Creating accessible PDFs

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Introduction

PDF (Portable Document Format) is a file format that was created by Adobe to provide a means of representing any document file type in a format that was independent of the software, hardware or operating system.

Adobe also created a free reader application called Adobe Acrobat Reader, now called Adobe Reader DC that is freely available for Windows, Macintosh and Android.

Other PDF readers are available offering different sets of features.

In addition to providing a format that is viewable across almost all devices PDF also provides:

- a non-editable document format that maintains the integrity of the original;
- a printable document, a feature regularly requested by learners;
- access to accessibility features such as reflow, colour, contrast, and read-aloud, making your documents more inclusive;
- a navigable document structure.

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Why?

A major benefit of accessible PDFs is that they make your materials available to a wider audience including those with disabilities without compromising the look of the original document.

Accessible PDFs enable the user to:

- use tags and tabbing to select correct reading order;
- navigate the page using bookmarks or a contents menu;
- use screen readers to read the page text out loud – for the visually impaired;
- provide descriptive text (ALT-Text) to ensure that readers understand the message behind images, tables and graphs;
- reflow text – making a page with two or more columns into one column for easier reading on smaller screens e.g. mobile;
- change colour contrast and font size.

How?

The first step to creating an accessible PDF is to create an accessible document.

Microsoft Word provides an already familiar interface for the creation of documents and versions from Word 2010 also have a built-in accessibility checker option that will assist you in rectifying any identified issues:

File > Info > Check for Issues > Check Accessibility

Microsoft Word has an export function that allows you to easily export your word document to PDF, retaining many of the accessibility features in the process.

Microsoft Word also comes with an excellent step-by-step 'how to' guide on 'Creating accessible Word documents.

File > Export > Create PDF/XPS

Creating accessible PDFs

To convert accessible Word documents to PDF visit the WebAIM site and look through their 'Converting documents to PDFs' page.

When?

It is good practice to create all your documents with accessibility in mind as this will ensure that you meet any accessibility obligations either legal or organisational.

Even if you do not require your materials to be accessible currently, creating them in this way will ensure that you meet any future accessibility requirements. In addition, anyone who decides to reuse your materials can do so in the knowledge that they are suitable.

Templates and guides

There are a number of additional templates and guides to support the creation of accessible Microsoft Word and PDF documents for learning. Some of these are described in the sections below including a number of tailored Microsoft Word templates which have been created by the EDU team for specific projects.

Creating accessible Microsoft Word documents

This Guide to creating accessible Microsoft Word documents, written by Donald Maclean at Perth College UHI, covers creating an accessible Microsoft Word document. It includes step by step instructions on running the accessibility check function within Microsoft Word.

Donald has also written a useful Guide to creating accessible PDFs based on an initial document created using Microsoft Word.

EDU Word template

The EDU has created a Word template – that can easily be used to save documents as PDFs - and is set up ready to use with built in styles and an initial table of contents. When you add your content to the template, using the inbuilt heading styles, these will be picked up in the table of contents when refreshed (right click and update).

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There are two heading styles – for section headings and sub-section headings – these will appear in the table of contents when refreshed. There is also a sub-title heading style which is for headings within the content which do not need to appear in the table of contents. Normal text is set to Calibri size 12 with 1.5 line spacing.

AaBbCcD AaBbC AaBbCc AaBbCcI
¶ Normal   Section he… ¶ Sub-sect… ¶ Sub-title…

Built in styles

[EDU Word template](#)

[EDU PDF template Quick Guide](#)

Built in 'Quick Parts'

Icons and panels can be inserted into your document:

Discuss   Collaborate   Download

Idea/hint   Information   Link

Listen   Portfolio   Print

Question   Read   Reflect

Watch

Built in Icons

You will find these by clicking on the **Quick Parts** icon in the text area of the **Insert** tab. See the Quick Guide above.

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Embedding PDFs in Brightspace

PDFs can be added to Brightspace units/modules but there is more than one way to do this, and more than one way to have them displayed:

- If they are added as attachments (**Create a file > Insert stuff**) they will be displayed as links, which students must click to open;
- However, if you select **Upload Files** from the Upload/Create dropdown list in Content and upload your PDF at that stage, the PDF will open automatically for students within the window.

Visit our Quick start guide to teaching online, where on page 17 ('Adding content to Brightspace') you will find illustrated step-by-step guidance on the various ways you can upload content, including PDFs, to Brightspace.

