

GUIDELINES FOR THE CREATION OF ACCESSIBLE POWERPOINT PRESENTATIONS

Version 1.0 - Last update: June 2026

Authors:

Salsabeel Hussein Ali Bazzari –

design, general structure and update of the Italian version

Chiara Bellini –

English translation and integration of content into the English version

Supervision:

Prof. Piergiovanna Grossi

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Index

I. Introduction.....	3
II. Useful information before we start.....	4
III. Accessibility in practice: what to do and how to do it	5
IV. Microsoft PowerPoint.....	6
1. Presentation structure: using default layouts.....	6
1.1. Why is it important?	6
1.2. How to do it	6
2. Language setting	9
2.1. Why is it important?	9
2.2. How to do it	10
3. Alternative text for images.....	13
3.1. Why is it important?	13
3.2. How to do it	14
4. Colours and contrast.....	16
4.1. Why is it important?	16
4.2. How to do it	17
5. Text formatting.....	19
5.1. Why is it important?	19
5.2. How to do it?	20
6. Hyperlinks	22
6.1. Why is it important?	22
6.2. How to do it?	22
7. Tables.....	25
7.1. Why is it important?	25

7.2.	How to do it	25
8.	Sections.....	29
8.1.	Why is it important?	29
8.2.	How to do it	29
9.	Check accessibility	33
9.1.	Why is it important?	33
9.2.	How to do it	33
10.	Title of the presentation.....	35
10.1.	Why is it important?.....	35
10.2.	How to do it.....	36
11.	Export in PDF format.....	37
11.1.	Why is it important?.....	37
11.2.	How to do it.....	37
V.	Conclusion.....	41

I. Introduction

Accessibility is a fundamental element to take into consideration in the creation of learning materials. It represents a way to make education a more inclusive, equal and respectful process towards every student. In addition, by following accessibility criteria, we are invited to reflect more about which learning approaches and strategies to adopt in the organization of the content as teachers.

This document addresses university lecturers and offers practical guidelines to create accessible PowerPoint presentations. It aims at the creation and revision of PowerPoint presentations in their desktop and online versions. Every part explains why it is important to follow specific accessibility criteria and shows a step-by-step tutorial on how to apply them with the help of visual examples and practical indications. The aim is to provide a useful and concrete tool to integrate accessibility in learning material in a simple, effective and coherent way.

We chose to focus on PowerPoint because it is one of the tools the university provided us with; nevertheless, similar considerations are to be applied to other compatible software, too, such as Google Slides and OpenOffice.

The tests and screenshots included in this document were created using the Microsoft 365 Education suite provided to students at the University of Verona and accessible through an institutional account.

The procedures described apply to both the online and desktop versions. Unless otherwise specified, the procedures and screenshots for the desktop version are based on Microsoft PowerPoint for Windows.

II. Useful information before we start

A presentation can be considered accessible when it can be easily read, navigated and understood by everyone, including those with visual, mobility or cognitive impairments. These presentations must not only be well-written but also organized such that they are compatible with assistive technology, such as screen readers. It is actually simpler – and usually faster – to create an accessible presentation from the very beginning than correcting a non-accessible one.

Before creating a presentation, there are some important aspects you should consider:

1. Language must be plain and simple;
2. The text in the slides must not be too long;
3. The presentation must be organized in a clear structure, with significant titles and a coherent division of the content;
4. Every section and topic should be easily recognizable, to facilitate the navigation between slides;
5. It is fundamental to use punctuation and initial capital letters properly;
6. The language of the presentation must be set correctly, so that correction tools and screen readers can recognize it and read the text in the right language.

Another aspect you should consider from the very beginning is the context of the materials you are going to use. If a presentation is going to be presented in physical class, it will be displayed on a screen, potentially far from students: for this reason, it is fundamental to guarantee high background

contrast, to use adequate character dimension, to avoid too small font size and to choose colours that can be read in a potentially difficult lighting conditions. On the contrary, if the presentation will be displayed online (whether synchronously or asynchronously), everyone will have the opportunity to see the content up close, regulate the lighting of their own screen and, if necessary, to zoom in or out. Nevertheless, it is important to guarantee a good background contrast and a clear visual hierarchy to improve reading.

III. Accessibility in practice: what to do and how to do it

The following pages will present practical guidelines to make PowerPoint presentations more accessible. Every criterium comes with a brief explanation of the reason why it is important, practical instructions on how to apply it and specific indications for desktop and online versions.

The structure will be the same to facilitate its consultation:

- Name of the criterium;
- Why it is important;
- How to do it (with references to both the desktop and the online versions of PowerPoint).

IV. Microsoft PowerPoint

1. Presentation structure: using default layouts

1.1. Why is it important?

A good structure makes the presentation easier to read and to navigate, especially for those using assistive technology. Each slide should have a unique and meaningful title. If, for layout purposes, the title should not be visible (for example, on a slide containing a full-page image), it should still be kept as a hidden title so that screen readers can identify it, and the presentation can maintain a logical content hierarchy.

1.2. How to do it

- In desktop version:
 1. When you create a new slide, choose a default layout ("Title and Content", for instance) from the "Layout" menu or from the "New Slide" button;
 2. Instead of manually inserting the title, always use the text box given by the layout;

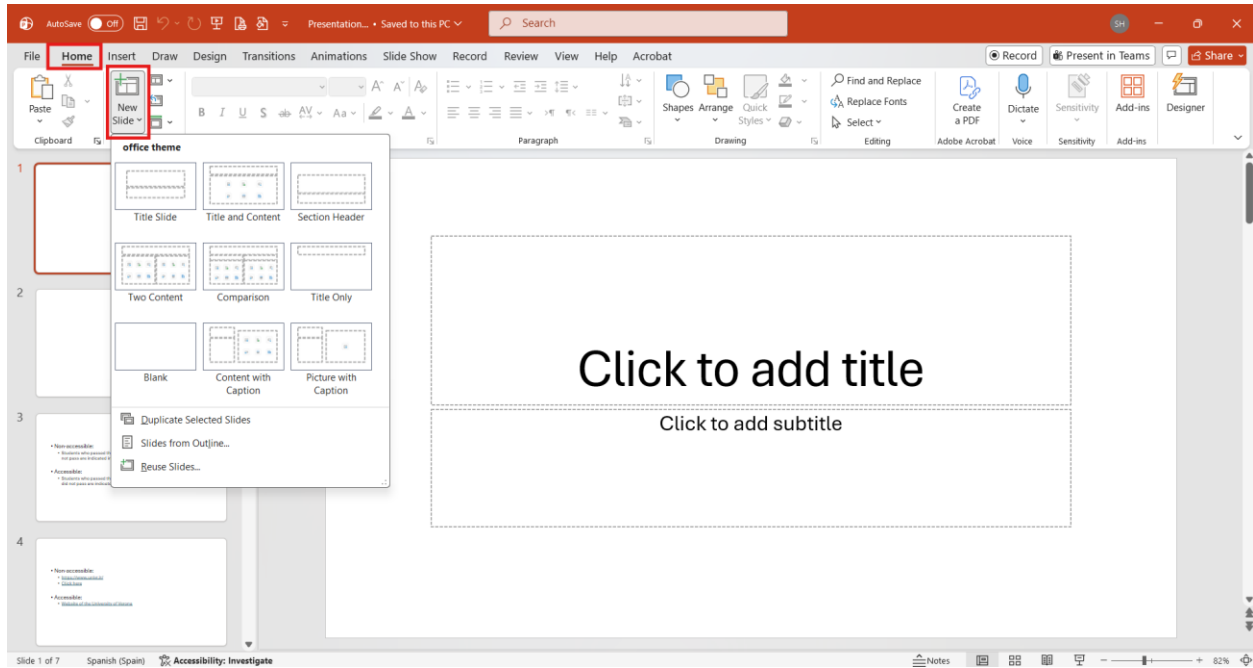


Image 1 – Example of PowerPoint default layouts (desktop version).

3. If the title must be hidden, you can move it outside the visible area of the slide, but it must be included anyway;

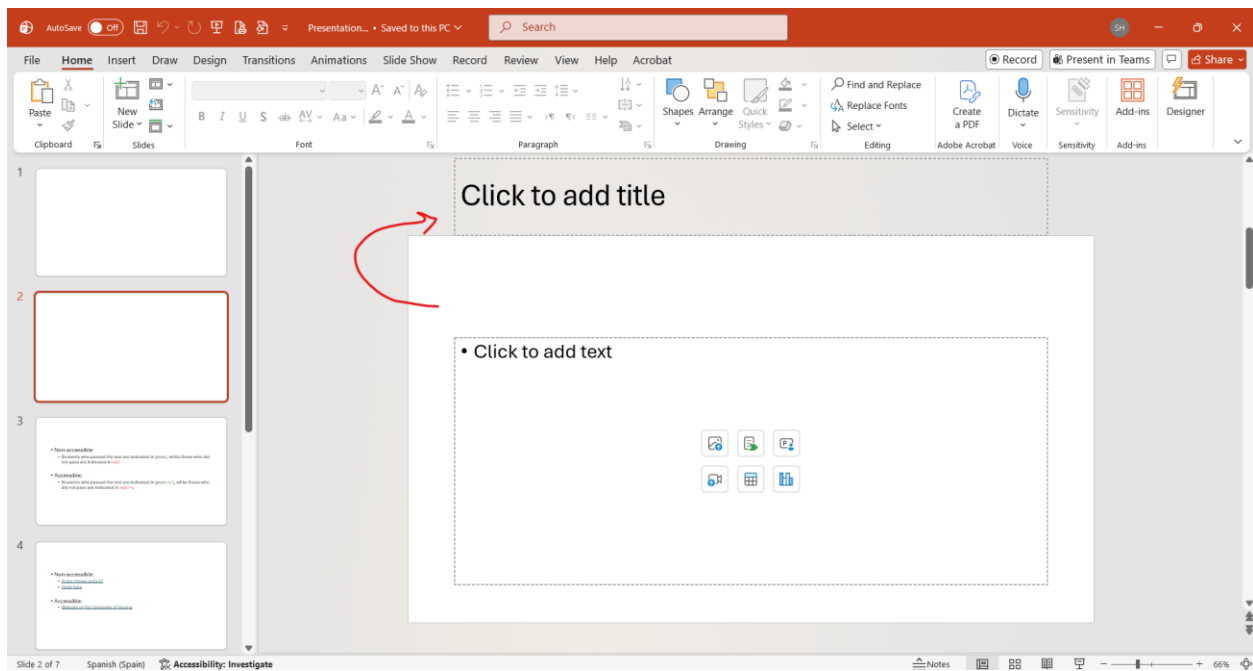


Image 2 – Example of slide where the title is present, but it is moved outside the visible area.

4. Maintain a hierarchical and coherent structure between the slides, for instance, by starting every section with a title slide;
5. Avoid using freely arranged text boxes to create the structure of the presentation. Default layouts guarantee a readable structure including assistive technologies.

- In online version:

The procedure to apply default layouts is very similar to the one of the desktop versions:

1. When creating a new slide, click on “Slide Layout” or “New Slide” in the “Home” tab and choose a default layout containing a title, such as “Title and Content”;

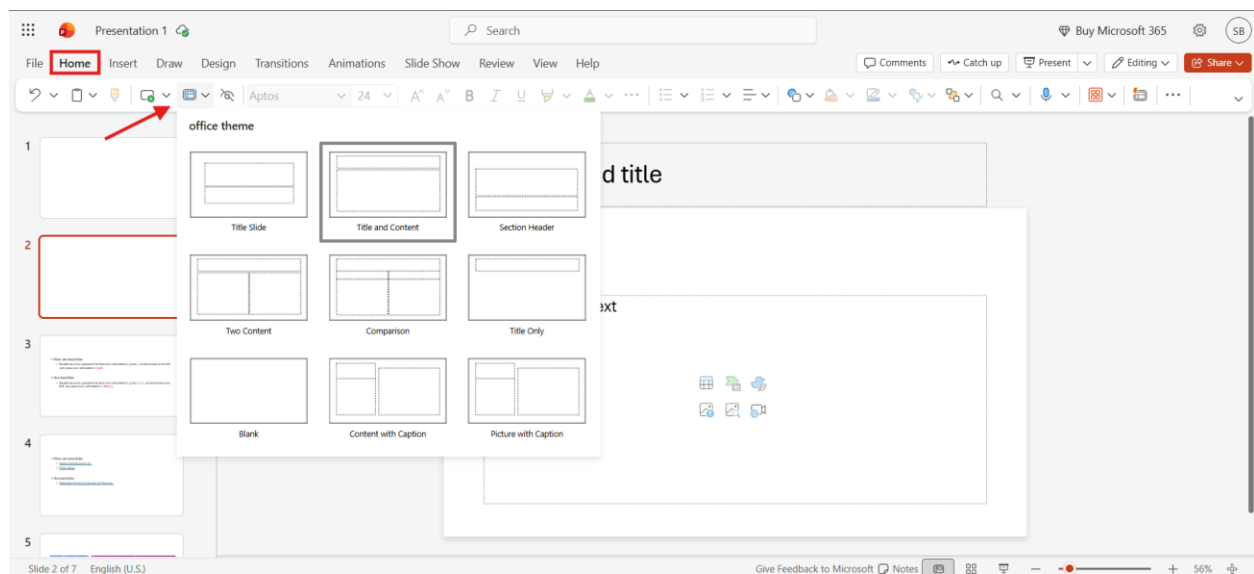


Image 3 – Default layouts in PowerPoint Online.

