

GUIDELINES FOR THE CREATION OF ACCESSIBLE WORD DOCUMENTS

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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 Word.....	6
1. Document Structure.....	6
1.1. Why is it important?	6
1.2. How to do it	6
2. Language Settings	12
2.1. Why is it important?	12
2.2. How to do it	12
3. Text Formatting.....	16
3.1. Why is it important?	16
3.2. How to do it	17
4. Alternative Text for Images.....	19
4.1. Why is it important?	19
4.2. How to do it	20
5. Colours and Contrast	23
5.1. Why is it important?	23
5.2. How to do it	23
6. Hyperlinks	25
6.1. Why is it important?	25
6.2. How to do it	25
7. Tables.....	28
7.1. Why is it important?	28

7.2.	How to do it	28
8.	Check Accessibility	33
8.1.	Why is it important?	33
8.2.	How to do it	33
9.	Document Title	35
9.1.	Why is it important?	35
9.2.	How to do it	36
10.	Exporting to Accessible PDF Format	37
10.1.	Why is it important?	37
10.2.	How to do it	38
V.	Conclusion	40

I. Introduction

Accessibility is a fundamental element to take into consideration when creating learning materials. It represents a way to make education a more inclusive, equal, and respectful process for every student. In addition, following accessibility criteria encourages lecturers to reflect more deeply on the teaching approaches and strategies they adopt when designing content.

This document addresses university lecturers and offers practical guidelines for creating accessible Word documents. It focuses on the creation and revision of Word documents in both desktop and online versions. Each section explains why it is important to follow specific accessibility criteria and shows, step by step, how to apply them, with visual examples and practical instructions. The aim is to provide a useful and concrete tool to integrate accessibility into learning materials in a simple, effective, and coherent way.

We chose to focus on Microsoft Office tools because they are the ones provided by the university; nevertheless, similar considerations also apply to comparable and compatible software, such as Google Docs or LibreOffice.

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 a UniVR 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 Word for Windows.

II. Useful Information Before We Start

A document can be considered accessible when it can be easily read, navigated, and understood by everyone, including people with visual, mobility or cognitive impairments. These documents should not only be professionally written, but also well designed and structured, so that they are compatible with assistive technologies, such as screen readers. In fact, it is easier – and often faster – to create an accessible document from the very beginning than to correct an existing one.

Before creating a document, there are some important aspects to consider:

1. Language should be clear and simple;
2. Texts and paragraphs should not be too long;
3. The document should include a table of contents or an introductory abstract to facilitate the retrieval of information;
4. The organisation of the content should be clear and consistent with the structure of the document;
5. It is essential to use punctuation and capital letters correctly;
6. The language of the document should be set correctly, so that proofing tools and screen readers can recognise and pronounce the text in the appropriate language.

Another aspect to consider from the very beginning is the context in which the document will be used. If the document is intended primarily for digital reading, it is important to provide a clear structure, meaningful headings, descriptive hyperlinks, and content that can be easily navigated, including through assistive technologies.

If the document will also be printed or distributed in paper format, it is equally important to maintain good contrast between text and background, use readable fonts, avoid excessively small text, and organise information clearly. In both cases, designing the document with accessibility in mind from the outset facilitates reading, consultation, and conversion into other formats, such as PDF.

III. Accessibility in Practice: What to Do and How to Do It

The following pages present practical guidelines to make Word documents more accessible. Each criterion is accompanied by a brief explanation of why it is important, followed by practical instructions on how to apply it, with specific indications for the desktop and online versions of Word.

The structure will always be the same to facilitate consultation:

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

IV. Microsoft Word

1. Document Structure

1.1. Why is it important?

A good structure makes a document easier to read and navigate. Using default heading styles (Heading 1, Heading 2, etc.) allows screen readers to understand the hierarchy of the content and enables users to move quickly from one section to another.

A well-structured document also makes it possible to generate a table of contents automatically. This is particularly useful in long documents, as it helps readers locate information more easily and move directly to the relevant sections.

As for the main title of the document, it is important to format it using the default "Title" style. This is a unique element that identifies the name of the document itself, unlike "Heading 1", "Heading 2" and the following heading levels, which are used to organise the sections hierarchically.

1.2. How to do it

1.2.1. Using Default Styles

- In desktop version:
 1. Write the title or subtitle of the section as usual;
 2. Select the text;
 3. Go to the "Home" tab > "Styles";
 4. Choose, for example, "Heading 1" for main headings, "Heading 2" for subheadings, and so on;

5. Always use heading levels in a hierarchical and coherent way: do not skip from “Heading 1” to “Heading 3”;
6. For the main title of the document, choose the “Title” style.

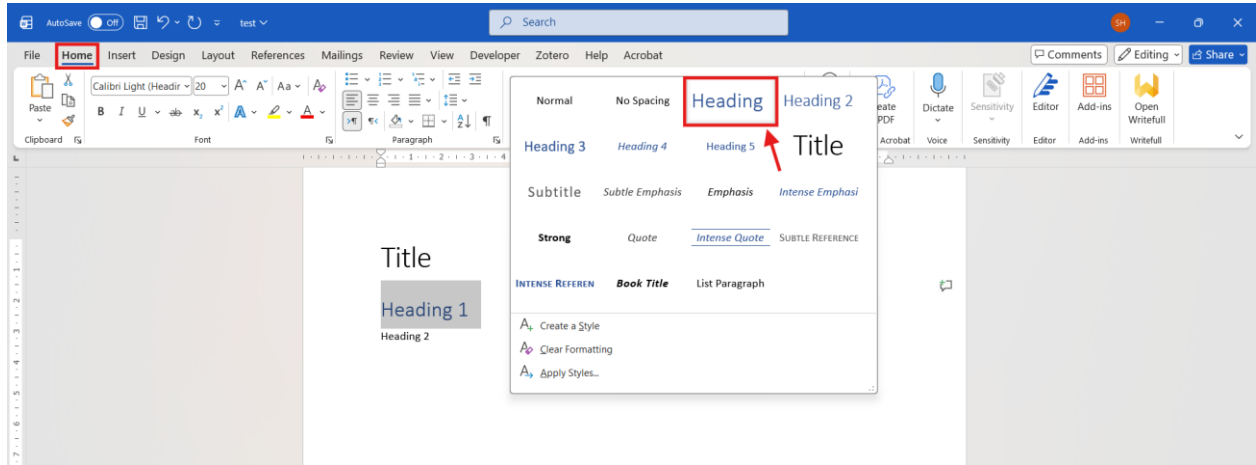


Figure 1 – Applying a heading style in Word from the Styles gallery in the Home tab.

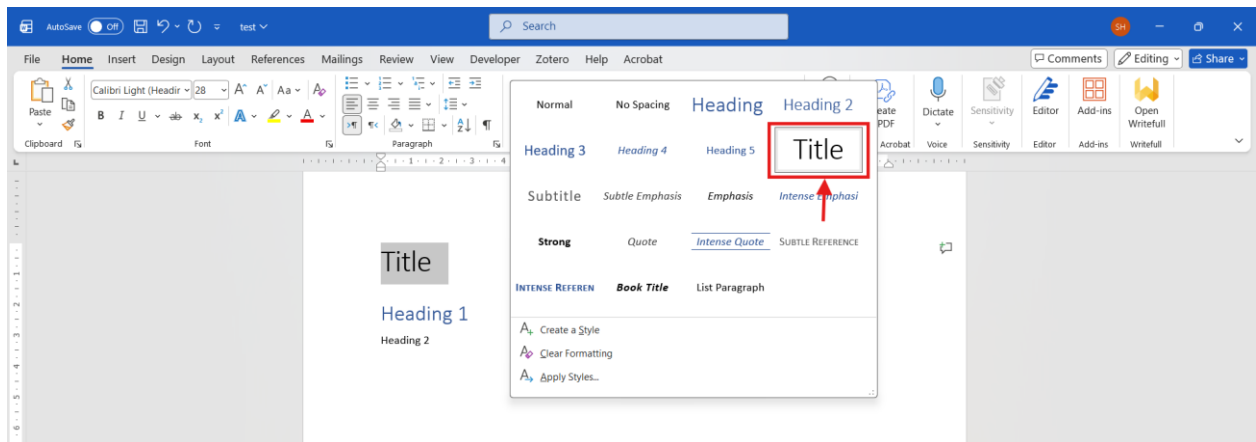


Figure 2 – Applying the “Title” style in Word from the Styles gallery.

- In online version:

The procedure for applying default styles is remarkably similar to the desktop version:

1. Select the heading text;
2. Go to the “Home” tab at the top;

3. Click on the “Normal” drop-down menu and choose the desired style, for example “Heading 1”;
4. For the main title of the document, choose the “Title” style.

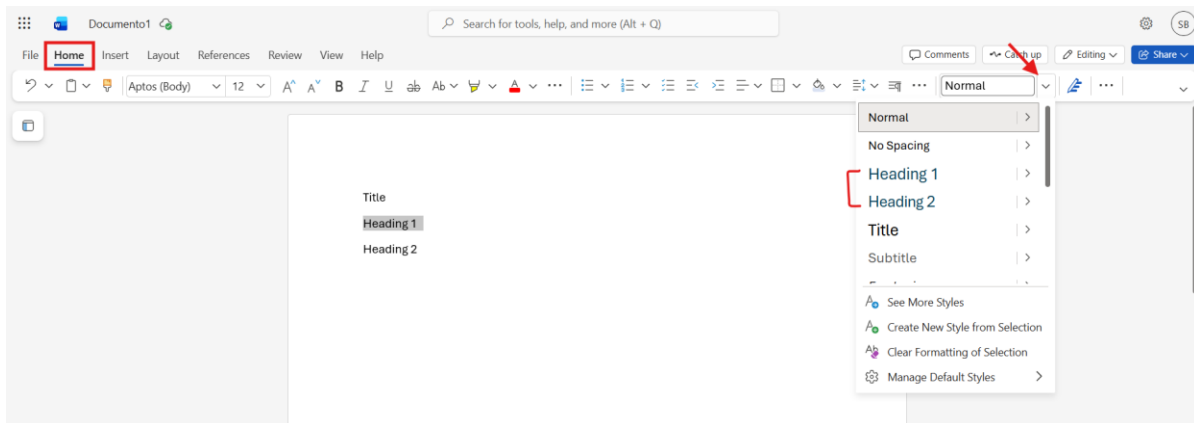


Figure 3 – Applying heading styles in the online version of Word.

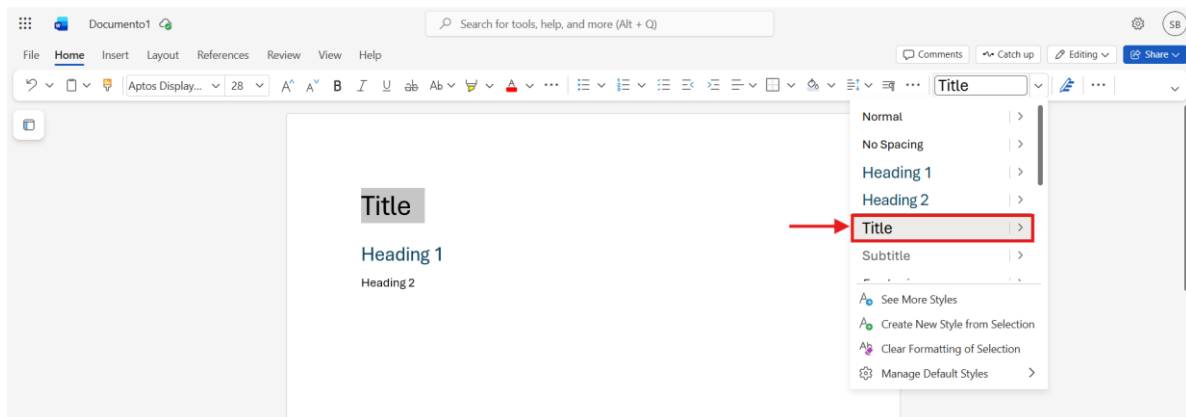


Figure 4 – Applying the “Title” style in the online version of Word.

Tip: each content block should be connected to a heading. Do not use manual bold formatting to create visual headings: they will not be recognised by accessibility tools.

1.2.2. Creating a Table of Contents

A table of contents can only be generated automatically if the document headings have been formatted using the default styles described in the previous section.

- In desktop version:
 1. Make sure that all headings in the document have been formatted correctly using the appropriate styles (Heading 1, Heading 2, etc.);
 2. Place the cursor at the beginning of the document, where you want the table of contents to appear;
 3. Go to the "References" tab;
 4. Click "Table of Contents";
 5. Choose one of the available built-in tables.

