Creating Accessible Emails

Email is one of the most common ways to communicate. While it is fun to design emails and documents that are eye popping and attractive, it is important to remember that not all people read emails visually. Roughly 9% of Bryant University students have a disability, and many disabilities affect how a student consumes email communication.

Email Design

Creating accessible emails is an important step in not discriminating against people with disabilities. With email being such an important communication tool, it is imperative that people with disabilities can understand the entire message that is being communicated.

Avoiding Tables

If possible, it is best to avoid using tables when communicating information in an email. Users who utilize assistive technology such as screen readers will run into problems if the table is not formatted properly. Instead, use a list or number structure to display this information. If you must use a table, be sure to include Table or Column Headers. You can learn more about [accessible table design](#) by accessing Microsoft's accessibility training website.

Color Usage and Contrast

Choose colors text and background colors that are high in contrast to each other. Avoid light text with light backgrounds and dark text with dark backgrounds. There are multiple websites and applications you can use to ensure your color contrast meets accessibility standards such as [Are My Colours Accessible](#) and [Colour Contrast Checker](#).

Use color mindfully when using it as a communication tool. Since some people cannot see color at all and others cannot discern between different colors, it is important that colors are not used as the sole source of communication. Instead try using text or shape differences so the meaning of your communication is not lost on the reader.

Email Design Templates

If you are using an email design template such as MailChimp, choose simple design templates. One or two column layouts are easier and more flexible as they can be read on both desktop and mobile devices.

Accessible Images (Alt Text)

When images are embedded into email, it is important to remember to add Alt Text to the image when information is being conveyed through the image. If the image does not convey any information, then you should mark the image as decorative. Both actions are important for people using screen readers or who have images turned off so that they are not missing out on any information being communicated.

Alt Text should be no more than 1-2 sentences and describe the key elements of the image. There is no need to describe every aspect of an image. You can learn more about Alt Text best practices on Harvard University's Digital Accessibility website.

How to add Alt Text in Outlook

To add Alt Text in Outlook, right click on the image, select "Add Alternate Text", write your description of the image, and select OK when finished. In Outlook there is no "mark image as decorative" button that you typically find in Microsoft Word or PowerPoint so you must type in "decorative image" to the Alt Text description box if the image is decorative.

Composing an Email

Descriptive and Clear Subject Lines

Descriptive and clear subject lines improve user experience for people using screen readers, helping them understand the email's relevance prior to opening the email.

Proper Heading Structure

Using proper headings allows people to understand the structure of content with an email. This is especially important for screen reader users. You will access the heading structure by selecting Format Text and clicking on Styles when writing a new email in Outlook. You can also write the text, highlight it,

right-click on the text and select Styles. Begin with Heading 1, and progress to each subsequent heading contained within the structure (Heading 2, 3, etc.).

If you are using a Mac, you will access the heading structure by selecting a line of text in the email, right-click the text, and select *Paragraph*. In the *Indents and Spacing* tab, update the *Outline Level* to your preferred heading level.

Body Text

Key factors to consider when writing accessible emails:

- Use sans-serif fonts such as Aptos, Arial, Calibri, or similar. Sans serif fonts create better accessibility, particularly for those with low vision or dyslexia, as the letter shapes are less complex, cleaner, and reduce letter confusion.
- Keep text to a reasonable size, at least 11 or 12-point font.
- Text should be aligned to the left, rather than center or justified.
- Links should be written with descriptive text. When screen readers come across a link, if the link is not descriptive, it will read each individual letter/symbol. Whereas, when the link is descriptive, the screen reader will state to the reader "link" and then read the descriptive text. You can learn more about writing descriptive link text best practices on Harvard University's digital accessibility website.
- Break up text into short paragraphs and use plain language.

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