check your document for accessibility.
* Test your document with different assistive technologies and users and get feedback on how to improve it. You can use the simulation features of some software, such as Microsoft Word or PowerPoint, to see how your document looks and sounds with different assistive technologies. You can also ask people with disabilities or accessibility experts to review your document and provide suggestions.
* You can access various resources and training materials on document accessibility and Section 508, such as the Section 508 website, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), the Accessible Electronic Documents Community of Practice (AED COP), or the Document Accessibility Resource Center (DARC).