

Accessibility for Content Creators

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What is Accessibility?



Accessibility is a design principle which requires that physical and digital environments include features that make them functional and user-friendly for people with disabilities.

Often, when people think of accessibility, they only imagine physical spaces. You may think of entry ramps to buildings, curb cuts, or the buttons on buildings that open doors automatically. However, accessibility is far more diverse than just ramps. For example, when you use a crosswalk and it makes a loud, rapid beeping noise, it's not just there to get your attention if you've been looking at your phone. The main purpose of the beeping is to alert those with impaired vision that it is safe to walk. Even common items used by everybody can be a tool for accessibility. For example, disposable straws are used by almost everybody, but they also help people with disabilities. People with certain disabilities must use straws to drink safely and without one, liquid could enter their lungs and cause health problems. As these examples show, accessibility is important. A lack of accessible features in physical spaces could result in bodily harm.

Digital Accessibility

Now that you've seen a few examples of accessibility in the physical world, you may be wondering how it pertains to digital spaces and content creators. Accessibility is important in all content you create. If websites and other forms of digital content are not accessible, then you are shutting out an entire group of people. Furthermore, people with disabilities have the right to access and use all the same content as everybody else. Just like how the lack of an entry ramp prevents a person using a wheelchair from entering a building, a lack of subtitles could prevent a deaf person from enjoying a movie. In both scenarios, the person with a disability is excluded from a space to which people without disabilities have full access.

Online accessibility is subject to guidelines just like it is for buildings and public places. According to the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI), accessibility must account for a range of disabilities including:

- auditory
- cognitive
- neurological
- physical
- verbal
- and visual ("Introduction to Web Accessibility").

Digital accessibility features can sometimes be difficult to spot. They often blend in to the design of a website or are hidden unless you are actively using them. However, there are plenty of common examples. Some features that you likely know about are:

- screen readers
- voice to text
- subtitles
- LED flash alerts
- and color contrast.

Even if you do not have a disability, you may have used some of these features yourself. People with perfect hearing use subtitles due to personal preference. Similarly, voice to text is a convenient way to send a hands-free text that many non-disabled people use when driving or if their hands are full. This website will teach you about two features in particular: alternate (alt) text and styles. Along with explaining what they are, this site will also teach you how to apply alt text and styles in two programs often used by content creators: Microsoft Word and Madcap Flare.

History of Accessibility

In the United States, accessibility is required by the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Before the ADA, disabled people were not fully protected by the same civil rights laws that prevent discrimination on the basis of race, religion, sex, or national origin. Today, the ADA prohibits discrimination and ensures that people with disabilities are given the same opportunities as people without ("Introduction to the ADA").

Before the ADA, discrimination was rampant and the accessible technology that we may take for granted today, such as curb cuts and entry ramps, were exceedingly rare. Often, people were denied jobs because of their disabilities. According to one of the original writers of the ADA, Robert L Burgdorf Jr., "People with disabilities were routinely denied rights that most members of our society take for granted, including the right to vote (sometimes by state law, other times by inaccessible polling places), to obtain a driver's license, to enter the courts and to hold public office" (Burgdorf). As Burgdorf describes, people with disabilities were considered less than and were not given a voice in society.

The list of discriminatory practices goes on but today there are a variety of accommodations for people with disabilities. These include fair hiring practices, access to buildings and transportation, and, increasingly, access to the Internet. Websites now contain a variety of accessibility features that make them usable for more and more people. The features described in this website, alternate text and styles, help people who use screen readers to read web pages. Other fea-

tures include color contrast on screens and subtitles on videos. Without these features, people with disabilities would be excluded from a major part of the modern world.

You may be wondering how the ADA applies to digital content when it was enacted before the ubiquity of the Internet. The ADA does not include any content that specifically addresses web accessibility. However, a website being inaccessible does not conform to the principles of the ADA which uphold equal opportunities for people with disabilities. Recently, a case brought to the Supreme Court's attention suggested that the ADA extends to websites.

In this case, a blind man named Guillermo Robles sued Domino's Pizza because their website did not work with his screen reader. Domino's took the case (now called Domino's Pizza v. Guillermo Robles) to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court denied Domino's petition to hear the case, essentially upholding the ADA's jurisdiction over websites (Higgins). This is an important step in increasing digital accessibility especially considering how many websites are far behind in implementing these features.

Accessibility vs. Usability and Universal Design

Accessibility is distinguished from the similar terms "usability" and "universal design" by its focus on disabilities. The other terms are also design principles, but they have different aims.

Usability refers to making technology pleasant and efficient to use. When designers want to increase a website's usability, they may change the layout of a page or the written copy. These changes will not necessarily make the website more accessible. It could still lack alternate text or proper use of styles. Similarly, many features added to increase usability can make a product appear better to people without disabilities but could still be difficult to use for people with them. For example, page design can be inaccessible if the color contrast is not sufficient. It doesn't matter how good your website looks if not all users can see it properly.

Universal design has more in common with accessibility than usability does, but it is a broader term. For example, universal design attempts to accommodate not only those with disabilities but also people who are not fully literate or fluent, have poor internet connections, are using mobile devices, and more ("Accessibility, Usability, and Inclusion"). Essentially, universal design does help people with disabilities, but that is not the only concern it addresses.

Although these terms all overlap, the primary goal of accessibility is to accommodate people with disabilities.

Why it Matters

As a content creator, it is your job to make your work as accessible as possible. However, the Internet is full of websites that don't put in the necessary work. Even major corporations are often lacking in accessible features. Many people may try to excuse a lack of accessibility or argue that it is not a big deal. These people are wrong: people with disabilities deserve equal opportunity in the digital world as much as in the physical world. If you need more convincing, here are some reasons why you should make all your content accessible.