2. If you do not want the title to be visible in the presentation, you can move it outside the visible area, keeping it in the structure of the slide anyway;

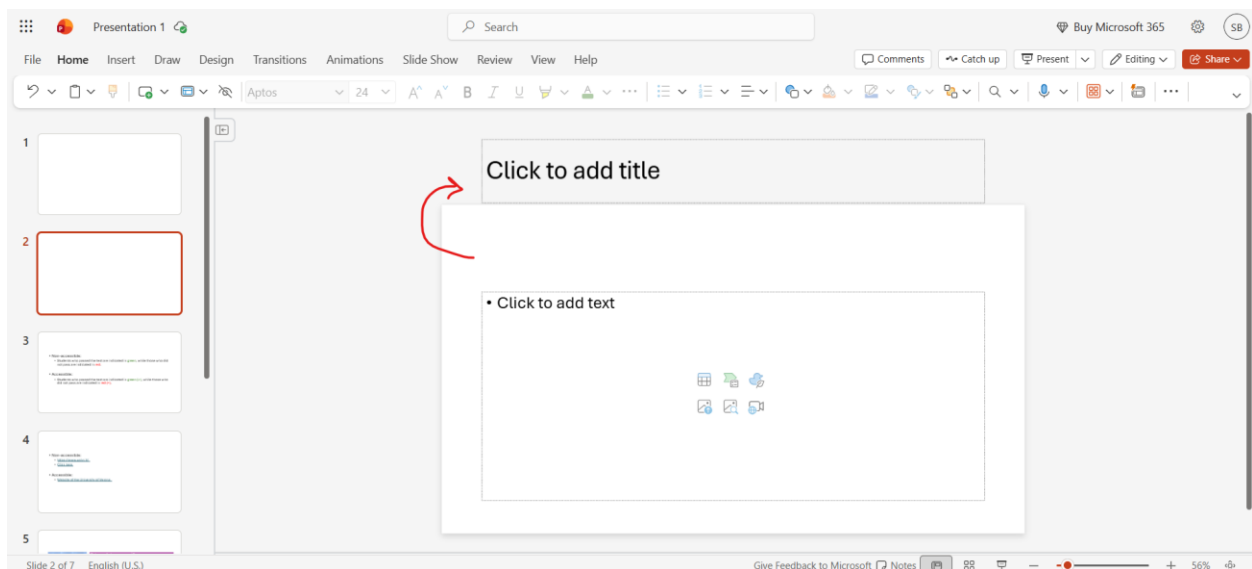


Image 4 – In PowerPoint Online it is possible to move the title box outside the visible area of the slide.

3. Avoid using manually inserted text boxes for the titles: they will not be recognized by screen readers, limiting the accessibility of the content.

2. Language setting

2.1. Why is it important?

In the creation of a PowerPoint presentation one of the very first steps must be the choice of the language.

In fact, on the one hand, this operation helps the user by warning him about grammatical and spelling mistakes, but, on the other hand, it is fundamental when it comes to accessibility. Indeed, assistive technology relies on the language of the document to establish the pronunciation through which to read correctly.

It is also important to remember that different languages can be used within the same presentation. For this reason, when a slide or a text box contains a

language different from the main one, the correct language should be assigned so that proofing tools and assistive technologies can interpret the content appropriately.

2.2. How to do it

- In desktop version:

To set the language for the entire presentation:

1. Go to “Review”;
2. Click on “Language” > “Set Proofing Language”;
3. Click on the “Document” option and then choose the language from the list;
4. Click on “OK” to confirm your choice.

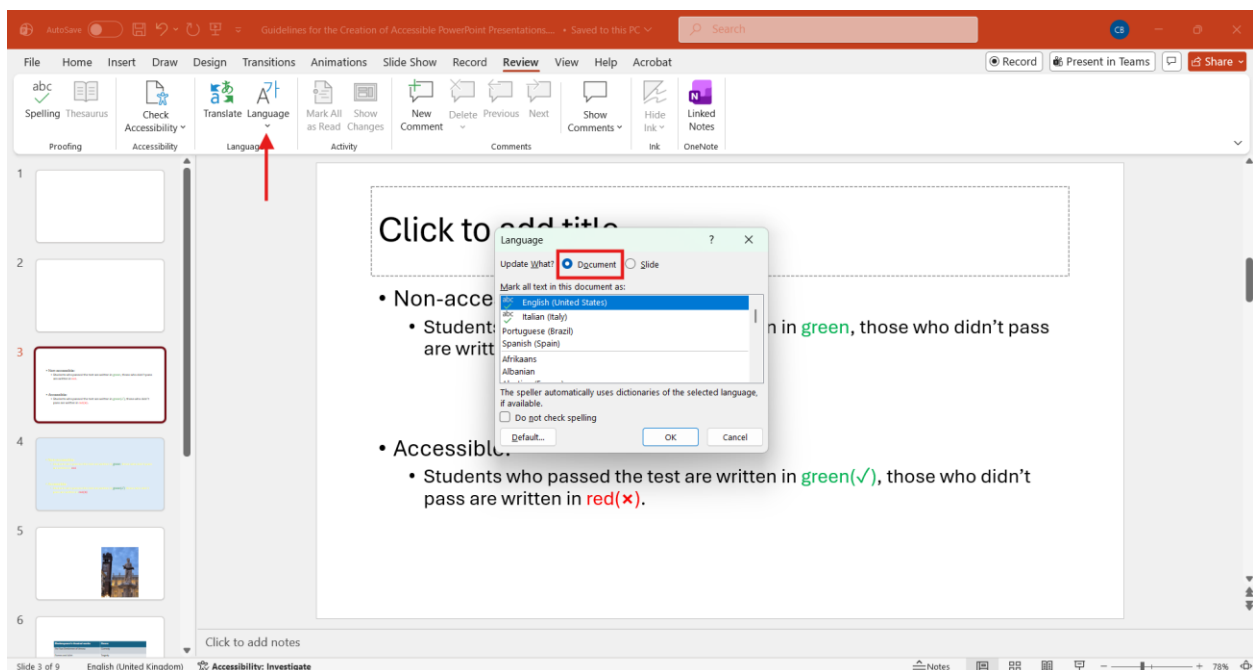


Image 5 - Language selection for the entire document in PowerPoint (desktop).

If you want to choose a different language for some specific slides in the presentation, position the cursor on the slide, then follow the same path explained above, but click on “Slide” instead.

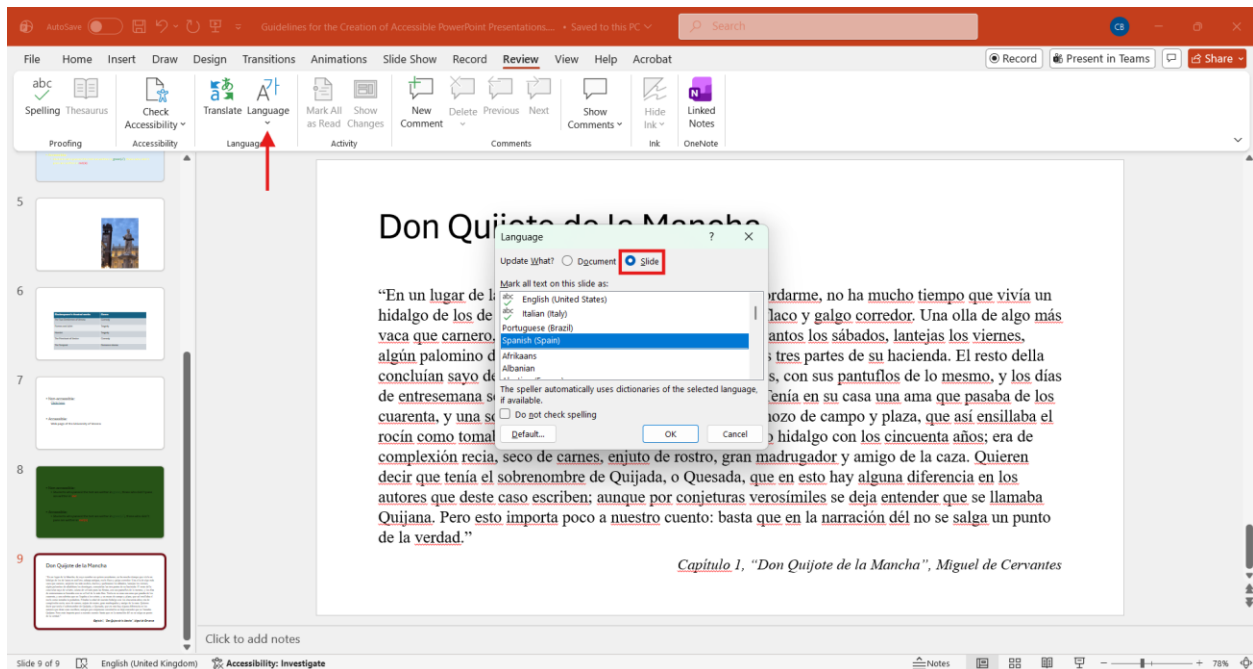


Image 6 - Language selection for a single slide PowerPoint (desktop).

- In online version:

In PowerPoint Online, it is not possible to change the default language of the entire presentation directly from the web application. The default language depends on the language settings of the Microsoft account. However, it is possible to set the proofing language for individual text boxes.

To change the language of a text box:

1. Select the text box;
2. Right-click on the selected text box;
3. Select Set Proofing Language;

4. In the Language window, choose the language of the text from the list;

5. Click OK to confirm.

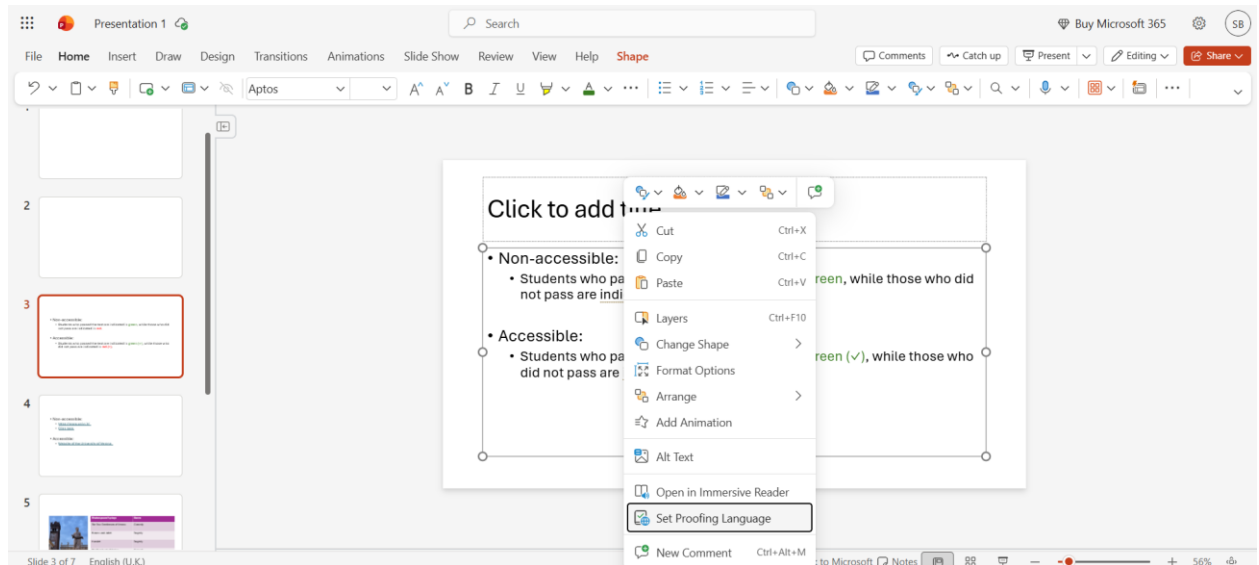


Image 7 – Setting the proofing language in PowerPoint Online from the text box context menu.

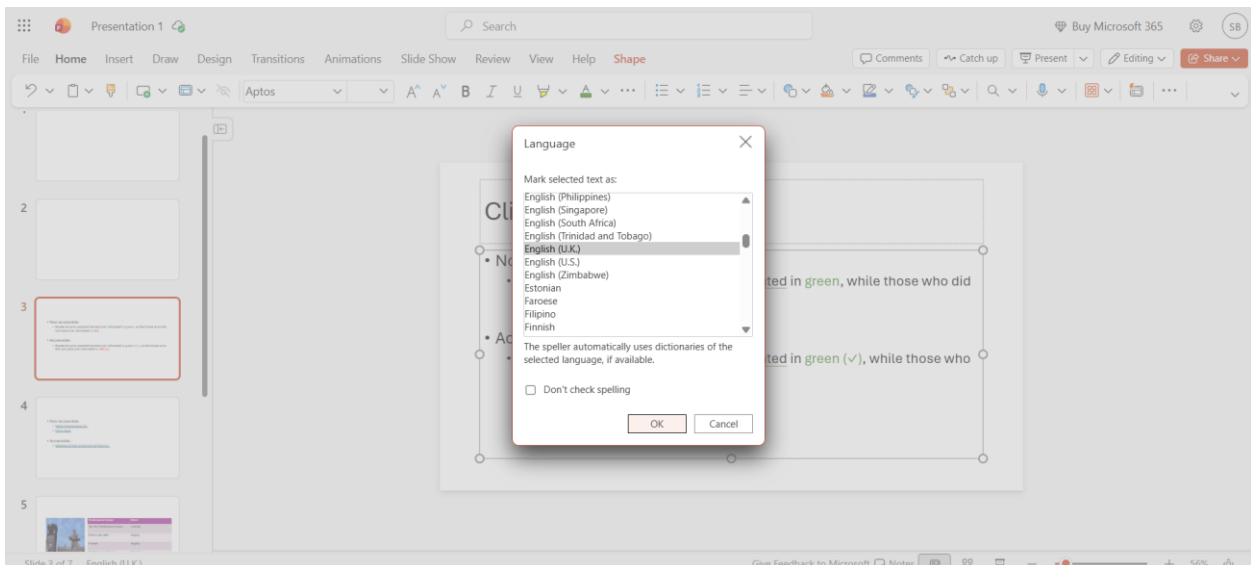


Image 8 – Language window in PowerPoint Online for setting the proofing language of the selected text box.