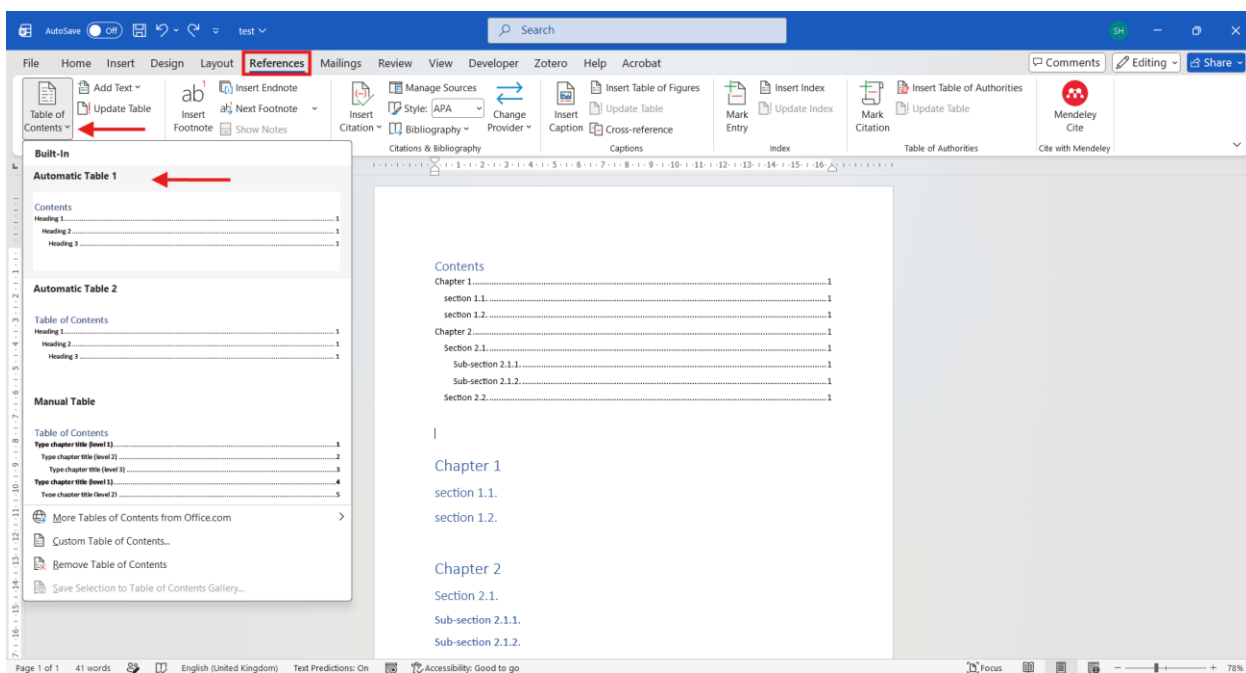


Figure 5 – Inserting an automatic table of contents in Word (desktop version).

Word automatically generates the table of contents based on the heading styles used throughout the document.

If you update the headings after creating the table of contents, you will need to update it.

1. Click anywhere inside the table of contents;
2. Click "Update Table";
3. Select "Update entire table";
4. Click "OK".

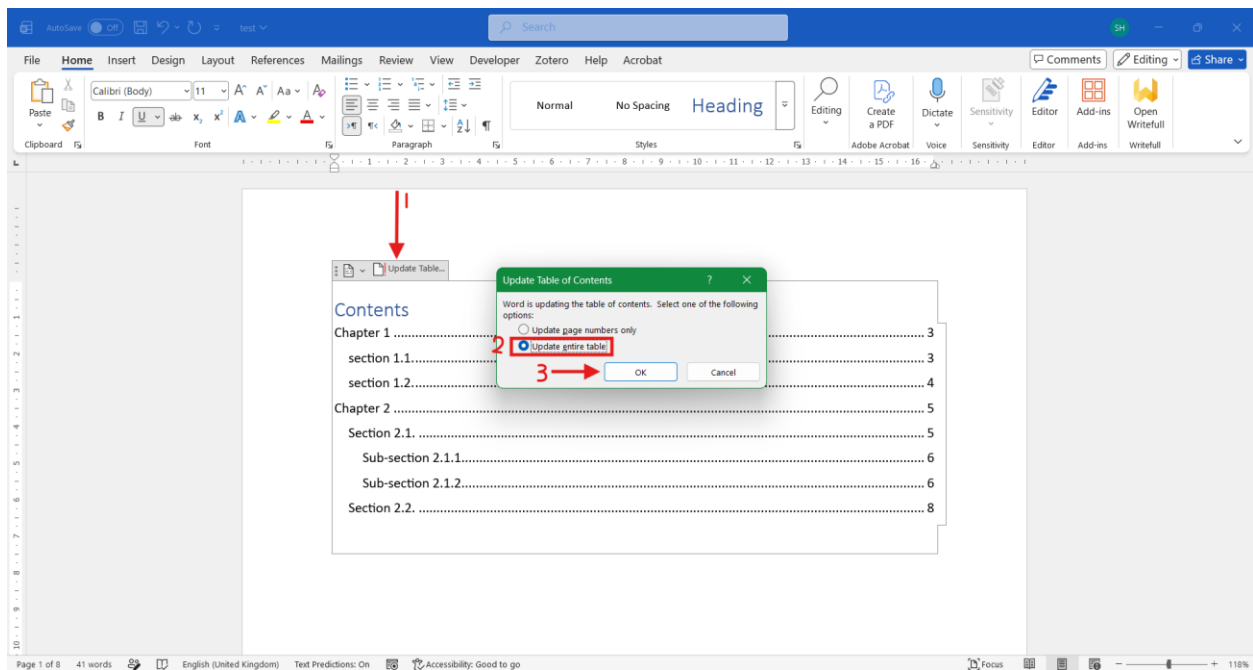


Figure 6 – Updating a table of contents in Word (desktop version).

- In online version:
 1. Make sure that all headings in the document have been formatted correctly using the appropriate styles (Heading 1, Heading 2, etc.);
 2. Place the cursor at the beginning of the document, where you want the table of contents to appear;
 3. Go to the "References" tab;
 4. Click "Table of Contents";
 5. Select "Insert Table of Contents".

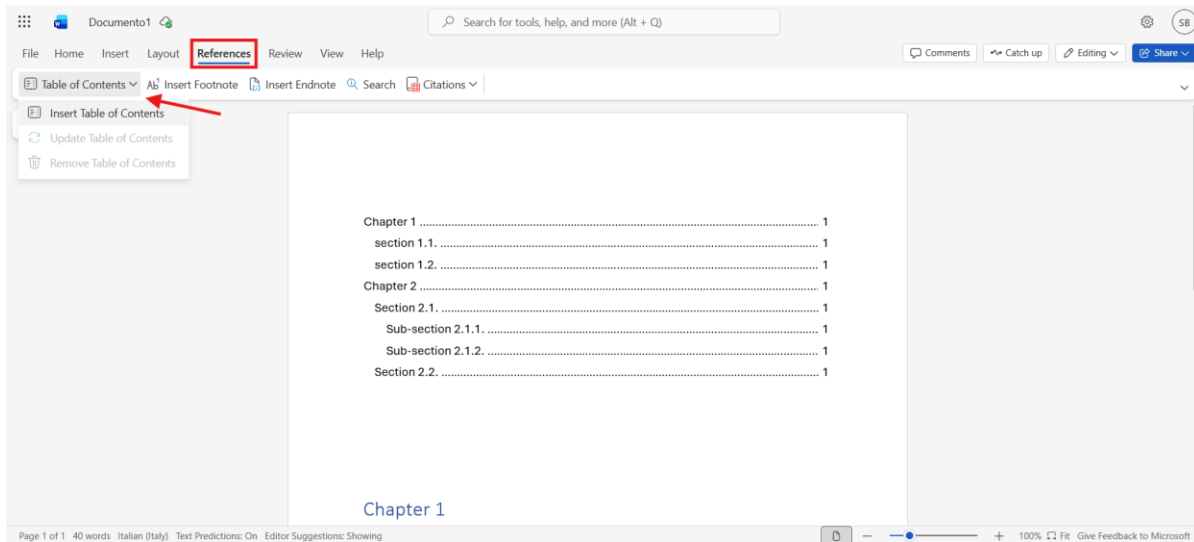


Figure 7 – Inserting a table of contents in Word Online.

Word automatically generates the table of contents based on the heading styles used throughout the document.

If you update the headings after creating the table of contents, you will need to update it.

1. Click anywhere inside the table of contents;
2. Click the “Update” button that appears above the table of contents.

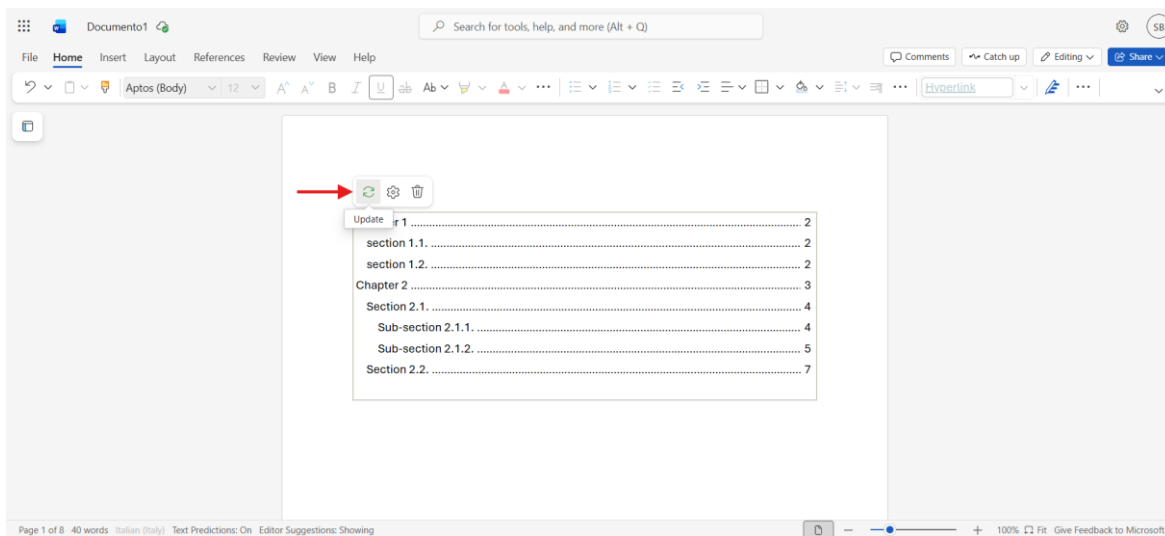


Figure 8 – Updating a table of contents in Word Online.

2. Language Settings

2.1. Why is it important?

Setting the language of a document correctly ensures that anyone using assistive technologies, such as screen readers, can listen to the text with the appropriate pronunciation and accent.

This is particularly important when the same document contains words or paragraphs in a language different from the main one. In these cases, the language of each text fragment should be specified to avoid pronunciation errors that could create ambiguity and affect the correct understanding of the document.

2.2. How to do it

- In desktop version:
 - To set the main language:
 1. Go to the “Review” tab;

2. Click "Language", then open the second "Language" menu and select "Set Proofing Language";
3. Make sure that "Current document" is selected;
4. Select the desired language;
5. Click "OK" to confirm.

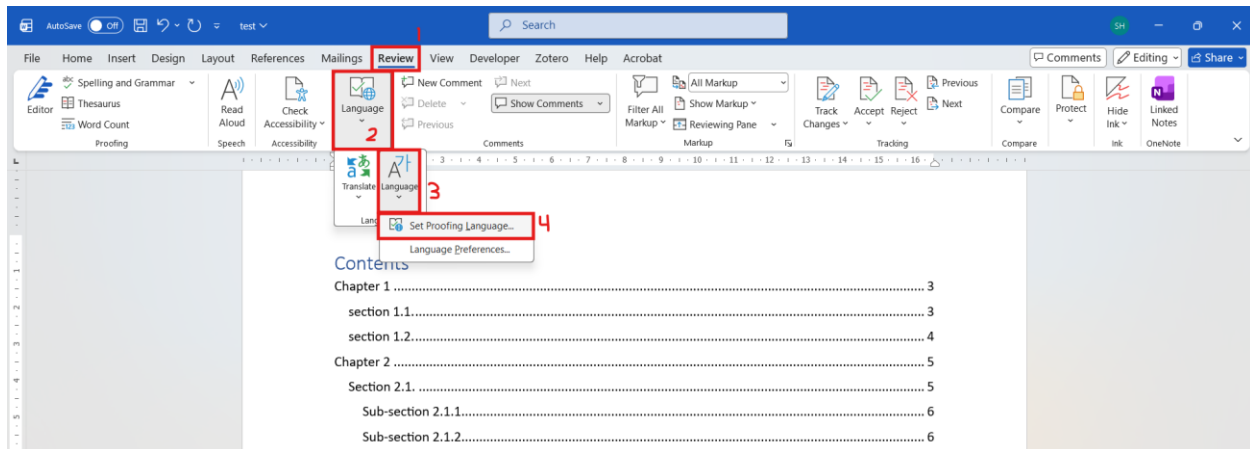


Figure 9 – Setting the main document language in Word (desktop version).