1. Accessibility is a human right.



In countries all over the world, including the United States, people with disabilities are provided with equal opportunities by the Americans with Disabilities Act (read more about this act under [History](#)). If your content is inaccessible, then you are restricting who can use it.

The various features you can use to make your content more accessible were not designed for nothing. They were specifically created to help disabled people. The hard part of finding solutions has already been done for you, you just need to implement them in your own work.

Also, because accessibility is a right, inaccessible websites are facing more and more lawsuits. According to the Bureau of Internet Accessibility (BoIA), "In 2018, there were 2,258 web accessibility lawsuits filed in the U.S., nearly tripled from

the 814 lawsuits in 2017" ("6 Unexpected Benefits of Web Accessibility"). Essentially, if you don't have accessible content, you risk a lawsuit. Incorporating accessible features into your work can prevent discrimination towards people with disabilities and lawsuits towards yourself.

2. Accessibility allows more people to access your content.

Although adding additional features to your new and existing projects may sound like more work, it pays off. If a website is accessible then more people can use it. According to BoIA, "1 in 4 U.S. adults is living with a disability" ("6 Unexpected Benefits of Web Accessibility."). So if you do not make your content accessible, you are missing out on 25% of your audience. It also improves search engine optimization (SEO): "In many cases, the goals of web accessibility and SEO are aligned. Building websites with cleaner interfaces and easier navigation helps people with disabilities, but it also improves your bounce rate (the percentage of visitors who leave your website after only one page visit)" ("6 Unexpected Benefits of Web Accessibility.").

An accessible website can improve your image as well. Websites that are more accessible show users that you care about them. In return, these users are more likely to support your website. People support content that aligns with their values. However, in the case of accessibility it's more than just aligning your content with something like good environmental practices. Accessible content directly supports the people who visit your website.

3. Accessible features improve usability for everybody—even designers.



Although accessibility's main purpose is to accommodate people with disabilities, many of the features are useful for everyone. Just think of how many times you've turned on subtitles when watching a movie because you couldn't understand a character. Or maybe you used voice to text to send a quick message when your hands were full. These features mainly exist to aid people with impaired hearing or vision. However, they are also convenient and increase usability for a variety of people.

Accessibility tends to increase usability. In fact, the entire technology industry owes a lot to people with disabilities for the inventions that led to where we are today. Cliff Kuang and Robert Fabricant, authors of the book *User Friendly*, write, "You sit at the end of a long line of inventions that might never have existed but for people with disabilities: the keyboard on your phone, the telecommunications lines it connects with, the inner workings of email" (199). They go on to explain how each of these now commonplace technologies were originally created to aid people who were blind and deaf. Nowadays, many companies actually talk directly to people with disabilities for ideas on not only how they can make their products accessible, but just usable in general. Technology that makes the world more accessible can lead to innovation.

On a smaller scale, the features described on this website can make your own work easier and more efficient. Styles make designing large documents and websites quick and easy. Say, for example, you want to use headings on your pages, much like the headings on this page. You want your website to look cohesive so all of the headings should have the same formatting. Instead of going through every single page and formatting your headings individually—a process known as inline or local formatting—you can set your headings to the same style, like "h1." Every heading set to "h1" will have the same formatting. In addition, you can edit the style itself and every "h1" element will be updated at the same time. Styles are an important accessibility feature because they work well with screen readers, but they can save content creators time as well.

Alternate (Alt) Text

What is it?

Alt text is an accessibility feature that provides text descriptions of pictures, graphs, and other visual elements so that they can be read by screen readers.

Alt text usually consists of a one or two sentence long description. This description is read aloud by a screen reader to a user with a visual impairment. Without alt text, screen readers cannot convey the information an image provides to a user. Instead, the screen reader will just say that it is an image without any description, or it will read the file name. This may cause people who use screen readers to stop using your websites. If they can't access part of the information, then there is no reason for them to stick around.

When writing alt text, make sure that your description is brief but appropriately descriptive. For example, let's look at this picture below:



An appropriate description for this image would be "A cup of coffee." In fact, that is the alt text I have used to describe it. Often, alt text is not appropriately descriptive. Some websites treat it like a hashtag and may have descriptions like "coffee latte cafe cup drink." This may imply that it's a cup of coffee, but it will more likely confuse users. Descriptions should use normal syntax so that they can be understood easily. Another common mistake is saying "This is an image of a cup of coffee." It is not necessary to tell the user that it is an image, this will be implied. Finally, you should not include too much information in your description. For example, If you are using a picture of yourself next to a description of who you are, you don't need to say "[Your name] is a technical writer and content creator." Just saying your name is enough, especially when the text beside the image already says the rest of that information.

Null (Empty) Alt Text

Every image on a website or document should be marked with some form of alt text to be considered accessible. However, there are some cases in which the content of an image is already adequately described or the image is only used for decoration and provides no relevant information. Informative images that are already described may have a caption or be referenced in adjacent body text. Decorative images, on the other hand, may require no description at all. In this case, the images still require what is known as null, or empty, alt text. This means that images are still marked with an alt tag—the tag used to add alt text in HTML—but the space for the description is purposely left blank.

A null alt tag tells screen readers that they can ignore an image. In some programs, like Microsoft Word, there is an option labeled “Mark as Decorative” so that the program knows you are leaving the space blank intentionally. If you do not specify that the image is decorative or does not require alt text, screen readers will read the image anyways—usually as a file name—and users will assume that the lack of alt text is a mistake and not a choice. Keep in mind that whether an image is decorative or informative is a judgment call made by the designer.

