ADA Compliance: PDF Basics

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Foxit PDF Editor

Foxit PDF Editor is a user-friendly, feature-rich application that allows you to view, edit, and manage PDF documents. It is a less expensive version of Adobe Acrobat Pro but works close to the same. As an instructor, you can use it to ensure your course materials, such as syllabi, lecture notes, and readings, are accessible to all students, including those who use screen readers or other assistive technologies.

The accessibility checker in Foxit is much stronger and more accurate than anything provided by Microsoft Office. While it may still miss some things, it will be your best tool to check the accessibility of any PDF document.

Acquiring Foxit PDF Editor

If you do not have Foxit installed on your Windows or Mac PC, please reach out to IT at helpdesk@msutexas.edu and request to have it installed with a license set up in your name.

Here are a few other options:

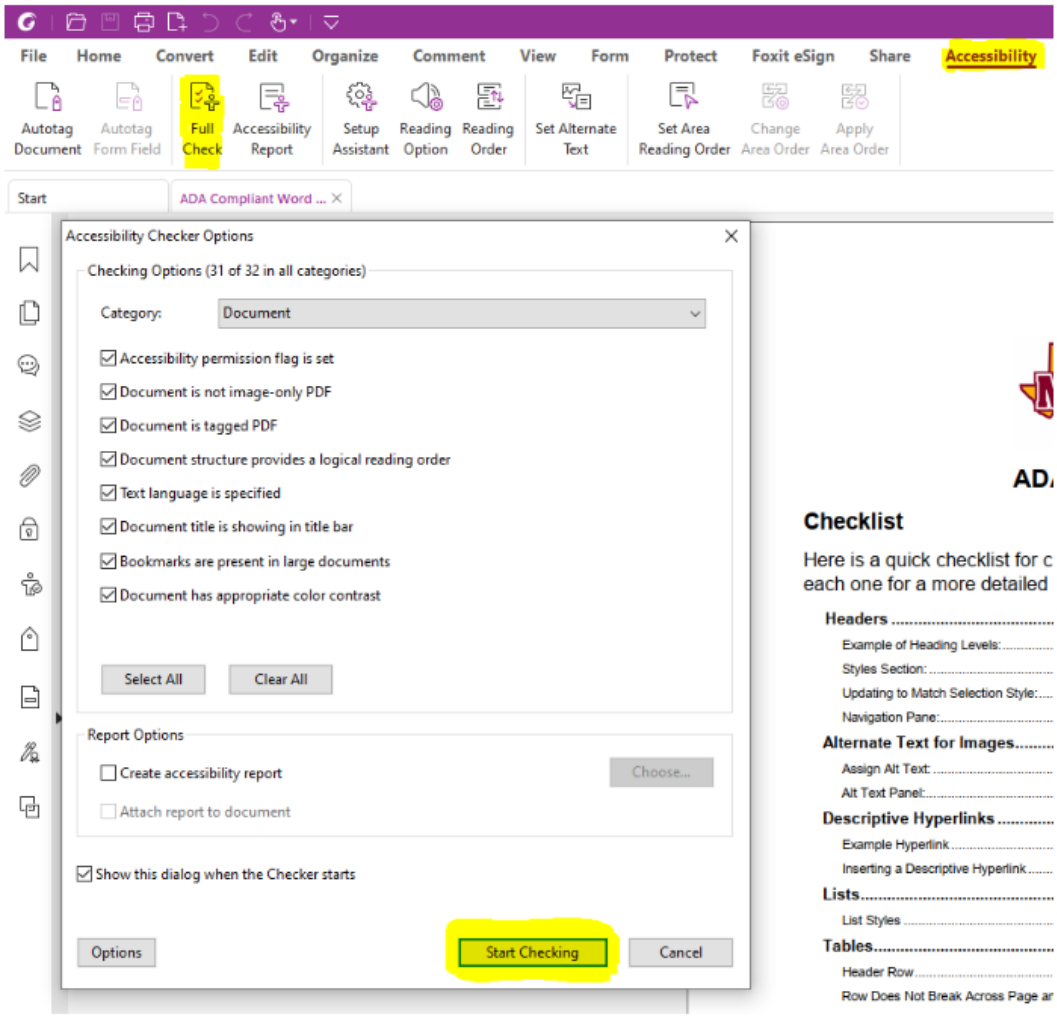
- Contact IT and have them install Foxit onto a PC in your department that you can use for ADA corrections.
- Distance Education has a full lab where each PC has Foxit. The lab is in the Hardin building, HA225.
- If you do not have an MSU owned PC, please reach out to IT to discuss the preferred process for obtaining access to Foxit.

Accessibility Checker

For this “How To” we will be using Foxit PDF Editor. This editor will be mainly utilized as an improved accessibility checker. The accessibility checker in Foxit is an incredibly powerful and efficient tool that makes creating inclusive documents straightforward and manageable. It quickly scans PDFs for a wide range of accessibility issues, such as missing tags, incorrect reading order, insufficient color contrast, and absent alternative text for images.

Locating the Accessibility Checker

To use the accessibility checker, open any PDF you want to check via Foxit. The checker will be in the top tool bar titled Accessibility, click on that to open more accessibility options. To run a check, click on "Full Check." A new window will pop up. You do not need to change anything on this new window, hit "Start Checking."

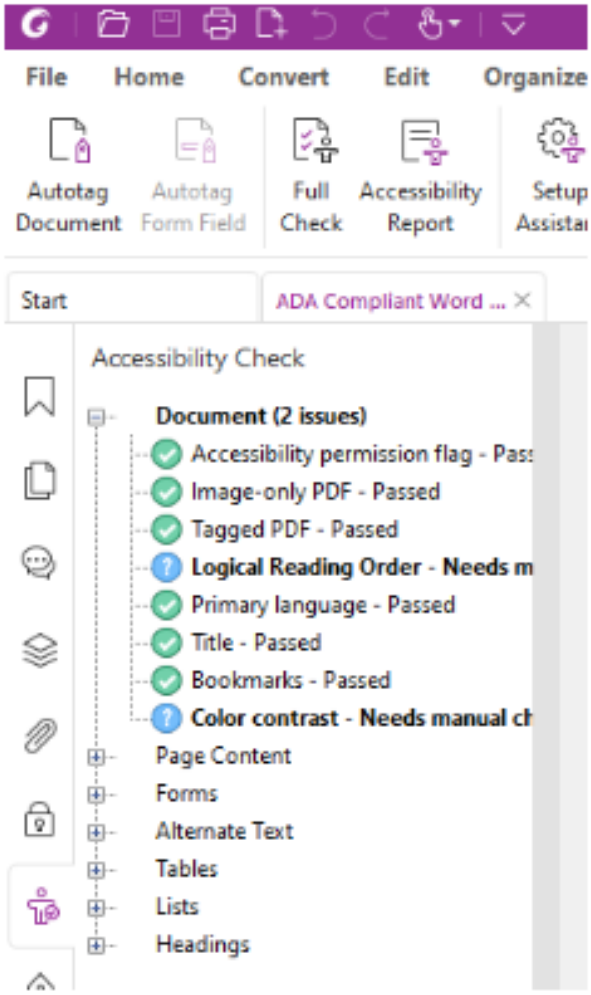


Congratulations, you have completed your first accessibility check! Let move on to the results.

