Seven Steps to Creating an Accessible
Email in Outlook

Disability Access Services

DOR DEPARTMENT of
REHABILITATION
Employment, Independence & Equality

About Disability Access Services

Centralized Resource and Information on Disability Access

Disability Access Services provides technical assistance and informational guidance to promote the civil rights and equality for persons with disabilities in the following areas:

Employment
Reasonable Accommodation
Physical Access of built environments
Access to private sector goods and services
Digital Access of electronic and information technology
Access to government programs, services, and activities

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Promoting an Accessible Future through Education and Information

Seven Steps to Creating an Accessible Email in Outlook

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Alternative Formats

In accordance with ADA requirements, this document can be made available in Braille or large print as a reasonable accommodation for an individual with a disability. To request a copy of alternative formats, please contact Disability Access Services.

Equal Opportunity Employer/Program

A Note About Hyperlinks in This Document

All links in this document have been created with meaningful text. The Uniform Resource Locator (URL) is also published to be available as a resource for those persons who print the document. The URL addresses that are spelled out in the document are not active links to avoid the confusion of presenting duplicate links.

Introduction

It is estimated that up to 4% of the population relies on some sort of Assistive Technology to access electronic documents, emails and Web pages. Assistive Technology includes; Screen Reading software, Refreshable Braille displays, and Screen Magnifiers. In the United States alone that equals 12.5 million people. If electronic documents are not created with accessibility issues in mind, they become very difficult if not impossible to read or navigate for this large number of people.

Accessibility to electronic documents is a right that is protected by both Federal and State law. Creating accessible electronic documents, including emails, is important to ensure access to persons with disabilities and the company or agency is protected against legal action. Additionally, it is just good business, when a very large segment of the population can equally participate and take advantage of the products or services that the company or agency provides.

Disability Access Services of California Department of Rehabilitation has put together this list of seven easy steps to follow when creating emails in Outlook. Take a few moments to get acquainted with these seven simple steps to ensure that emails are fully accessible to everyone.

Step One: Choose HTML Format

Microsoft Outlook gives the option of creating emails in one of three formatting styles; Plain Text, Rich Text or HTML. Since HTML supports semantic headings, images with alternative text, links, and lists it is the best format for ensuring the creation of accessible emails. Set HTML as the default email setting.

To set HTML as the default setting in Microsoft Outlook 2007 in the main Outlook menu go to **Tools, Options, Mail Format**. In the **Message Format** area choose **HTML** from the drop down menu. Click **OK.**

To set HTML as the default setting in Microsoft Outlook 2010 in the main Outlook menu go to the **File** tab, click **Options**, and then click **Mail**. Under **Compose Message**, select **HTML** from the drop down menu next to **Compose message in this format.** Click **OK.**
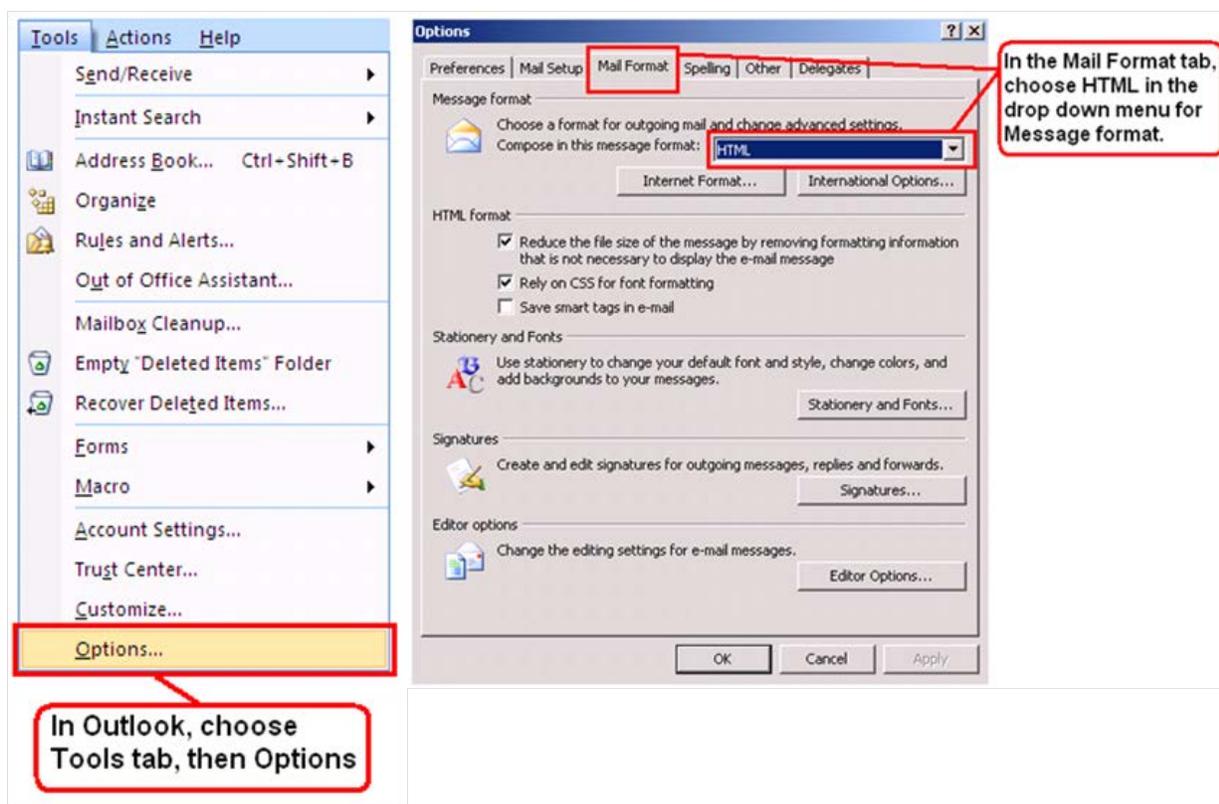

