

Accessibility: Heading Structures in Word Documents

By Jane Nguyen

For many of us, the extent of our accessibility savvy is “make sure videos have captions.” That was certainly true of me for a while, even if I was vaguely aware of other measures.

In the past few months, I’ve become more mindful of accessibility. It’s something we’ve been hearing about more and more but don’t necessarily know how to implement in our learning content.

I was murky on heading structures in Word documents for longer than I’d like to admit. I knew that Word docs should *have* heading structures; I just had no idea what that meant and how to create them in a Word doc.

I’d like to talk about it this week, because it’s so simple and we should all get into the heading structures habit. The reason it’s important is that many students who have visual challenges or no sight at all use screen readers to read content on documents and websites. When those documents and websites are formatted with headings, the screen reader will announce headings by saying, “heading...” This, in turn, helps the learner to mentally organize information and take notes more easily and effectively.

What *NOT* to do:

Creating screen readable heading structures in Word means *not* creating your headings simply by making the font size bigger and clicking on “bold,” then reverting to regular, unbolded Times New Roman 12-point font for a paragraph of text, before making another heading by enlarging the font size and putting it in bold, and so forth. Of course, visually, headings will look just fine when you do it this way. However, a screen-reader will not recognize your makeshift headings as headings, and it will not announce “heading” to the learner (an announcement is indeed needed.)

What to do:

Instead, you should first think about how many heading levels you’ll need for the document. Perhaps just three.

Heading Level 1: American Wars

Heading Level 2: Civil War, World War I, World War II

Heading Level 3: (underneath Civil War: Battle of Fort Sumter, Battle of Sewell's Point; underneath WW 1: Battle of the Somme, Battle of the Frontiers; underneath WW II: Battle of the Bulge, Battle of Midway)

Of course, you can format your headings as you type or after you've finished the whole document, as long as you use the functions in Word for headings. I'm going to assume you've typed everything in regular font the whole way.

Highlight/select "American Wars." Choose the **Home** tab in the ribbon. A **Styles** box will appear. There, you can pick the heading styles that create a hierarchy. I would pick **Heading 1** (largest) for American Wars. Then, select Civil War and use **Heading 2** (smaller than Heading 1). The same for WW I and WW II. When you select each battle, choose **Heading 3** for each of them. (Heading 3 is smaller than Heading 2).

Here is a [video version](#) of what I described above.

Check out these resources as well for yet more information and how-to:

- [How to Create Headings in Word \(Using Heading Styles\)](#)
- [Working with Headings in Word Documents](#)
- [Microsoft Word - Adding Headings to a Document](#)

If you'd like assistance with creating a heading structure in your Word documents, please don't hesitate to reach out to the instructional design and technology (IDT) team. We're happy to help!