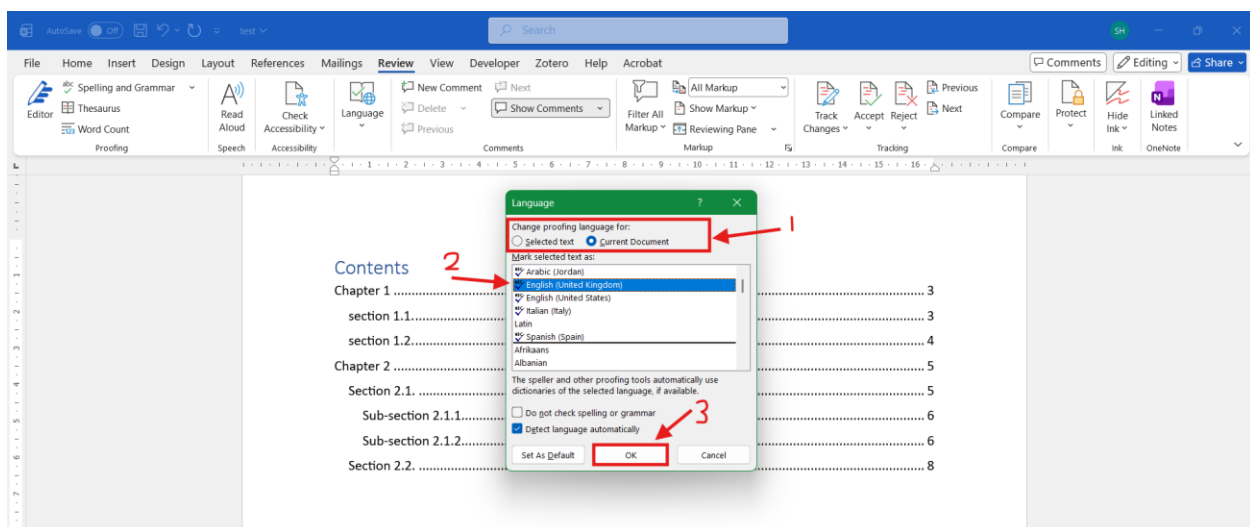


Figure 10 – "Language" dialog box in Word (desktop version) for changing the language of the current document.

To set a different language for selected text, select the text, then follow the same path explained above, but choose “Selected text” instead of “Current Document” (Figure 11).

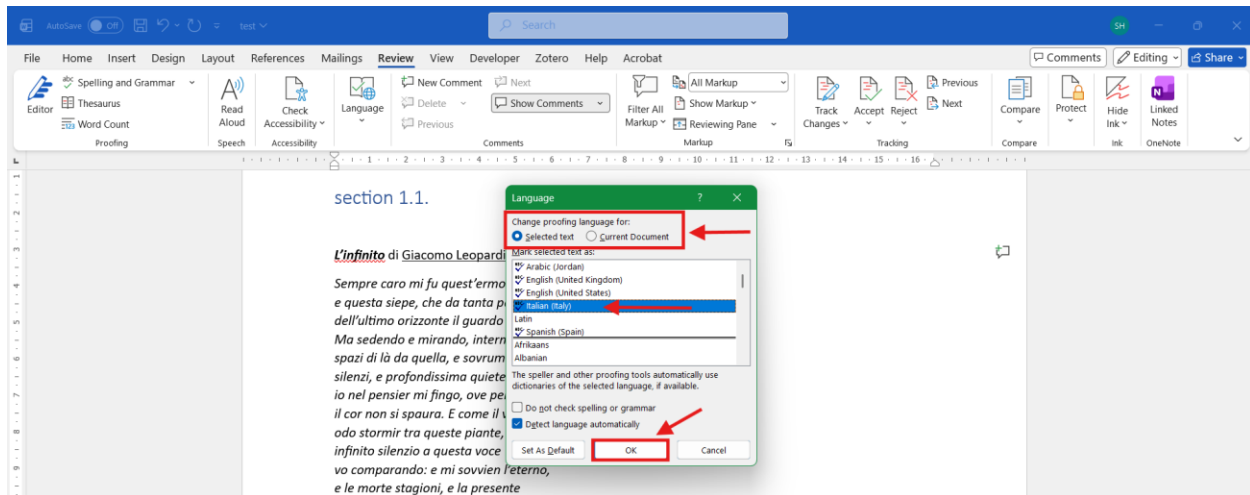


Figure 11 – “Language” dialog box in Word (desktop version) for changing the language of selected text.

- In online version:
 - To set the main language:
 1. Go to the “Review” tab;
 2. Open the “Editor” drop-down menu and select “Set Proofing Language”;
 3. Make sure that “Current document” is selected in the “Apply proofing language to” section;
 4. Select the desired language;
 5. Click “OK” to confirm.

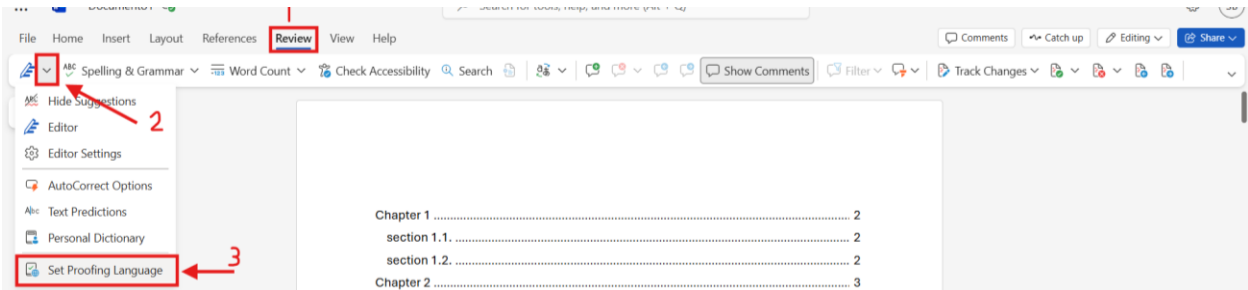


Figure 12 – Setting the main document language in Word Online.

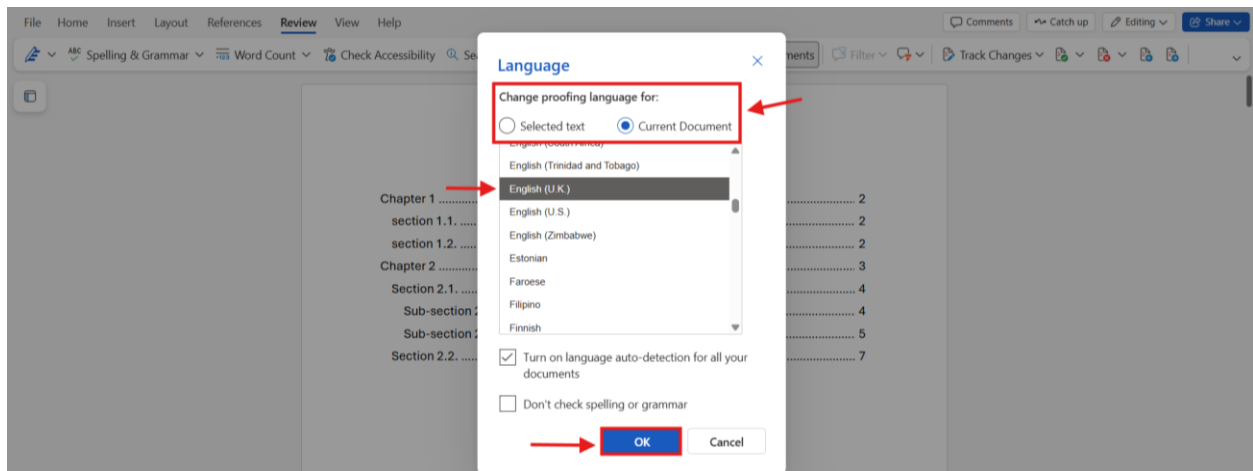


Figure 13 – "Language" dialog box in Word Online for changing the language of the current document.

To set a different language for selected text, select the text, then follow the same path explained above, but choose "Selected text" instead of "Current Document" (Figure 14).

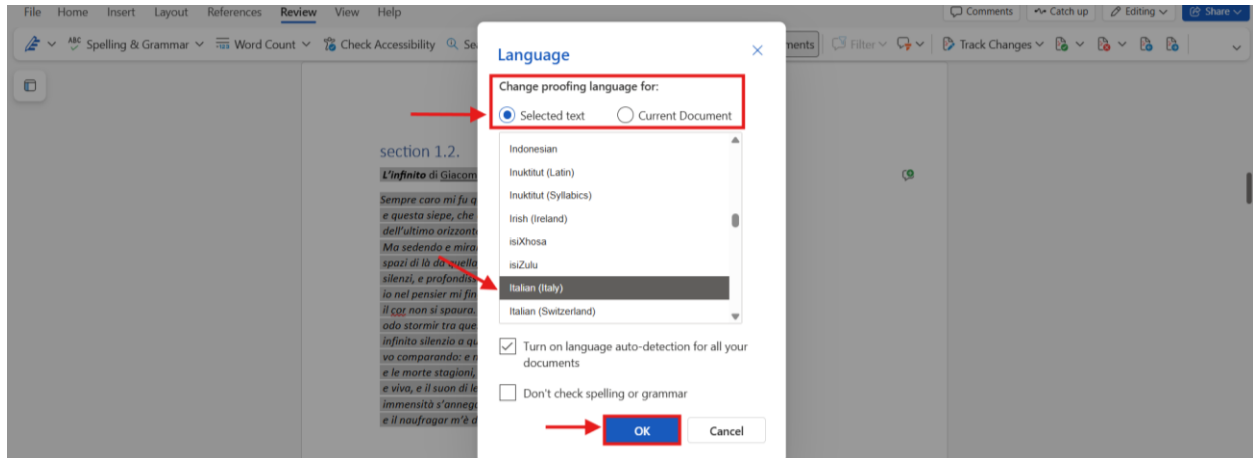


Figure 14 – "Language" dialog box in Word Online for changing the language of selected text.

3. Text Formatting

3.1. Why is it important?

Text formatting directly affects the readability and comprehension of a document. Well-organised text is easier to read and becomes a tool for inclusion. For people with visual impairments, learning disorders such as dyslexia, or cognitive difficulties, choosing appropriate fonts and styles can make the difference between accessible content and content that is difficult to use.

Fonts that are too small or decorative can make reading tiring, especially on screens or mobile devices. Similarly, excessive use of italics, bold or capital letters reduces readability and may create problems for screen readers. Inconsistent spacing and alignment can also affect the clarity of the text and make the content more difficult to follow.

Taking care of text formatting means ensuring that the document is readable in different contexts, understandable with the support of assistive technologies, and clear for everyone who reads it.

3.2. How to do it

- General recommendations:
 - Choose a clear and readable font, preferably a sans-serif font (e.g. Verdana, Arial, Calibri);
 - Use a minimum font size of 12 pt (14 pt is recommended) for body text and 16 pt or larger for headings;
 - Avoid justified alignment; use left-aligned text, which is generally easier to read;
 - Set line spacing to at least 1.2;
 - Use bold moderately to highlight important concepts; avoid excessive use of italics and underlining;
 - Avoid writing entire words or sentences in capital letters, as this reduces readability and may make the text more difficult to interpret with screen readers;
 - When creating lists, use Word's built-in "Bulleted List" or "Numbered List" tools instead of manually inserting dashes, numbers, or symbols.
- In desktop version:
 1. Select the text you want to modify;
 2. Go to the "Home" tab;
 3. To change the font and font size, use the "Font" and "Font Size" menus;

4. To change the alignment, use the alignment buttons (Align Left, Centre, Align Right);
5. To adjust line spacing, click the “Line and Paragraph Spacing” button and select an appropriate value (at least 1.2);
6. To create a bulleted or numbered list, use the “Bullets” or “Numbering” buttons;
7. Optional: use “Increase Indent” and “Decrease Indent” to create sublists.