Figure 1: Outlook 2007 menu mapping to ensure HTML is the default format.

Another alternative is to choose HTML on a message by message basis. Go to; **File, Format Text** and then choose HTML from the **Format** area of the Ribbon.
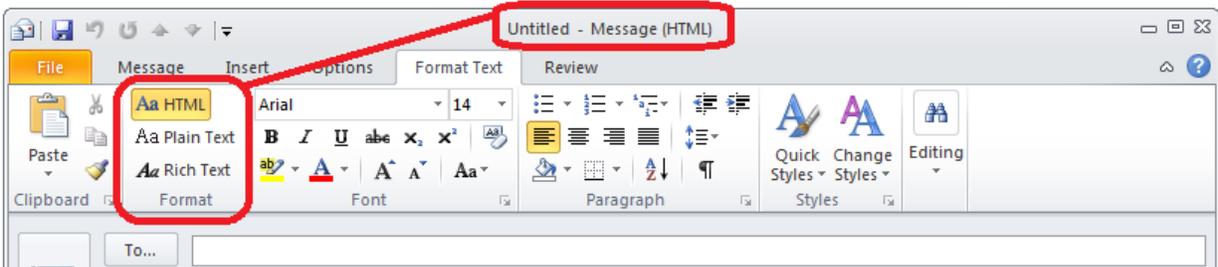
If Navigating by Keyboard: Alt – O – TH.

Figure 2: Microsoft Office 2010 Outlook Ribbon showing Format Text tab.

Step Two: Choose Appropriate Font Style and Size

There are hundreds of fonts to choose from for email. However, not all fonts are created equal when it comes to accessibility. The font styles listed below are the most commonly recommended due to both their readability and availability across a variety of computer operating systems.

Generally, sans serif fonts work best as screens with low resolution make serif fonts more difficult to discern.

In order to ensure that emails are accessible to the largest audience possible, choose one of the following serif font styles for emails:

Arial

Verdana

No matter which one of the font styles above is chosen, the font size should be at least 12 point or larger.

Step Three: Use Good Contrast

Good Contrast

People who have low-vision or color-blindness have difficulty reading text on screens when text color does not strongly contrast with the background color. Over 5% of men have partial color blindness either having difficulty distinguishing red from green, or blue from yellow. Choosing poor color combinations can make reading a struggle.

Readers with macular degeneration, glaucoma or other eye diseases may have great difficulty reading text which is small or which does not contrast strongly with the background.

In short, always choose a color of text that has a high level of contrast from the background. Emails with low contrast can be difficult, if not impossible to read for people with low vision.

Backgrounds

While Outlook gives the option of changing the color or texture of the background, or even placing a picture behind text, it is recommended to keep the background white. Any shading in the background can make email difficult to read.

If a background color is included ensure that the contrast with the accompanied text is sufficient. There are several color contrast testing tools that can be accessed free online to help determine the level of contrast in email.

Step Four: Adding Illustrations

Microsoft Outlook allows illustrations to be added to emails. Outlook 2007 offers five options (Picture, Clip Art, Shapes, SmartArt and Charts), Microsoft Outlook 2010 adds a sixth option (Screenshots).

To add an illustration, place the cursor where the illustration is to be inserted, go to the Insert tab and then choose the type.

If navigating by keyboard - Alt, N, then tab to the correct illustration type.