Accessibility Check Results

Good Results

If everything is perfect with your PDF, it should look like this.

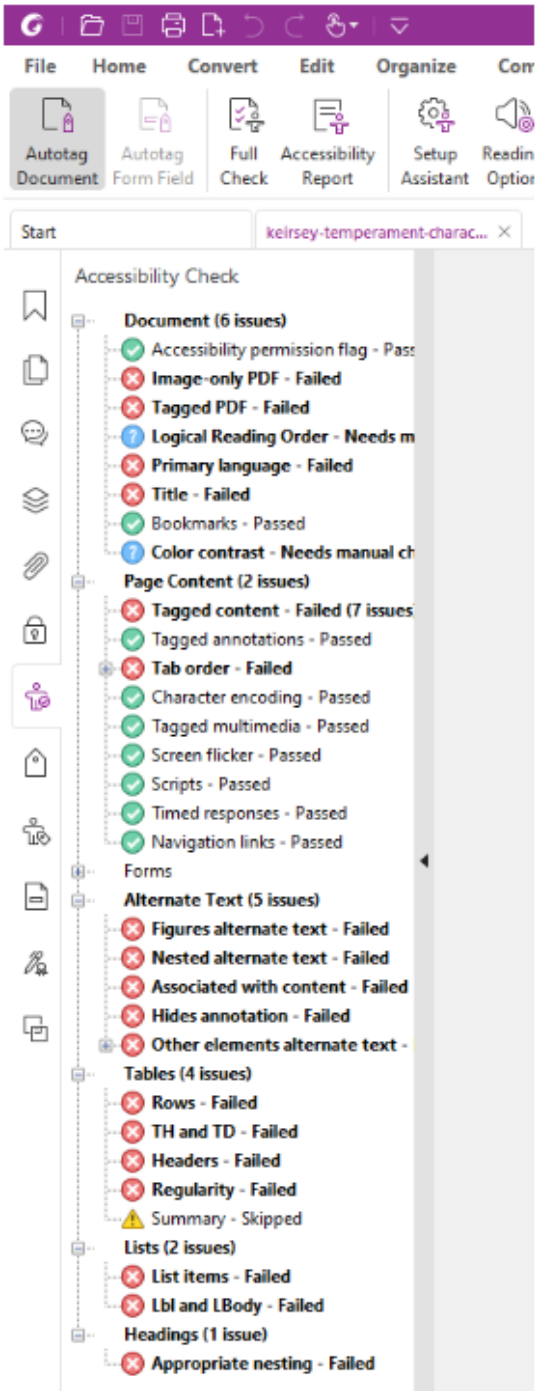


How can it be perfect with two issues?! That is because "Logical Reading Order" and "Color Contrast" will appear 100% of the time. The checker feels that it cannot do a good job at checking those two issues itself. If you created this PDF through a Word, PowerPoint, or Excel document then you most likely have the reading order and color contrast already compliant, which means you can ignore these warnings.

***Note:** These results can sometimes be deceiving! Try to always check the tags to verify its compliance. You will learn about tags later in this module.

Bad Results

Well, anything that does not look like the "good results" screenshot above is technically not compliant. Here is an example of bad results.



As you can see, issues galore! Due to the amount of issues, I can deduce that this file has zero compliance. The biggest reason is most likely either its missing tags or its a scanned document, both of which we will go over further in this “How To.”

Options for correcting a non-compliant PDF

Often times getting a PDF fully compliant can be time consuming. Here are some ideas to help you find faster ways to keep the content you love!

- Reach out to the owner of the document, or the website you got the document from.
    - You may currently have an out dated PDF document. The owner may still be getting their own content fully compliant for the April 2026 deadline and could provide you with a compliant version at a later date. It is always best to put the compliance work back on the owner. If they are a government website or an education website (such as content from publishers) then they **must** comply with your request. They have to follow the same laws that we do!
- Try to fix the PDF issues yourself.
    - This step is a more technical. You will learn more about this in the Tags section of this "How To."
- See if you can recreate the document yourself in Word or PowerPoint.
    - By doing this, you can add in the compliance edits and then resave it as a PDF document. Articles that are just a couple headings and large paragraphs are good examples of easy to recreate documents.
- If you cannot instruct without the PDF document and its under 10 pages, send it to me (zack.shanks@msutexas.edu) and I will try my hardest to get it compliant for you.
- Find another resource.
    - Sadly, this is the final option. If none of the options above work then your only choice is to not use the document and find something else that is compliant.