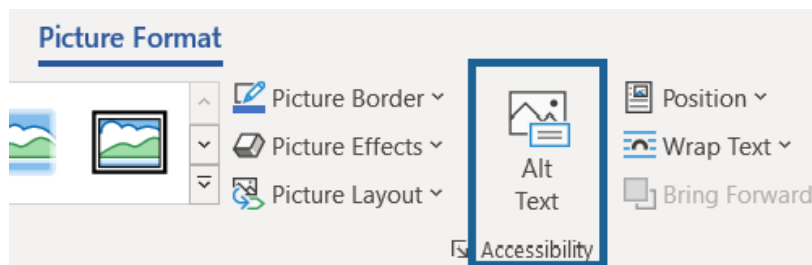
Alt Text in Microsoft Word

Alt text is not only a feature in website design, it should be used in all the digital content that you create. For example, in word processors like Microsoft Word, you should still add alt text to elements such as images, shapes, and charts in case somebody is accessing your document online rather than in a printed form. Luckily, adding alt text in Word is easy and intuitive.

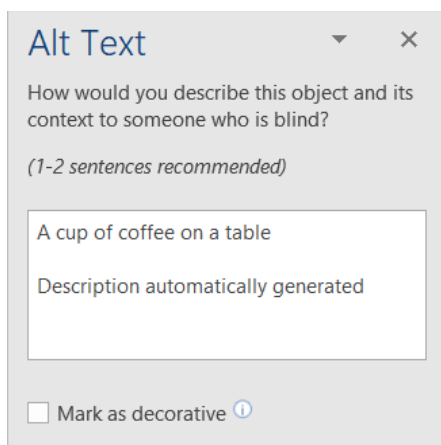
Applying alt text

The alt text feature in Microsoft Word is quick and easy to use. As you may know from the other pages of this website, alt text allows screen readers to describe an image to users. In Word, an informative description can be added to your content using the intuitive Alt Text panel.

1. Select the photo you want to add alt text to. A new menu tab titled **Picture Format** appears.
2. Open the **Picture Format** tab.



3. Click the **Alt Text** icon in the Accessibility section of the **Picture Format** tab. The **Alt Text** sidebar opens to the right of your document.



4. Place your cursor in the text box in the **Alt Text** sidebar.

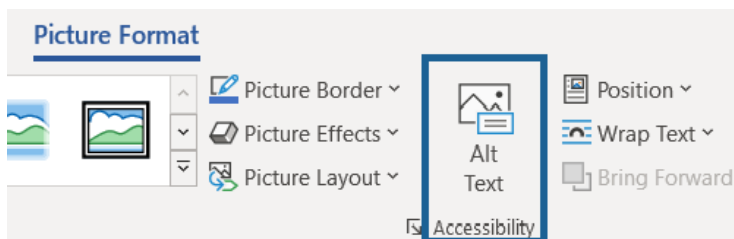
Note: Microsoft Word automatically generates alt text for new images. This function is not always accurate so you should replace it with your own description whenever necessary.

5. Type a 1-2 sentence description of the image.

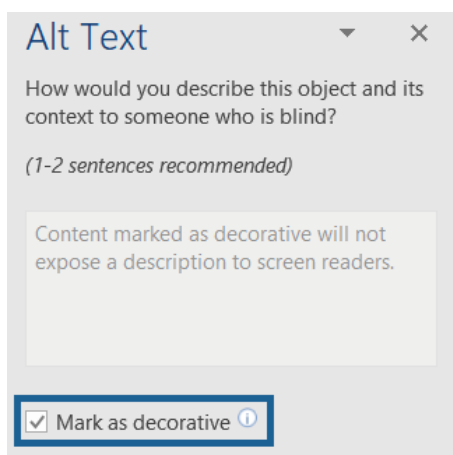
Marking an image as decorative

Sometimes, the images you add will only be decorative. Other times, they will be adequately described by adjacent text or a caption. In either case, you do not need to add a full alt text description. However, you do have to mark the image as decorative so that screen readers know they can ignore it. This process is as simple as checking a box.

1. Select the image you want to mark as decorative. A new tab titled **Picture Format** appears.
2. Open the **Picture Format** tab.



3. Click the **Alt Text** icon in the **Accessibility** section of the picture format tab. The **Alt Text** sidebar opens to the right of your document.



4. Check the box labeled **Mark as decorative**. The alt text box turns gray and cannot be typed in.

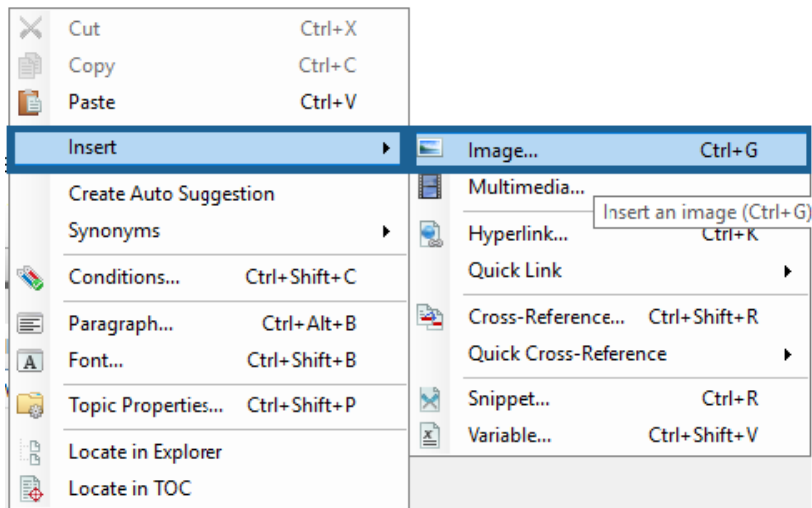
Alt Text in Madcap Flare

Alternate (alt) text in Madcap Flare is easy to add and it makes a big difference in the accessibility of your content. Remember, alt text should be used on every visual element that provides information to users. This way, people using screen readers have access to the same information as other users.