Wrap Text

After inserting the illustration, **Right Click** on image (Shift+F10), pick **Wrap Text**, then choose **In Line with Text** from the context menu. Selecting In Line with Text will ensure that the image will be seen by screen reading software.
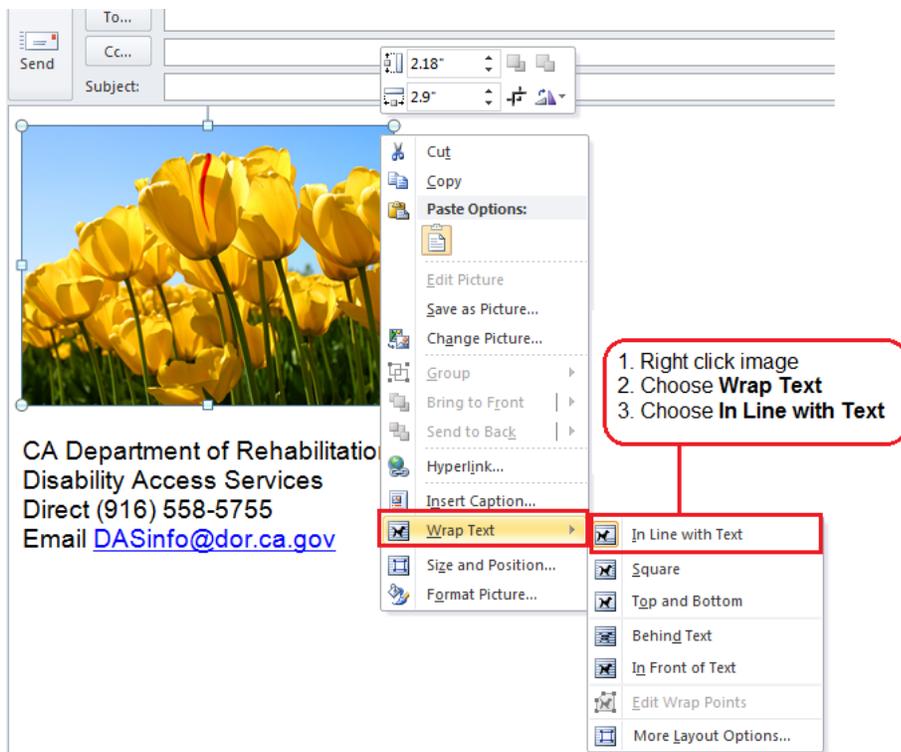

Figure 3: Showing how to choose In Line with Text as the Wrap Text option.

Adding Alternative Text and Captions

Alternative text and captions are read by screen readers allowing the content and function of the illustrations to be accessible to those with visual or certain cognitive disabilities.

Microsoft Outlook 2007

To add alternative text (Alt text) to a Picture, Clip Art, or SmartArt image in Outlook 2007; **Right Click** (Shift + F10) on the image, click **Size**, choose **Alt Text** tab.
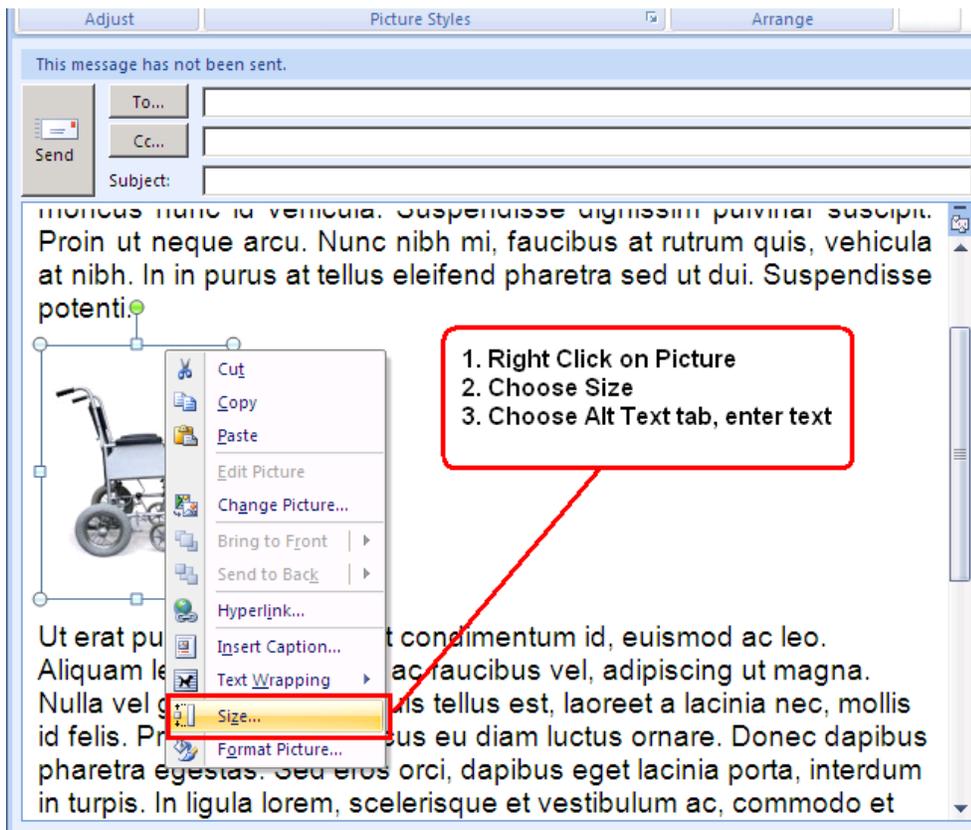
To add Alt text to Shapes in Outlook 2007, **Right Click** on the Shape, choose **Format AutoShape**, then choose **Alt Text** tab.

