Accessibility features make all of us less crabby

Crabby Office Lady

Everyone sees, hears, feels, and maneuvers around the world differently. Accessibility features exist to help those of us with less than perfect vision, hearing, or dexterity.

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Very few of us have 20/20 vision, perfect hearing, and 100-percent use of every single part of our bodies. In fact, among adult computer users in the United States, 1 in 4 has a vision difficulty, 1 in 4 has a dexterity difficulty, and 1 in 5 has a hearing difficulty. But even if you don't have any issues regarding vision, dexterity, or hearing, chances are you may know, work with, or love someone who does. As the computer-using population grows older, these numbers are bound to increase.

In Office and at Microsoft (and, hopefully, at other companies that make computing software and hardware), we really do strive to build technology for everyone, including those who experience physical difficulties or disabilities. I'm here to point you toward some resources that will help you get the most out of your software so that you can get the most out of your computer time, and then get on with your day.

What is "accessibility?"

So, what does "accessibility" mean? For our purposes, it means technology that makes using your computer possible, even when you have an impairment. This means software makers make programs more accessible for you, and you are able to get your work done. And how do we all do this? Read on.

Some of the features listed below are Office-only accessibility features (such as being able to build accessible forms), and some are brought to you by our good friends at Windows.

Zoom in and see better

- In most Office 2007 and Office 2003 programs, you can zoom in on your files to make information more readable on the screen. You can also choose a High Contrast color scheme to improve legibility.
    Turn on high contrast in Windows Vista
    Turn on High Contrast in Windows XP

Get a better view

- **Word 2007** Full Screen Reading view improves the resolution and display of text for reading on the screen. As well, in Full Screen Reading view, you can highlight content, track your changes, add comments, and review changes.
- **Word 2003** With the Reading Layout View, if you're opening a document primarily to read it, text is automatically displayed using Microsoft ClearType technology, which improves the legibility of what you're reading. As well, **Reading Layout** and **Reviewing** are the only toolbars that are displayed — all others are hidden, giving you more room for the document. Read more about reading layout view in Word 2003.

Design accessible Web sites

- FrontPage 2003 enables you to create sites that are more accessible for people with disabilities and also includes an Accessibility Checker to identify accessibility problems in your site.

Learn your keyboard shortcuts

- Fact is, keyboard shortcuts are the meat and potatoes of accessibility features for any program, whether it's Windows or Word. Maybe you have difficulty using the mouse, or are starting to suspect your wrist doesn't like it. Give your mouse (and your wrist) a break; learn how to work with the keyboard in Office and start accomplishing tasks more quickly and easily with simple keystrokes. Using keyboard shortcuts can help you complete some tasks faster and more easily. Many features and commands are available directly by pressing two or more keys simultaneously.

  > Keyboard shortcuts in the 2007 Office system
  > Work with the keyboard in Office 2003

Customize toolbars and menus

We try to anticipate your needs when we're designing toolbars and menus, but one size — or style or button arrangement — does not fit all.

- **Office 2007** In Office 2007, the Quick Access Toolbar is a customizable toolbar that contains a set of commands that are independent of the tab that is currently displayed. You can customize the Quick Access Toolbar in the Office 2007 programs that use the Ribbon, which is part of the Microsoft Office Fluent user interface.
- **Office 2003** You can customize toolbars and menu commands in most Office 2003 programs to put the most used commands within easy reach.
- Customize your toolbars and menus

Automate tasks

- You can also reduce keystrokes in most Office 2003 programs by automating them with a macro. A macro is a series of commands and instructions that are grouped together as a single command to accomplish a task automatically. For example, create a macro in FrontPage to create new pages and apply templates to them. It's like having your own robot.

Talk to your computer

- **Office 2007**
- **Office 2003** Speech recognition is installed in all Office programs by initially using the feature in Word 2003, or by doing a custom installation. Install and train speech recognition

Let your computer talk to you

- Narrator is a text–to–speech utility for people who are blind or have low vision. Narrator reads what is displayed on the screen — the contents of the active window, menu options, or text that has been typed.