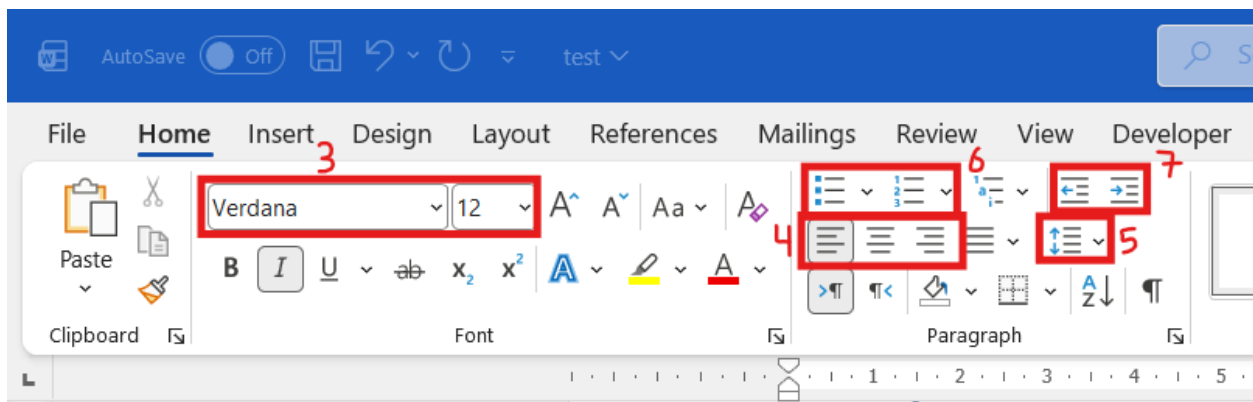


Figure 15 – Word (desktop version), Home tab: font (3), font size (3), alignment (4), line spacing (5), lists (6), and indentation (7).

- In online version:
 1. Select the text you want to modify;
 2. Go to the “Home” tab;
 3. To change the font, click the font name and choose one from the list.
To change the font size, click the number and select the desired value;
 4. To change the alignment, use the alignment buttons (left alignment is recommended);
 5. To adjust line spacing, click the “Line Spacing” button and select an appropriate value, preferably at least 1.2;

6. To create a bulleted or numbered list, use the “Bullets” or “Numbering” buttons in the “Home” tab;
7. Optional: to create sublists, use “Increase Indent” and “Decrease Indent”, available in the paragraph options.

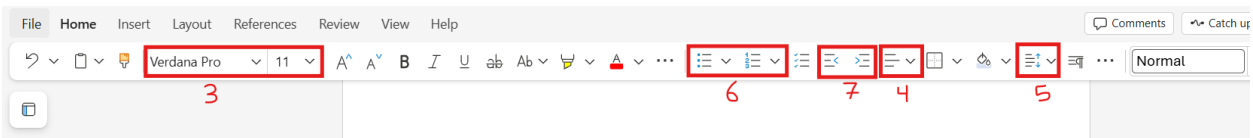


Figure 16 – Word Online, Home tab: font and font size (3), alignment (4), line spacing (5), lists (6), and indentation (7).

4. Alternative Text for Images

4.1. Why is it important?

Alternative text (alt text) is essential to ensure that images can be understood by people using assistive technologies, such as screen readers. It allows people who cannot see an image to receive an equivalent textual description.

Alt text does not only support people with visual impairments but also improves the overall clarity and accessibility of the document. In addition, it is a fundamental requirement according to the WCAG guidelines (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) and digital accessibility requirements in academic contexts ([W3C](#)).

However, not all images convey information. Some are used only to decorate the document and do not add meaningful content. These are called decorative images. When possible, decorative images should be marked as decorative so that they do not interfere with assistive reading. Examples include borders, graphic patterns, backgrounds, or ornamental icons used only to make the content more visually appealing.

4.2. How to do it

Before explaining how to insert alt text in a document, it is useful to understand what makes alt text effective.

Good alt text:

- ⬆ briefly describes what is visually relevant in the image.
- ⬆ does not include phrases such as “image of” or “picture of,” because this is already implicit.
- ⬆ is coherent with the surrounding context.

Consider the following photo as an example (Figure 17):

✓ A correct alt text would be:

“Statue of the Madonna Verona on the fountain in Piazza delle Erbe, with Torre del Gardello and illuminated historical buildings in the background.”

- Why is it effective?
 - a. It is brief but informative;
 - b. It describes what can be seen and where, without unnecessary expressions;
 - c. It is useful for readers who cannot see the image.

✗ An incorrect alt text would be:

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

- Why is it inadequate?
 - a. It is too generic;
 - b. It does not provide context or meaning;
 - c. It uses expressions that should be avoided, such as “image of”.



Figure 17 – Image used to illustrate examples of effective and ineffective alt text.

The accuracy of alt text also depends on the context in which it is used. The same image, for example this photo of Verona, can be described differently depending on the type of lesson (art history, architecture, geography, etc.) or the audience. For example, if the image is intended for children or people who are not familiar with the topic, it is better to avoid overly technical language and use simpler, more understandable descriptions.

- In desktop version:
 1. Right-click the image;
 2. Select "View Alt Text";
 3. In the Alt Text pane on the right, enter a brief but meaningful description (one or two sentences are usually sufficient);
 4. If the image is decorative and does not convey information, select "Mark as decorative."

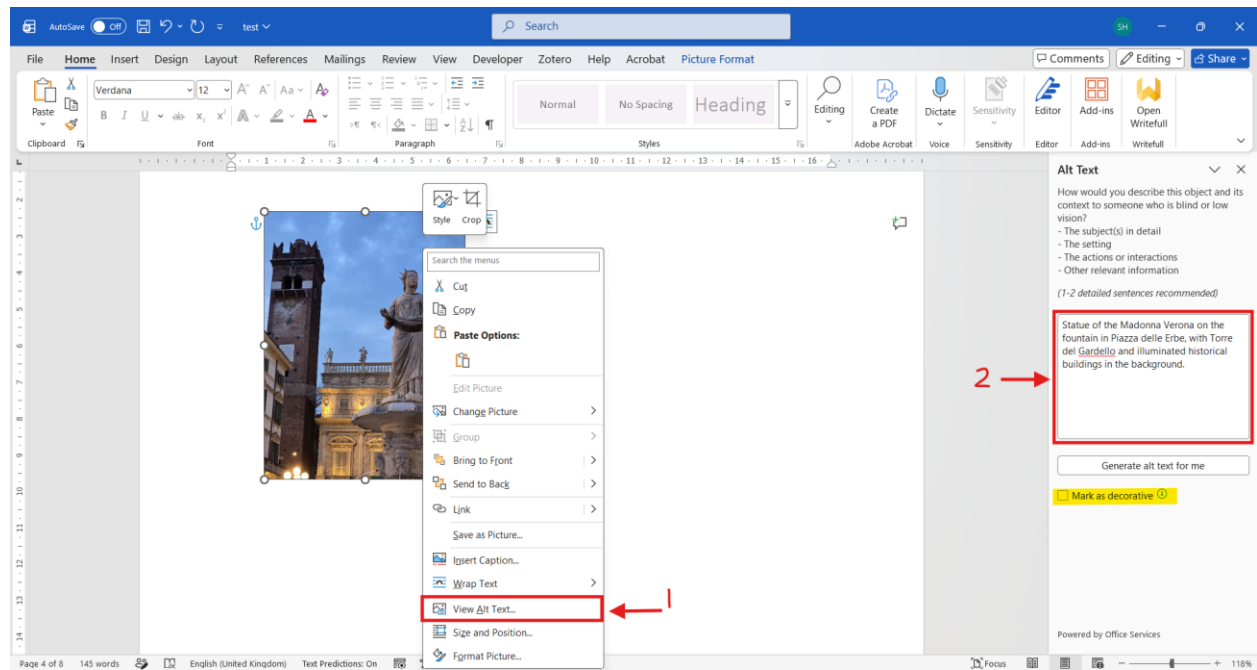


Figure 18 – Adding alt text and marking a decorative image in Word (desktop version).

- In online version:
 1. Click the image to select it;
 2. Go to the "Picture" tab in the top ribbon;
 3. Click "Alt Text";
 4. Enter the descriptive text or mark the image as decorative.

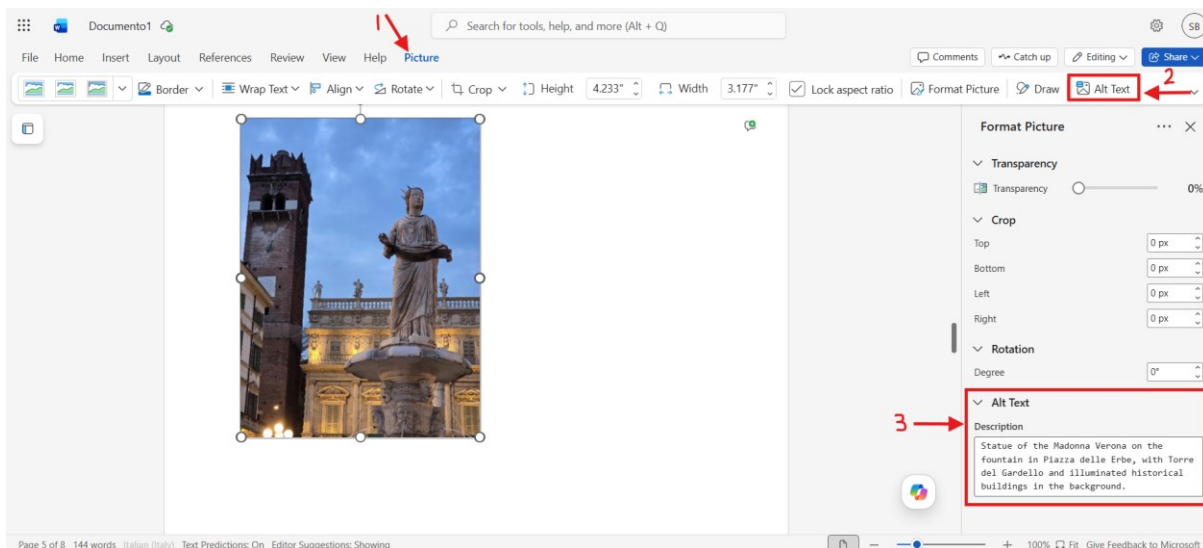


Figure 19 – Adding alt text in Word Online.

5. Colours and Contrast

5.1. Why is it important?

Good contrast between text and background is essential to ensure readability, especially for people with visual impairments, colour blindness, or reading difficulties. Inadequate colour combinations can make the content difficult or impossible to read. It is not enough for colours to be simply “visible”: contrast must be clear and perceivable, including for people with visual difficulties.

5.2. How to do it

- In desktop version:
 1. Select the text you want to modify;
 2. Go to Home > Font Colour and choose a colour that provides sufficient contrast with the background;

3. To change the background colour, go to Design > Page Colour. If you are working with a table, use the table formatting options available under Table Design;
4. Avoid problematic colour combinations, such as red/green, yellow/white, or blue/black;
5. Do not rely on colour alone to convey information. Add symbols, labels, or explanatory text in addition to colour (e.g. "Error X" instead of using red text alone).

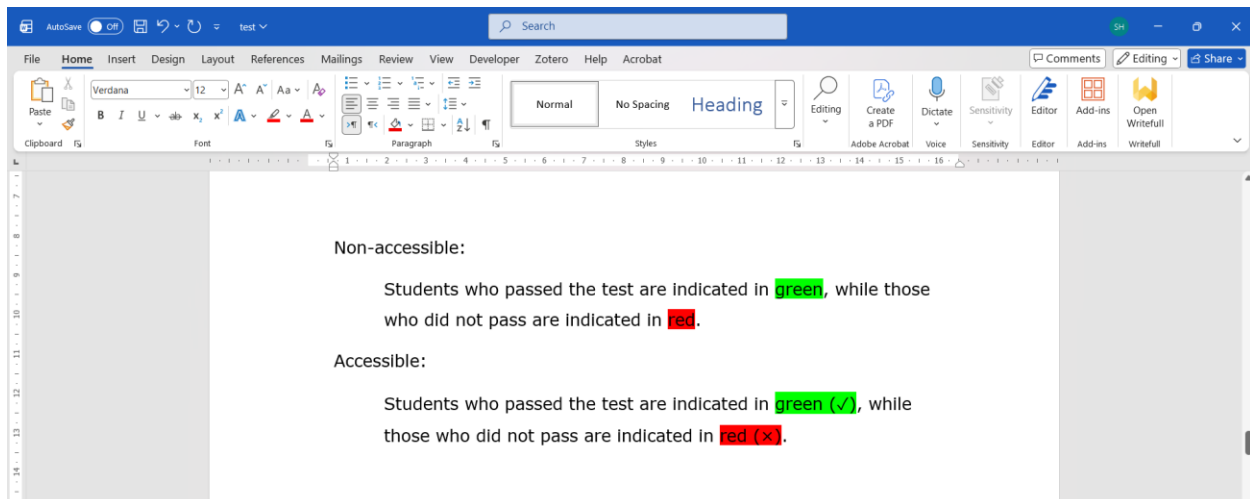


Figure 20 – Practical example in Word: in the first case, the meaning is conveyed only through colour; in the second, the addition of symbols makes the information accessible.

- In online version:
 1. Select the text;
 2. Go to Home > Font Colour and choose a readable colour;
 3. To change the background, go to Design > Page Colour;
 4. Avoid low-contrast combinations and decorative backgrounds;
 5. If colour is used to indicate a status or an error, also add a symbol or a word.