Alt text cannot be added to a Chart in Outlook 2007. Instead **Right Click** on the Chart and enter a **Caption.**

Microsoft Outlook 2010

To add Alt Text to a Picture, Clip Art, SmartArt and Screenshot in Outlook 2010; **Right Click** (Shift+F10) on the image, click **Format Picture** (or Object, or Chart), then choose **Alt text**.

To add Alt text to Shapes in Outlook 2010, **Right Click** on the Shape, choose **Format AutoShape**, then choose **Alt Text** tab.

To add Alt text to a Chart in Outlook 2010, **Right Click** on the Chart, choose **Format Chart Area**, then choose **Alt Text** tab.
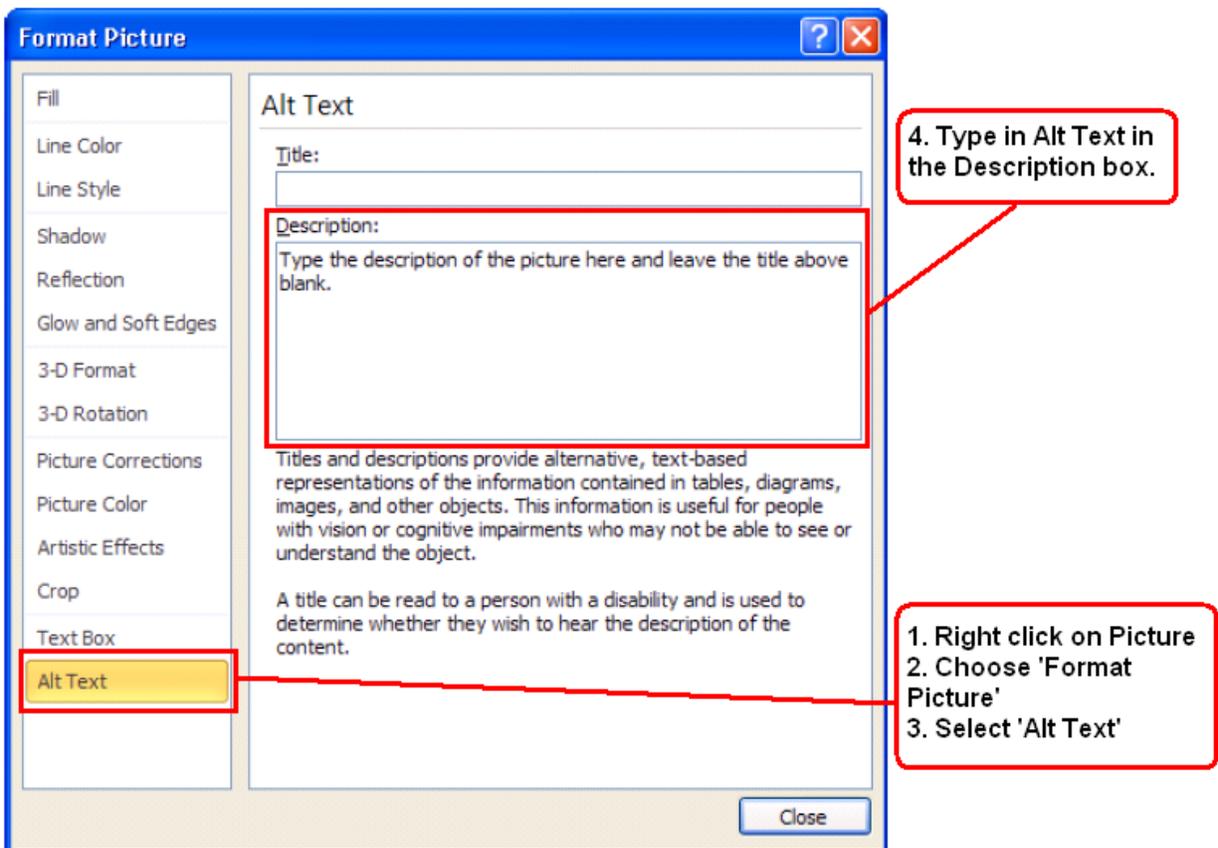

Figure 5: Alt Text menu screen for formatting a picture in Outlook 2010.