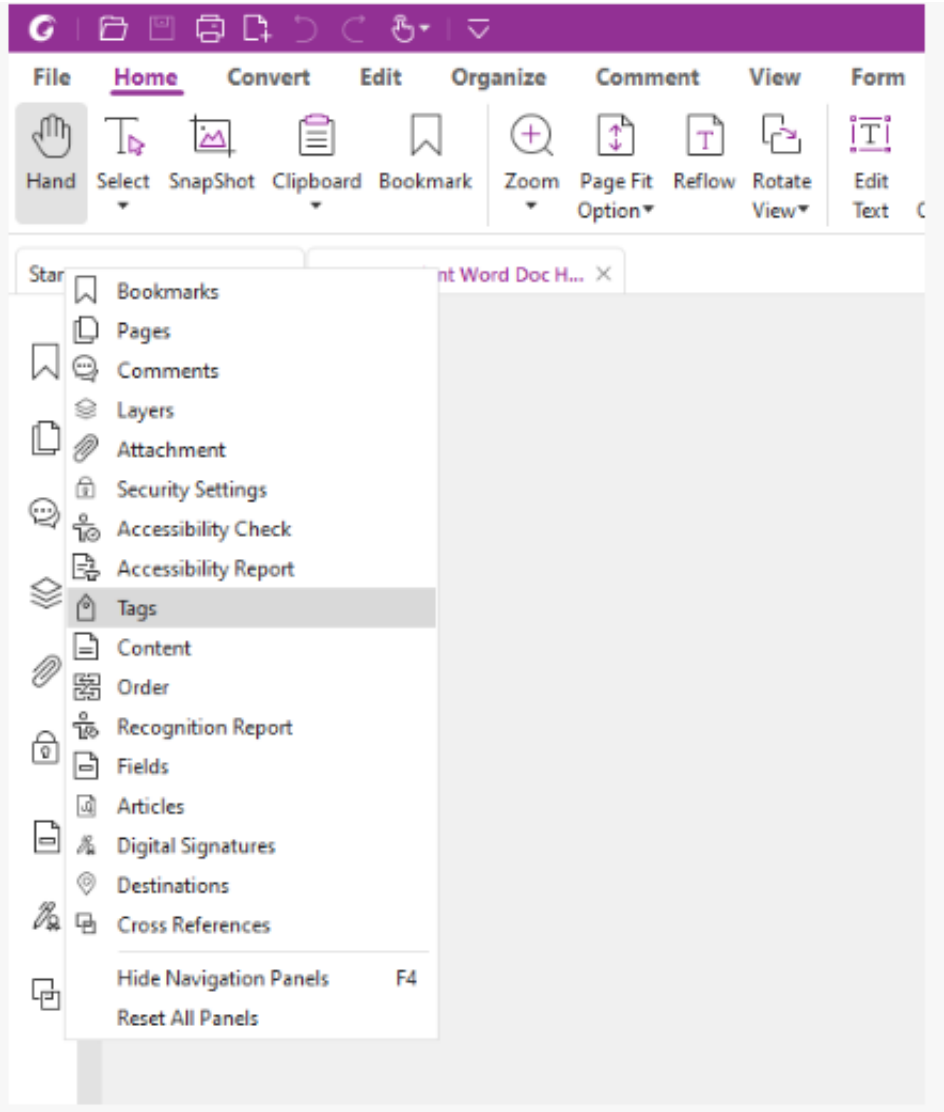
***Reminder:** A perfectly compliant PDF will *always* come with 2 issues marked as "need manual check." These issues are Logical Reading Order and Color Contrast.

Tags

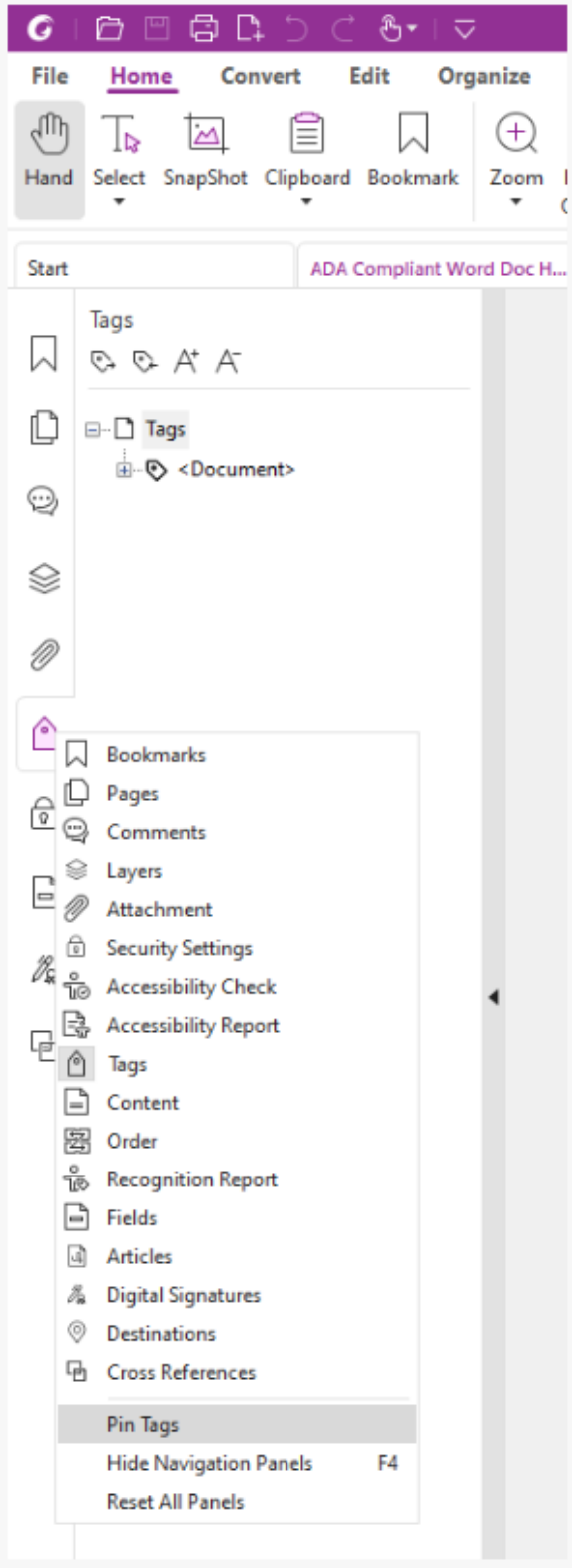
PDF tags are hidden labels in a PDF document that describe the structure and order of the content, like headings, paragraphs, lists, and tables. They help screen readers and other assistive technologies understand how to read the document out loud or display it in a meaningful way. Without tags, a PDF may be hard or impossible for people with disabilities to navigate. Tags make sure everyone can access and understand the information, no matter how they're reading it.