Watch this video and download this guide which will take you through the process of setting up a PDF to open automatically for students in a Learning Module.
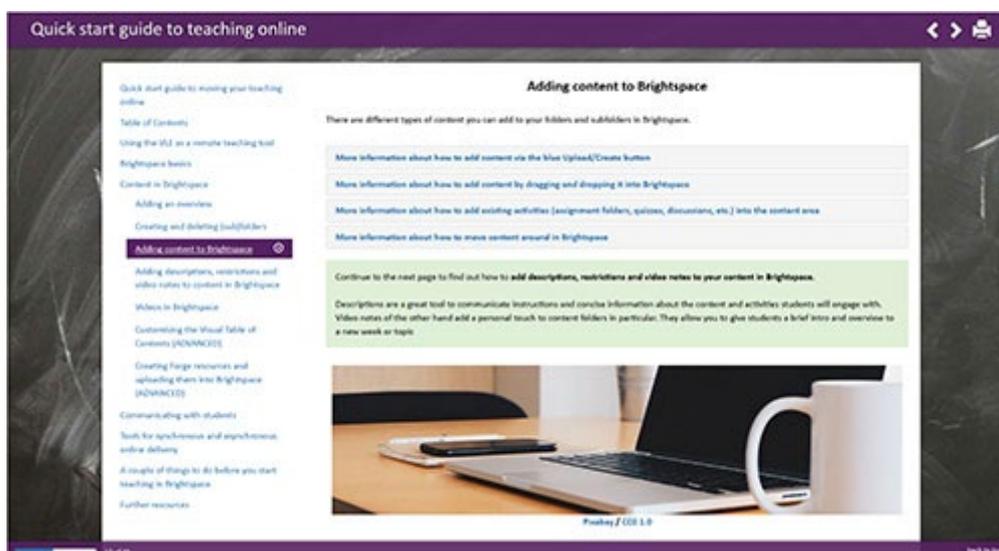
Adding content to Brightspace

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Examples of using templates

Two examples of using templates within EDU projects:

Work-based learning hub

In this example, a bespoke Microsoft Word template was designed to support the subject leads and teaching staff involved in the delivery of the Work-based learning foundation apprenticeship programmes across the university.

The template specification, including the branding, use of icons and heading styles, was determined through discussion at an initial workshop of subject leads. The guide builds on other available resources and focuses on using the built-in activity icons created by the EDU.

Download an example [template](#) and the [guide](#) for this project.

Nursing degree programme

The Microsoft Word template designed for the nursing degree programme was developed through two highly productive scoping workshops. These workshops ensured that the final template encapsulated the requirements of the team including automatic logos, ALT text, standard iconography (with ALT text) and standardised headers and footer information.
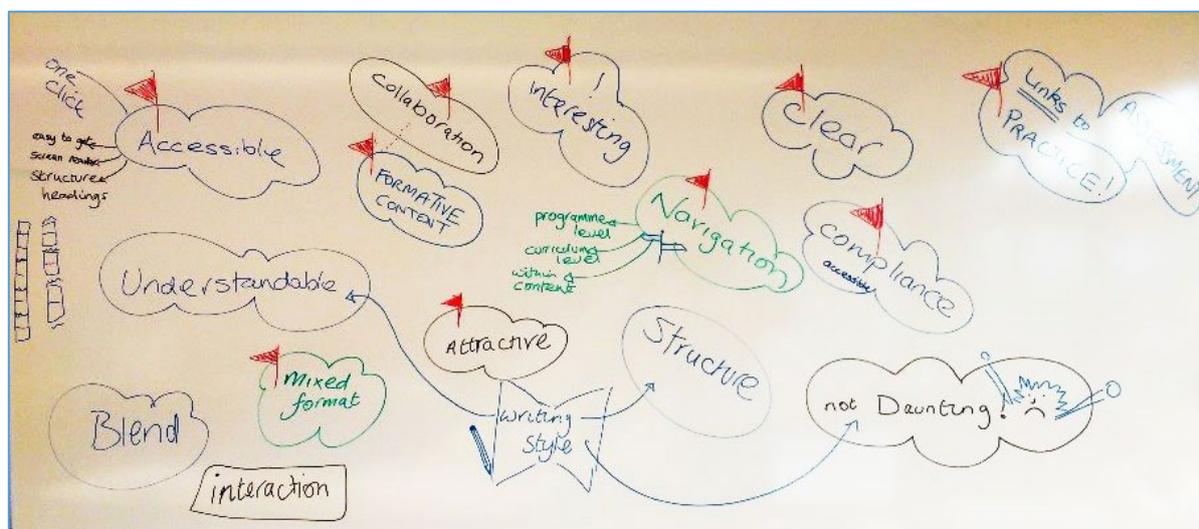