Step Five: Create Signatures

Signatures in Outlook provide a way to add name and contact information to emails the same way every time without re-typing. Several different signatures can be entered depending on the purpose of the email.

To do this go to the Insert tab, choose Signature, and then Signatures. (Alt, N, G, S). Signatures created in this way can be read by screen reading software and are accessible.

Steps for adding Signatures:
- Go to the **Insert** tab, choose **Signature**, then **Signatures**
- Click on **New**
- Give Signature a name, then click **OK**
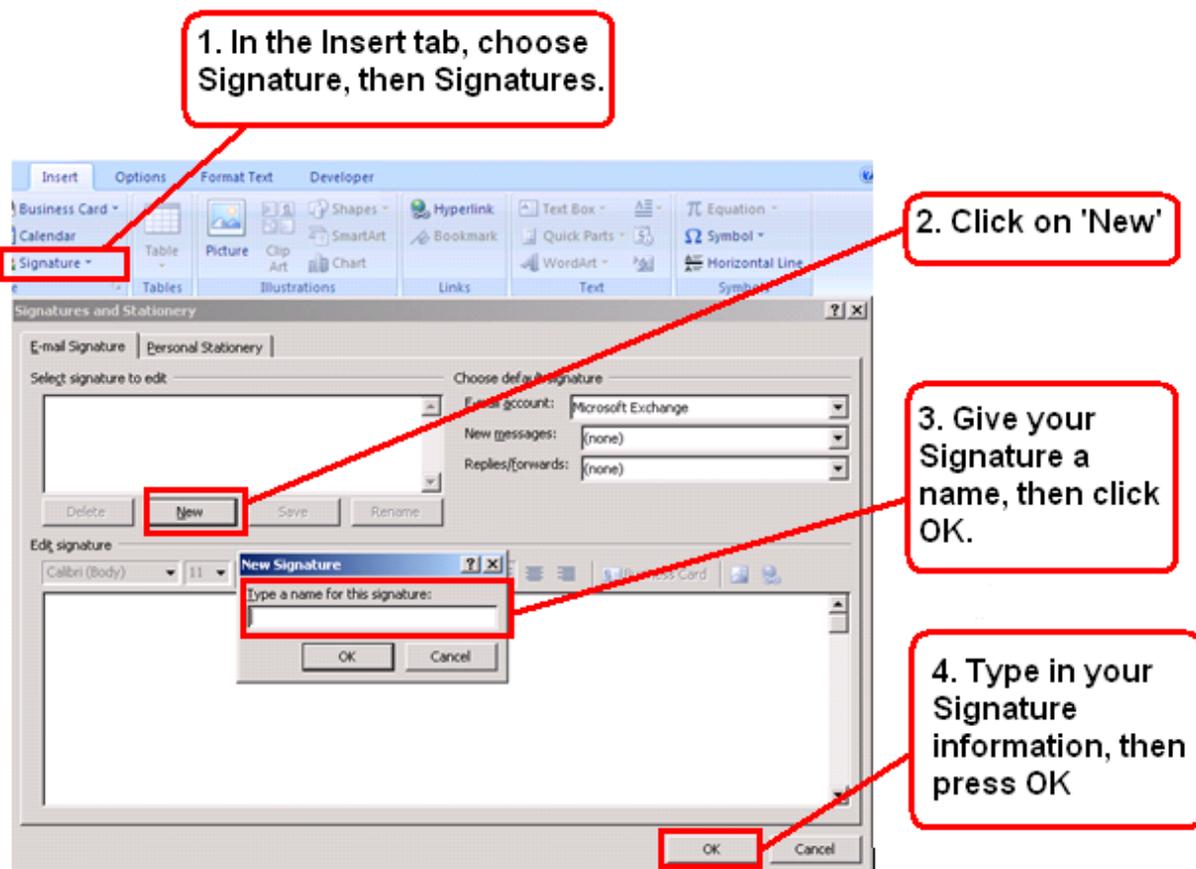- Type in Signature information, then click **OK**

Figure 6: Steps to create a Signature in Outlook.