Locating Tags

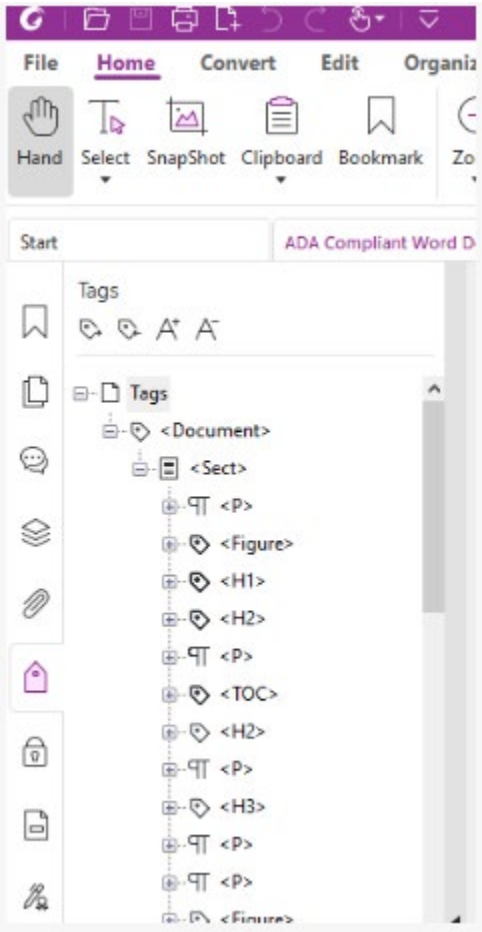
Open Foxit PDF Editor and locate the toolbar on the left side of the window. By default, tags may not show up on the bar. Right click any empty space on the bar and choose "Tags."



The tags panel should appear. Right click on the Tags toolbar again and select "Pin Tags" so it will be there for future PDF files.

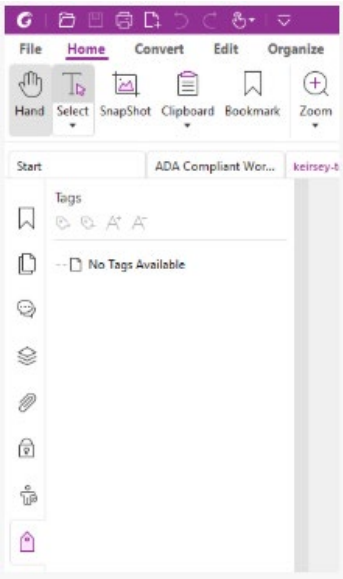


If your document has tags, it should look like this.

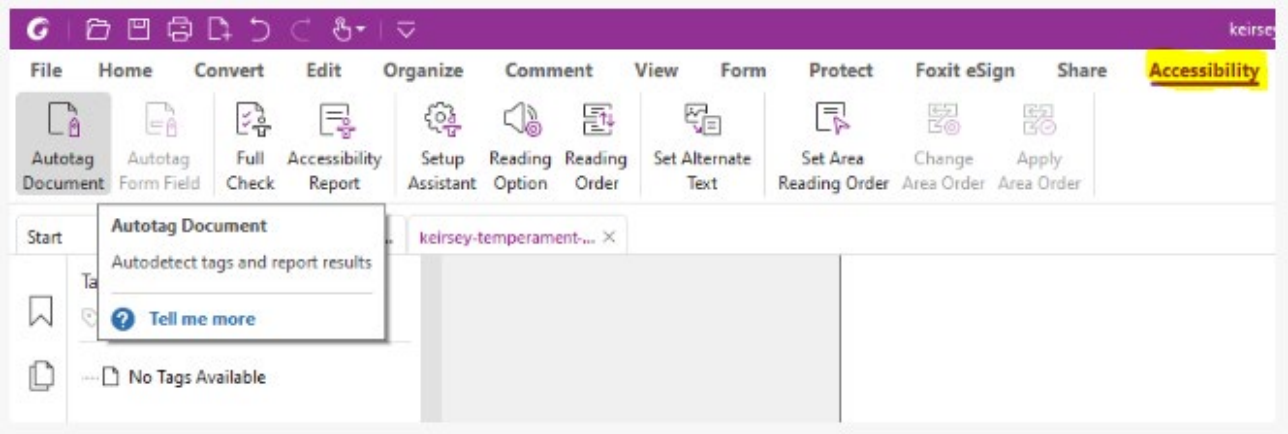


<u>Autotag Feature</u>

If your document does not have tags, it will look like this.



One of the ways to easily add tags to a document is using the "Autotag Document" feature. Keep in mind the autotag will not run perfectly and they will need to be checked for accuracy. You will find this feature under the Accessibility tab.



Tag Legend

These are the main tag abbreviations to learn and what they represent.

- <Document>
  - The main tag which all other tags are nested.
- <Part> or <Sect> (Part or Section)
  - These are the tags that are used for the major sections of the document and can help with tag organization. For example, if I want to separate each a 3-page document so that each page has its own <Part> tag. You could have 1 of these or 10 of them, depending on how you want to structure the tags.
- <H1> through <H6> (Headings)
  - H1 is header 1 and should be the title of your document. There should be no other header 1s. The rest of the document will be headers 2 through 6. Think of headers like a table of contents in a book. Header 1 is the title of the book. All of the header 2s are the main chapters in the book. If there are sub section in a main chapter, that would be a header 3, etc...
- <P> (Paragraph)
  - These tags are for the body text. These will be the most often used tags in a document.
- <L> (List)
  - The main list tags. All other list tags will fall under this one.
- <LI> (List Item)
  - This will be the tag for each bullet point and accompanying text within a list.
- <Lbl> (List Label)
  - This is the tag for the bullet identifiers (bullet points, numbers, letters).

- <LBody> (List Body)
    - This is the text portion of the bulleted item.
- <Table>
    - The main tag that houses all table tag components.
- <TR> (Table Row)
    - The main tag that houses all tags in a specific row.
- <TH> (Table Header)
    - Heading cells within the table row tag.
- <TD> (Table Data)
    - Data cells within the table row tag.
- <Artifact>
    - Decorative images and non-essential content.
- <Figure>
    - Graphic element such as a logo, photo, or chart.

Lists and Tables

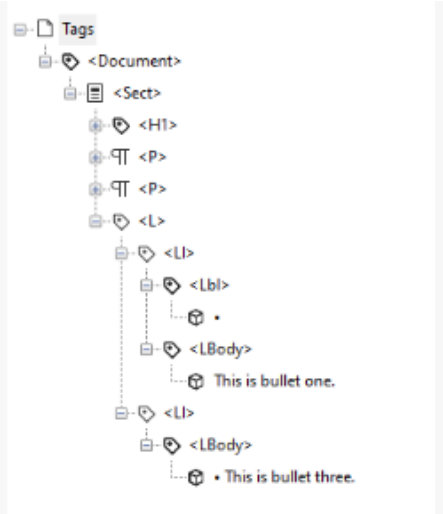
Tags for lists and tables can be more complicated and time consuming that other tags. Below are two screenshots of what a well set up list and table look like. Both examples below belong to a <Sect> tag, which is under a <Document> tag.