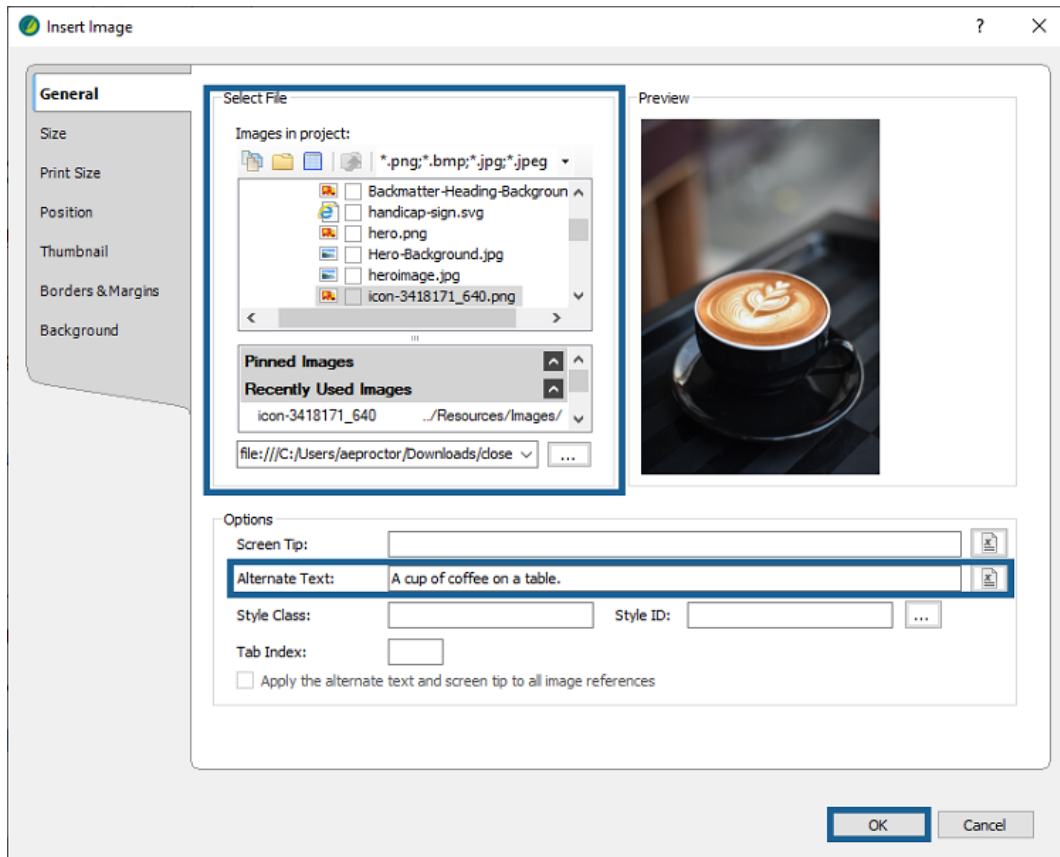
Applying alt text while inserting a new image

When you add a new image to your Madcap Flare project, you should always add alt text. In Flare, adding alt text is simple. All you have to do is type your description in the same window you use to insert a new image. The description will automatically be added to the text editor for you.

1. Right-click where you want your new image to appear. A context menu appears.
2. Click **Insert** in the context menu. A pull-right menu extends from the context menu.



3. Click **Image...** on the pull-right menu. A pop-up window titled **Insert Image** opens.

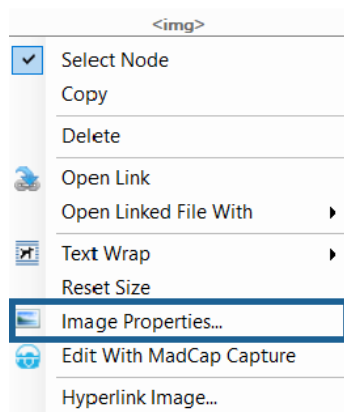


4. Select the image you want to insert from the **Select File** section of the pop-up window.
5. Type your desired alt text in the **Alternate Text** box in the **Options** section of the pop-up window.
6. Click **OK** to save your changes. The image appears in your project.

