

Flexible Text that Users can Manipulate

Images might not be an accessible format for all instructors to create, but text-heavy syllabi can also be substantially improved by considering the needs of disabled students. Most importantly, documents should build in options for users. Instructors cannot anticipate all individual students' abilities, so syllabi should allow users to alter text based on individual needs.

Digital text can offer that flexibility, allowing students to enlarge text, change colors, or use screen readers. Yet, these features are not automatic, and many digital spaces are still inaccessible to blind users.

Accessibility cannot be an afterthought and it cannot be assumed. With syllabi, for example, scanned-in versions of original paper documents wouldn't yield text that is readable to a screen reader. Syllabus text should be accessible through multiple modes—orally and visually.

Reader-Friendly Text:

When making text more accessible, a strategic place to start is by thinking about learning disabilities that affect reading, such as dyslexia. The images above show before and after versions of a course description. The before text shows one dense paragraph in Times New Roman font and single spacing that takes up 2/3 of the page. The after text breaks up the print into a list of manageable bullet points and follows recommendations from the [British Dyslexia Association](#):

- Use a 12-14 point sans serif font (e.g. Helvetica, Arial, Verdana, Tahoma). Serif fonts, which have tails on the characters, can blend text together.
- Divide the page into two columns so that each line contains between 6-9 words.
- Use 1.5 line spacing.
- Break up text into smaller paragraphs of between 2-4 sentences.
- Avoid black text on a white background, which can produce glare. Instead use another dark font color on a light colored background, such as navy on light gray. (Readers with low vision may prefer the stark contrast of black on white, so we strive to format text in an accessible way that still allows users to make individual changes.)
- Opt for bold over italics to emphasize text—the jagged lines can wash out text.
- Align text to the left. Centering makes it difficult to find the next line, and justified text looks like one overwhelming block .

Hierarchical Document Design

Students need a syllabus that is organized for quick information retrieval. Word processor features can dynamically simplify document use. For instance:

- Table of Contents provide a snapshot of content for navigation.
- Headings differentiate sections and create hierarchy.
- Bulleting and numbering organize points into lists.
- Tables compactly show multiple dimensions of data.
- Text boxes group together related information.
- Bolded or underlined text emphasizes key points.

Within Microsoft Word, use the available styles to format headings rather than simply making text larger and bold on your own. The styles provide structural tags that make content navigable for screen readers. For example, use “heading 1” for the title, “heading 2” for major sections, and “heading 3” for subsections.

Interactive Text with Hyperlinks

Hyperlinks provide a happy medium in which the syllabus links, but does not repeat information accessible outside it. By decreasing text and increasing white space, the words that remain become more legible. Making the syllabus interactive in this way also allows students to access information they need in a particular moment on their own terms.

Instructors can link to a wide range of materials, including:

- Paper prompts saved in a cloud storage service such as [box](#).
- Course websites or class management systems
- Library and bookstore websites
- University offices such as the advising center or center for students with disabilities
- Disciplinary style guides. Purdue OWL has strong guides for [MLA](#), [APA](#), and [Chicago](#).
- University student codes of conduct. They cover a range of inappropriate behaviors so the syllabus doesn't have to outline them.

Digital Reader Supports

Certain font systems might increase text legibility for people with disabilities. Both Dyslexie and Beeline Reader have wide testimonial support, so students might find them useful.

[Dyslexie Font](#): Dyslexie font manipulates letter openings, slants, and tails so that each character has a unique form to create greater letter recognition. A master's thesis by Renske de Leeuw found that several reading errors decreased with Dyslexie font and that it created a pleasant or very pleasant reading experience for more than half of the dyslexic readers questioned. The font is free for personal use, and a similar open access font is available called [Opendyslexic](#).

[Beeline Reader](#): Another experimental program claims to enable readers with dyslexia, ADD, and vision disabilities to read more quickly. The Beeline Reader, a web browser add-on and PDF viewer, uses colors to match the end of one line to the beginning of the next, making it easier for the eye to find its place.

Using Meaningful Link Text

Link text should be unique within a page, should be meaningful when read out of context, and should help users to know something about their destination if they click on it. Link text such as "Click here" and "More" fail to meet these criteria. Consider the various ways users interact with links:

- Screen reader users can generate a list of links and navigate them alphabetically. Redundant or ambiguous link text such as "More" is meaningless in this context.
- Users of speech recognition technology can select a link with a voice command like "click" followed by the link text. Therefore it is also helpful to use unique link text that is short and easy to say.

For more information on making text accessible visit our [Accessibility Handbook](#).