Creating Accessible Documents in Word
How to Topic 01: Headings

This document complements the video
Creating Accessible Documents in Word – Part 1: Headings & Styles available at:
https://laudatotech.com/2021/03/03/creating-accessible-documents-in-word-part-1/

Laudato Technology Solutions
https://laudatotech.com/

Copyright © 2021 Nicholas C. Laudato
nick@laudatotech.com

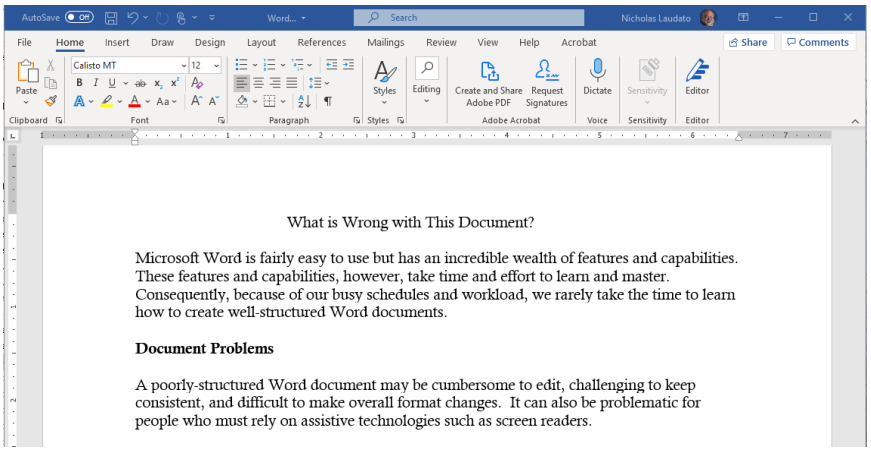
Using Headings in Microsoft Word

In written documents, ***headings*** are used to mark the starting points of sections. Headings are typically formatted to stand out, so readers can understand the structure of the document, and the relationships between document sections and sub-sections. Readers can use the headings to scan through sections of interest. For example, in *Microsoft Word*, headings may use a larger font and may be shown with larger vertical space between paragraphs.

Hidden Characters

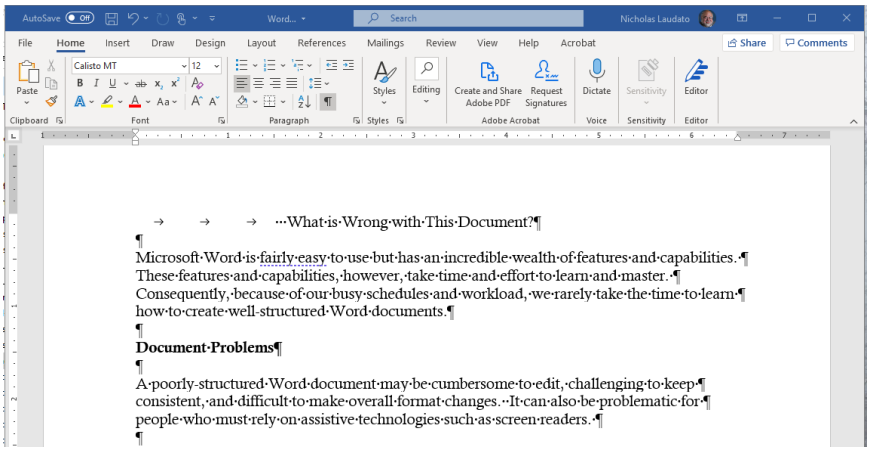
However, from the perspective of accessibility, bolding, centering, or enlarging the font does not make the text a true "heading." For example, the following screen capture of a document **looks** acceptable to the sighted viewer and will print as displayed but is not well formatted for accessibility.

Figure 1: Screen Capture of Poorly-Formatted Document



To see why it is not well-formatted for accessibility, you must change the default view in *Microsoft Word* to show *hidden characters*.