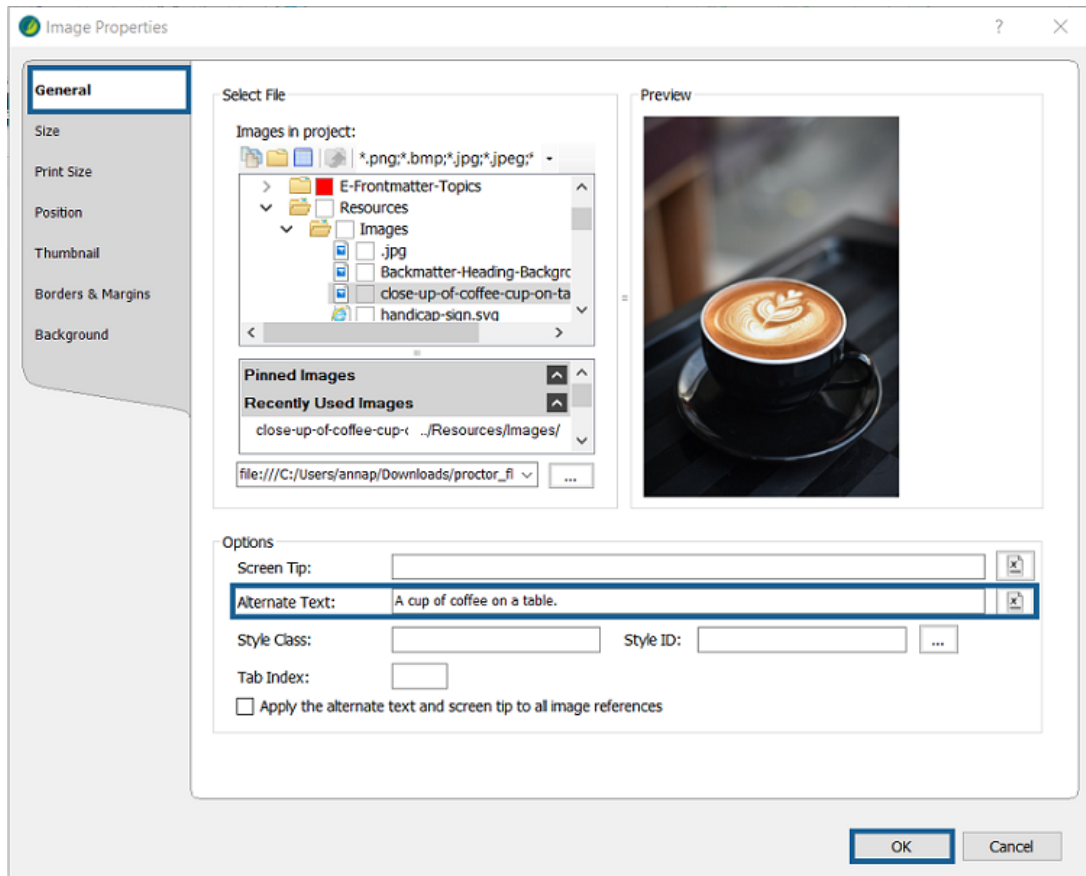
Applying alt text to an existing image

So you have read through this website and learned about the wonders of accessibility. Now you're excited to start using alt text. The only problem is that you already have images in an existing Madcap Flare project and they don't have any alt text. Luckily you don't have to reinsert all those images. Instead, you can add alt text to an existing image in a few quick steps.

1. Right-click the image you want to add alt text to. A context menu appears.



2. Select **Image Properties** from the context menu. A pop-up window titled **Image Properties** window opens.

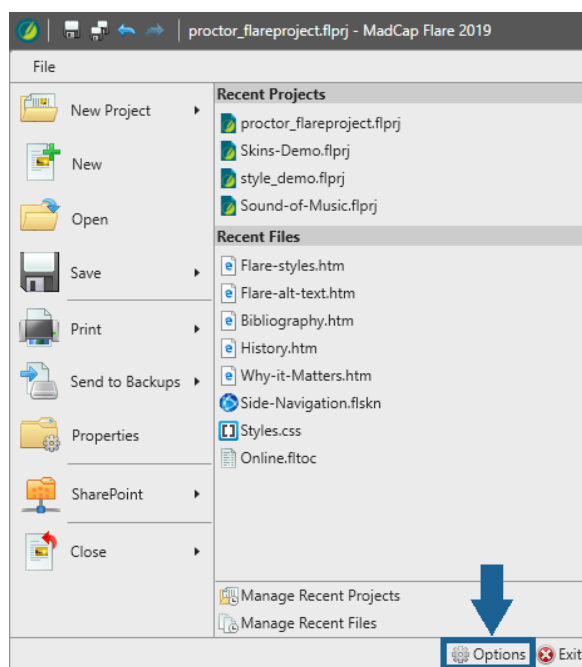


3. Open the **General** tab in the **Image Properties** window.
4. Type your desired alt text description in the **Alternate Text** box in the **Options** section.
5. Click **OK** to save your changes.

Applying null (empty) alt text to new images

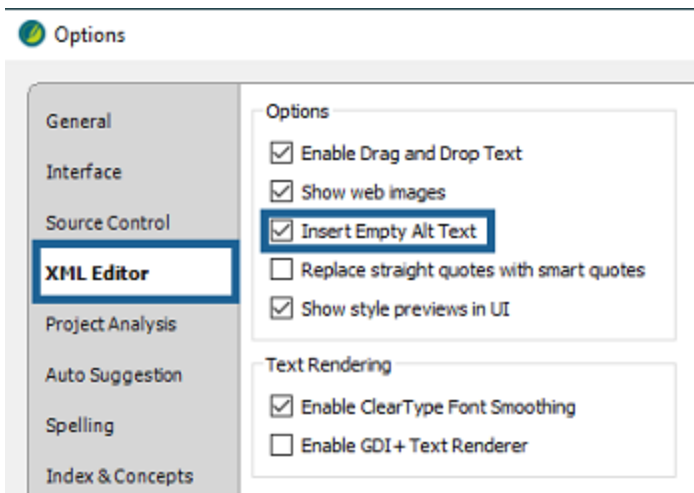
Not every image you use is going to provide information to your users. Many will just be decoration or will be adequately described in adjacent text. However, leaving the alternate text box blank when you add a new image will not always create a null alt tag in the Flare text editor. If you want Flare to add a default empty alt tag every time you don't type a description, you can enable it in settings.