Once a signature has been created, it can be added to emails by picking it from the list created. Insert tab, Signature, then either choose one already created, or make a new one. (Alt, N, G)
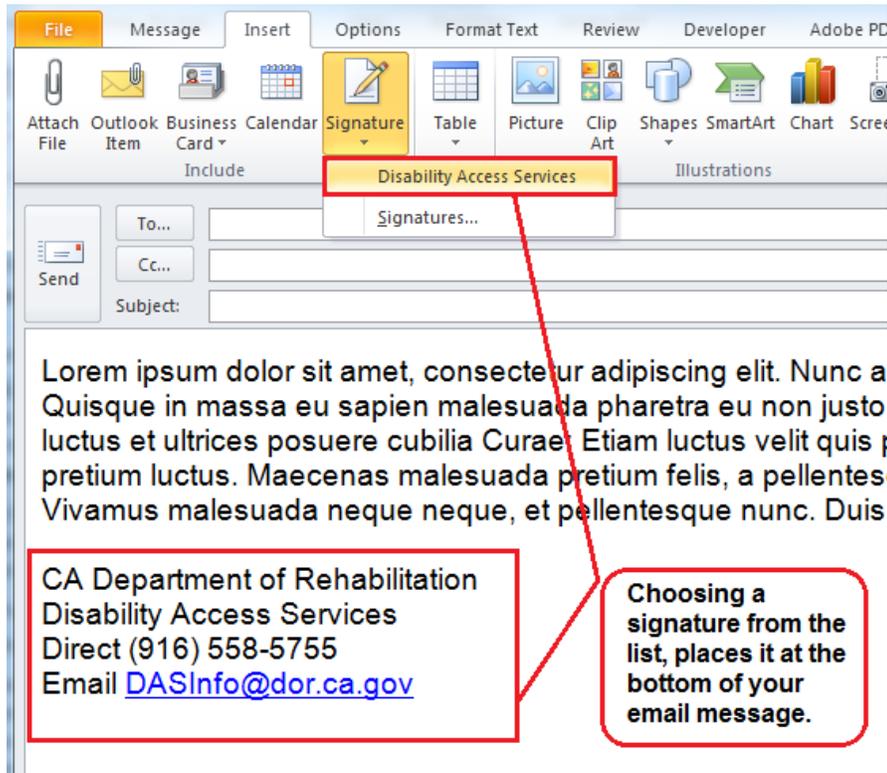

Figure 7: Choose a Signature to add to an email.

Rules for Font Style and Size apply to the email signature as well. Occasionally people choose a Script style font for the name in the Signature. These types of fonts present difficulties for persons with low vision. Use a Sans Serif font for all elements in emails, including the signature.

vCards and Electronic Business Cards

Some Outlook users like to use vCards, or electronic business cards as signatures. These choices, however, cannot be read by screen reading software, and so are considered to be inaccessible.

Step Six: Use Meaningful Hyperlink Text

Just as in all documents, hyperlink text in emails should provide a clear description of the link destination, rather than providing either just the URL or simply words such as, Click Here.

To add a hyperlink to email:

