Accessible Tables & Forms

When designing Canvas pages, Word documents, or online assignments, tables and forms must be formatted correctly so screen readers can navigate them logically. Unstructured tables and unlabeled form fields create significant barriers for students using assistive technology.

1. Accessible Tables: Data Only, Never Layout

Tables should **only** be used to display structured, relationship-based data (such as schedules, grade breakdowns, or comparative specs)—never as a visual tool to position text side by side or to format page layouts.

Key Guidelines for Tables

- **Designate Header Rows:** Always specify the top row as a **Header Row**. This allows screen readers to re-announce column headers as students navigate through the data cells.
- **Keep Structure Simple:** Avoid merged, split, or nested cells. Screen readers navigate grids linearly (left-to-right, top-to-bottom); complex layouts cause screen readers to read data out of context.
- **Add a Table Caption/Title:** Provide a brief title or caption above the table (e.g., *"Table 1: Weekly Reading Schedule and Due Dates"*) so screen reader users know what data the table contains before navigating it.
- **Avoid Blank Cells:** Fill empty cells with clear indicators such as *"N/A"*, *"None"*, or *"0"* so users know the content wasn't accidentally omitted.

How to Set Headers in Canvas & Word

- **Canvas RCE:** Highlight the top row $\rightarrow$ Click **Table Properties** $\rightarrow$ Select the **Cell** tab $\rightarrow$ Set **Cell Type** to **Header Cell** and **Scope** to **Column**.
- **Microsoft Word:** Click inside the top row $\rightarrow$ Go to the **Table Design** tab $\rightarrow$ Check the **Header Row** box. Then right-click the row $\rightarrow$ **Table Properties** $\rightarrow$ **Row** tab $\rightarrow$ Check **"Repeat as header row at the top of each page."**

2. Accessible Forms & Quizzes: Clear Labels & Logical Flow

Whether creating digital assignment submission boxes, surveys, or Canvas quizzes, form inputs must clearly indicate to assistive technology exactly what information is requested.

Key Guidelines for Forms

- **Always Provide Explicit Field Labels:** Place clear text labels directly above or beside input fields (e.g., *"First Name," "UH Student ID Number"*). Never rely *only* on placeholder text inside the box, as it disappears when typing and is often ignored by screen readers.
- **Write Clear Instructions:** Include instructions at the top of the form, explicitly marking required fields (e.g., *"Fields marked with an asterisk (*) are required"*).
- **Organize Logically:** Arrange questions in a single column, in a logical top-to-bottom reading order so students navigating with the Tab key don't skip fields.
- **Provide Meaningful Error Messages:** If a student submits an incomplete or incorrect field, ensure the system highlights the specific field in text (e.g., *"Question 3 is required before submitting"*), rather than just turning the field border red.

3. Quick Checklist for Tables & Forms

Feature	❌ Avoid	✅ Recommended
Table Layout	Merged cells, split cells, empty cells	Simple grid with clear row and column structure
Table Purpose	Multi-column text layouts, decorative alignment	Tabular data, schedules, matrix comparisons
Form Labels	Blank input boxes, placeholder-only text	Permanent text labels above or next to inputs
Form Navigation	Multi-column, scattered field layouts	Single-column, sequential Tab-key order

The "Tab & Read" Test: Click inside your table or form and press the Tab key repeatedly. Does the focus box move smoothly from left to right and from top to bottom? If it skips around or jumps unexpectedly, the reading order needs adjusting!