6. Hyperlinks

6.1. Why is it important?

Hyperlinks allow users to quickly access external resources. If they are not inserted correctly, they can be unclear and create difficulties for people using screen readers. An accessible link should be brief, clear, and descriptive: readers should immediately understand where the link leads. It is not recommended to paste the full web address or use generic expressions such as “click here”.

6.2. How to do it

- General recommendations:
 - Keep hyperlinks underlined: this is the standard way to indicate a link, so people with visual impairments or colour vision deficiencies can immediately recognise it as a hyperlink;
 - Use a colour that contrasts well with the surrounding text and background, usually blue for active links and purple for visited links;
 - Avoid removing the underline or using colours that are too similar to the surrounding text, as this may make the hyperlink difficult to recognise;
 - Use the same style for all hyperlinks throughout the document to ensure consistency and clarity.
- In desktop version:
 1. Select the text to which you want to add the hyperlink (e.g. Website of the University of Verona);
 2. Go to Insert > Link or right-click the selected text and choose Link;

3. In the dialog box, enter the web address in the Address field;
4. Check that the visible link text is clear and descriptive;
5. Click OK to confirm.

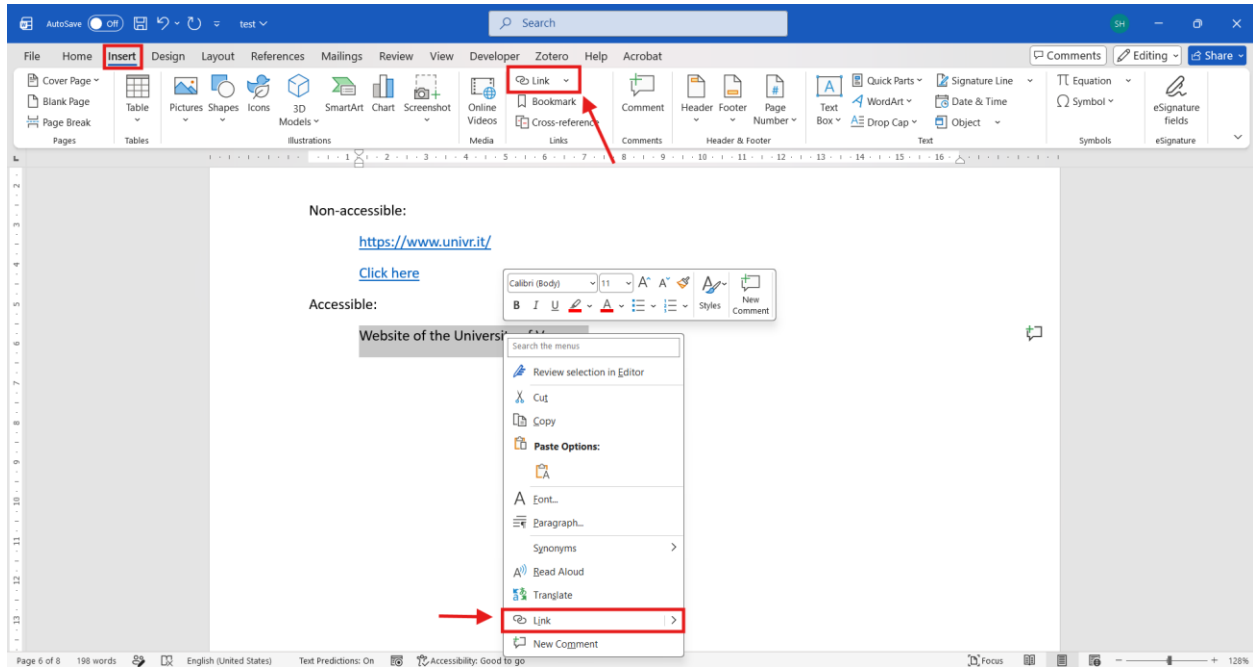


Figure 21 – Adding a hyperlink in Word (desktop version) from the Insert tab or the context menu.

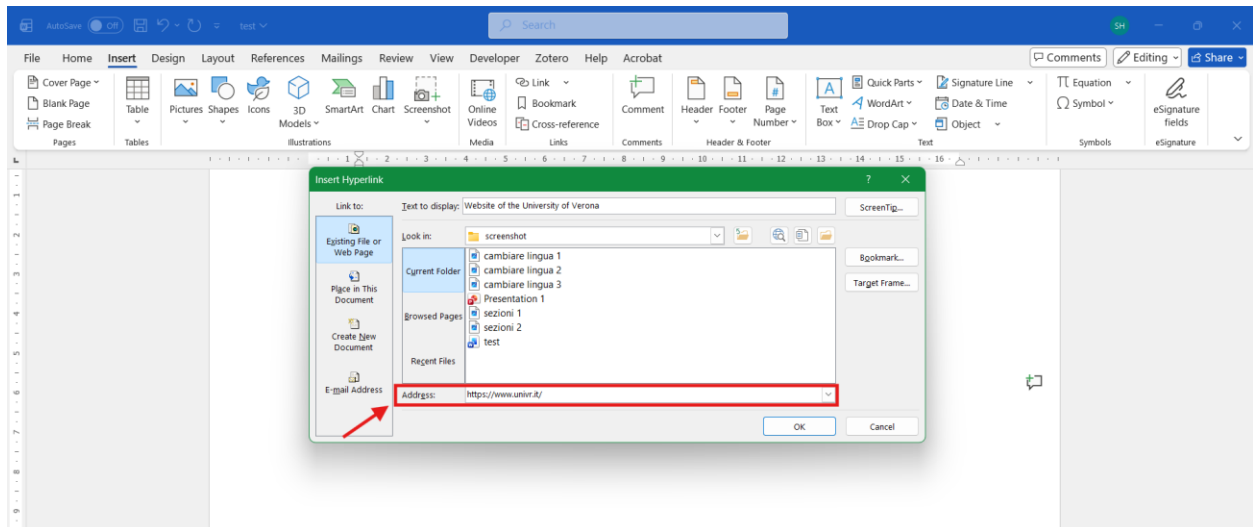


Figure 22 – "Insert Hyperlink" dialog box in Word (desktop version), showing the visible text and web address fields.

- In online version:
 1. Select the text to which you want to add the hyperlink;
 2. Go to Insert > Link, or right-click the selected text and choose Link;
 3. Enter the web address in the Enter link field;
 4. Make sure that the visible link text is descriptive;
 5. Click OK to confirm.

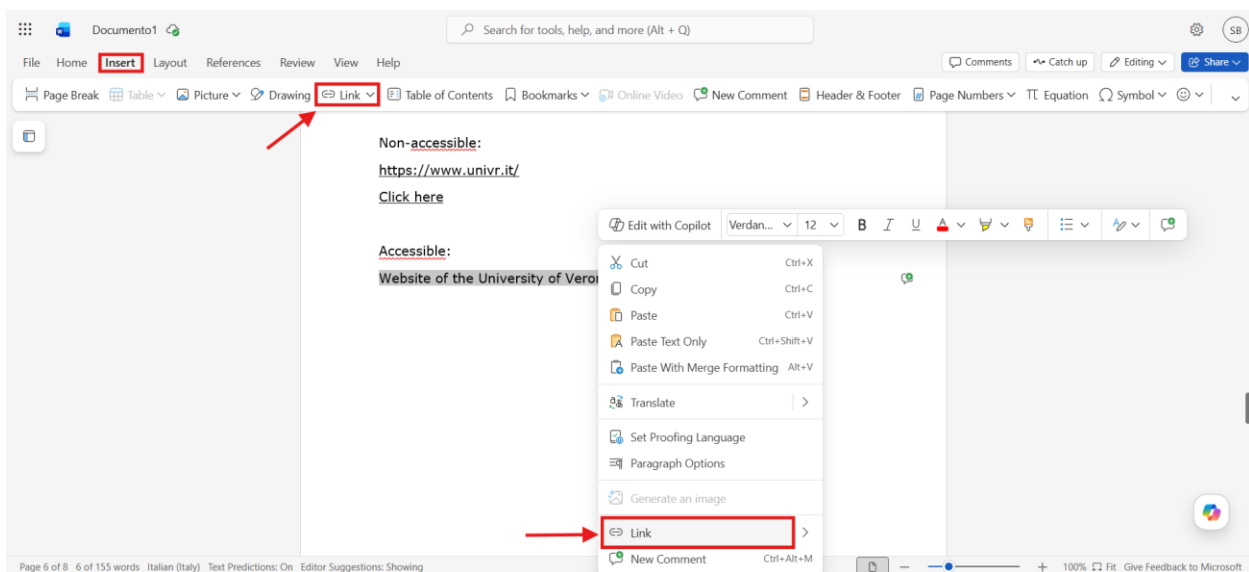


Figure 23 – Adding a hyperlink in Word Online from the Insert tab or the context menu.

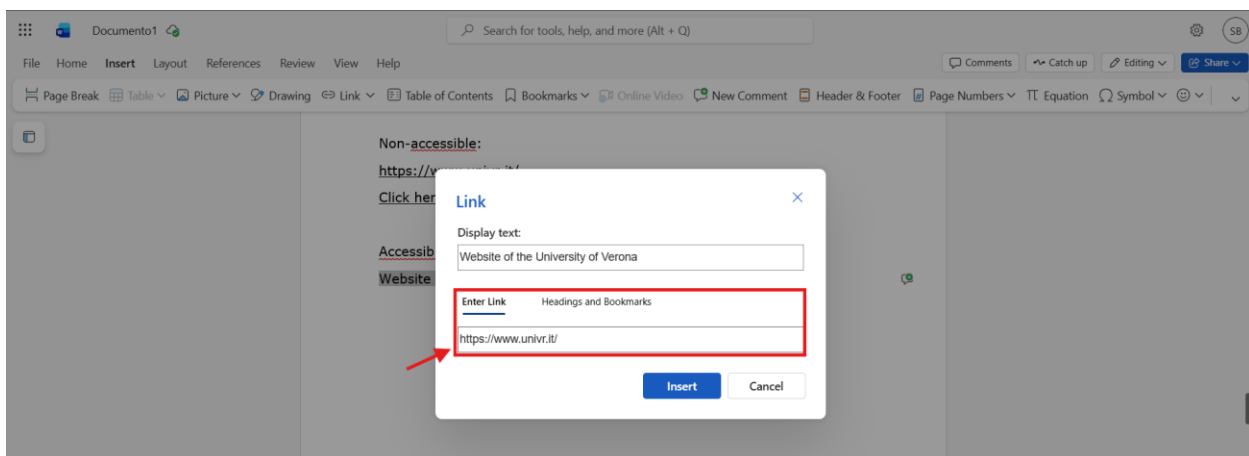


Figure 24 – "Link" dialog box in Word Online, showing the display text and web address fields.

7. Tables

7.1. Why is it important?

Tables help organise and present information in a structured way. However, if they are not created correctly, they can be difficult or impossible to understand for people using screen readers. Complex table layouts, merged cells, empty cells, or tables used only for visual formatting can create accessibility barriers and make the content harder to navigate.

To ensure accessibility, tables should be used only for presenting data, include clear column headings, and maintain a simple, logical structure that assistive technologies can interpret correctly.