1. Open the **File** tab. A drop-down menu opens.



2. Click **Options** in the bottom right of the **File** drop-down menu. A pop-up window titled **Options** opens.

3. Open the **XML Editor** tab in the pop-up window.



4. Check the box labeled **Insert Empty Alt Text**.
5. Click **OK** to save your changes.

Note: This setting will only affect new images. Existing images that do not have a null alt tag will not have one added to them after changing this setting.

Styles

What are they?

A style is a design tool that applies the same formatting to every page element that is set to the same style category.

These style categories are often used on text and have names like "Heading 1" or "h1," depending on the software you are using. In a word processor, all body text is initially set to a basic "paragraph" style. You can edit that style to change the appearance of all your body text at once. You could also set some text to different styles like headings or lists. For example, if you set text to the "Heading 1" or "h1" style, its formatting will change and it will become a prominent heading, rather than body text.

Why should you use them?

Styles are also an accessibility feature. They allow content to be organized into headings and subheadings which can be differentiated from body text by screen readers. Users can then skim through headings without having to listen to all the body text between each one. Essentially, styles allow people with impaired vision to skim a page similar to how people with normal vision can, which saves them time.

If you need an extra incentive to learn to use styles, they also make work easier for content creators. Formatting with styles is more efficient and helps you create a consistent page design. Rather than having to change the color of every heading in your document one by one—known as inline formatting—you can set each heading to a specific style. For example, any text set to “Heading 1” would all look identical. If you want to change the color of every “Heading 1” element at once, you can edit the style itself in the Styles section of the program. Once you save the style, every “Heading 1” in your project will automatically change to the color you chose. Just like how styles save time for people using screen readers, they can also save time for designers.

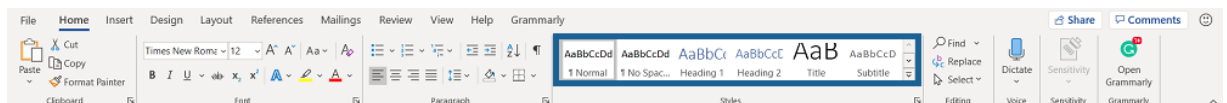
Styles in Microsoft Word

Using styles in Microsoft Word is a great way to make sure that your content is accessible and has a uniform design. Basic styles can be applied in just a few clicks and will work with screen readers, allowing users to skim content by its headings. From a content creator's perspective, they allow more control over your document as well. Styles allow you to create titles, headings, subtitles, and more that all have the exact same formatting. This way, you can edit a style once and the new formatting will be applied to all text set to that style.

Applying a style

When you want to add headings to your pages, you can use the default styles provided by Word. These styles have preset formats that instantly give your pages visual hierarchy and an added accessibility feature.

1. Select the text you want to style.
2. Open the **Home** tab.



3. Click the drop-down arrow in the **Styles** section of the Home tab. A drop-down menu opens.

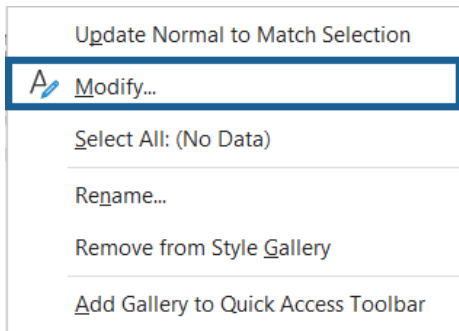


4. Select a format from the **Styles** drop-down menu. The text formatting changes to match the style selected.

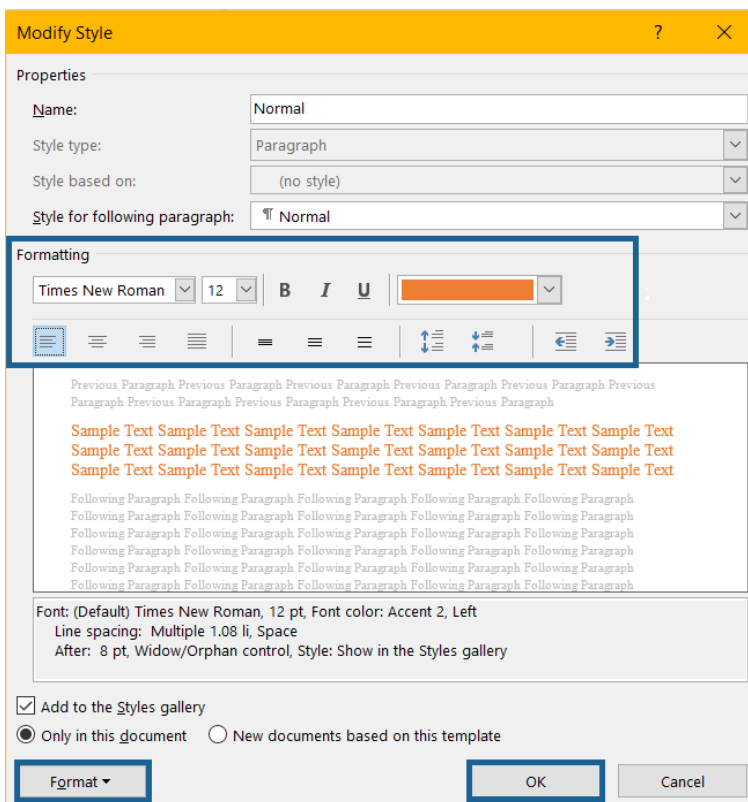
Modifying a style

The preset styles in Word are useful, but you might not love how they look. Luckily, you can edit the appearance of any style and your changes will be applied throughout your document instantly.