Creating accessible Office documents

Now that you know where to go to get the information you need to use Office documents, what about creating them in the first place? There are rules when it comes to creating the various types of documents, drawings, spreadsheets, etc. so that they're accessible to everyone. Take some time to review these guidelines. You want to make sure your message isn't being lost because of the way you're sending it.

- About creating accessible Office documents
- About checking Web pages for accessibility
- Create an accessible Office document (Training course)

Creating accessible Web sites

When you're creating a Web site, there are many ways to make sure that you're playing fair and that your site's message is getting across to everyone. For example, you'll want to be sure to add alternative (ALT) text to all your images. ALT text provides a description for people who

can't see images. Also, apply style sheets. This is important because it allows your users to customize fonts and colors. And finally, create accessible image maps to make links within images more accessible.

Below are some links to help you get started in creating Web sites that are accessible to everyone.

- Tips for creating accessible Web sites in Publisher
- Make hyperlinked buttons more accessible to screen reader software in FrontPage
- Make Web page graphics more accessible in FrontPage
- About checking Web pages for accessibility
- Run an accessibility report in FrontPage

NOTE Review the information on the World Wide Web Consortium Web site surrounding the Web Accessibility Initiative (W3C WAI). There is lots of great information regarding what the WAI is, who is participating in it, and why it's so important.

Getting the help you need

Even though there are many features and technologies available to you, there is so much information out there that it can be overwhelming. There are a few ways to tackle this.

- **Listen to the experts** The Accessibility Advocate is an Office Online column written by a variety of experts in the field of accessibility. From exploring assistive technology that can help you make better use of your computer to exploring the Inclusive Innovation Showroom on the Microsoft Main Campus in Redmond, WA. , this content on our Web site is THE place to go for accessibility ideas and resources.
- **Using the Help system in Office** Change the appearance of a Help topic, figure out how to use expandable links in topics, and learn those keyboard shortcuts for using the **Ask a Question** box and the **Help** task pane and window.
  Accessibility features in Office Help
- **Guides by impairment** If you need to find accessibility features that that address your weak eyesight, you probably don't want to be slogging through all the information regarding features for those with hearing issues. And visa versa. Each guide provided on this Web site offers a list of assistive technology products and links to step-by-step tutorials for accessibility features that are helpful for specific types of difficulties and impairments.
  Accessibility: Guides by Impairment
- **Training about accessibility for Office** I am a huge fan of the training courses on our Web site. For one thing, they're free (and I'm cheap). For another, they can teach you all sorts of things that you never knew were possible.
- **Get accessible support** If you have difficulty reading or handling printed materials, you can obtain the documentation for many Microsoft products in more accessible formats.
  Documentation in accessible formats for Microsoft products

Beyond Office

Office isn't the only product that has tried to make your computer easier and more comfortable to use. Windows as well as other Microsoft products also have built-in accessibility features.

But even going beyond Microsoft (yes, there is a world outside our door), there are many what we call "assistive technology products" created by various manufacturers to provide additional accessibility to those individuals needing it. This includes alternative input devices (such as touch screens and sip-and-puff systems, activated by inhaling or exhaling), braille embossers, reading tools and learning disabilities programs, screen readers, and voice recognition products. Visit the Assistive Technology Products Web site.

Onward

And there you have it. Why should you, I, or anyone else who has some sort of impairment be restricted from the kind of software we want to use? We shouldn't be. Period. Visit the Microsoft Accessibility Web site for more information.

"You never know till you try to reach them how accessible men are; but you must approach each man by the right door." — Henry Ward Beecher

About the author

Annik Stahl, the Crabby Office Lady columnist, takes all of your complaints, compliments, and knee-jerk reactions to heart. Therefore, she graciously asks that you let her know whether this column was useful to you — or not — by entering your feedback using the **Did this article help you?** feedback tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.

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