7.2. How to do it

- General recommendations:
 - Avoid using tables when they are not necessary: the same information can often be presented in a more accessible way through a list or structured text;
 - Keep tables simple, without merged cells or nested tables;
 - Avoid empty cells, as they can confuse screen readers;
 - Always set a header row to provide context for the data;
 - If the table is long and continues across multiple pages, activate the “Repeat Header Rows” option to keep the first row visible.
- In the desktop version:
 1. Select the table;
 2. Go to Table Design and, in the Table Style Options group, select Header Row;

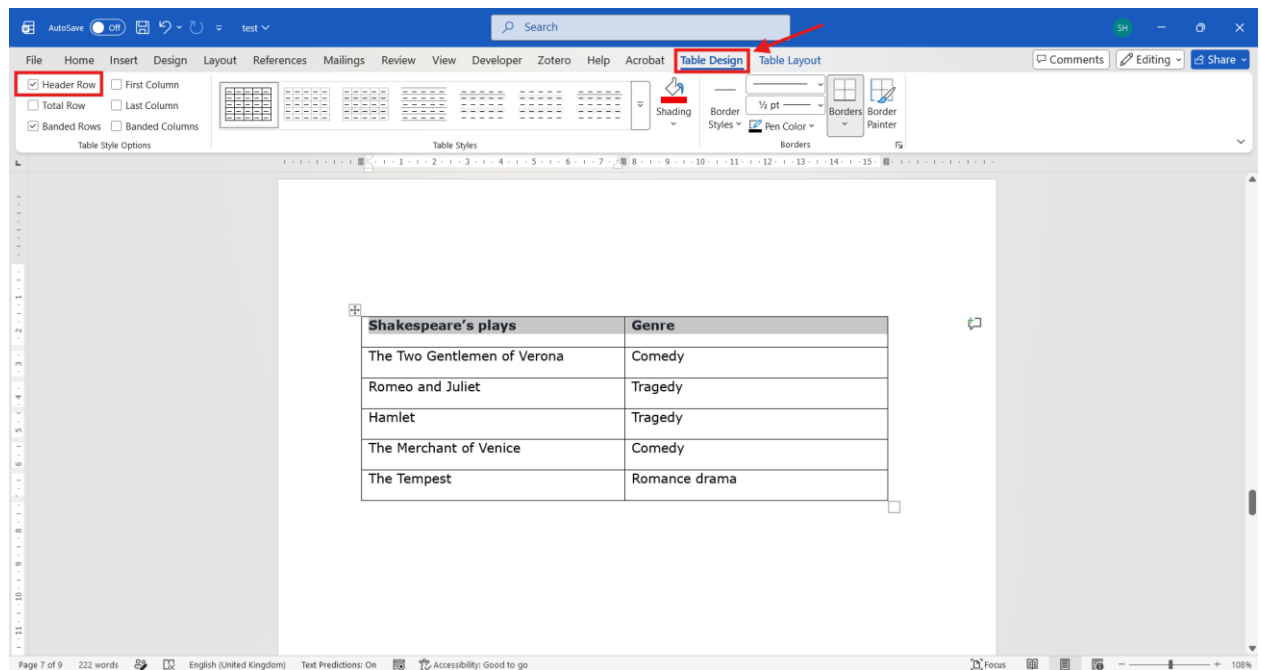


Figure 25 – Enabling the header row in Word (desktop).

3. Then select the header row and go to Table Layout > Data > Repeat Header Rows to ensure that the header row remains visible when the table extends across multiple pages.

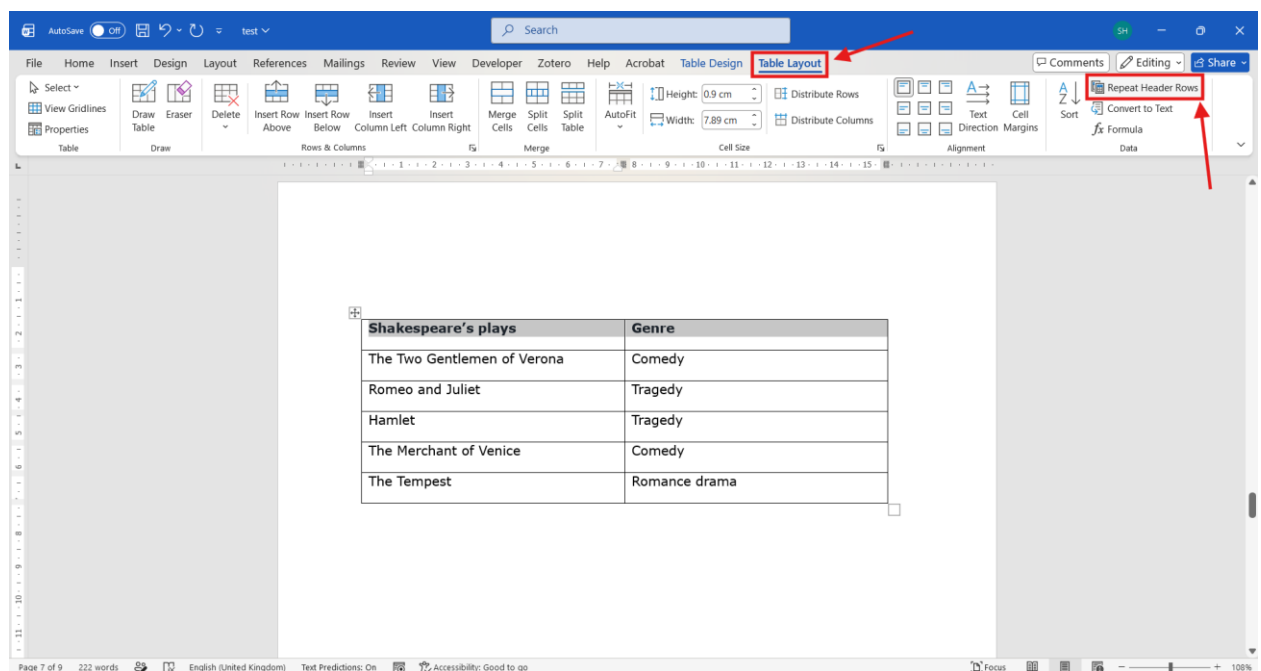


Figure 26 – Repeating the header row in Word (desktop).

4. To add alternative text, right-click the table and select Table Properties;
5. In the Alt Text tab, enter a title and a brief description of the table, then click OK.

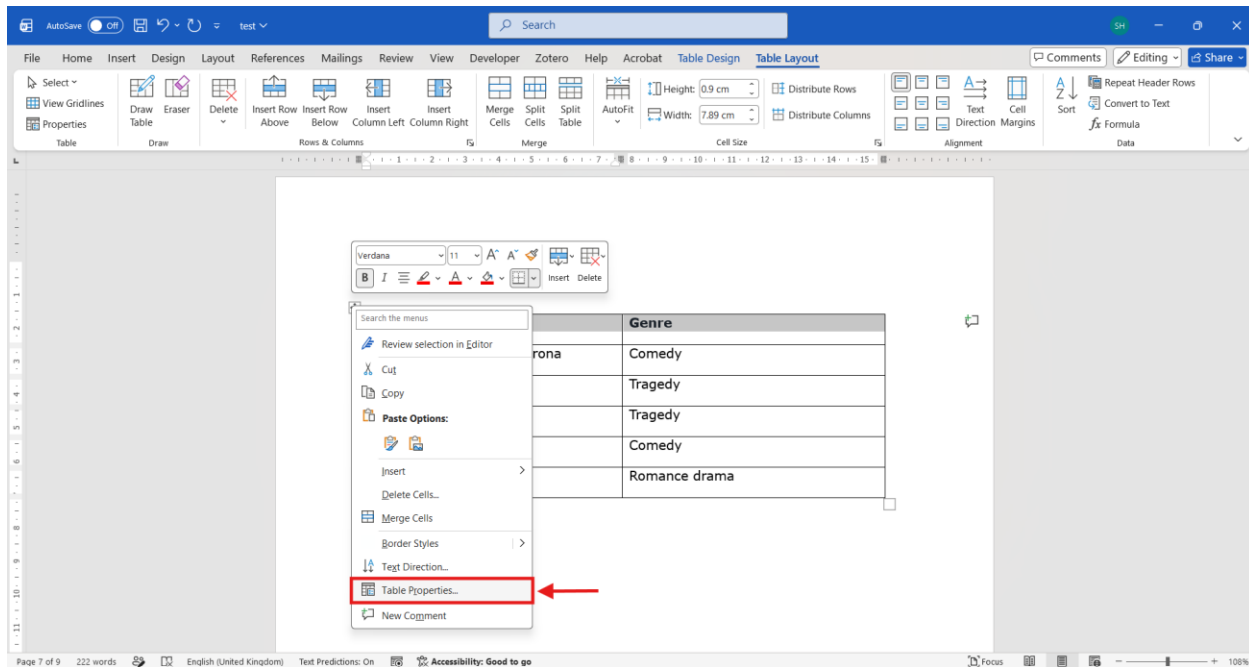


Figure 27 – Opening the table properties in Word (desktop).

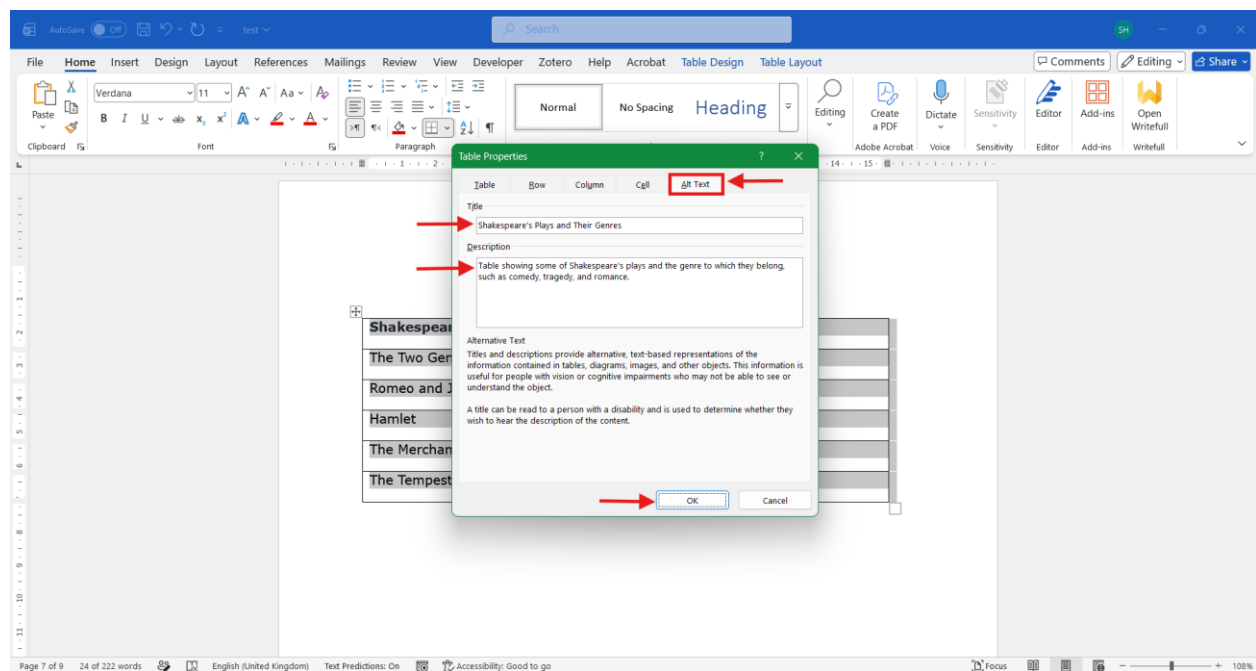


Figure 28 – Adding alternative text to a table in Word (desktop).

- In the online version:
1. Select the table;
 2. Go to the Table tab;
 3. To set a header row, click Style Options and select Header Row;

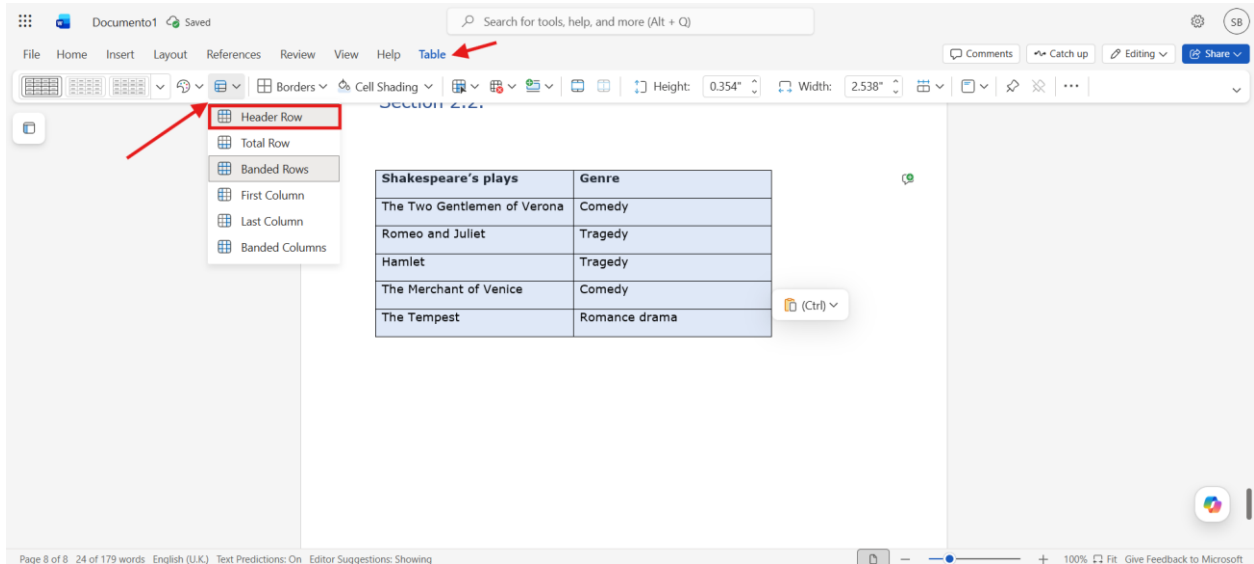


Figure 29 – Enabling the header row in Word Online.