   a) Place the cursor where the hyperlink will appear, or simply highlight the text in the email to become a link.
   b) In the **Insert** tab, click on **Hyperlink** and a dialog box will open. (Alt, N, I)
   c) In the **Text to Display** box, type in the name or phrase that briefly describes the link destination. If text is highlighted, this box will already be filled.
   d) Enter a URL, a location within the same document, an email address, or even link to another document.
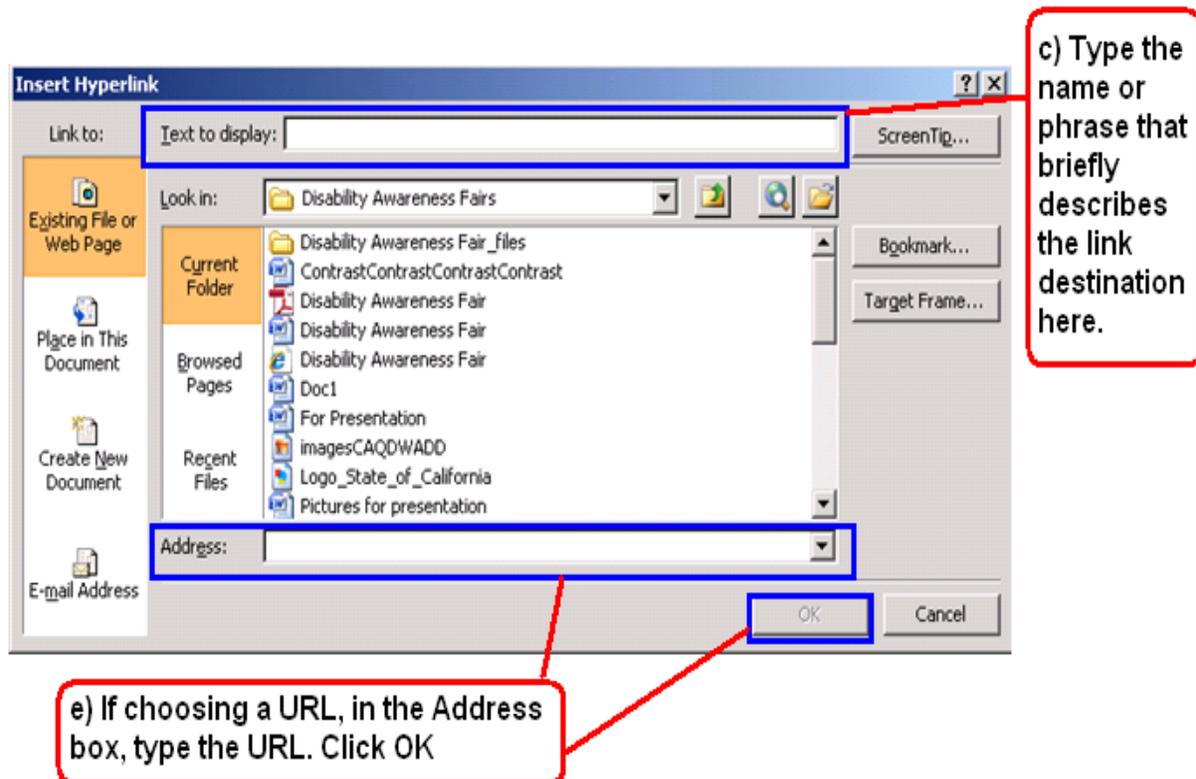   **e)** If choosing a URL, type it into the **Address box**. Click **OK**.

Figure 8: Graphic of Insert Hyperlink dialog box

Step Seven: Provide Structure to Your Email

Using built-in formatting styles could be the single most important step in making emails accessible. Built-in formatting styles provide a logical reading order that serves as a navigation guide for persons utilizing assistive technologies. Adding structure to emails can be done in the same fashion that structure can be added to Microsoft Word documents.

In the Format Text tab, Choose the Styles menu and then apply structure.

Headings

To Apply Headings:

- Highlight the text chosen for the Heading. (To select text with the keyboard, place cursor at beginning of text, press and hold Ctrl+Shift and Right or Left Arrow to end of text to be highlighted).
- Open the **Styles Pane**. (keyboard shortcut is ALT, O, FY).
- Apply the appropriate **Heading** to the text in the main document. (Arrow up or down within Styles pane to find appropriate Heading).
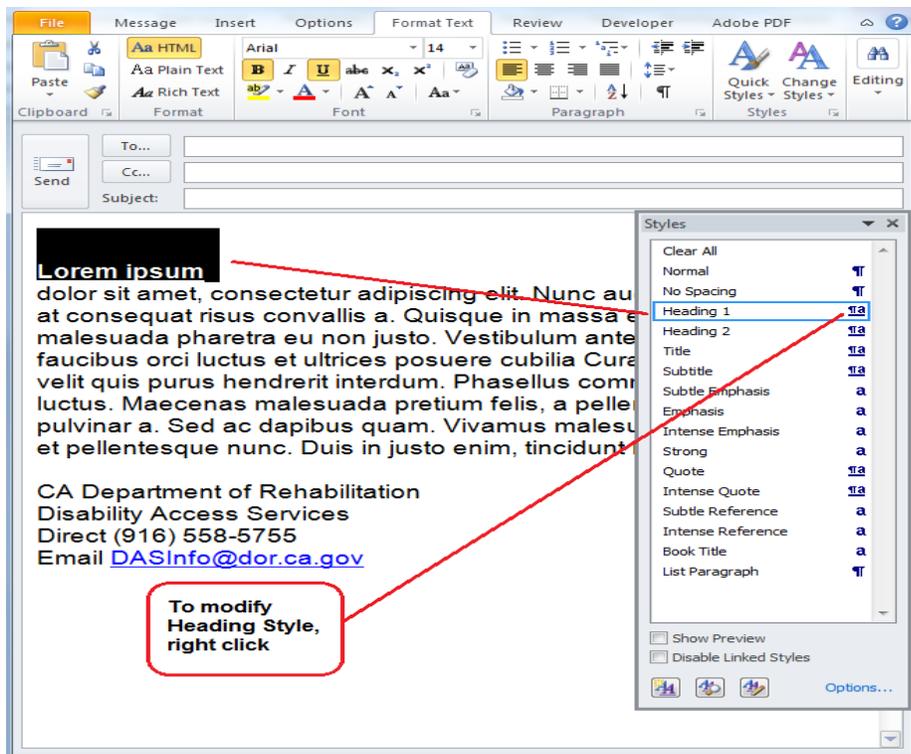- To modify the heading styles, **Right Click** (Shift+F10) the style name.