1. Open the **Home** tab.
2. Open the **Styles** drop-down menu.
3. Right-click on the style you want to modify in the drop-down menu. A context menu appears.



4. Click **Modify** in the context menu. A pop-up window titled **Modify Style** opens.



5. Click on the **Font** box in the **Formatting** section and choose a font from the drop-down list.
6. Click on the **Font Size** box in the **Formatting** section and choose a size from the drop-down list.
7. Click on the **Font Color** box in the **Formatting** section and choose a color from the drop-down list, if desired.
8. Select a type of emphasis, if desired.
 - Click the **B** icon to bold your text.
 - Click the **I** icon to italicize your text.
 - Click the **U** icon to underline your text.
9. Select an **Alignment**, if desired.
10. Click the **Format** drop-down menu in the bottom-left corner to find more options.
11. Click **OK** to confirm your changes. Any text already set to the style you modified changes to match the new formatting.

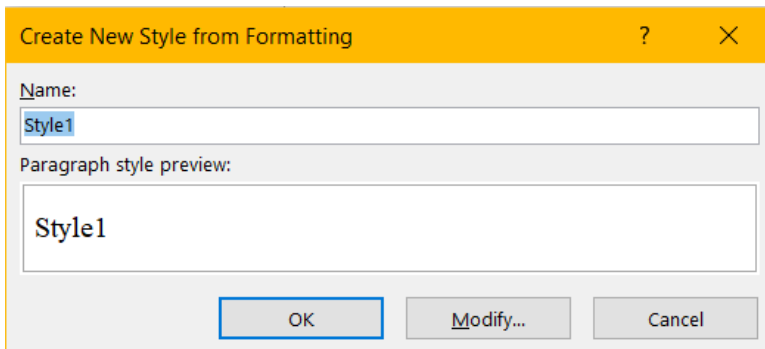
Creating a new style

If you don't see the style you want in Word, you can create your own. New styles will be added to the list of existing styles so that you can access them at any time.

1. Open the **Home** tab.
2. Open the **Styles** drop-down menu.



3. Select **Create a Style** from the drop-down menu. A pop-up window titled **Create New Style from Formatting** opens.



4. Type a descriptive name for your new style in the **Name** text box.
5. Click **Modify** to edit the style. To edit a style, use the steps in the "Modifying a style" procedure above.
6. Click **OK** to save your changes. The new style is added to the Styles panel.

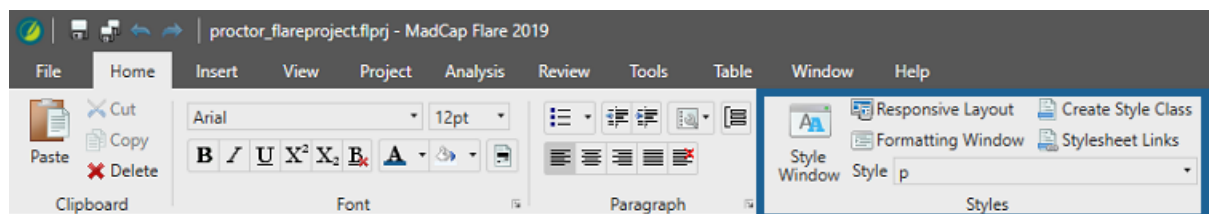
Styles in Madcap Flare

As explained in the [Styles](#) page of this website, styles allow screen readers to skim through content. This improves the usability of websites for people with visual impairments. Styles also allow content creators to design uniform documents and web pages. In projects with multiple pages like those made with Madcap Flare, styles help you keep your formatting organized and consistent.

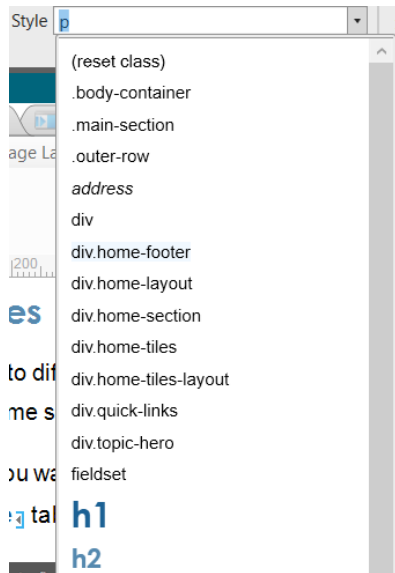
Applying styles

You can apply styles in Madcap Flare quickly and easily. Once you have a page element set to a style, it will update to match every other element that uses the same style. For example, if you create a header by setting text to "h1," it will match every other "h1" in your project.