List

Lists are started with a <L> tag. Inside of this tag, you will have one <LI> for each bullet line in your list. Inside of each of these tags you will have one <Lbl> tag and one <LBody> tag. The Lbl is for the bullet identifier and Lbody is for the text content.

Sometimes PDFs will put the bullet point with the <LBody> text content. This is fine. Both ways work!

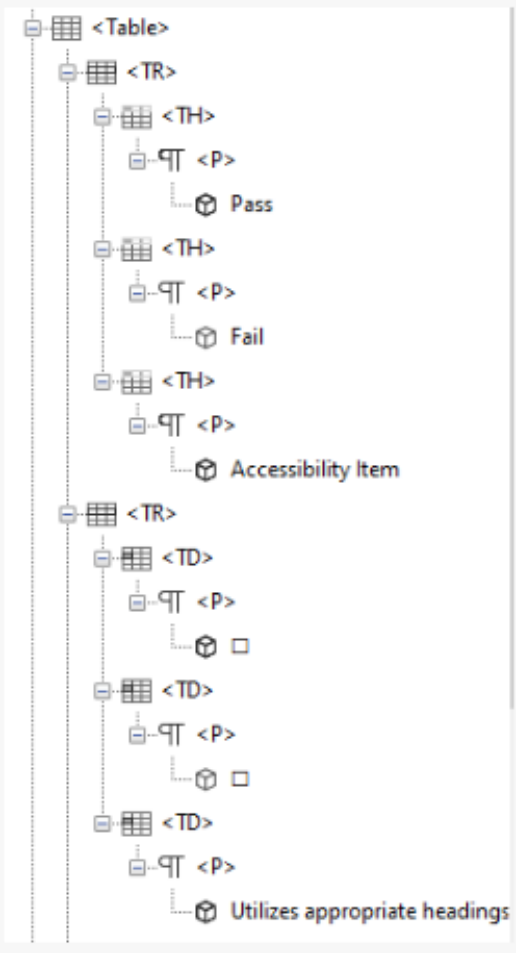
Below is a screenshot example. The first part of the list follows the L -> LI -> Lbl and Lbody format. The second part of the list skips the <Lbl> and only uses <Lbody>.



Table

You will start your table with a <Table> tag. Under this should be one <TR> per row in your table, including the header row. Under the <TR> tags you will have either <TH> if it's your header row or <TD> for normal data rows. Under these tags you will have a <P> tag that houses the content of the cell.

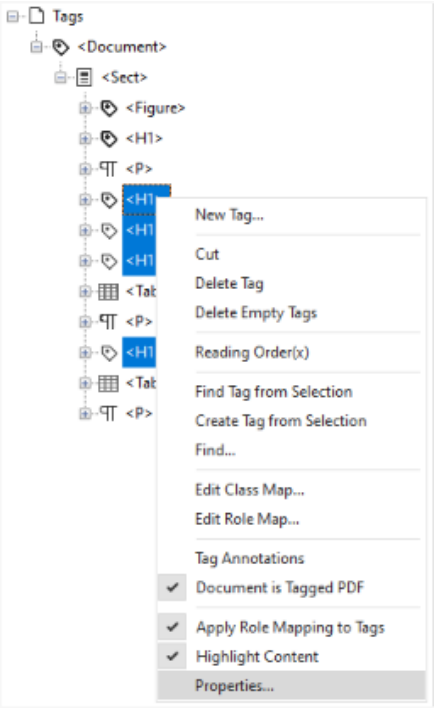
Below is an example of a table tags. This example shows the first 2 rows of a table. The first is the header row of the table while the second is a normal data row.



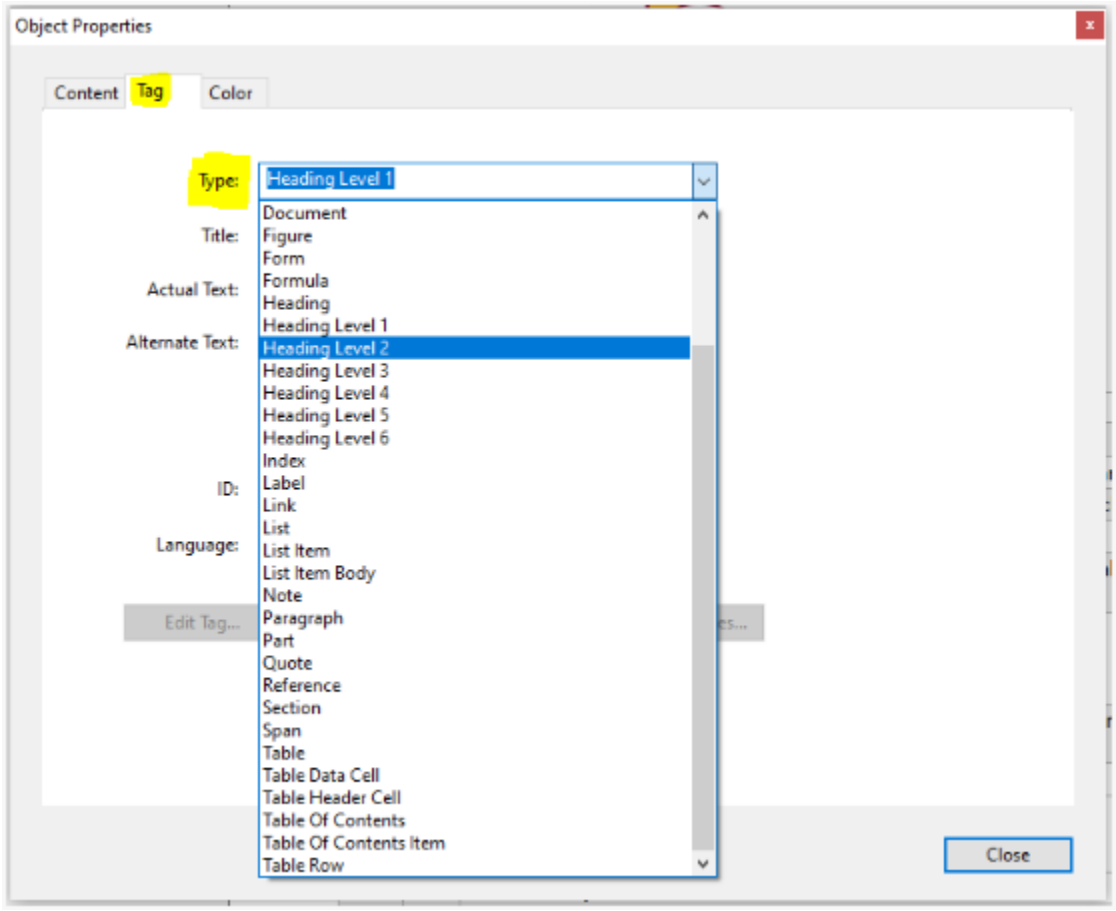
Correcting Tags

There will be times you get a PDF from online and the tags are pretty close to correct with only a few corrections. The example below is close, but all of their headers are marked <H1> which is header 1. This document should only have one <H1> while the rest are either <H2> or above.