This procedure must be repeated for each text box that requires a different proofing language.

Note: In some versions of PowerPoint Online users cannot change the language of the interface, due to an external block imposed by administrators. This is the case of the educational version used by students for instance, when they access their OneDrive account with academic credentials.

3. Alternative text for images

3.1. Why is it important?

Alternative texts (also called “alt text”) are essential to guarantee the understanding of images by users of assistive technologies, such as screen readers. It allows people who cannot see pictures to receive an equivalent textual description.

It does not only help people with visual impairments, but it also improves the clearness and general accessibility of the presentation. In addition, it represents a fundamental requisite according to the WCAG guidelines (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) and the digital accessibility requirements in the academic field ([W3C](#)).

However, not every image is capable of transmitting information. Some are only used to decorating the presentation, without adding significant value. In these cases, we talk about decorative images. When it is possible, these images should be marked as decorative to avoid interfering with assistive reading.

3.2. How to do it

Before showing you how to insert alternative texts in a presentation, it is useful to understand which characteristics they should have to be considered satisfactory. A good alternative text:

- ⤴ Briefly describes what is visually relevant in the image;
- ⤴ Does not include “picture of” or “image of” statements, because that is implicit in the image itself;
- ⤴ It must be coherent with the surrounding context of the content.

For instance, analyze the following picture (Image 9):

- ✓ An example of correct alternative text would be:

“Statue of the Madonna of Verona on Piazza Erbe’s fountain, with Torre del Gardello and enlightened historical buildings in the background”

- Why is it effective?
 - a. It is brief, yet informative;
 - b. It describes what can be seen and where, without mentioning unnecessary details;
 - c. It is useful for readers with visual impairments.

- ✗ An example of an incorrect alternative text would be:

“Picture of a statue in front of a building.”

- Why is it inadequate?
 - a. It is too generic;
 - b. It does not refer to a context or a meaning;
 - c. It uses expressions that should be avoided (“picture of...”)



Image 9 – Image used as an example of a good and bad alternative text

The accuracy of an alternative text also depends on its context of use. The same image, the one presented above for instance, can be described differently according to the type of lesson (history of arts, architecture, geography...) or the public it will be shown to. For example, if we are going to present this picture to children or someone who is not sufficiently expert in the topic, we should avoid too technical language and use simpler and more comprehensible descriptions.

- In desktop version:
 1. Right-click on the image;
 2. Select "View Alt Text";
 3. Fill in the empty field in the sidebar;
 4. Insert the alternative text or mark the image as decorative.

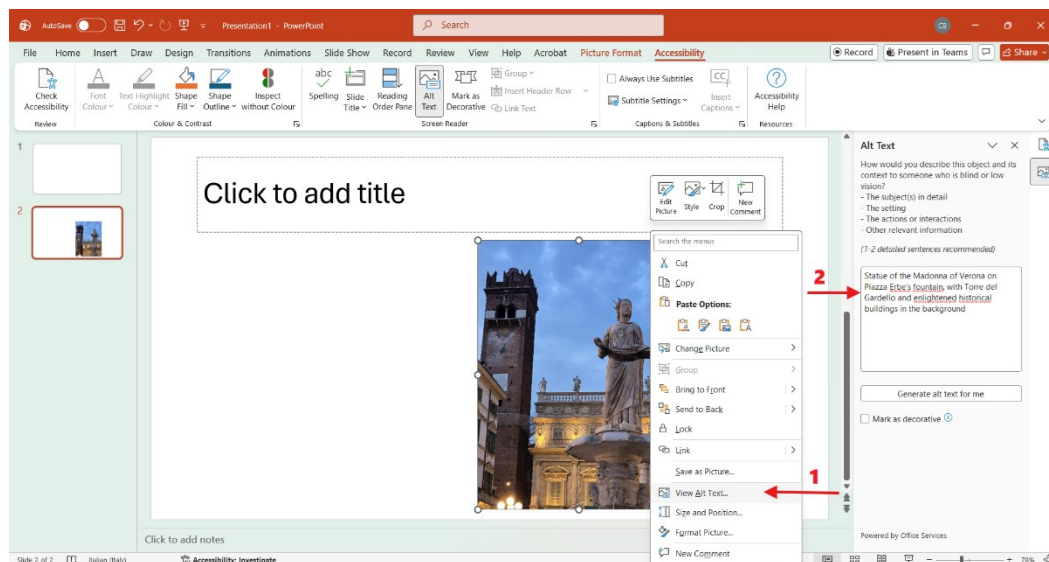


Image 10 – Compilation of an alternative text in PowerPoint (desktop version).

- In online version:
1. Select the image;
 2. Click on the "Picture" tab;
 3. Click on "Alt Text" to open the sidebar;
 4. Insert the alternative text or mark the image as decorative.

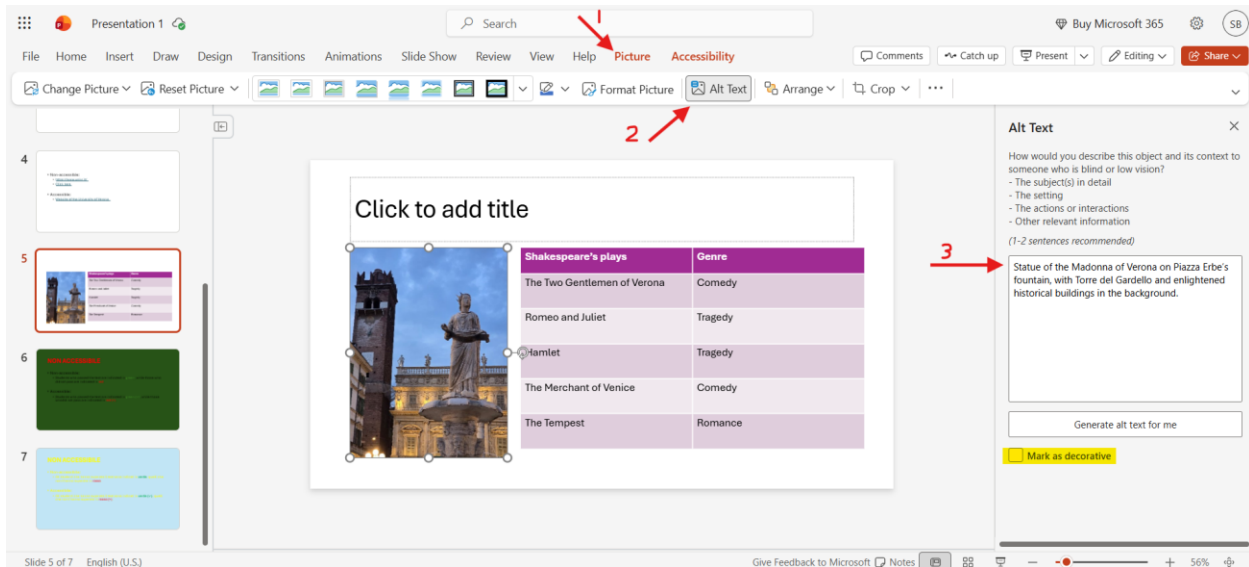


Image 11 – Compilation of an alternative text in PowerPoint Online.

4. Colours and contrast

4.1. Why is it important?

In a presentation, the contrast between text and background is fundamental, as the slides are going to be displayed and seen from far apart in environments with variable lighting. Inadequate colours can undermine the readability of the text, especially for people with visual impairments or disorders, such as colour blindness.

4.2. How to do it

- In desktop version:
 1. Click on "Design" > "Variants" > "Colours" and choose combinations with high contrast ratio (black/white, dark blue/white).
 2. Avoid problematic combinations, such as red/green, yellow/white, blue/black or too elaborated images as a background;
 3. Do not rely solely on colours to transmit meanings: add asterisks, parenthesis, or other annotation symbols together with colours or an explanatory text.

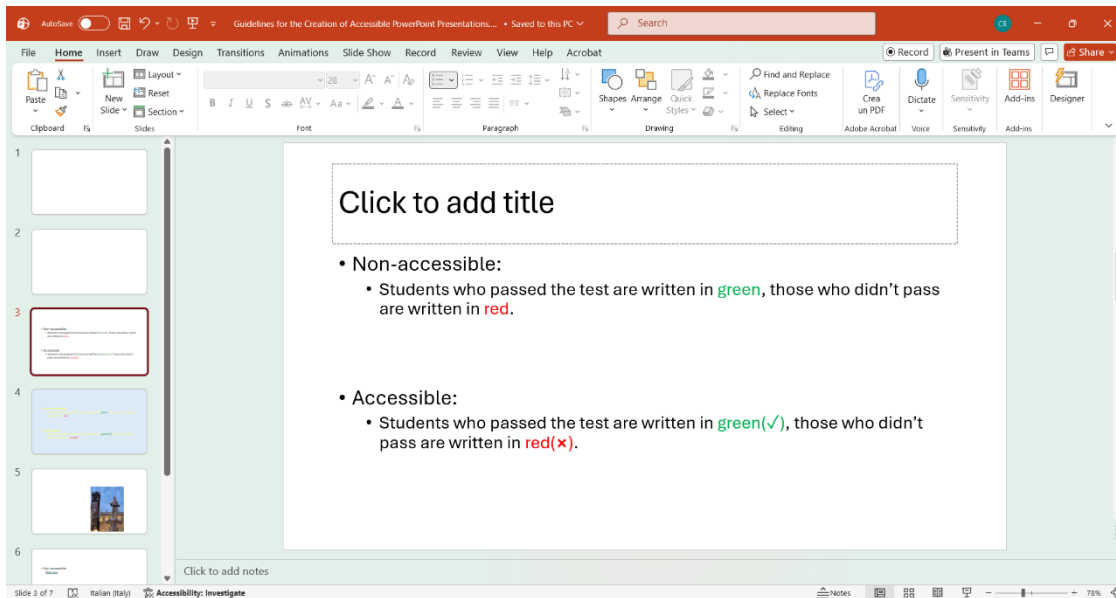


Image 12 – Practical example in PowerPoint: in the first case, the meaning is conveyed only through colours; in the second one the combination of colours and symbols makes the information accessible.

Choosing a good contrast ratio between text and background is essential to provide people with content everyone can easily read. “Visible” colours cannot be considered sufficient: a neat and measurable contrast is required, and it must be perceivable by people with visual impairments.

It is recommended to use colours at the opposite ends of the colour spectrum to guarantee an optimal readability, white and dark blue or white and black combinations, for instance.

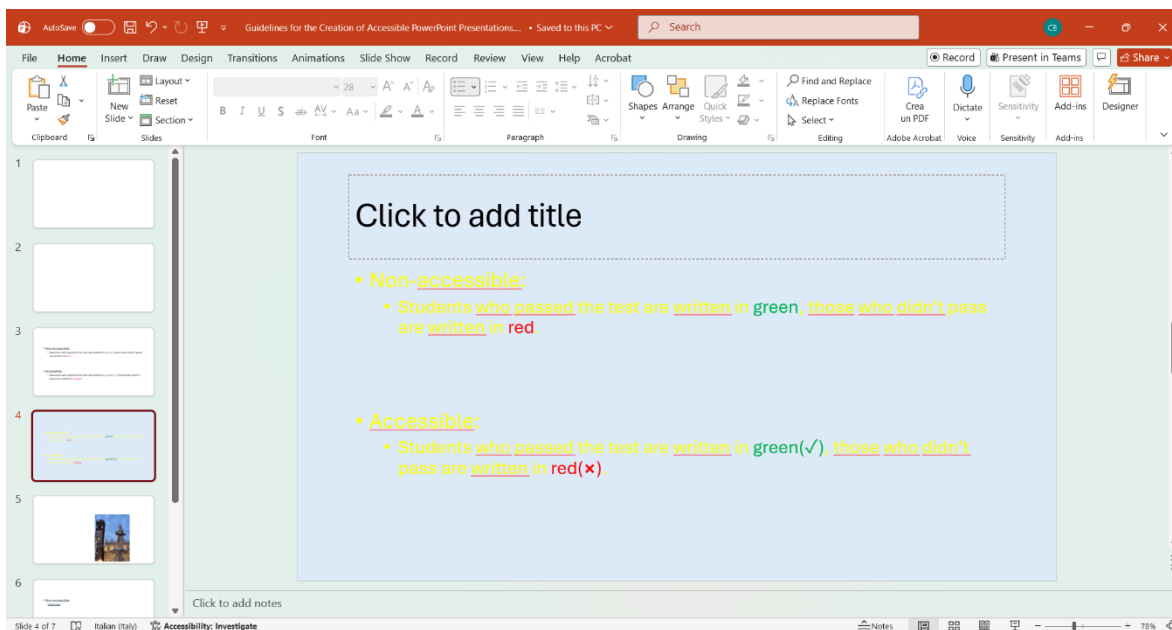


Image 13 – Non accessible slide with light blue background and yellow text – low contrast.

- In online version:
 1. Click on “Design” > “More Variants” > and choose one of the available options to modify the colours of the theme;
 2. Select the text > “Home” > “Font Colour” to change the colour;

3. For the background: "Design" > "Background";
4. Avoid low contrast combinations or decorative backgrounds;
5. If you want to use colours to convey a meaning, add symbols or additional text.

