

Email Accessibility Compliance

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Before you start

Email is an important communication tool that has become a common part of everyday life. As with online information and documentation, email from town offices/employees also needs to be accessible by April 26, 2028. Town employees should start using accessibility best practices now to prepare for upcoming compliance standards. Currently, most email applications have some accessibility options for reading incoming messages. Depending on which email program you are using, even though the requirements for accessibility apply, the particular email interface you use may or may not have readily available tools to help verify that your outbound message is accessible. For instance, Microsoft Outlook has a built-in accessibility checker when composing a message. However, Gmail, Apple iCloud Mail, Yahoo Mail, and Proton Mail do not have built-in accessibility checkers, though third-party add-on options are available for some of them.

Email Content

Like web and document accessibility requirements, your email message needs to meet certain standards and requirements.

Writing styles

The subject and body of the message should be clear and concise. The purpose of the message should use plain language targeting the intended audience. Some best practices include

- Spell out abbreviations before using them. For example, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
- Avoid use of jargon or phrases
- Avoid overuse of all capital letters.
- Avoid references to shape, size, sound, color, or location.
- Use inclusive language.
- Avoid using a trademark unless referring to a specific product.

Check Color Contrast

By default, email messages use a style of black text on a white background. If you add colored text, text highlighting, and/or background images, make sure you test for color contrast, and that the contrast ratio is 4.5:1 or greater. Never use color as the only method of emphasis or meaning.

Add Alternative Text to Images

Images are a wonderful way to visually reinforce your information. However, for those with vision impairment, you need to provide a text explanation using Alternative Text (alt text) that can be read by a screen reader. Guidelines for alt text include

- All images must have alt text or be marked as decorative
- Avoid text on images and do not use images that are just text
- Alt text should consider the context of the image and be as meaningful as possible.
 - Does it tell a story? Then it should describe the image concept
 - Is it a screenshot in a tutorial? Then it should be more literal and exact
 - Is the image functional? Then it should describe the function instead of how it looks
- Do not use "a picture of", "an image of", "a photo of", "the blah blah icon", etc as the screen reader will already announce the item which has the alt text.
- Avoid excessive use of images

Descriptive Links

Links should have descriptive text that tells the user what to expect when they select the link.

- Avoid generic terms such as “Click Here”, “Learn More”, and “Read More”
- Create a link text that is as specific as possible. For example, use “Download the FY24 Report (PDF)” instead of “Click Here”.
- The link should make sense even out of context.
- Avoid using full or raw URLs as they are confusing to a screen reader.

Use Proper Text Formatting and Styles

When creating emails, do not use background images or stationery and use heading levels, if possible, to break up sections of text.

- Use a simple, clear font, preferably a sans serif font, size 12 or larger.
- Don’t modify the text space to “squish” the letters, words, or sentences too close.
- Use Black text on a white background to ensure appropriate color contrast
- Bulleted or numbered lists using the built-in list tools
- Paragraph text that is left justified. Full Justification should be avoided.
- Where Headings are used, ensure proper heading hierarchy.

Create Accessible Tables

Tables create difficulties for screen readers unless there is clear definition between header and data cells. Not all email software can create accessible tables. Currently, the desktop version of Microsoft Outlook has a table creation tool while the web version of Microsoft Outlook cannot label table headers, rows, or columns.

- If available, use built-in table tools to insert simple data tables.
- Do not use nested rows, columns, or merged cells
- Mark the header row, and, when applicable, first column as headers.
- Avoid blank rows, columns, and cells.
- Do not use tables for layout or formatting purposes.
- If you need to provide complex data in table format, attach the information as an accessible document.

Simplify Your Signature Block

Your signature block should, minimally, contain

- Your name
- Your town department
- Your town phone number
- Your town email address

It should not contain

- Cursive or fancy fonts
- Personal or extraneous messages
- Slogans
- Decorative images
- Unnecessary content

If your signature contains hyperlinks, use meaningful link text.

Verify That Email Attachments Are Accessible

Documents attached to email messages that are public facing must be accessible. Accessible documents are encouraged for internal communications whenever possible.

- Attachments should have a unique and descriptive name.
- Attachments that are not accessible, such as a scanned document in .tif or .jpg format, cannot be read by screen readers.
 - Include a description of the attachment at the bottom of the mail

Embedded or Attached Audio and/or Video Files

If audio and/or video files are embedded, linked, or attached to the message, you need to ensure that accessibility features such as captions, transcripts, and audio description are available as needed. Autoplay should be avoided and controls provided to pause or stop any video or audio.

Before You Send Checklist

- Is the subject clear and descriptive?
- Is the message written in plain language?
- Is the font easy to read, at least 12 points or larger?
- Avoided references to shape, size, sound, color, and location?
- Are headings and lists created with built-in formatting tools?
- Do tables have a proper header row and/or a header column?
- Are abbreviations spelled out the first time they're used?
- Is color used appropriately and with sufficient contrast?
- Do informative images contain meaningful alt text?
- Are hyperlinks descriptive?
- Is the signature block simple?
- Are all attachments accessible and descriptively named?
- If audio or video are embedded, linked, or attached
 - Are accessibility captions, transcripts, audio descriptions or other appropriate accessibility features provided?
 - Is autoplay disabled and media controls provided?
- Did you run Outlook's Accessibility Checker?