The quickest fix for this is to convert the incorrect tags into the correct tags. You can right click on a tag, or if you hold down the Ctrl button on your keyboard you can click multiple tags and then right click on a selected tag, and choose properties.



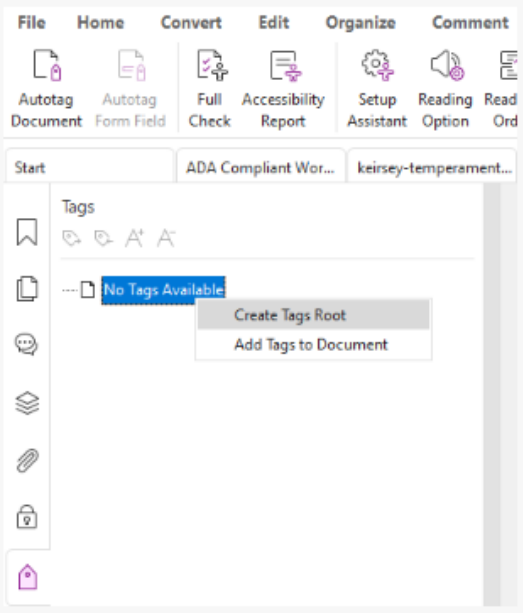
The Object Properties window will appear. Click on the Tag tab and click the dropdown next to the type section. This is where you can change your header 1s to header 2s. Repeat this for any other tags that need corrections.



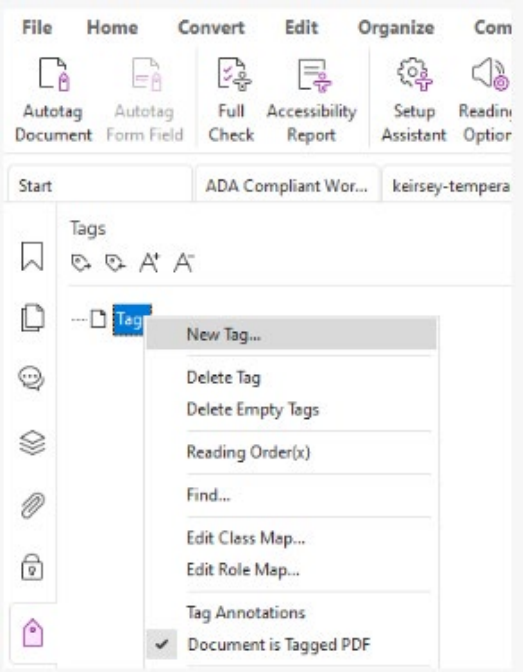
Manually Tagging

Sometimes the PDF or autotag is so bad that it may be faster to manually create the tags.

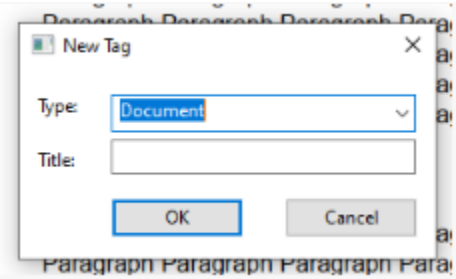
Start by going to the left toolbar and choosing Tags. On the Tags window, right click where it says "No Tags Available" and choose "Create Tags Root." Your tag tree needs its root if it's going to grow!



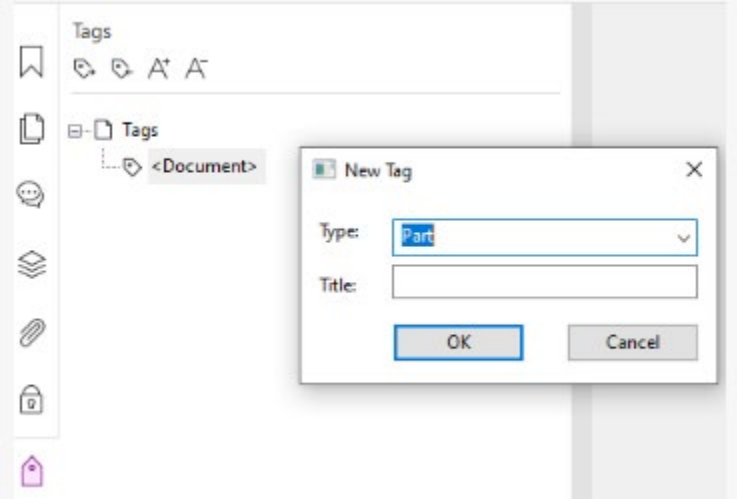
Next, right click your new Tags tag and choose "New Tag."



In the popup window, choose Document and press OK.



Next, right click your new <Document> tag and choose "New Tag." This time in the pop-up window select "Part" or "Section" and press OK.