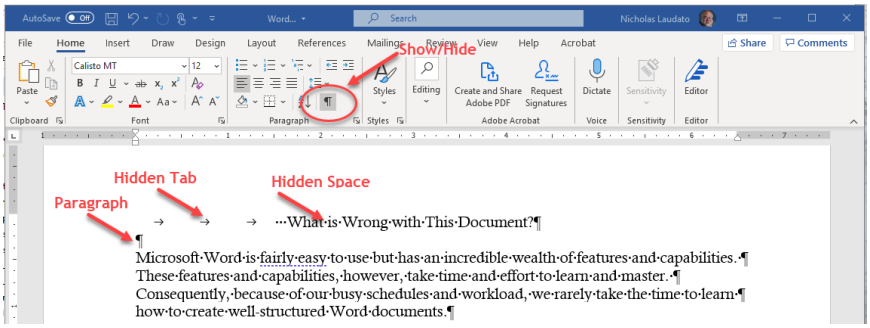
Figure 2: Screen Capture Showing Hidden Characters



These *hidden characters* do not print as such on a printer. They include symbols to designate carriage returns (paragraph markers), spaces, and tab characters. To change your display so

these characters are shown, click on the "Show/Hide" (¶) button on the formatting ribbon as shown on the next figure.

Figure 3: Screen Capture Showing Hidden Characters with Annotations



Showing these invisible characters will reveal each individual *tab* character, *space* character, and *paragraph marker*. Because these are usually hidden, they are not a problem to the sighted reader, but some people must use screen reader software (such as *JAWS* and *NVDA*) to read the text. Older screen readers often read each individual tab character, space character, and paragraph marker, complicating the reading with useless information.

The special characters that are displayed in this manner are not the only hidden components in a *Microsoft Word* document. A *Word* document also includes embedded, invisible codes that control the display of text, including font size, boldness, italics, line spacing, margins, headings, tables, lists, and many more.

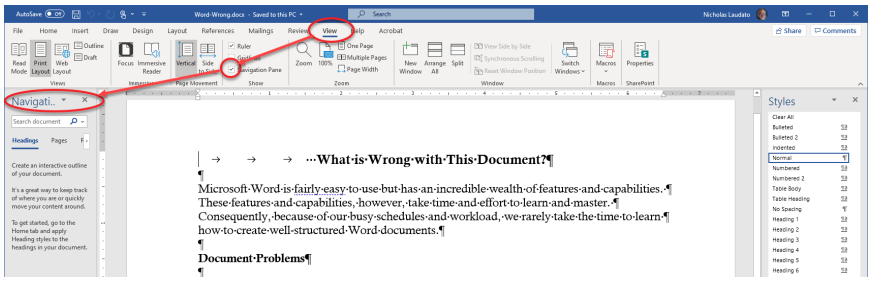
Viewing Document Structure

For sighted individuals, the document structure can be comprehended by viewing the formatted headings that divide the document into sections and sub-sections. Sighted individuals can use these headings to navigate the document, skipping sections of limited interest and focusing on those deemed more important.

Similarly, properly formatted headings can enable a person using a screen reader (such as *JAWS* or *NVDA*) to understand the structure of the document and to navigate the document using a keyboard only, jumping from heading to heading, if desired. Headings also allow screen readers to function properly for an individual with low vision or other limitations.

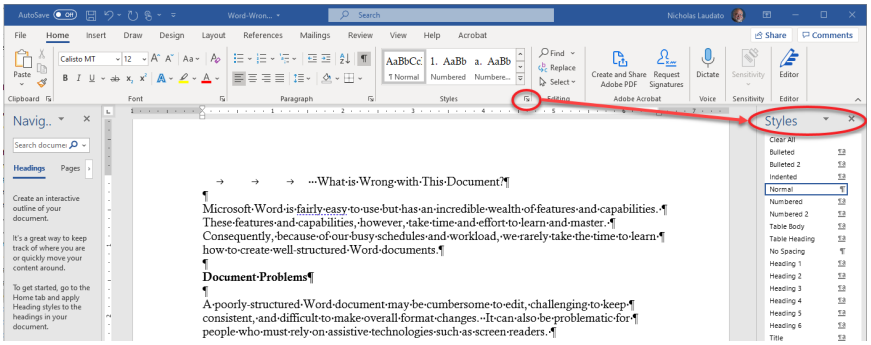
It is easy to view the structure of a document by examining its headings, either in *outline view* or via the *navigation pane*. To turn on the *navigation pane*, click "View" on the menu bar and check the "Navigation Pane" box. The *navigation pane* will display all of the headings in the document, indented to reflect their level.