4. If the table is long, select the first row and click Pin up to this row to keep it visible as a header row when the table continues onto subsequent pages;

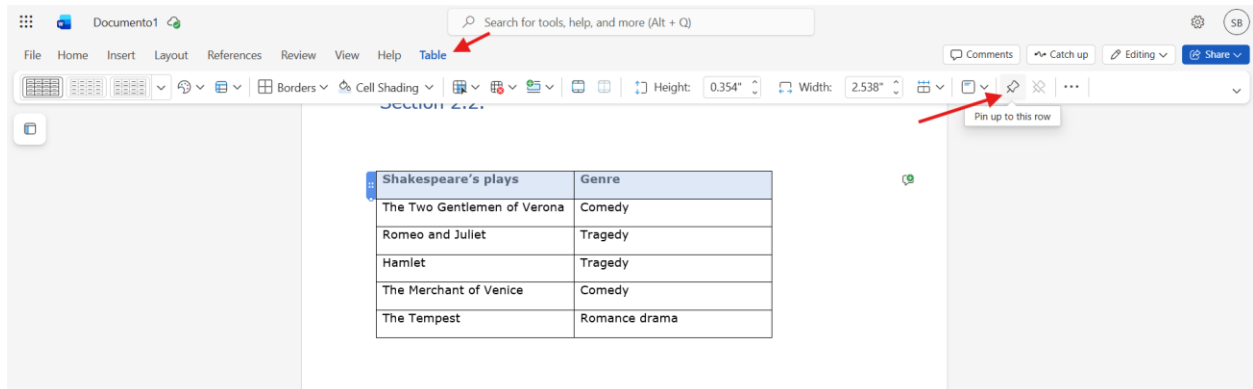


Figure 30 – Repeating the header row in Word Online.

5. To add alternative text, select the table, go to the Table tab, click the three dots (...), and select Alt Text. In the dialog box, enter a Title and a brief Description, then click OK.

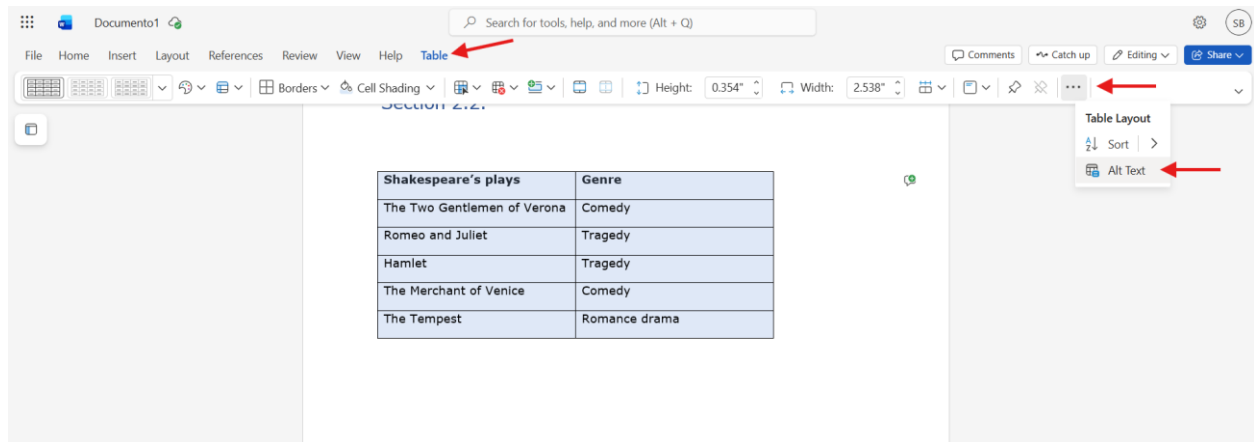


Figure 31 – Opening the Alt Text command in Word Online.

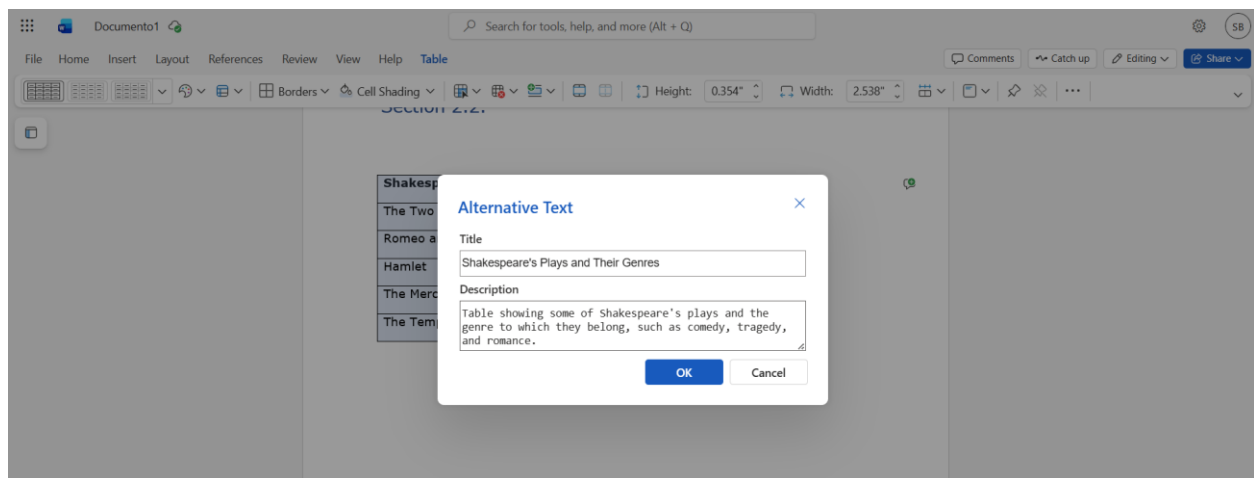


Figure 32 – Adding alternative text to a table in Word Online.

8. Check Accessibility

8.1. Why is it important?

Even when accessibility rules are applied, it is easy to overlook some steps. The Check Accessibility tool in Word helps automatically identify errors and warnings, such as images without alt text, complex tables, or missing headings. Using it before saving or sharing a document helps ensure that the content is readable and usable by everyone.

8.2. How to do it

- General recommendations:
 - Always use Check Accessibility as a final check before sharing the document;
 - Remember that the results may include both errors, which should be corrected, and warnings, which should be evaluated case by case;
 - The automatic check does not replace manual review: also check the clarity of the text, hyperlinks, and headings.
- In desktop version:
 1. Go to the "Review" tab;
 2. Click "Check Accessibility";
 3. A side panel opens, showing errors, warnings, and suggestions on how to correct them.

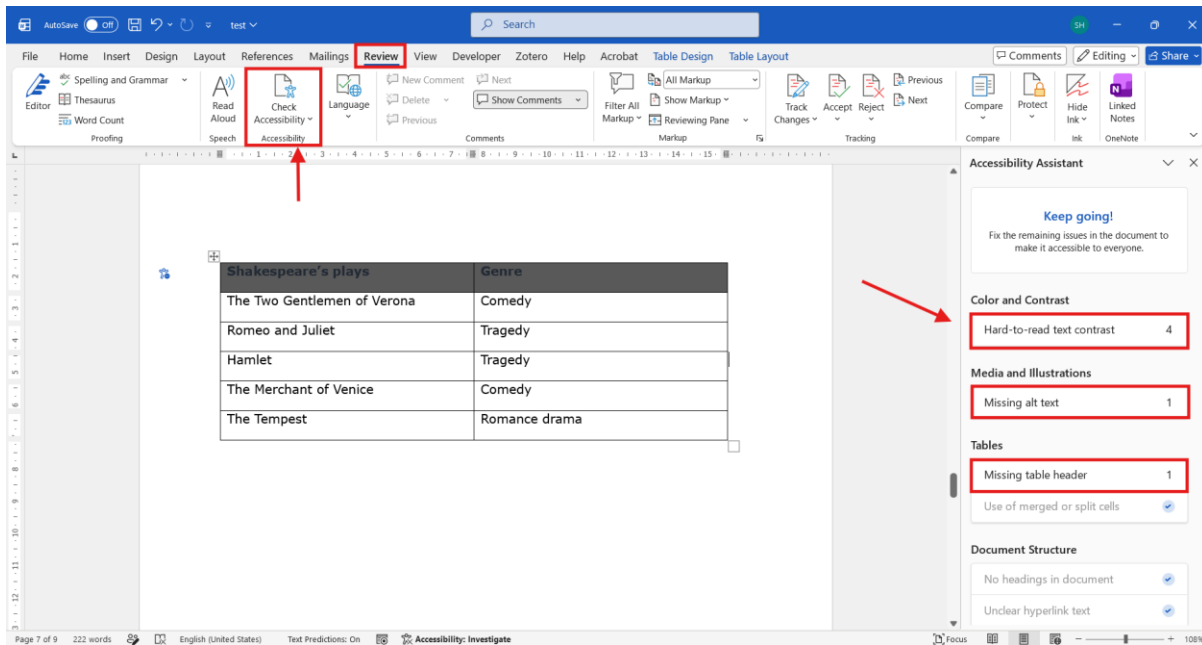


Figure 33 – Check Accessibility results panel in Word (desktop version).

Note: this tool does not detect all accessibility issues. For example, it may not identify that a hyperlink is not descriptive or that a full URL is used as link text. For this reason, a manual check is also important.

- In online version:
 1. Go to the "Review" tab;
 2. Click "Check Accessibility";
 3. A side panel opens, showing errors, warnings, and suggestions on how to correct them.

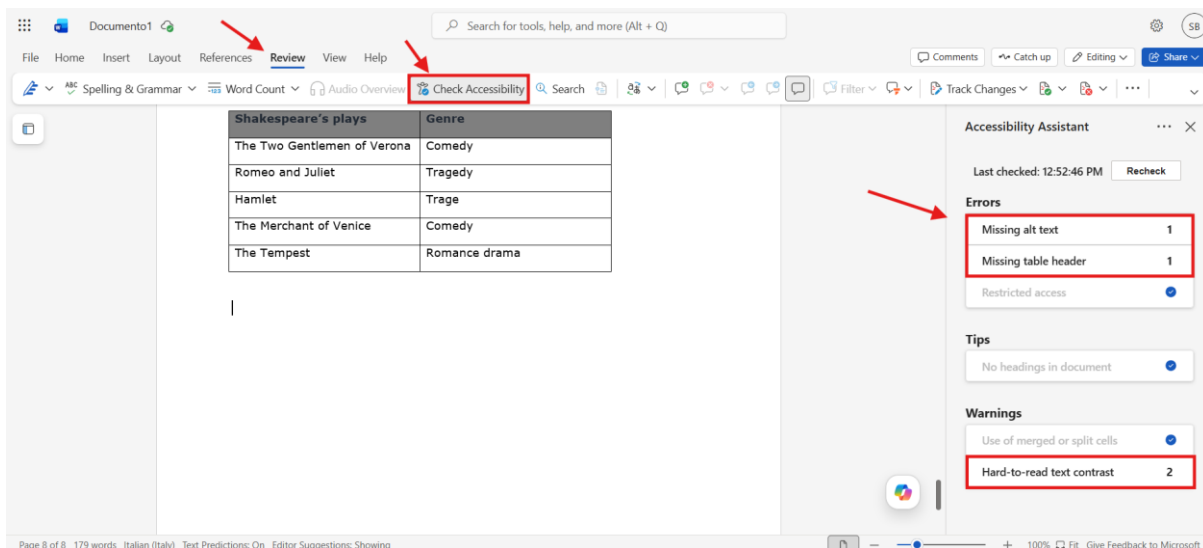


Figure 34 – Check Accessibility results panel in Word Online.

Note: also in the online version, the automatic check does not detect some issues, such as non-descriptive hyperlinks or full URLs. For this reason, manual review is necessary and, if needed, external tools can also be used.

9. Document Title

9.1. Why is it important?

Adding a title to a Word document is a key step in ensuring accessibility. The document title helps people using assistive technologies, such as screen readers, understand the document's purpose and content before reading it. For this reason, it is important to provide accurate document properties, such as the title, author, and any relevant comments, before sharing the document.

Note: unlike the desktop version, Word Online does not currently allow users to edit these document properties. To ensure that the document includes the appropriate metadata, it is recommended to complete this step using the desktop version of Word.

9.2. How to do it

- In desktop version:

1. Go to File > Info;
2. Click Properties > Advanced Properties;
3. In the Summary tab, enter the document title, author and any relevant comments;
4. Click OK to save the changes.