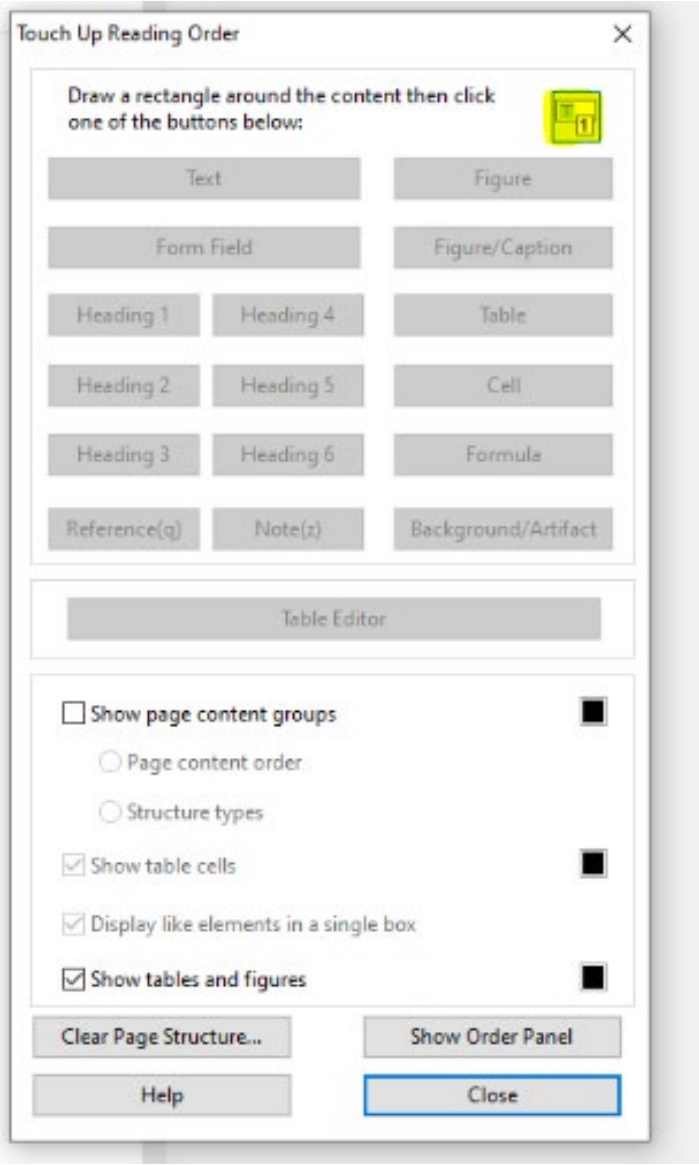


***Note:** You may need to rearrange newly created tags. It is a drag and drop feature. Click and hold, drag to the correct location and release. For this example, I had to click and hold the tag <Part> and drag it right below the words <Document> so that it would nest correctly. Everything else will be nesting under <Part>.

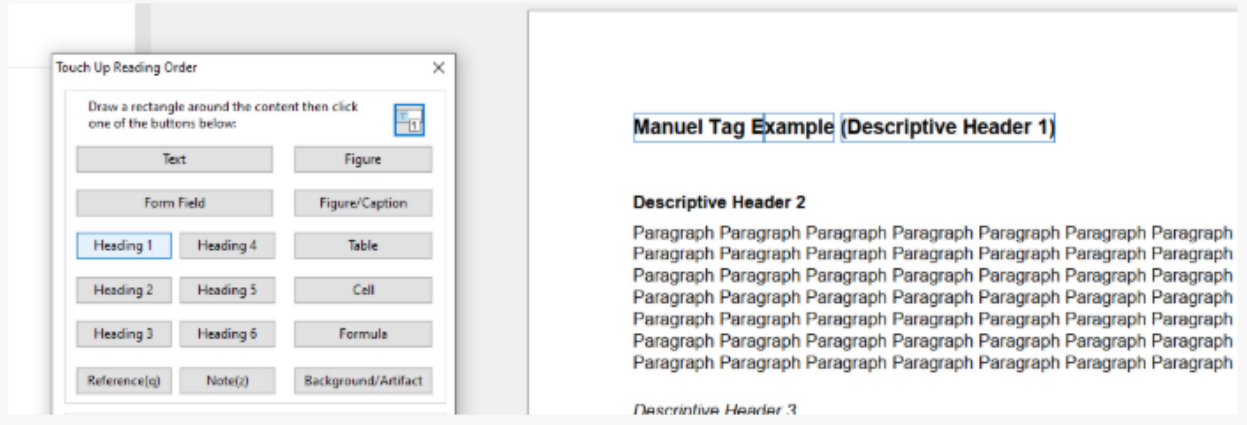
The steps above are the same steps for almost every document. You will always start with Tags followed by Document and then Part or Sect.

Now we can tag the content of the document.

The quickest way to accomplish this is by selecting "Reading Order" in the top tool bar under the Accessibility tab. This opens up the Touch Up Reading Order window. Click on the top right button that looks like a T and a 1.



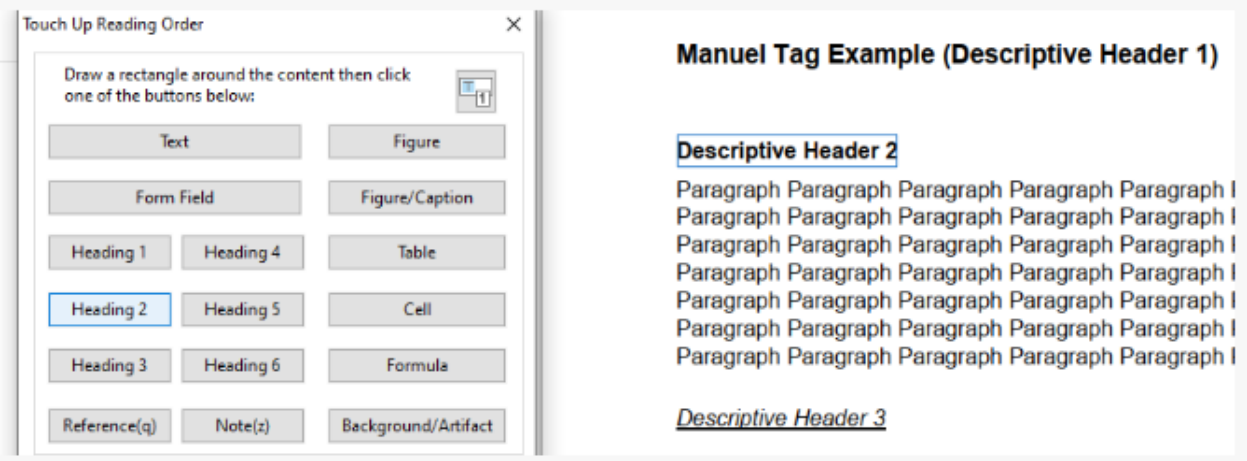
This tool will allow you to highlight lines in your document. Left click and drag to highlight the first header. You will notice you can now click on most of the buttons in the Touch Up Reading Order window. I highlighted the heading 1 first, so I am going to press Heading 1 from the list provided. This will create a tag for the highlighted text and label it accordingly.