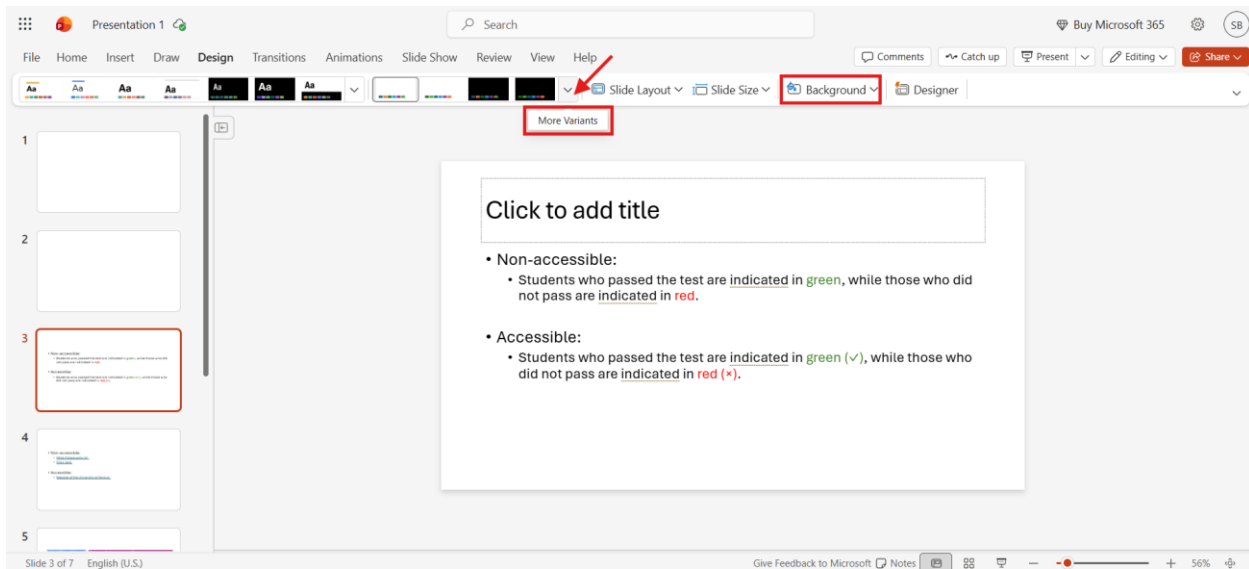


Image 14 – Modification of the colours of the theme in PowerPoint Online.

5. Text formatting

5.1. Why is it important?

Text formatting in a presentation affects the readability and clarity of contents. Too small font size or decorative fonts can be difficult to read, especially if the presentation is displayed in a classroom. In the same way, the excessive use of italics, bold and capital letters reduces the readability and can interfere with accessibility tools. An adequate formatting guarantees information to be easily understood by everyone, including people with visual impairments or specific learning disorders.

5.2. How to do it?

- In desktop version:

1. Select the text in the slide;
2. Click on the “Home” tab;
3. To change the font, click on the name of the font and choose a readable one, preferably a sans serif (i.e., Arial, Calibri, Verdana);
4. To modify the font size, click on the number right next to the font and select an adequate value (at least 20-24 for the body, 40 or more for the headings);
5. To align the text, use the alignment buttons (we recommend using “Align Left”). Avoid justified alignment, as it makes the text less readable;
6. To set line spacing, click on the icon “Line Spacing” and choose at least 1.2;
7. To create a bulleted or numbered list, use the dedicated buttons in the “Home” tab. Do not insert hyphens or spaces manually;
8. (Optional) To create multi-level lists, use the “Increase / Decrease List Level” buttons.

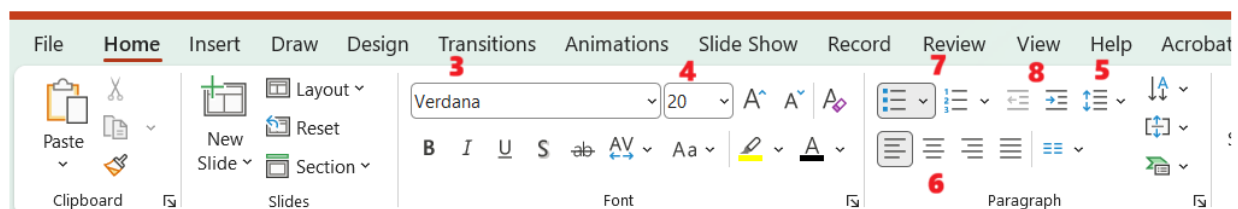


Image 15 – PowerPoint (desktop) “Home” tab: font (3), size (4), line spacing (5), alignment (6), lists (7), indentation (8).

- In online version:
1. Select the text in the slide;
 2. Click on the “Home” tab;
 3. To change the font, click on the font name and choose from the list;
 4. To change the size, click on the number and select the value (at least 20-24 for the body, 40 or more for the headings);
 5. To align the text, click on the dedicated buttons (we recommend using “Align Left”);
 6. To set the line spacing, open the “More Options” menu (click on the three dots), select the line spacing and choose a value (we recommend using a value between 1.2 and 1.5);
 7. To create a bulleted or numbered list, use the “Bullets” or “Numbering” buttons;
 8. (Optional) to create multi-level lists, use the “Increase / Decrease List Level” buttons.

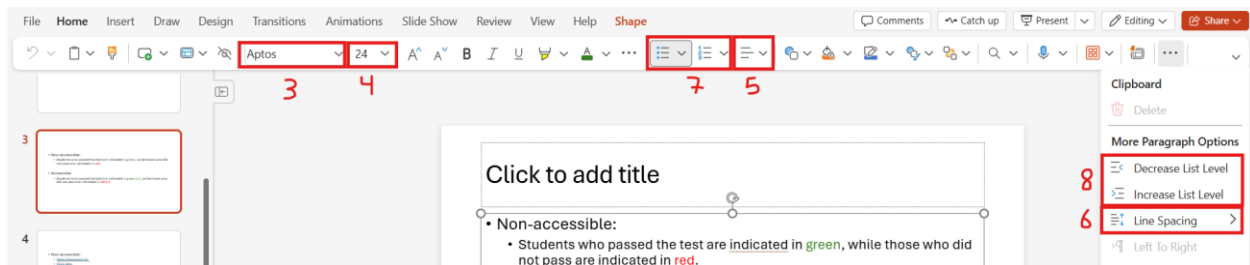


Image 16 – PowerPoint Online “Home” tab: font (3), size (4), alignment (5), line spacing (6), lists (7), indentation (8).

6. Hyperlinks

6.1. Why is it important?

In presentations, hyperlinks allow users to access external resources (websites, documents, video). If the link is not clear enough, it can represent an obstacle for readers or users of screen readers. An accessible hyperlink must be descriptive, so that it can be comprehensible without writing the complete web address or interpreting a “Click here” button.

6.2. How to do it?

- Recommendations:
 - Always underline the hyperlink: it represents a standard for hyperlinks, in this way people with visual impairments or colour-blindness can immediately identify it as a link;
 - Use a colour that sufficiently contrasts with the text and the background (usually blue for hyperlinks and purple for the already seen ones);
 - Avoid eliminating the underline or using colours that are too similar to the surrounding text: it risks not making it clear that it is a hyperlink;
 - Use the same style for all the hyperlinks throughout the presentation to guarantee coherence and clarity.
- In desktop version:
 1. Select the text or the object (i.e., pictures, shapes) to which you want to attach a hyperlink;

2. Click on "Insert" > "Link" (or right-click > "Link");
3. In the dialog window, insert the web address in the field "Address" if it is an external hyperlink;
4. Verify that the "Text to display" is descriptive;
5. Confirm by clicking on "OK".

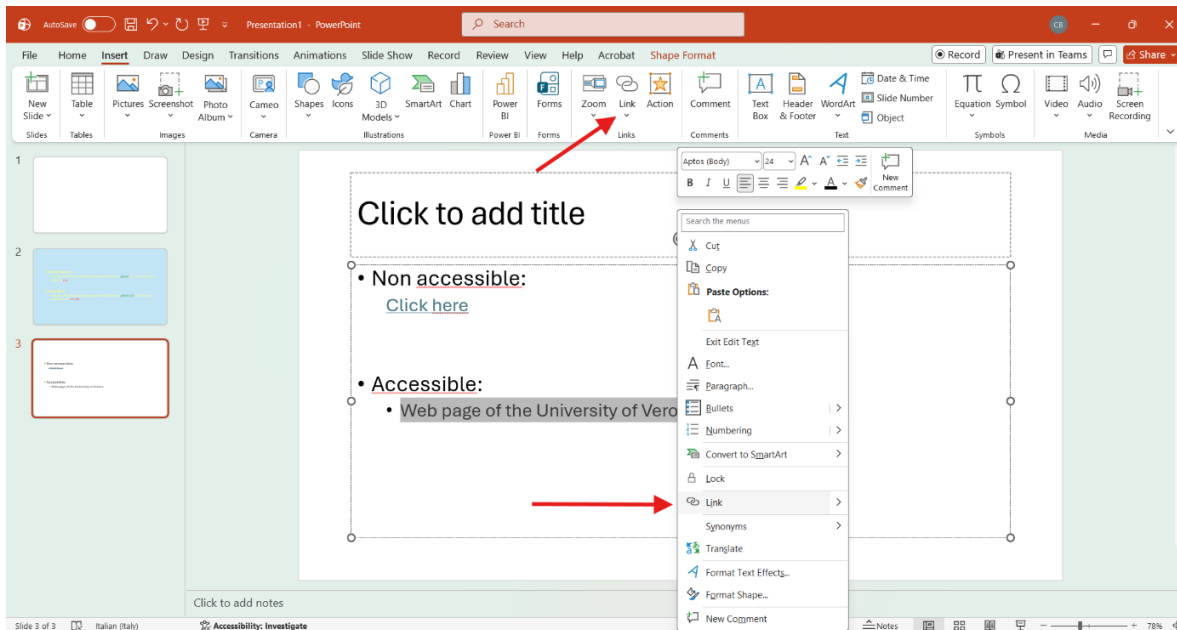


Image 17 – Hyperlink insertion in PowerPoint (desktop).

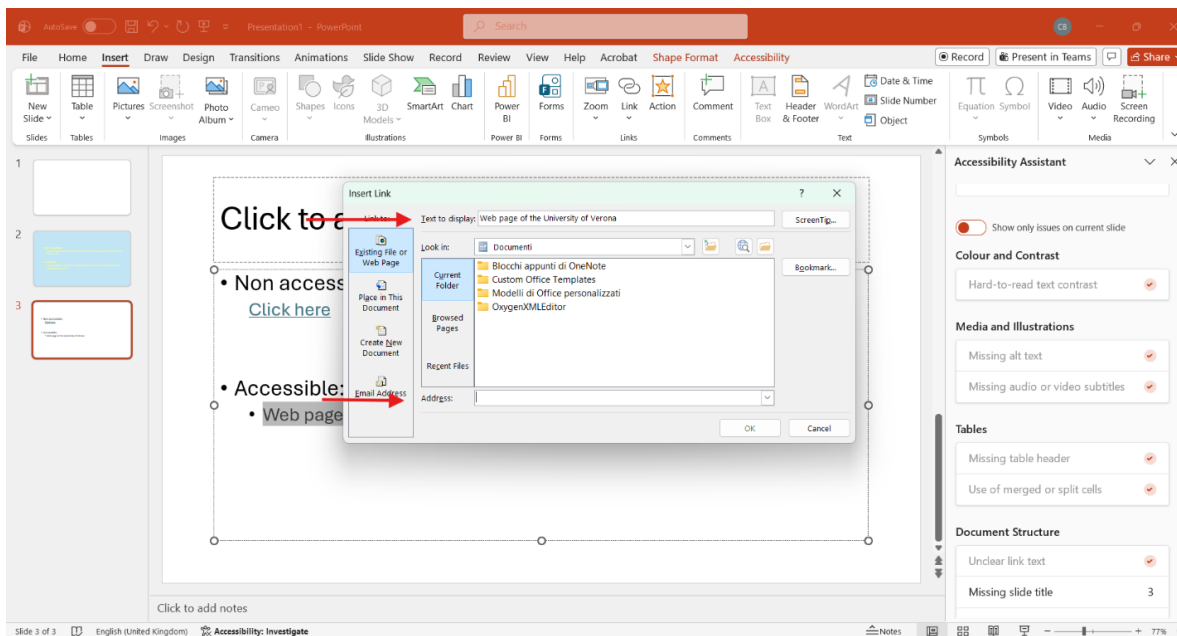


Image 18 – "Insert Link" window in PowerPoint (desktop).

- In online version:
1. Select the text or the object to add the hyperlink to;
 2. Go to "Insert" > "Link" (or right-click > "Link");
 3. In the dialog window, write the address in the appropriate field;
 4. Check that the "Display Text" is descriptive and understandable;
 5. Confirm by clicking on the "Insert" button.

