Creating Accessible Emails

*Using MS Outlook 2013*

**Why make emails accessible?**
Email is one of the most important forms of communication to many of us in the Queen’s community. Email is fast, efficient, and creates a record of the communication. Like documents, accessible email communications ensures that they usable by the widest range of users. This is important because, perhaps unknown to you, an email recipient may be a person with a disability who uses assistive technology such as a screen reader which reads aloud information on the screen such as text or image descriptions provided through alternative text (Alt Text).

**Which Format to Use?**
When composing a new email message, there are 3 formats to choose from:

1. **Plain text** email will suffice for most small, routine correspondence. The advantages of plain text are that it can be read by any email program, is compatible with all email systems, and is compatible with all assistive technologies. Limitations of plain text are that you cannot apply document structure and the links are limited to full URLs.
2. **Rich text** allows you to add formatting to your text. You can make text bold, add underlines, and insert links. Rich text does not allow you to add “semantic structure,” such as headings, which helps those using assistive technology screen readers in handling long, complicated documents. If you create a heading using bold text, a screen reader user will not know that the text is meant to be a heading. Also, rich text is not displayed the same in all email applications.
3. **HTML** email is a good choice when you wish to add more formatting and structure to a message. HTML supports semantic headings, images with alternative text, links, and lists. When your emails contain any of these features, HTML is the format to use.

(Source: *Outlook 2010: Creating Accessible Emails*)
Since HTML supports semantic headings, images with alternative text, links, and lists it is the best format for ensuring the creation of accessible emails. Set HTML as the default email setting. Choose FILE >> OPTIONS, Under Compose messages, in the Compose messages in this format list, click HTML. Click OK to accept your changes, and close.

Appropriate Font Style and Size
Just as with accessible Word documents sans serif fonts work best such as Arial, Helvetica or Verdana. Use 12 point or larger.

Appropriate Use of Colour
When using colour, you must make sure that any information conveyed with colour is also conveyed in black and white. For example, if you’re using colour to identify key words in a document, make sure that you also make them stand out in another way (for example, by putting them in bold).

Backgrounds
While Outlook gives the option of changing the color or even placing a picture behind text (e.g. stationary), it is recommended to keep the background white. Any shading in the background can make email difficult to read.
If a background color is included, please ensure that the contrast with the accompanied text is appropriate. List of Colour Contrast Testers.

**Colour Contrast**
You must provide high colour contrast to the text in your document. A good example of high colour contrast is black and white; while an example of poor colour contrast is light yellow and white.

**Providing Structure**
Styles are formatting instructions automatically programmed into most MS Office applications including Outlook. You can follow the guidelines for Creating Accessible Word Documents ([Windows](#) or [Mac](#)). Styles are used in lieu of the buttons on the toolbar (for example, the “Bold” button, or the “Bullets” button). Use them to create:

- Titles (using the “Title” style)
- Headings (using one of nine “Heading” styles)
- Subtitles (using the “Subtitle” style)
- Bulleted Lists (using one of five different “List Bullet” styles)
- Numbered Lists (using one of five different “List Number” styles)
- Words in italics (using the “Emphasis” style)
- Words in bold (using the “Strong” style)
- Underlined words (using the “Subtle Reference” style)

**Headings**
Headings are a type of Style which makes it easier for various adaptive technologies to navigate a document. Many people do not create Headings correctly, either making font sizes bigger or in bold rather than using the formats already provided by Outlook. By using Headings, you are creating a real structure in your document which will be correctly read by assistive technology and will make the page more usable for everyone. While composing an email you can access the **Style** section under the **FORMAT TEXT** tab.
Alternative Text
Any pictures, graphs or text boxes within a document must be given alternative text. Alternative text must give an accurate description of what the item is, so that the user’s assistive technology may convey what information is demonstrated by the item. It is a best practice to avoid using text boxes as they may be inaccessible by screen readers.

1. Inset the image by choosing the INSERT tab
2. Select the image and right click inside the image. A menu will appear.
3. Select “Format Picture”. This open up the Format Picture panel on the right-hand side.

4. Select the “Layout and Properties” button.
5. Type the description in the area provided.

How to Create Good Alternate Text
- Consider the content and function of your image.
- If it provides content to your document, make sure that the information the image provides is described in the alt text.
- If your image only provides a function (for example, providing a portrait of a historical figure described in the text) you need only describe the image. In
the case that the image is of a historical figure, write his/her name as the alt text.

- Try not to use “Image of...” or “Graphic of...” as alt text. That is usually evident to the person reading the alt text.
- Do not repeat the information which is contained in the document itself into the alt text. If it's already in the document, that should be enough.

Wrapping Style of Non-Text Elements
To ensure the accessibility of non-text elements, the “wrapping style” should be set as “In line with text”.

1. Select the image/text box and right click inside the image. A menu will appear.
2. Select “Wrap Text”.
3. Select “In line with text”

Hyperlinks
To link your document to a website or another document, you may use hyperlinks. When doing so, make sure that the Hyperlink has context and describes where it leads. It should not just read “click here”, and should make it clear what the destination of the link is (example, the web link www.queensu.ca should be written as "Queen's University").
Inserting a Hyperlink in Outlook

1. Highlight the text you wish to be the link.
2. Choose the **INSERT** tab.
3. Select the “Hyperlink” option. A new window will pop up.
4. At the bottom, where it indicates to put the address, type in the address of the website. Or, if you are creating a Hyperlink to a file, search for the desired file in the browser window. Select it.
5. Once you’ve either typed in the web address or selected your desired file, click **OK**.

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**Signatures and vCards**

Signatures in Outlook provide a way to add name and contact information to emails the same way every time without re-typing.

Steps for adding Signatures:

1. Go to the **INSERT** tab, choose **Signature**, then **Signatures**
2. Select **New**
3. Give Signature a name, then click **OK**
4. Type in Signature information, then click **OK**
Some Outlook users like to use vCards, or electronic business cards, as their signatures. Screen readers cannot read the information on a vCard and therefore they are considered inaccessible.

**Attachments**

All email attachments need to be accessible. Making other documents accessible are covered by the Accessibility Hub "How-to" section. If for some reason you must send an inaccessible attachment, you must make sure that the body of your email includes all of the information that is included in the attachment.

**External Resources**

[Outlook 2010: Creating Accessible Emails](#)

[Accessibility Features in Microsoft Office 2010](#)

Microsoft’s guide, [Create Accessible Word Documents](#), offers online video tutorials and a reference sheet that may be used offline. Closed captions are available for videos by selecting the CC button.

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Please contact the Accessibility Coordinator, Andrew Ashby, in one of the following ways:

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