What are Headings and Why are They Important for Accessibility?

Headings are more than just large, bold text; they're structural signposts that organize digital content hierarchically. Crucial for accessibility, headings enable screen reader users to quickly navigate documents, much like a sighted person skims a table of contents. Without them, users would have to listen to an entire document to find information. Additionally, structured headings boost readability for everyone by breaking up long text blocks that follow a logical order, making content easier to digest.

Think of headings as an outline:

- **Heading 1 (H1):** The title of your document or page, there should only be one H1 (the “Title” style does not work for accessibility).
- **Heading 2 (H2):** Major sections within your document.
- **Heading 3 (H3):** Sub topics or sections within an H2.
- **Heading 4 (H4):** Sub-sub topics or sections(headings beyond H4 are used less frequently).

Always use headings in a logical, hierarchical order. Do not skip heading levels, e.g., going from H1 directly to H3, as that will disrupt the readability of the document.

How to Add Accessible Headings by Content Type

In Microsoft Word

1. Select the text you want to turn into a heading.
2. Go to the “Home” tab in the Ribbon.
3. In the “Styles” pane, you'll see heading options for “Heading 1,” “Heading 2,” “Heading 3,” etc.
4. Click the desired heading level (e.g., “Heading 1” for your title, “Heading 2” for major sections).

Tip: If you want to change the appearance of your headings (font, size, color), modify the style in the Syles pane rather than manually formatting the text. This ensures consistency and accessibility.

In Microsoft PowerPoint

Headings in PowerPoint are called slide titles, and can be added two different ways:

1. Use the “Title Box” on the slide where it says “Click to Add Title”

or

1. Click the “View” tab in the Ribbon, and select “Outline View”
2. In the Outline pane on the left side of the screen, type a title in the form field by the slide number

Tip: Even if an image covers the entire screen, add a slide title. This will provide screen readers with the necessary navigation. Note, slide titles names should be unique to easily differentiate them.

On a Canvas Page

In Canvas, the title of the page is by default Heading level 1. The first heading you add to the page itself should be Heading level 2.

1. While in the page editor, Select the text you want to make a heading.
2. In the page editor toolbar, find the “Paragraph” dropdown menu.
3. Click the dropdown and select the desired heading level (e.g., “Heading 2” for major sections within your Canvas page, “Heading 3” for sub-sections).

Resouces for Accessibility

- Accessibility by Design – accessibility tutorials by content type
- Accessible and Inclusive Electronic Content – 3-week Online/Asynchronous accessibility Best Practices in Teaching Course