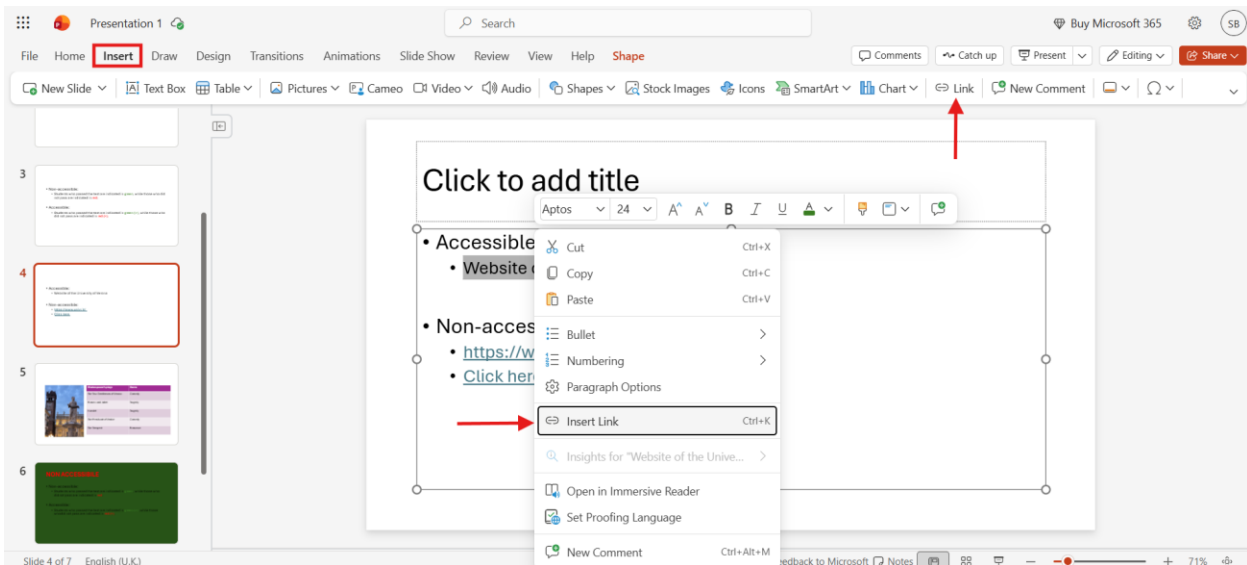


Image 19 – Insertion of a hyperlink in PowerPoint Online.

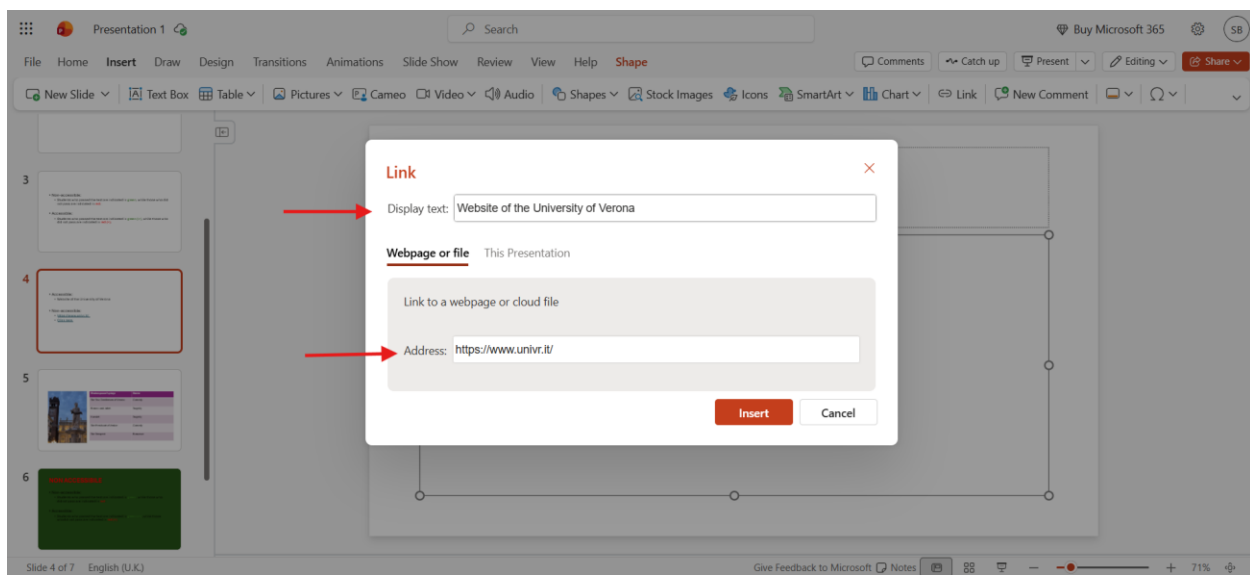


Image 20 – PowerPoint Online "Hyperlink" tab.

7. Tables

7.1. Why is it important?

In presentations, tables help organize and display information. However, if they are not used adequately, they can be difficult to understand for users of screen readers. Missing headers, merged cells and complex tables reduce accessibility. Making accessible tables means allowing everybody to understand their content.

7.2. How to do it

- Recommendations:
 - Avoid inserting tables if they are not necessary: usually, it is preferable to use a list or a structured text;
 - Choose a simple layout: do not use merged, split or empty cells;
 - Always use a header row to make the data more transparent;
 - Always add an alternative text with a title and a brief description.
- In desktop version:
 1. To set the header row: select the table > go to "Table Design" > "Table Style Options" > activate "Header Row";

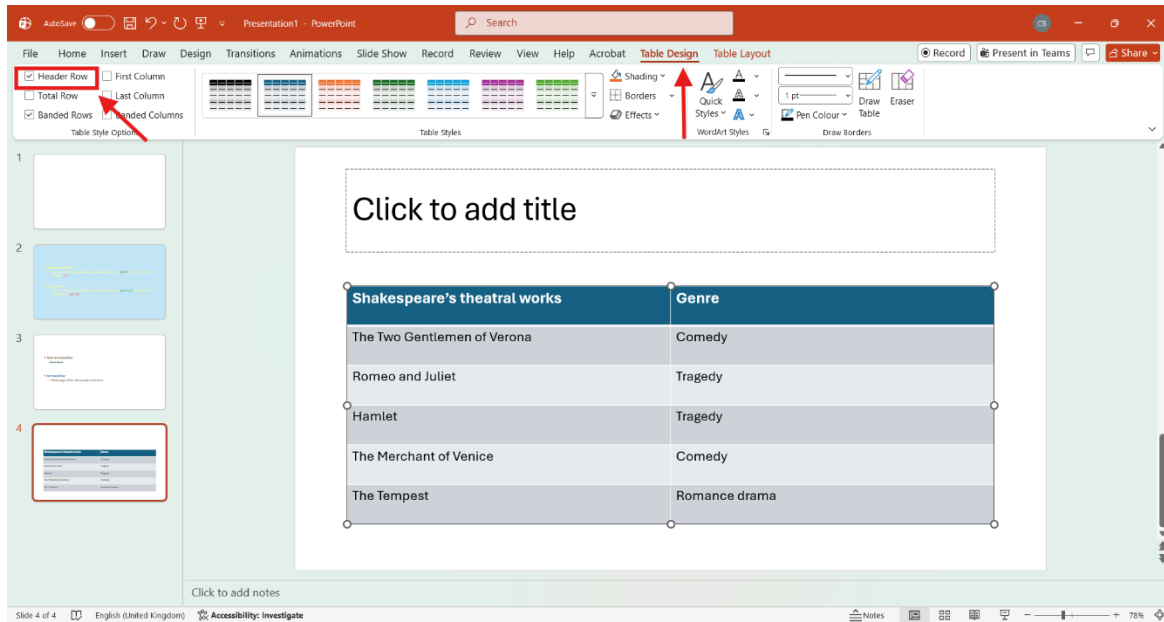


Image 21 – Activation of the header row in PowerPoint (desktop).

2. To add alternative text: select the table > right-click on it > choose View Alt Text. In the sidebar that opens, insert a brief description of the table.

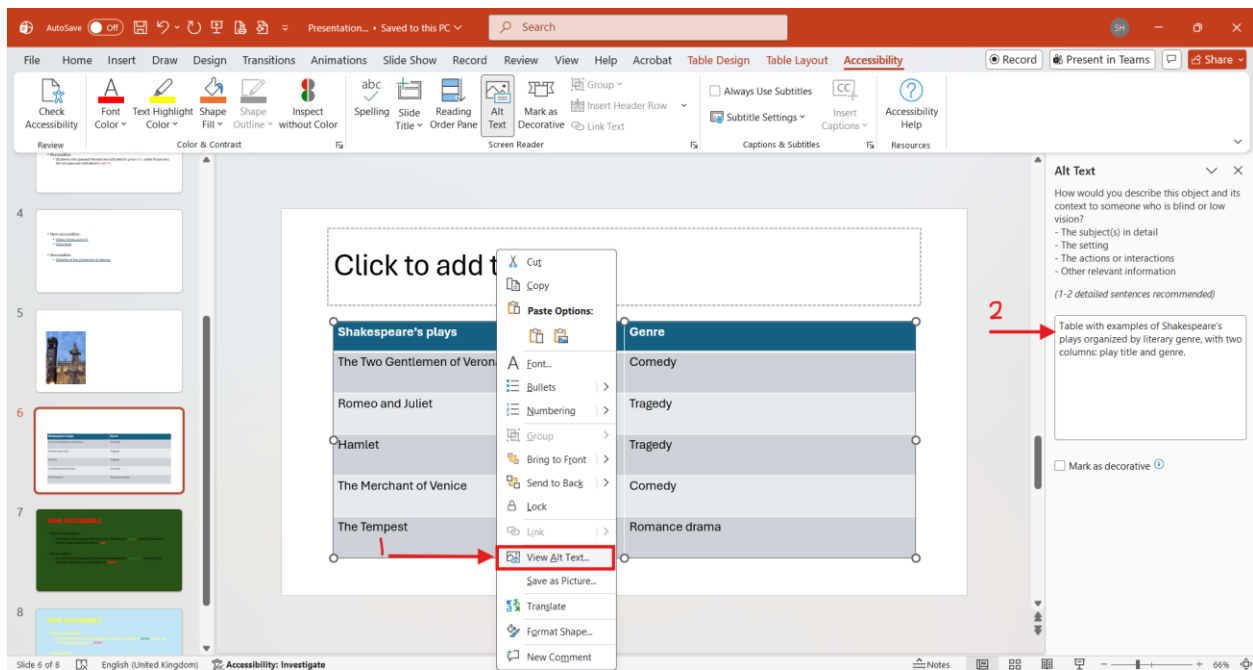


Image 22 – Adding alternative text to a table in PowerPoint desktop from the table context menu.

- In online version:

1. To set the header row: select the table > go to "Table" tab > "Style Options" > activate "Header Row";

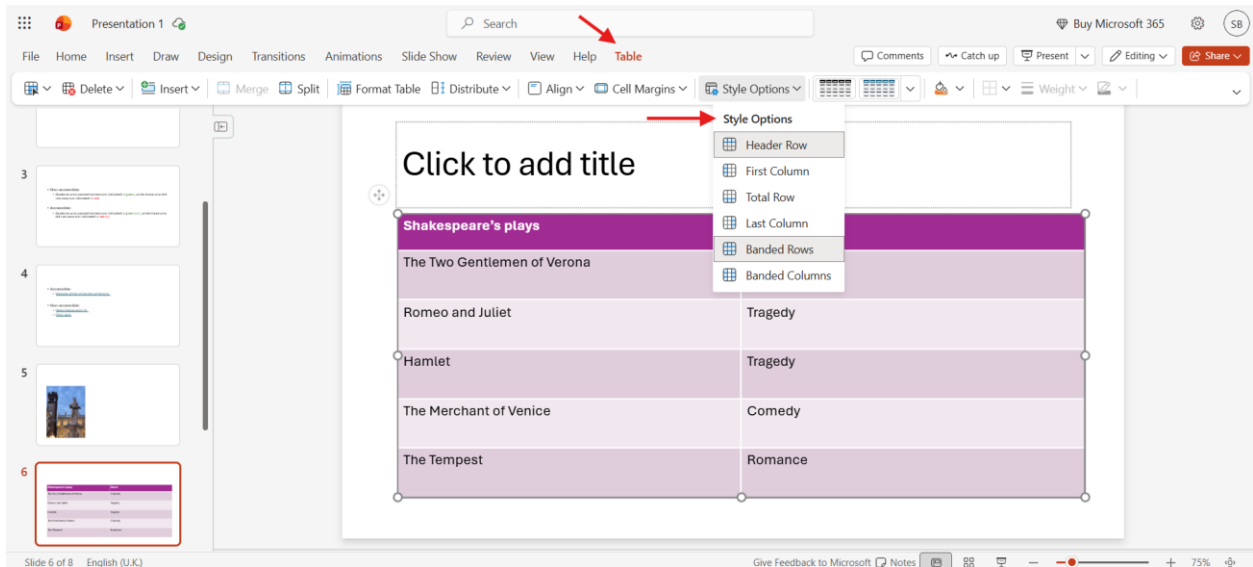


Image 23 – Activation of the header row in PowerPoint Online.

2. At the time this manual was created, PowerPoint Online did not provide direct access to the Alt Text pane for tables from the context menu. To add alternative text, follow these steps:
 - a. Open the Review tab;
 - b. Click Check Accessibility;
 - c. In the Accessibility tab, select Alt Text;
 - d. Select the table;
 - e. In the sidebar, insert a brief description of the table.