1. Select the text you want to apply a style to.
2. Open the **Home** tab.



3. Open the **Style** drop-down list in the **Styles** section of the **Home** tab.

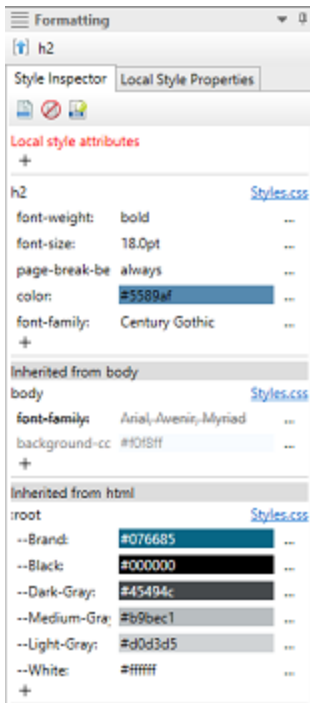


4. Select the style you want to use. The text changes to match the style selected.

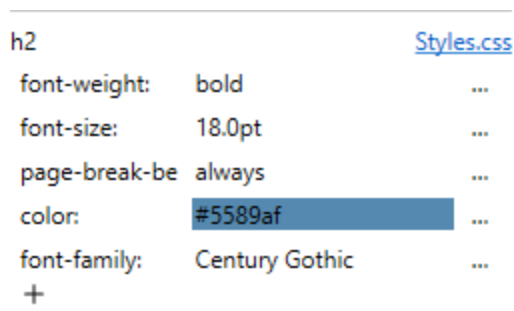
Editing styles

You are editing a project in Flare and realize that you want to change how your "h1" style looks. Instead of going through every single page to update all your headings, you can edit the style itself. Once a style has been edited, the changes will be applied to every "h1" in the entire project.

1. Open the **Home** tab.
2. Click **Formatting Window** in the **Styles** section. A side panel opens to the right of the page you are editing.



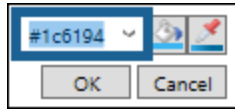
3. Open the **Style Inspector** tab.
4. Place your cursor on text that is set to the style you want to edit. The **Style Inspector** displays the properties of whatever text your cursor is on, with the name of the style on the top left. (In the following image, my cursor was on "h2" text hence the "h2" label in the top left.)



5. Click on the ellipsis (three dots) next to a formatting option to edit it.
6. To change the font:
 - Click the ellipsis to the right of **font-family**. A drop-down menu appears.
 - Choose a font from the drop-down menu.

7. To change the font color:

- Click the ellipsis to the right of **color**. A drop-down menu appears.

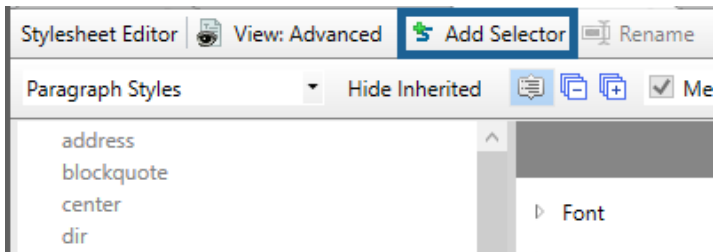


- Type the hex code for the color you want in the text box.
 - Click **OK** to save your changes.
8. If you do not see a property you want to change, click the plus sign and select the property you want to edit from the drop-down list.

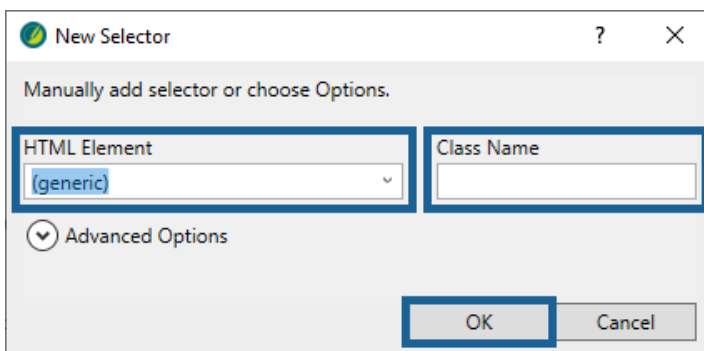
Creating a new style class

When you're working on a project, you may want to create a brand new style. You might be adding notes or tips to a procedure and you want them to have a different color or a border. When this happens, you can create a new style class.

1. Open the **Stylesheet Editor**.



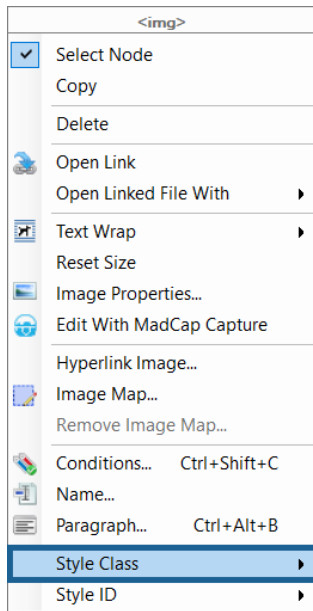
2. Click the **Add Selector** button at the top of the page. A pop-up window titled **New Selector** opens.



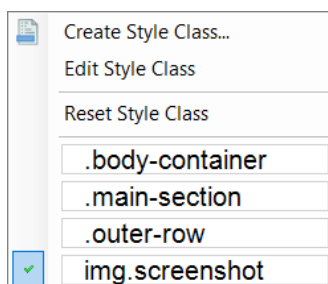
3. Open the **HTML Element** drop down list and select an existing style you want to base your new style class on. For example, if you want to create a new style class for images, select the **img** element.
4. Type a descriptive name for your new style class in the **Class Name** text box. For example, if you are creating a style class for screenshots so that all screenshots have the same formatting, you can name the class "screenshots."
5. Click **OK** to create your new style class.

Note: New style classes will inherit formatting from their related HTML element. You can edit the new style class using the same procedure described in "Editing styles."

6. Right-click on the element you want to apply your new style class to. A context menu appears.



7. Click **Style Class**. A pull-right menu appears.



8. Select your new style class from the pull-right menu.

About Me



My name is Anna Proctor and I am senior at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. I am completing a Bachelor of Arts in English as well as a minor in Linguistics. I am also pursuing a certification in Professional Writing and Technical Communications (PWTC). When I graduate, I hope to work in either technical writing or user experience design. Currently, I spend most of my time reading, cooking, or playing with my dog.

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