Figure 4: Screen Capture Showing How to Display the Navigation Pane



It is also useful to display the styles in use in your document. To turn the "Styles Pane" on, click the "Styles" button in the lower right-hand corner of the *styles* area on the ribbon (see figure below) or press ***<Alt><Ctrl><Shift>S***.

Figure 5: Screen Capture Showing How to Display the Styles Pane



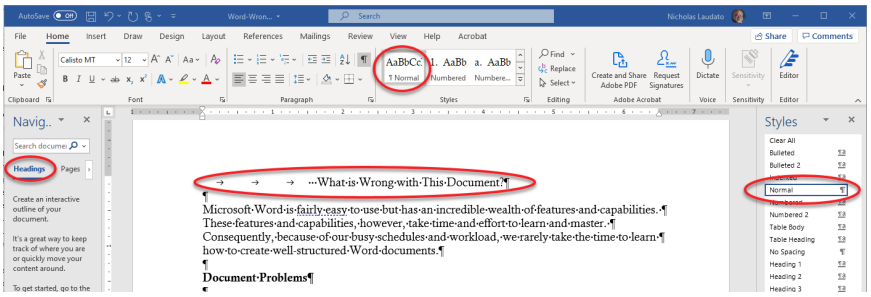
The *styles pane* will highlight the style that is associated with whatever text you have selected (or wherever the cursor is placed).

The Heading Style

Individuals who must use a screen reader (such as *JAWS* or *NVDA*) to read electronic text, cannot ***see*** the course structure but can, if the document is formatted using *heading styles*, use those headings to understand the structure and navigate the document.

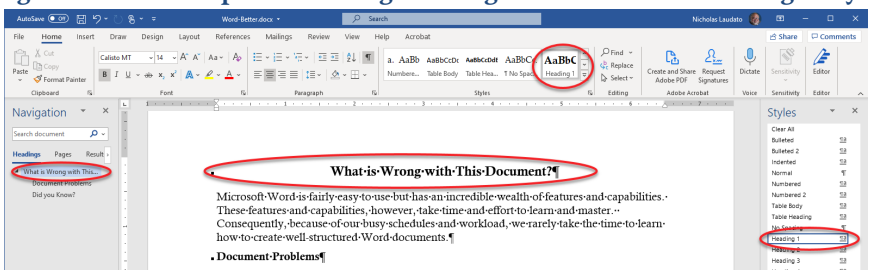
The following figure shows a document that is not formatted using styles. All text is associated with the default style called "Normal," even though it superficially looks like it uses heading styles. Note that the circled text shows the "Normal" style and the *navigation pane* shows no headings.

Figure 6: Screen Capture Highlighting the Assumed "Heading" with "Normal" Formatting



Contrast the above figure with the figure below, in which the text "What is Wrong with This Document" is formatted as a *Heading 1* and consequently appears as such in the *navigation pane*.

Figure 7: Screen Capture Showing Heading Formatted with Heading 1 Style



When the *Heading* styles are used, screen readers can successfully navigate the document.

Summary and Final Notes

In order for your document structure (sections and sub-sections) to be understood by a screen reader, the headings must be formatted using the *Heading* styles. You will know if you have successfully formatted your headings if they all appear in the *navigation pane* and match the outline of the document. You should not see empty lines in the *navigation pane* as these indicate empty headings (a paragraph that contains no text but is formatted as a heading).

Some writers prefer to have only one *Heading 1* in a given document while others have multiple *Heading 1*'s to designate major sections (usually each starting on its own page). The important thing is to be sure to nest the headings in hierarchical order and not skip heading levels. That is, do not jump from *Heading 1* to *Heading 3* without an intervening *Heading 2.*

As a bonus to your heading-related accessibility efforts, *Word* can automatically create an accurate table of contents using your defined heading levels.