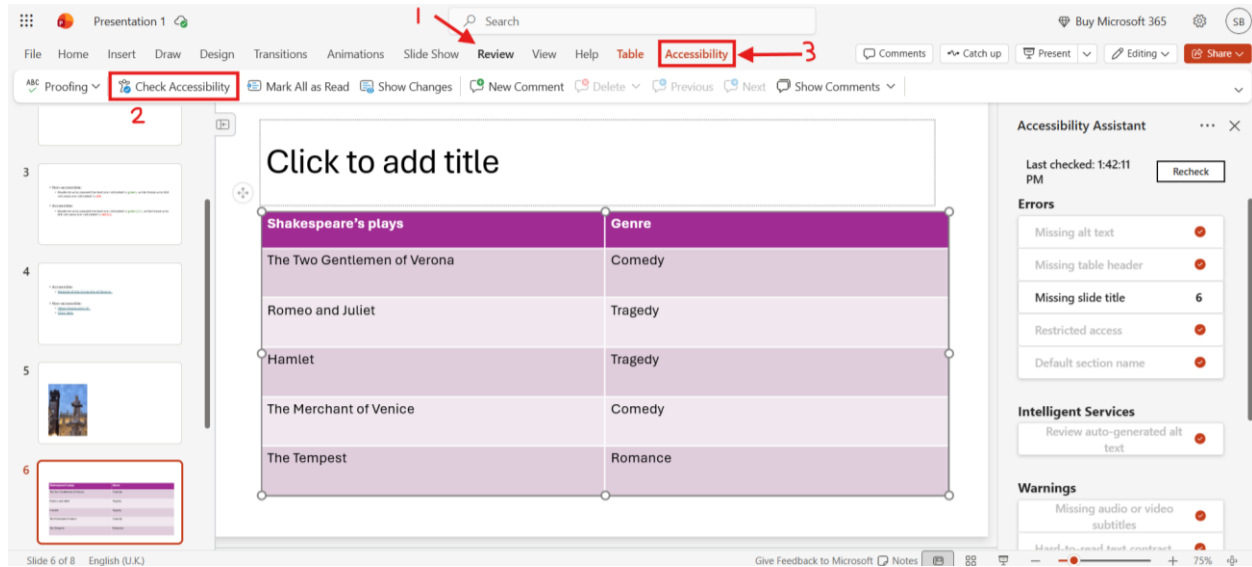


Image 24 – Opening the "Accessibility" tab in PowerPoint Online from Review > Check Accessibility.

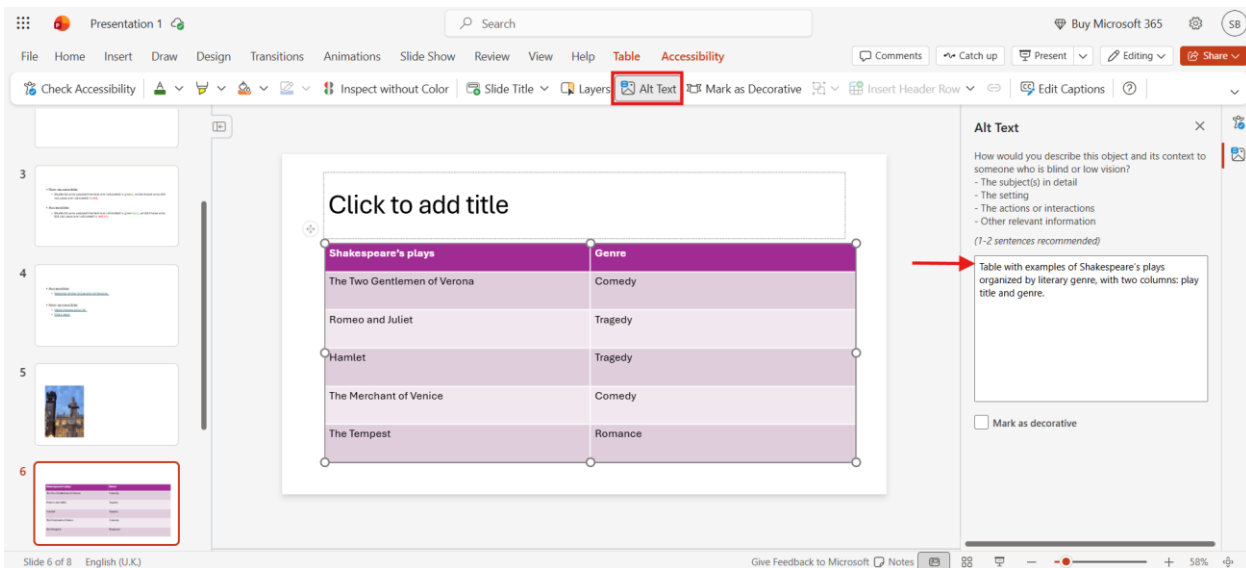


Image 25 – Adding alternative text to a table in PowerPoint Online from the "Accessibility" tab.

8. Sections

8.1. Why is it important?

The division of a presentation into sections makes it easier to navigate it. Each section needs to have a simple but significant title, in order to summarize the content of the slides contained there.

8.2. How to do it

- In desktop version, sections can be added in two ways:

A. From the “Home” tab, click on “Section” > “Add Section”;

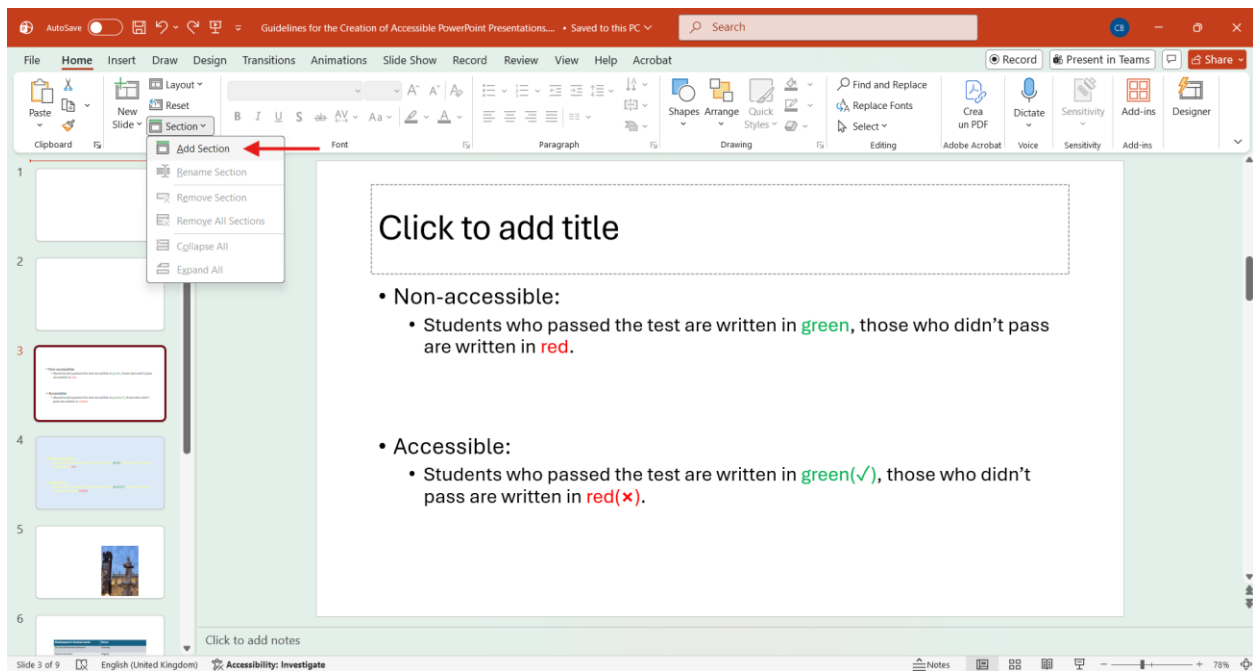


Image 26 - "Section" window open in PowerPoint (desktop): from here it is possible to modify all the sections of the presentation.

B. From the left sidebar, right-click in the space between the slides you want to insert the section in, then click on “Add Section”.

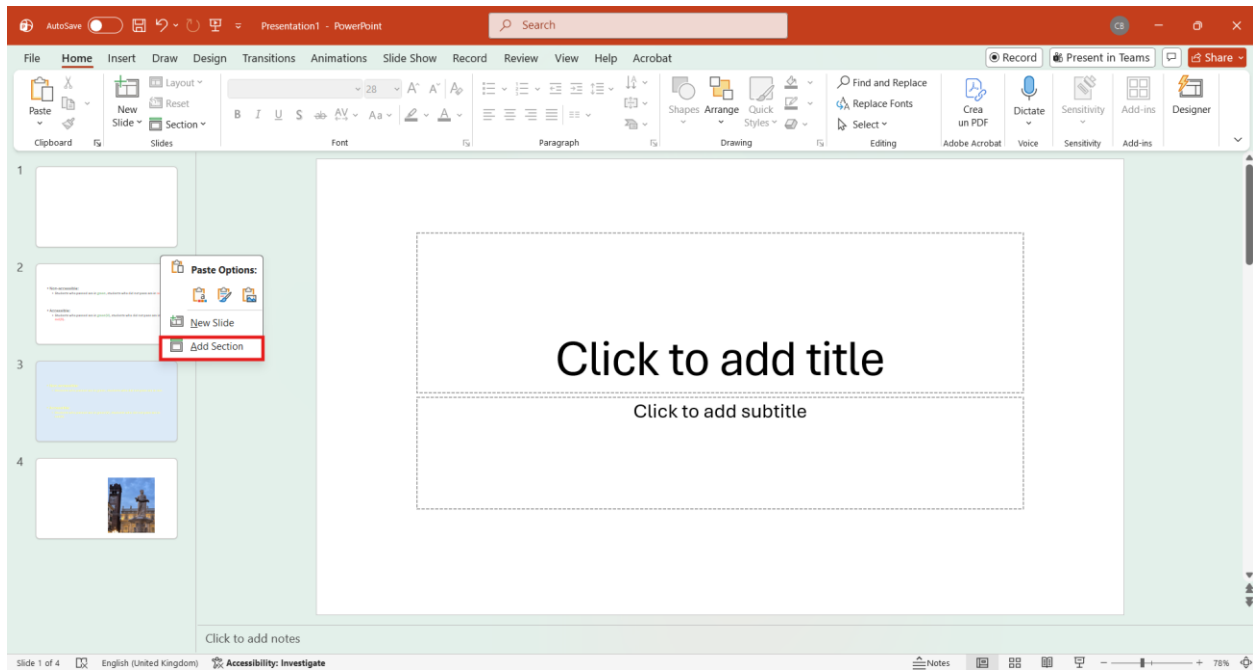


Image 27 – Slides left sidebar: from here it is possible to add sections.

Some sections will be automatically generated, and the user can modify them by right-clicking on them in the left sidebar. Another “Section” window will open, from which it is possible to rename, add, remove and change the order of the selected section.

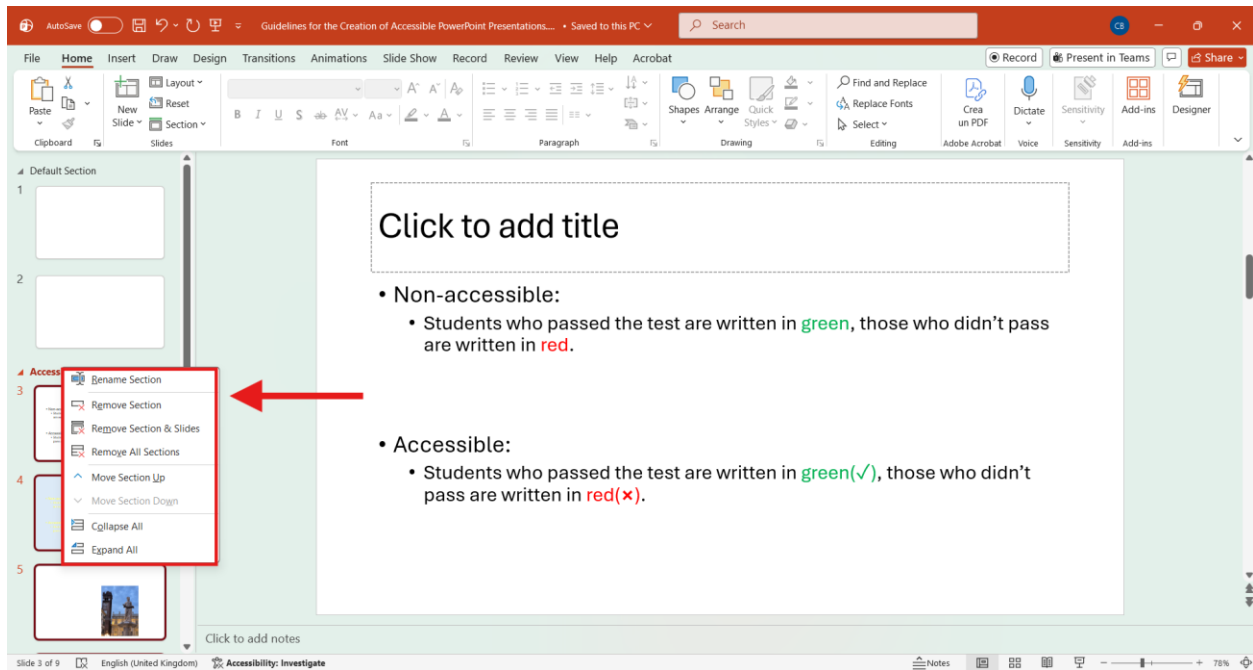


Image 28 - "Section" window open in the sidebar in PowerPoint (desktop): from here it is possible to modify the selected section.

To move the slides from one section to another, select the slide and drag it into the desired section.

- In online version:
 1. Go to "View", then click on "Slide Sorter": a dedicated menu will open;
 2. As in desktop version, right-click between the slides where you want to insert the section and click on "Add Section".