Suggestions captured during workshop

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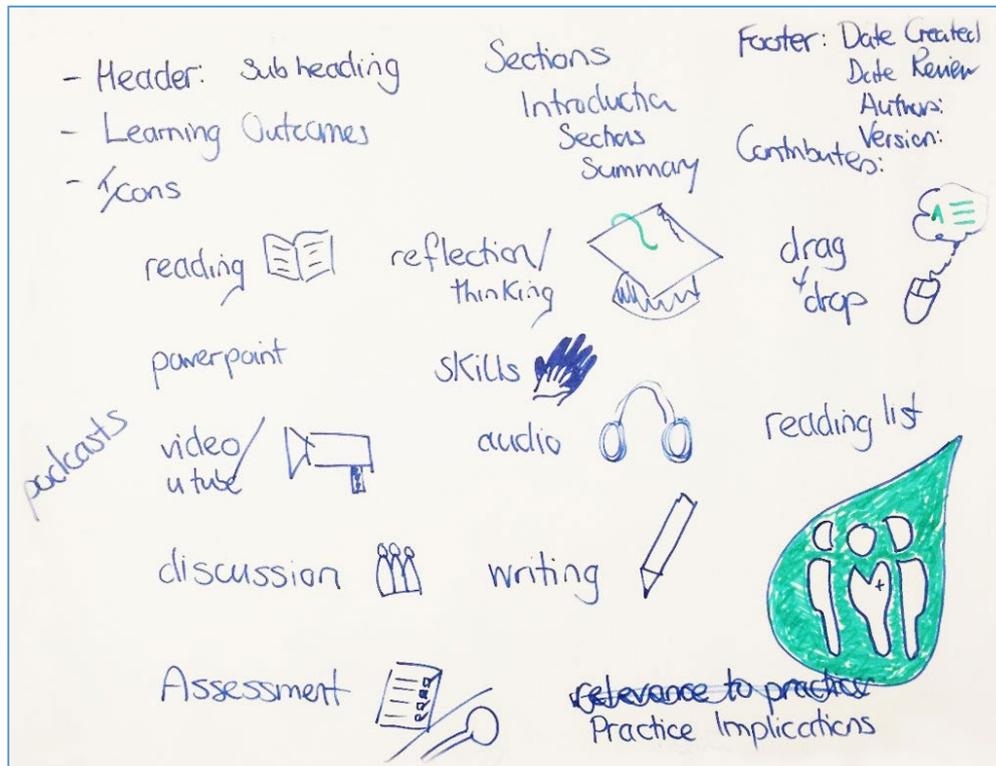
Ideas for icons suggested during workshop

The final design supported effective navigation of learning content across the modules within the programme.

The aim of the team was to enhance the student experience by providing easily accessible and navigable learning content within the virtual learning environment.
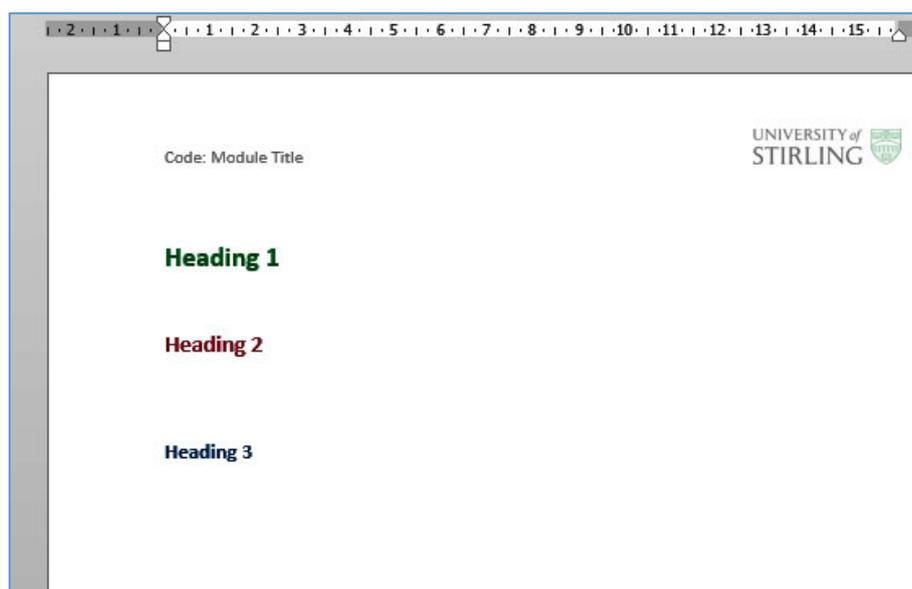
Final version of bespoke template for nursing degree programme

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Bespoke icons used within the template