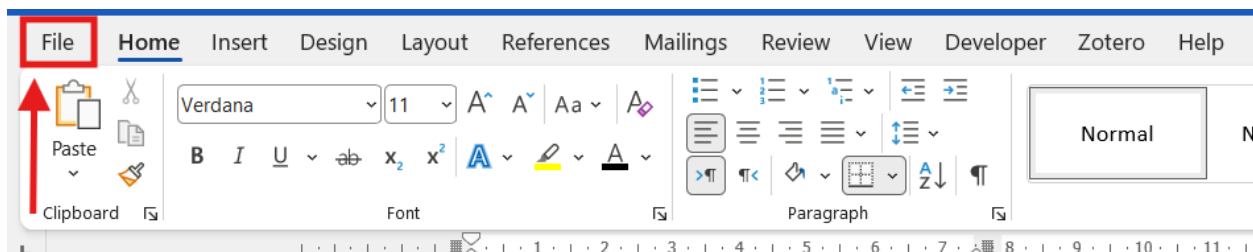


Figure 35 – Adding a document title in Word (desktop version): location of the File tab.

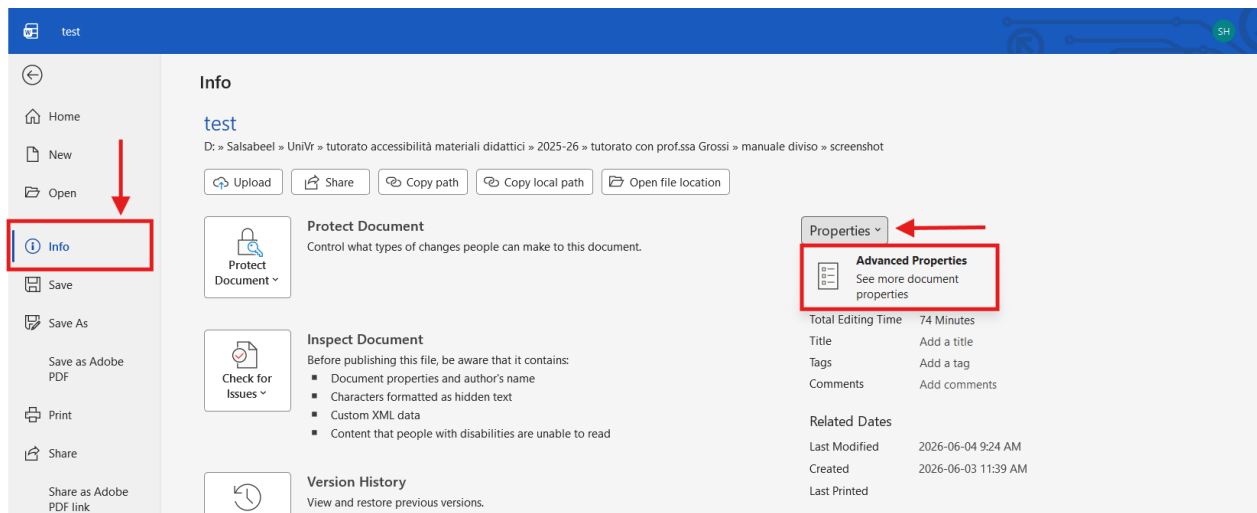


Figure 36 – Adding a document title in Word (desktop version): how to access Advanced Properties from the Info page.

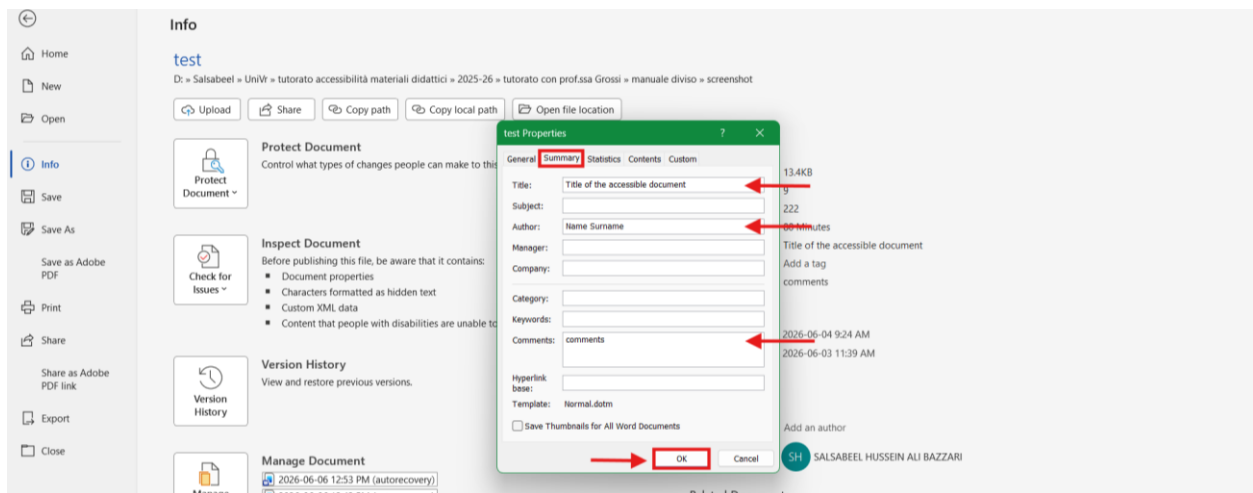


Figure 37 – Adding a document title in Word (desktop version): Properties dialog box used to edit the document's advanced properties.

10. Exporting to Accessible PDF Format

10.1. Why is it important?

Saving a Word document as an accessible PDF is not an automatic process. However, it is essential to ensure that the logical and hierarchical structure of the document is preserved after conversion.

This allows assistive technologies, such as screen readers, to interpret the content correctly and read it in a clear and meaningful order. In addition, accessibility tags ensure that alt text for images, tables and charts remains available and allow users to navigate more easily between sections and specific elements of the document.

Note: unlike the desktop version, Word Online does not currently allow users to fully configure the accessibility options for PDF export, such as setting tags or selecting the type of export. To ensure that the document is exported as an accessible PDF, it is recommended to use the desktop version of Word.

10.2. How to do it

- In desktop version:
 1. Go to File > Export;
 2. Click Create PDF/XPS Document;
 3. Click Create PDF/XPS;
 4. Click Options;
 5. Make sure the following options are selected:
 - Create bookmarks using: Headings;
 - Document properties;
 - Document structure tags for accessibility;
 6. Clear the Bitmap text when fonts may not be embedded checkbox;
 7. Click OK to confirm;
 8. Click Publish to export the file.

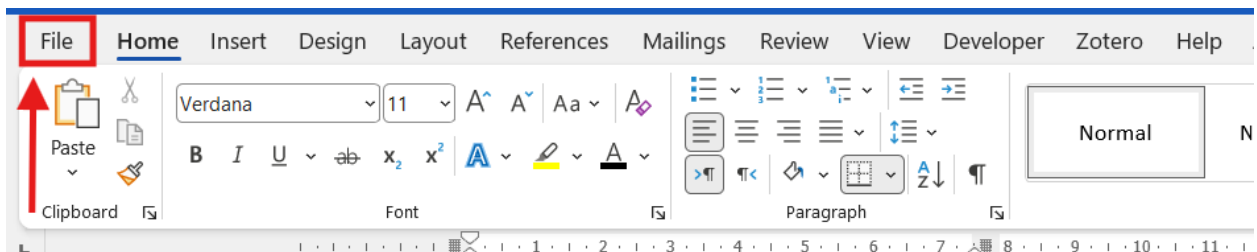


Figure 38 – Exporting a document as an accessible PDF in Word (desktop version): location of the File tab.

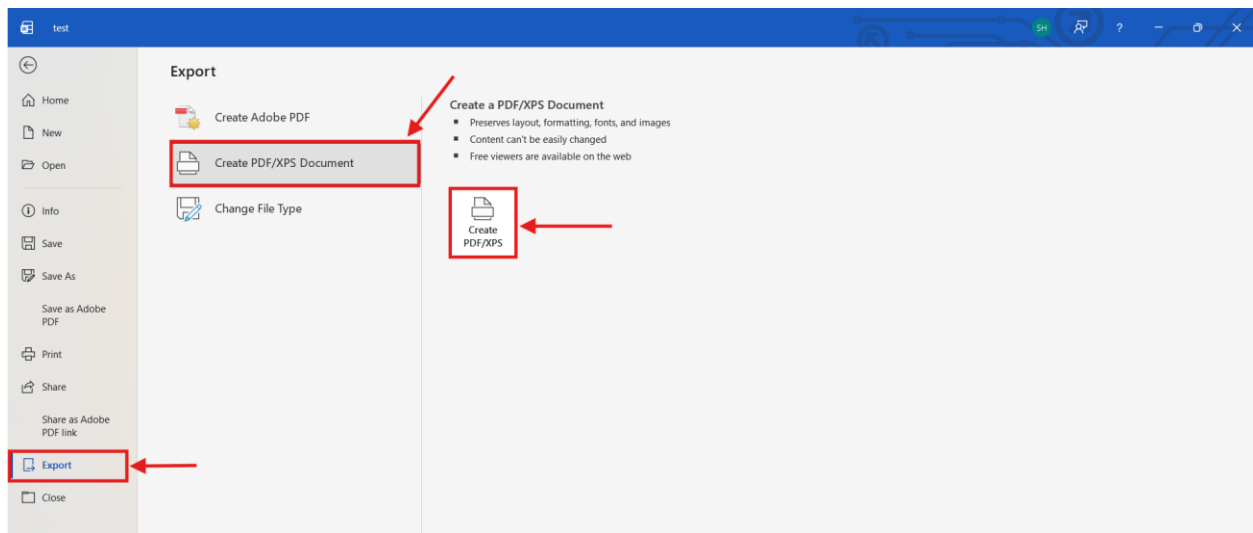


Figure 39 – Exporting a document as an accessible PDF in Word (desktop version): how to access the Create PDF/XPS option from the Export page.

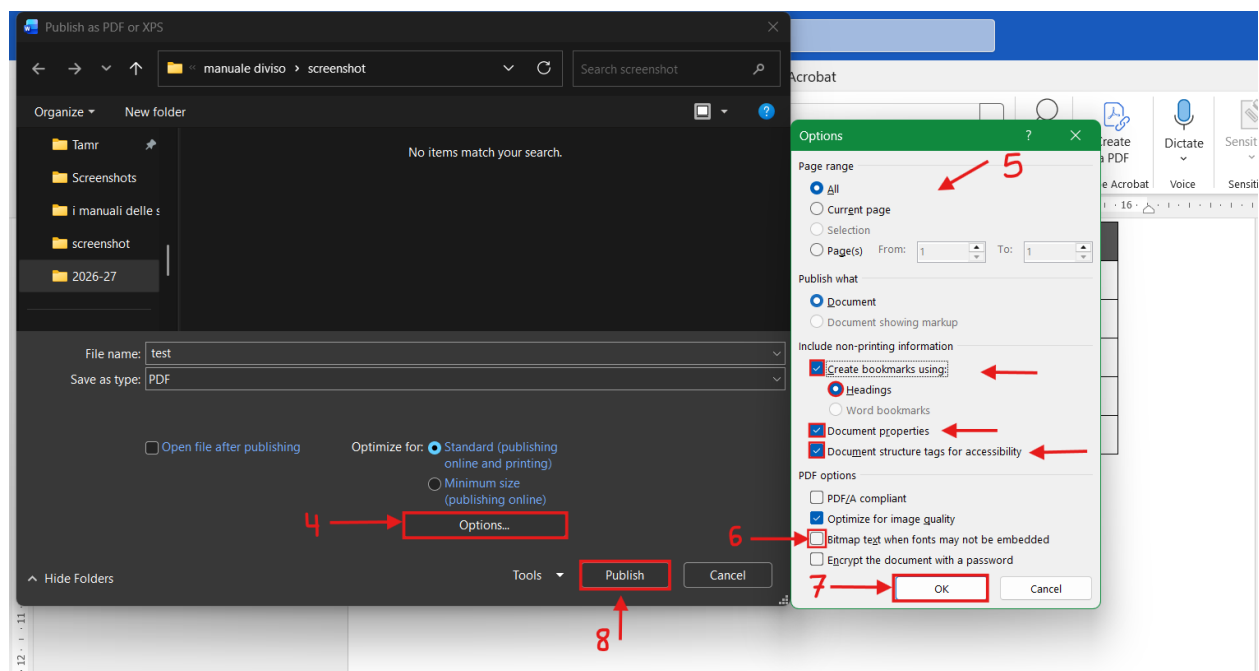


Figure 40 – Exporting a document as an accessible PDF in Word (desktop version): Publish as PDF or XPS and Options windows showing the accessibility settings to select before publishing the document.

V. Conclusion

Creating accessible documents is not only about following technical requirements, but also about ensuring that everyone can read, understand and use the content. Every choice – from text formatting and colour selection to images, tables, and hyperlinks – contributes to making a document more inclusive.

The Accessibility Checker tools built into Word are valuable for identifying errors and providing recommendations, but they do not replace manual review. A final critical check is always necessary to ensure that links, alternative text, document structure, and content are clear and meaningful.

In conclusion, designing accessible documents means adopting an approach based on consideration and respect for the people who will use them. A small effort during the preparation stage can make a significant difference for readers and improve the overall quality of the document.