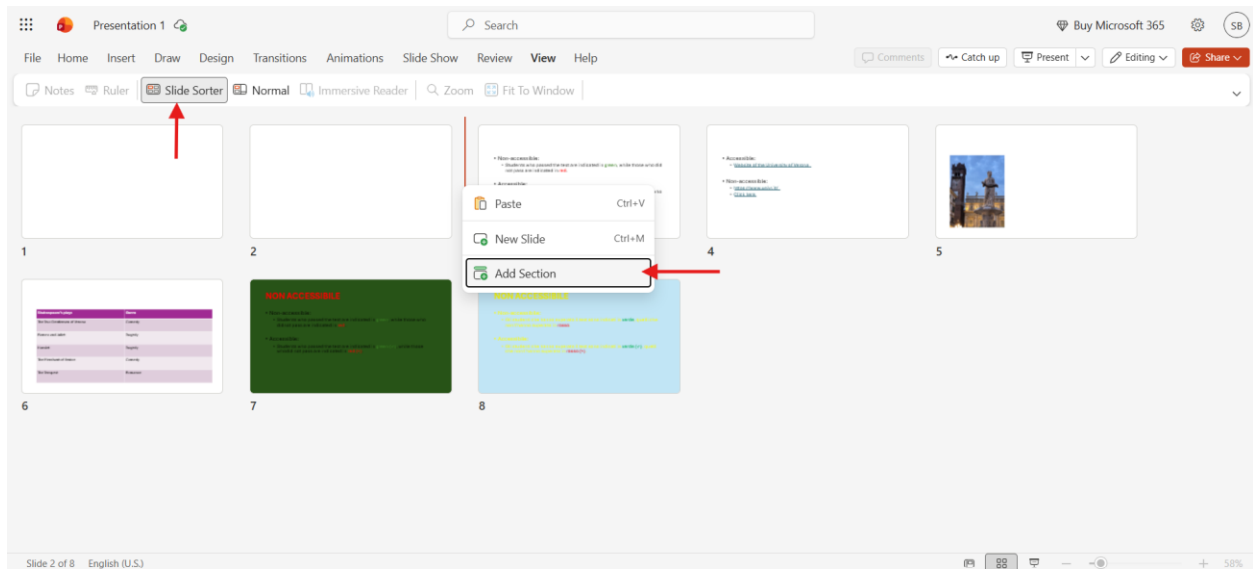


Image 29 - "Slide Sorter" menu open in PowerPoint Online.

3. To modify the name, the position or to remove a section, right-click on it and a dedicated menu will open.

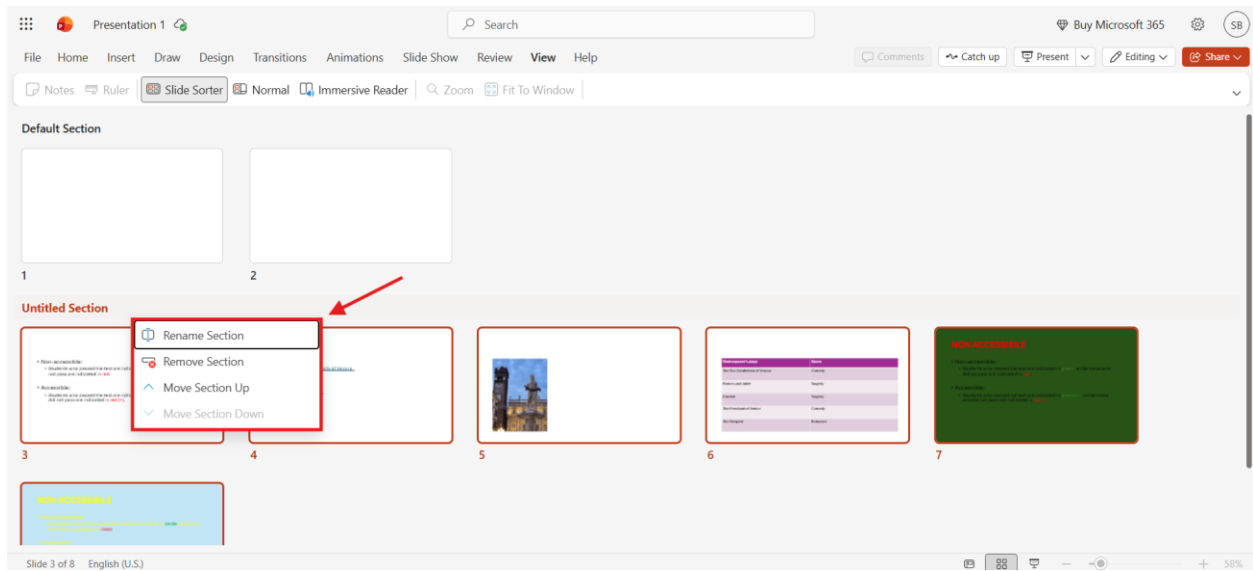


Image 30 - "Section" menu open in PowerPoint Online.

9. Check accessibility

9.1. Why is it important?

Besides common mistakes such as missing alternative text or unstructured tables, presentations may have other specific problems: slides without the title or wrong reading order, to mention some. The “Check Accessibility” tool reports these kinds of issues, allowing the user to swiftly correct them.

9.2. How to do it

- General recommendations:
 - Always check the accessibility of your presentation before sharing or presenting it;
 - Check the alerts as well: they often suggest useful improvements (i.e. low contrast ratio);
 - The “Check Accessibility” tool does not detect everything: some aspects, such as non-descriptive hyperlinks or unclear texts, always require manual revision.
- In desktop version:
 1. Go to the “Review” tab;
 2. Click on “Check Accessibility”;
 3. A sidebar will open on the right, showing mistakes, alerts and suggestions, for instance “Missing slide title”.

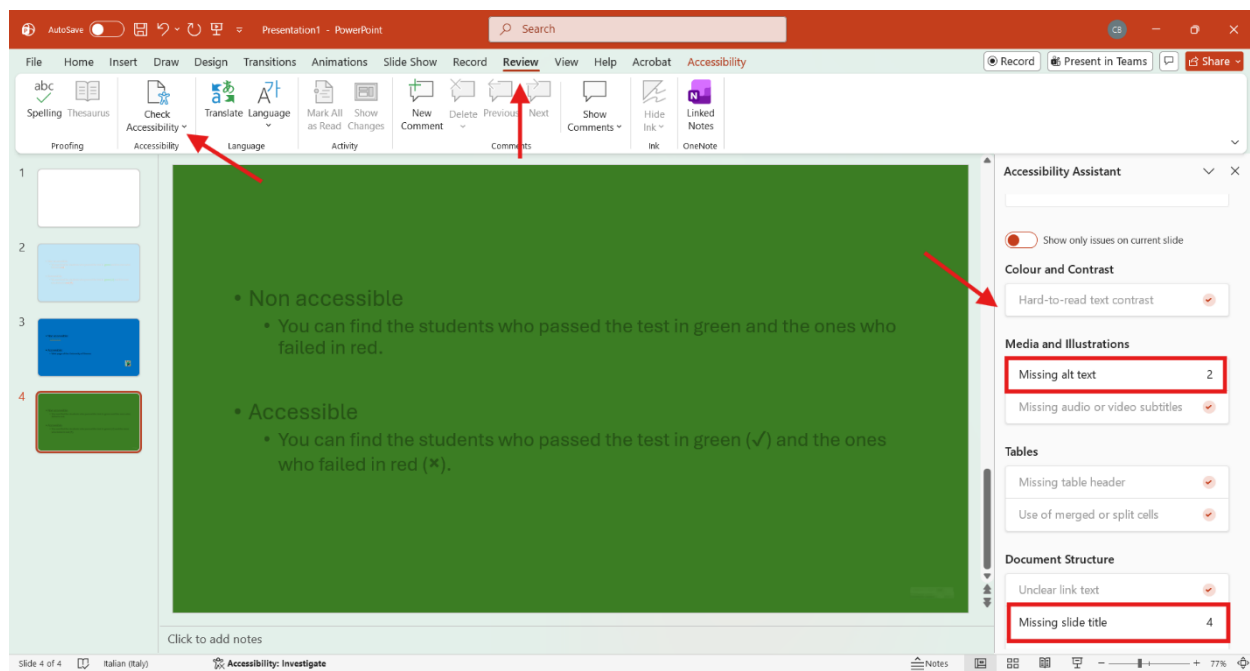


Image 31 – "Check Accessibility" result panel in PowerPoint (desktop).

Note: this tool reports many common problems, but it cannot detect all the issues, such as non-descriptive hyperlinks or unclear texts. A manual inspection is always required.

- In online version:
1. Go to "Review";
 2. Click on "Check Accessibility";
 3. The "Accessibility Assistant" box will open on the right, showing mistakes (i.e. images without alternative text), suggestions and alerts;
 4. Click on the elements to visualize the recommended actions and fix the problems.

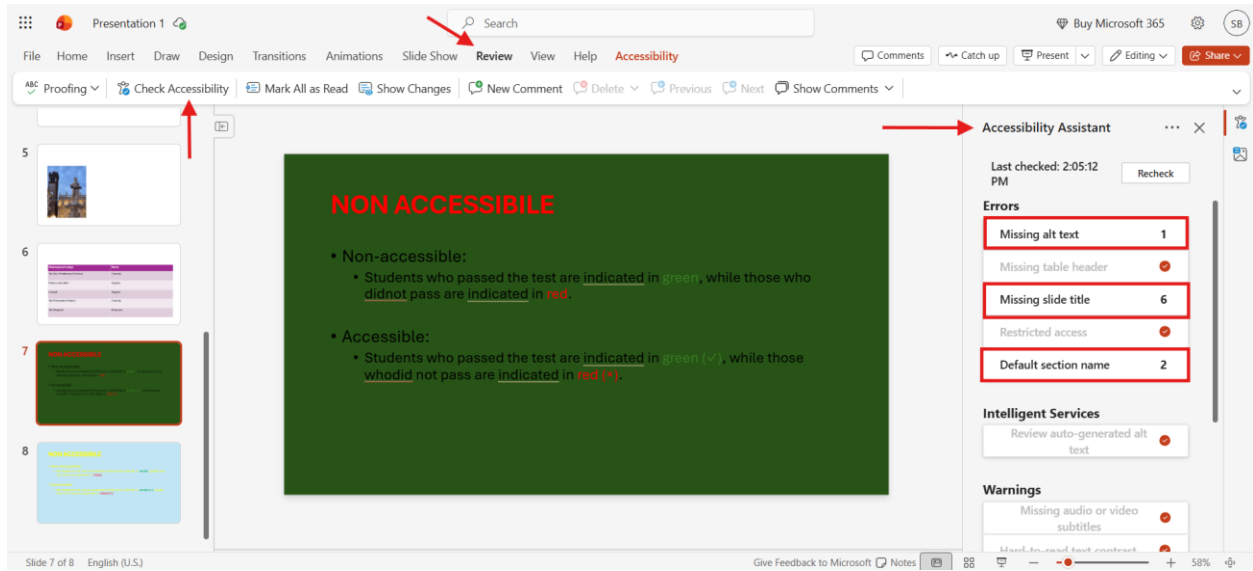


Image 32 – "Check Accessibility" result panel in PowerPoint Online.

Note: as well as in the desktop version, also in the online version some problems are not automatically detected, non-descriptive hyperlinks for instance. It is useful to integrate automatic inspection with a manual one and, if necessary, external tools such as [WebAIM Contrast Checker](#) for the colours.

10. Title of the presentation

10.1. Why is it important?

Adding a title to a PowerPoint presentation is an important step to ensure its accessibility. The title allows users of assistive technologies, such as screen readers, to understand the context and content of the presentation more easily. For this reason, before sharing the file, it is important to correctly fill in the presentation properties by adding metadata such as title, author, subject and any comments.

Note: At present, PowerPoint Online does not allow users to configure these metadata with the same level of control available in the desktop version. To ensure more complete management of the file properties, it is therefore recommended to carry out this operation using the desktop version of PowerPoint.

10.2. How to do it

- In desktop version:

1. Go to "File" > "Info";
2. Click on "Properties" > "Advanced Properties";
3. Fill in the fields "Title", for the name of the presentation, "Subject", to specify the area this document belongs to, "Author" and "Comments", in which it is recommended to insert a brief description of what the user will find in the presentation.

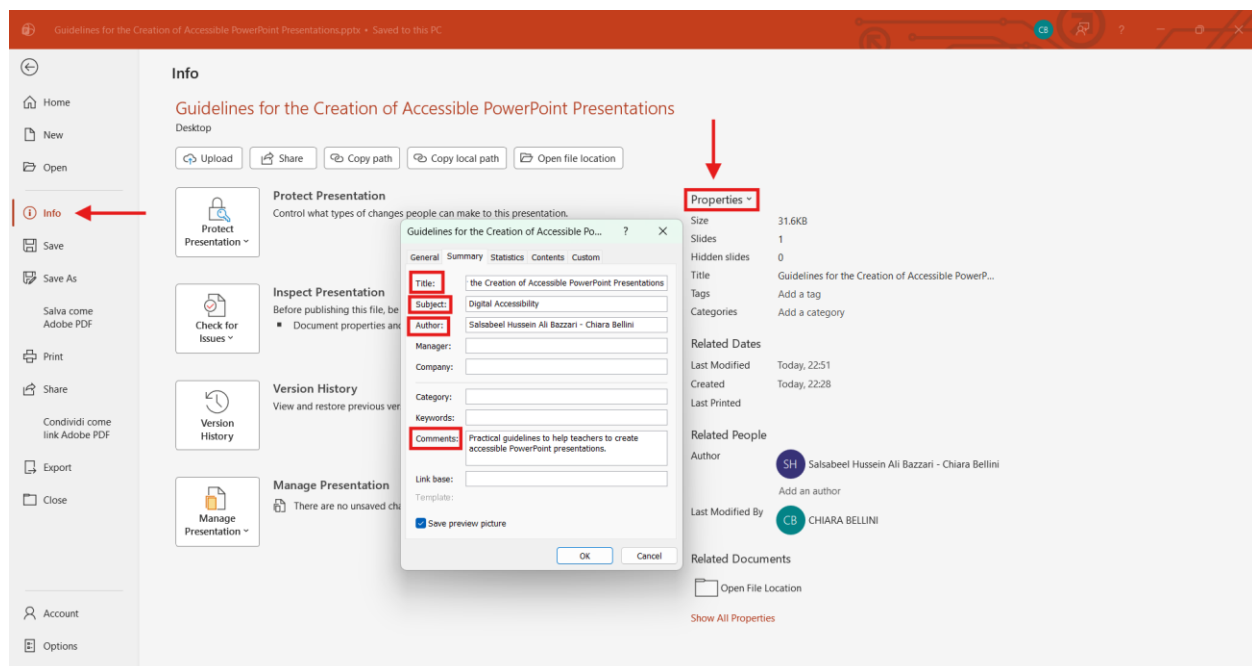


Image 33 - "Info" section and "Properties" box open in PowerPoint (desktop).