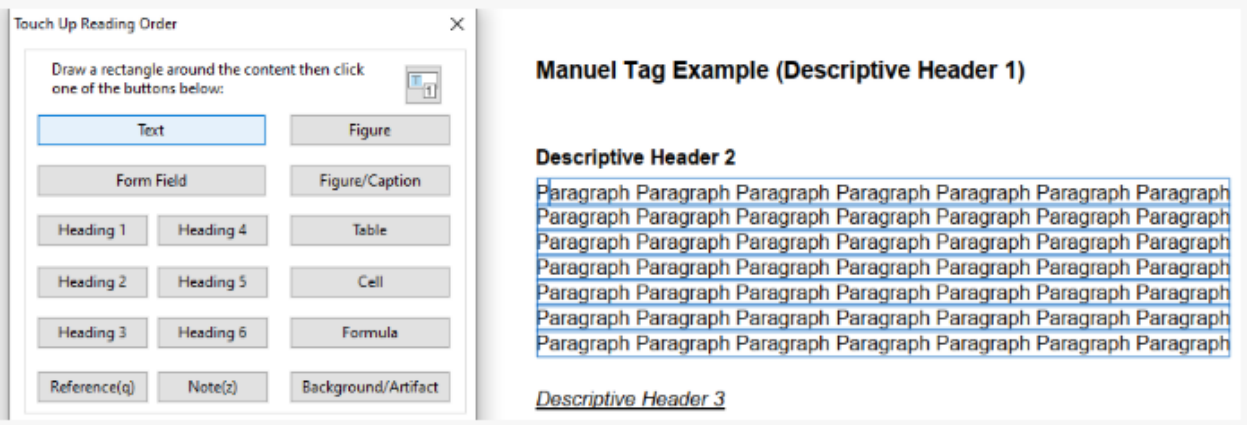
Repeat the steps for the rest of the document until every line of content has a tag. Paragraphs can be highlighted as a big chunk and labeled together under the Text choice. Use the Figure option for images.

Here are the next two tags for this document:

Heading 2



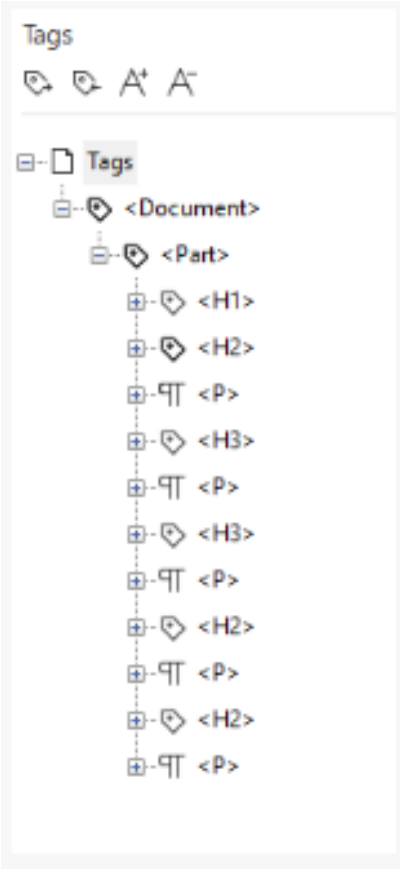
Text



***Reminder:** New tags will often be out of order. Make sure to drag and drop each tag and put it in the correct place! Below are screenshots of before and after the tags are reordered.

Before

After



***Note:** Tables and lists can be very time consuming and difficult to tag, depending on the content. If you have a document full of lists and tables it may be easier to convert it to a Word, PowerPoint, or Excel file and then get it compliant through one of those programs then resave as PDF.

***Reminder:** Before you finish your document and save, be sure to check if it has a title in the properties section! In Foxit, click File then choose Properties. Under the general section will be a spot you can type your descriptive document title.

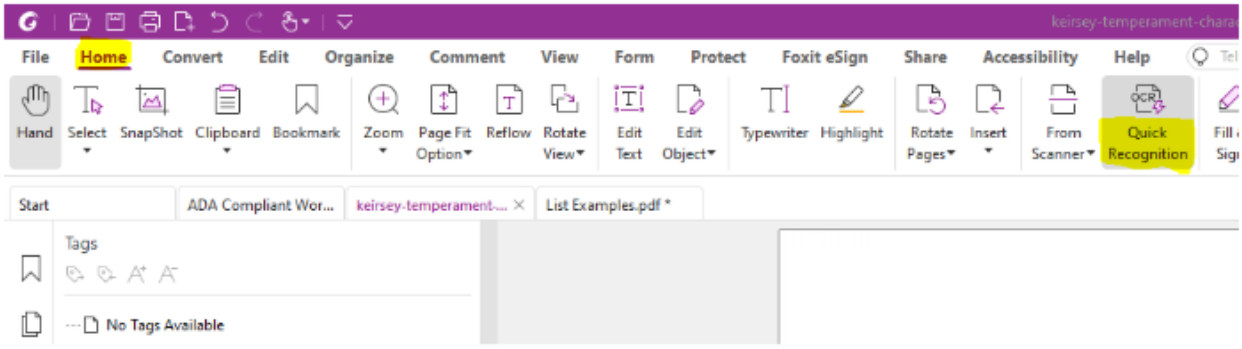
Scanned Documents

In the ADA world, we try to avoid using scanned documents whenever possible. A scanned document is an image of what you were scanning which would give zero content information to screen readers. Sometimes we cannot get away from scanned documents, which is understandable. Below is the process to get a scanned document ADA compliant.

OCR Quick Recognition

OCR Quick Recognition looks at a scanned document or image and quickly turns the picture of the text into real, editable text. This makes it possible to search, copy, and readable with a screen reader.

In Foxit PDF Editor, click on the Home tab. You will find OCR Quick Recognition on the far right of the Home toolbar.



OCR will process in the bottom right corner. Once completed, your document will have readable text!

***Note:** For OCR to work well, the scanned document needs to be easily readable and to have good contrast. This allows OCR to run more effectively. If the scan is too dark or unreadable then OCR cannot help. At that point you would want to find another source or recreate the scanned document yourself in Word, PowerPoint, or Excel and get it compliant that way.

After OCR Quick Recognition

Now that screen readers can read the file, we still need to tag the PDF. You can do this manually, or try your luck with the autotag document feature. Either way, verify that the tags are correct and your document will be ADA compliant.

Additional Assistance

If you need additional assistance, have ADA related questions, or would like to verify that you created an accessible Word document, send an email to zack.shanks@msutexas.edu.

Created By:

Office of Accessibility and Instructional Design

Distance Education

Midwestern State University