Figure 9: Microsoft Outlook Styles Pane

List formatting

When bulleted list and numbered list formatting is used, Screen Readers will properly announce the text as being part of a list. List formatting provides the user with a means to quickly navigate between items as well as move in and out of lists.

When bullets and numbers are made with incorrect formatting, such as repeated use of the Tab key or Spacebar, Screen Readers will treat the lists as regular text, meaning that the list reading controls are inoperative.

The easiest way to set lists in Outlook is: **Format Text** tab, **Paragraph** group and use the list controls.

If navigating by Keyboard make a list by first highlighting the text then pressing Alt, O. Then press U for Unordered list (bulleted list), N for Numbered list, or M for more options for the list.
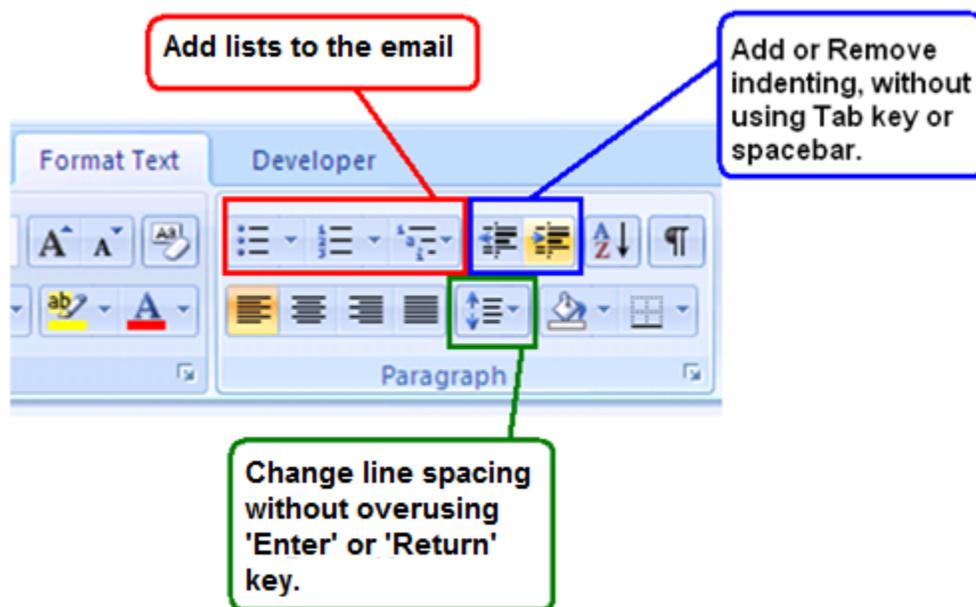

Figure 10: Paragraph section of Format Text tab of Microsoft Outlook ribbon.

Indenting and Line Spacing

This same area of the formatting ribbon can be used to add (Alt, O, AI) or delete (Alt, O, AO) indenting, as well as, control line spacing (Alt, O, K) in email.

Attachments

All attachments to email should be accessible.

Disability Access Services has produced a series of short and simple documents that cover making Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint and PDF document accessible. These documents are available for viewing or for download from the Disability Access Services website.

Figure 11: Steps to Creating Accessible Documents series.

References/More Resources

[Outlook 2010: Creating Accessible Emails](http://governor.state.tx.us/files/disabilities/accessdocs/20-Email.pdf)
http://governor.state.tx.us/files/disabilities/accessdocs/20-Email.pdf

[Accessible Features in Microsoft Office 2010](http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/outlook-help/accessibility-features-in-microsoft-office-2010-HA010369190.aspx)
http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/outlook-help/accessibility-features-in-microsoft-office-2010-HA010369190.aspx

[Microsoft Accessibility: Office 2007 Accessibility Tutorials](http://www.microsoft.com/enable/training/office2007/default.aspx)
http://www.microsoft.com/enable/training/office2007/default.aspx

[Colour Contrast Analyser](http://www.visionaustralia.org/digital-access-cca)
http://www.visionaustralia.org/digital-access-cca

To Find [Color Code Numbers](http://www.2createawebsite.com/build/hex-colors.html)
http://www.2createawebsite.com/build/hex-colors.html

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