11. Export in PDF format

11.1. Why is it important?

Once the presentation is complete, it is important to export it in an accessible format that can also be read by assistive technologies, such as screen readers. One of the most used formats is PDF. To export a presentation as a PDF, it is not necessary to use specific software, such as Adobe Acrobat: PowerPoint allows users to save the file directly with this extension.

However, it is important to remember that a PDF can be considered accessible only if it preserves the document structure, tags, alternative texts and reading order already set in the PowerPoint presentation. For this reason, during the export process, it is necessary to check that the accessibility options are enabled.

Note: At present, PowerPoint Online does not allow users to fully configure the accessibility options for the PDF format, such as tag settings or the selection of the export type. To ensure greater accessibility of the exported file, it is therefore recommended to export the presentation as a PDF using the desktop version of PowerPoint.

11.2. How to do it

- In desktop version there are two ways to save a PowerPoint presentation in a PDF format:
 - A. Go to "File" > "Save As" > "Browse" and choose the location where to save the documents;

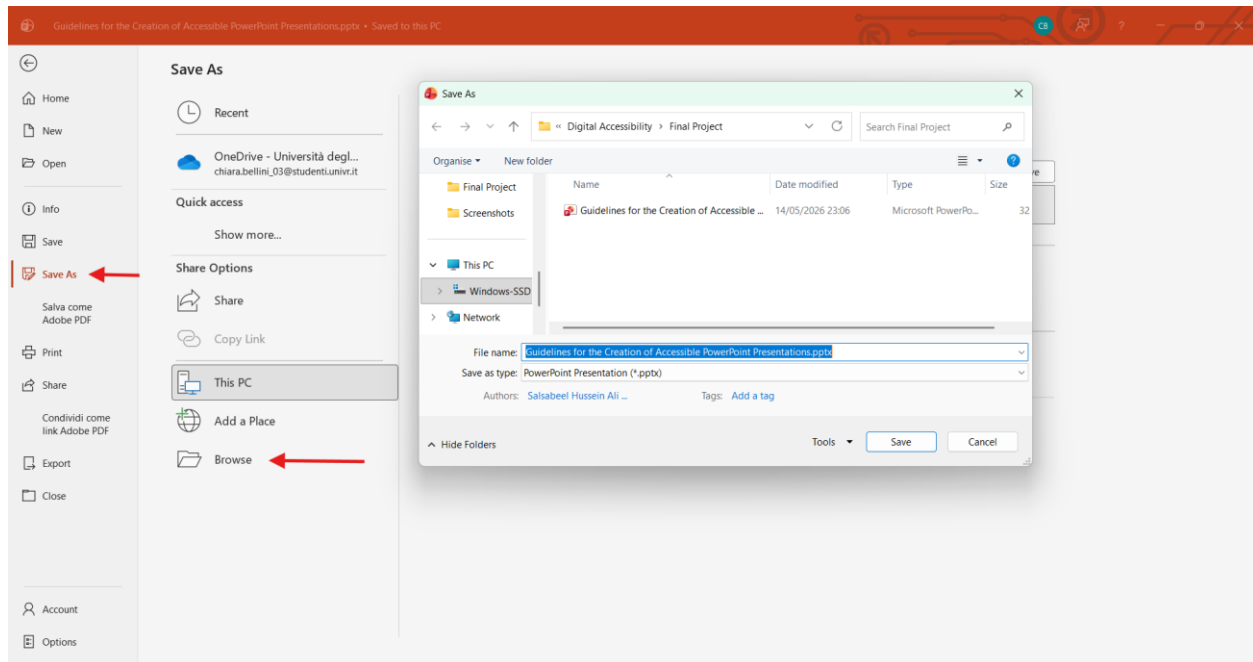


Image 34 - Path to follow to save a presentation in PDF format from the "Save As" button in PowerPoint (desktop).

B. Go to "File" > "Export" > "Create PDF / XPS Document" > "Create PDF / XPS";

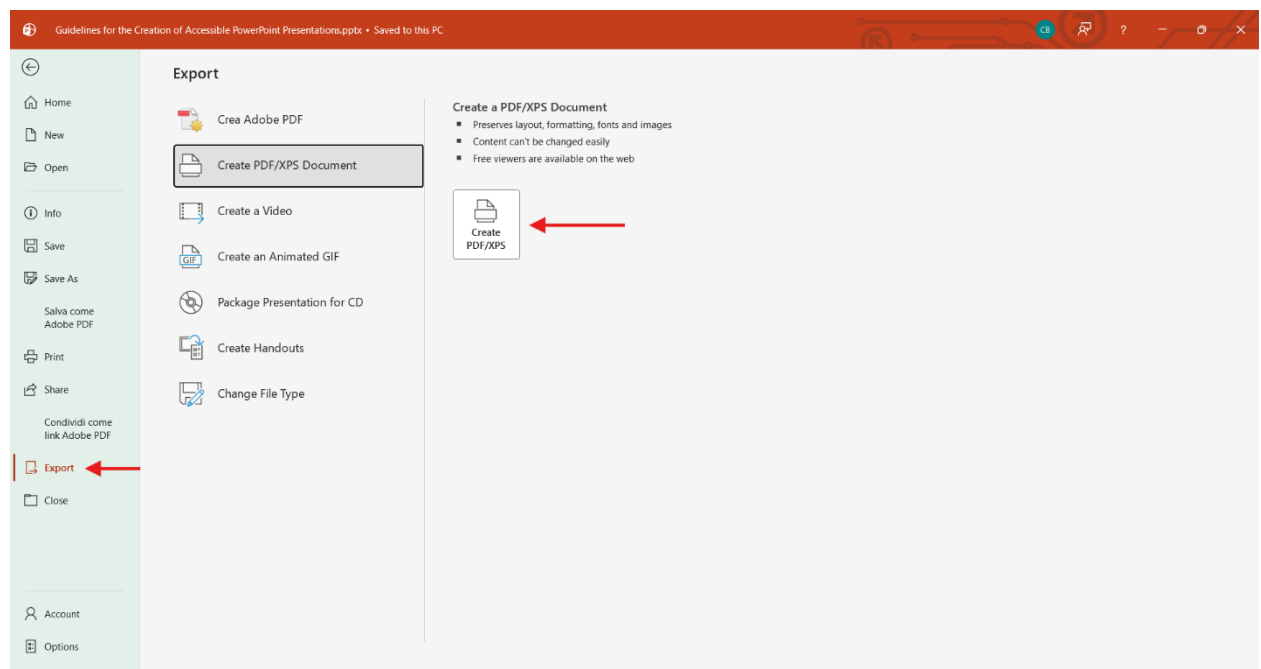


Image 35 - Path to follow to save a presentation in PDF format from the "Export" button in PowerPoint (desktop).

Either way, the same window will open, from where it is possible to choose a format from the “Save as type:” menu.

1. Choose the extension “PDF (*.pdf)”;
2. Click on “Options” and make sure that the “Document structure tags for accessibility” box is checked, then confirm by clicking on “OK”;
3. Click on “Save” or “Publish”.

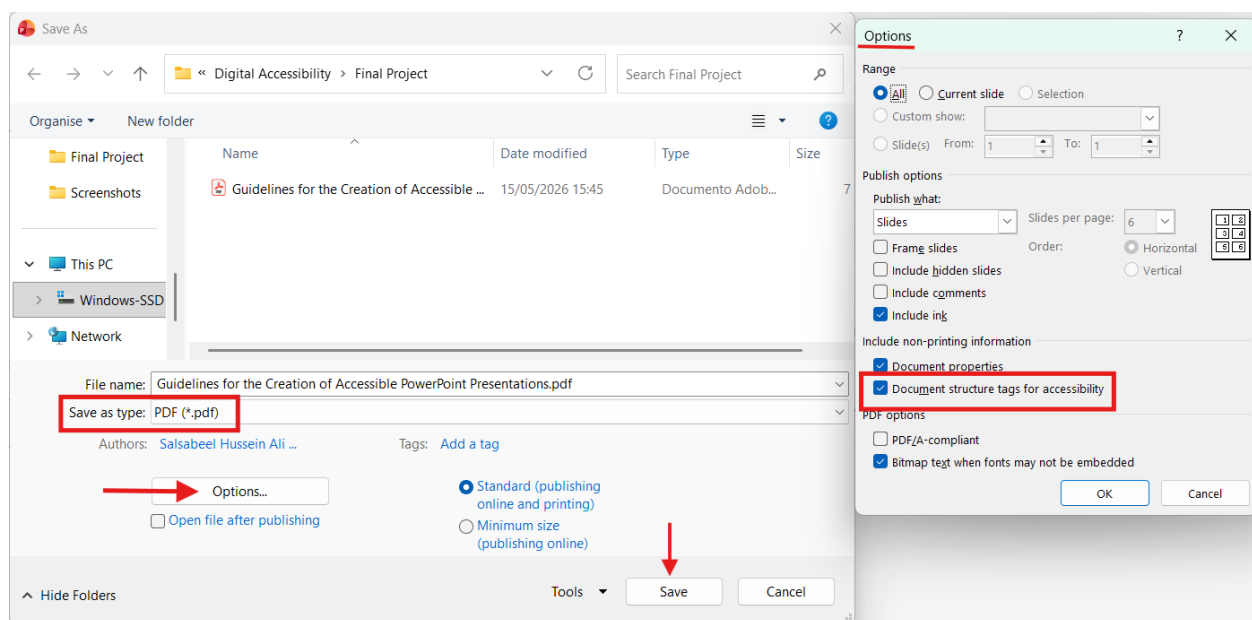


Image 36 - How to check for accessibility tags when saving a presentation in PDF format in PowerPoint (desktop).

- In online version:

In this version the path to save a presentation in PDF format differs from the one of the desktop version, as it is directly connected to the OneDrive account:

1. Click on “File” > “Export” > “Download as a PDF”;

2. When the pop up "Your presentation is ready" appears click on "Download";
3. Save the file.

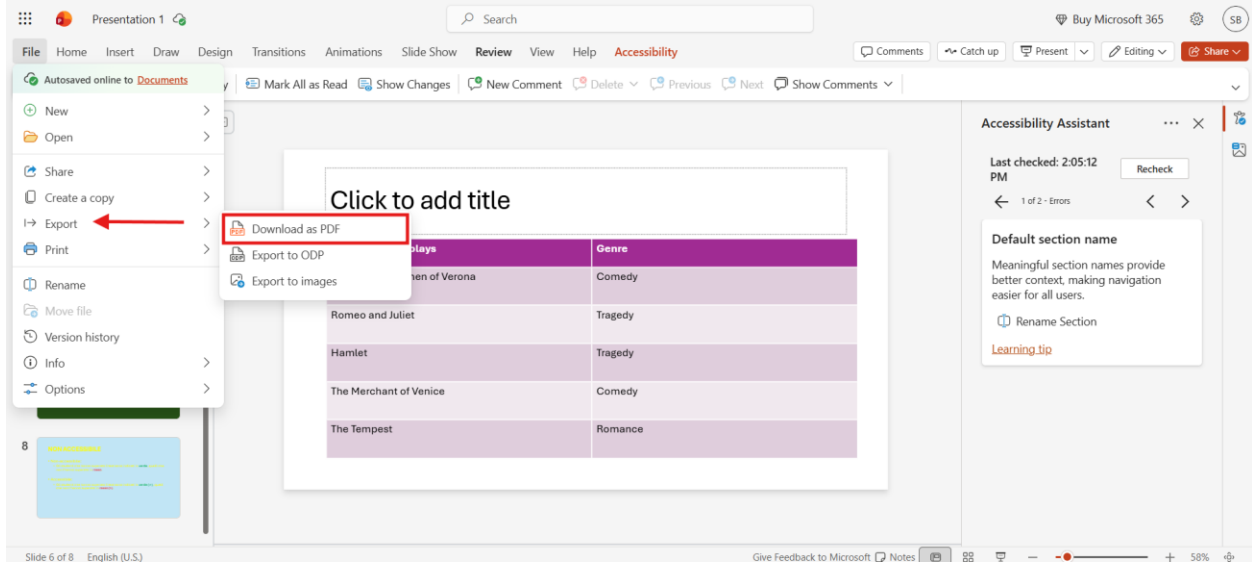


Image 37 - Path to follow to save the presentation in PDF format in PowerPoint Online.

Note: this version of PowerPoint does not allow the user to choose the type of PDF and tags to set, at least in educational versions (which are accessed with university or school credentials). Consequently, it is recommended to export from the desktop version.

V. Conclusion

Creating accessible presentations does not simply mean following technical rules, but also guarantee everyone the possibility to read, understand and use contents. Every choice – from the text format to colours, images, tables and hypertextual links – contributes to make the presentation more inclusive.

The “Check Accessibility” tool already integrated in PowerPoint represents a valid support to detect mistakes and suggestions but still does not substitute manual inspection. It is always required to eventually check the presentation to ensure that hyperlinks, alternative texts, structure and contents are clear and understandable.

To sum up, to project accessibly means to adopt a perspective based on attention and respect for who will employ our presentations. A small effort during the preparation of the document will result in a great benefit for those who will see or assist to the presentation and for the overall quality of the work.