

Creating and Exporting Accessible Designs using Canva

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KATS Network
www.katsnet.org

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Creating and Exporting Accessible PDFs Using Canva

Canva is a web-based design tool that helps people create flyers, presentations, infographics, and other documents. Users like Canva because it is easy to use, offers many templates, and allows quick creation of visually appealing designs.

Canva also offers features that help support accessibility. For example, users can add headings, alt text, set the reading order, and run an accessibility check before exporting their design.

However, accessibility problems can occur if accessibility is not considered. Screen readers may read content out of order, headings may not be structured correctly, or important information may only be presented visually. Following an accessible workflow ensures that your PDF works well for everyone, including people who use screen readers or keyboard navigation.

Choosing the right format in Canva is an important first step in creating accessible content. Canva offers two main approaches: **Docs**, which are designed for writing and structured documents, and **design formats** such as **flyers, posters, and graphics**, which focus on visual layout. Each option serves a different purpose and has different accessibility considerations. Understanding how they differ will help you select the best tool for your content and reduce accessibility issues later in the design process.

We will cover the key differences here, but most of this guide focuses on using Canva to create flyers, posters, and similar materials.

Canva Docs vs. Canva Designs (Flyers, Posters, etc.)

What is Canva Docs?

Canva Docs is Canva's document editor. It is designed for content such as:

- reports
- guides
- meeting notes

- procedures
- longer, text-based documents

Key characteristics

- Linear, text-first layout (similar to Word or Google Docs)
- Built-in structure for headings and paragraphs
- Content flows naturally from top to bottom

What are Canva Designs (Flyers, Posters, etc.)?

These are Canva’s traditional design formats used for things such as:

- flyers
- posters
- social media graphics
- infographics
- marketing materials

Key characteristics

- Free-form layout (you can place elements anywhere on the page)
- Focus on visual design and branding
- Often uses columns, images, and layered elements

Key Differences for Accessibility

1. Layout and Reading Order

Canva Docs	Canva Designs
Content is naturally linear (top to bottom).	Layout is free-form .
Reading order will generally be correct by default.	Reading order must be manually set in the Layers panel . Content in the layers panel flows from the bottom to top
Easier for screen readers to follow	Higher risk of incorrect or confusing reading order

What this means

Docs are more predictable. **Designs** require more effort to ensure accessibility.

2. Document Structure (Headings)

Canva Docs	Canva Designs
Supports structured headings more like traditional documents	Headings must be applied manually
Easier to create a logical outline	Text may look like a heading but not be tagged correctly

What this means

Docs are better for structured content. Designs require careful attention to heading levels.

3. Complexity of Layout

Canva Docs	Canva Designs
Simple, text-focused layout	Complex layouts, overlapping elements
Less risk of accessibility issues	Greater risk of: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Incorrect reading order• Visual confusion• Screen reader issues

4. Use of Images and Graphics

Canva Docs	Canva Designs
Images are usually supporting content	Images are often central to the design
Easier to manage alt text in context	Higher risk of: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Missing alt text• Text embedded in images

5. Accessibility Effort Required

Canva Docs	Canva Designs
Lower effort to make accessible	Higher effort to make accessible
Many accessibility features are more natural or built-in	Requires: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Manual reading order adjustments• Careful layout decisions• More thorough testing

When to use each

Use Canva Docs when	Use Canva Designs when
The content is text-heavy	The goal is visual communication
You need a structured document	You are creating marketing or promotional materials
Accessibility is a priority	The content is short and highly visual
The document will be read in detail (policies, guides, reports)	Layout and branding are the main focus

Practical Guidance

- If your document needs to be **fully accessible and easy to navigate**, start with Canva Docs.
- If you must use a design (flyer, poster), keep the layout **simple** and carefully check:
 - reading order
 - heading structure
 - alt text
 - color contrast

Key Takeaway

- Canva Docs is **better for accessibility by default**.

- Canva Designs **can be accessible but require more effort and careful review.**

Design Tips for Creating Accessible Designs in Canva

Use Clear, Easy-to-Follow Layouts

- Single-column layouts are often easiest to follow and help maintain a clear reading order.
- Multi-column layouts can be used but use them carefully. Make sure the **reading order still follows the intended sequence** for people using assistive technology, such as screen readers.
- Check that the layout is **easy to follow visually** and that users can move through the content without confusion.

Avoid Placing Important Text in Images

- Text inside images cannot be read by screen readers.
- Use text boxes for all important information.
- If important text must be included in the image, be sure to include it in the image's alt text so that screen reader users have access to it.

Use Clear Heading Structure

- Headings organize content logically.
- Start with a main heading, then subheadings.
- Do not use headings purely for styling.

Choose Readable Fonts

- Use simple, clear fonts.
- Sans-serif fonts tend to work best (such as Arial, Verdana, Tahoma, Aptos, or Calibri)
- Maintain consistent fonts throughout the document. You may use one font for **headings** and another for **body text** but avoid using many different fonts.

Maintain Good Color Contrast

- Text should stand out from the background.
- Avoid placing text on busy images or patterns.

Use Adequate Spacing

- Leave space between sections.
- Avoid crowded layouts.

Be Careful When Using Templates

- Templates may prioritize visual appeal over accessibility.
- Check heading structure, reading order, and alt text.
- Test the PDF with multiple accessibility tools, such as a **screen reader**, a **text reader**, and **PAC**. Many built-in templates can contain hidden accessibility issues that are not easy to detect without testing.

Write in Plain Language

- Use short sentences and clear instructions.
- Avoid jargon and organize content into clear sections.
- Define acronyms the first time they are used.

Printable Desktop Quick Reference for Canva

For detailed steps, see next section: **Step by Step Guide for Accessible Canva Designs.**

1. Add a Document Title (Project Title / File Name)

- **What it is:** The document's title becomes the PDF title metadata.
 - **Why it matters:** Screen readers announce the document title to users.
 - **How to:** Click the file name at the top, enter a descriptive title (e.g., "Student Job Fair Information").
-

2. Check and Set the Document Language

- **What it is:** Sets the language for the document.
 - **Why it matters:** Screen readers use it for correct pronunciation.
 - **How to:** File → Settings → Locale settings → Choose the correct language.
-

3. Add Alt Text for Images

- **What it is:** A short description of images read by screen readers.
 - **Why it matters:** Helps people who cannot see images understand them.
 - **How to:** Select image → More options (3-dot menu) → Alternative Text → Enter description → Save.
-

4. Manually Set Heading Levels to Create Structure

- **What it is:** Organizes content into headings and subheadings.
 - **Why it matters:** Screen reader users navigate by headings.
 - **How to:** File → Accessibility → Edit text semantics. For each element, select the More options (3-dot menu) and assign as a heading (Level 1-6) or Paragraph. Textboxes with multiple elements, expand the container and set the structure for each element.
-

5. Run the Accessibility Checker

- **What it is:** Scans your document for common accessibility issues.
- **Why it matters:** Helps identify problems before export.
- **How to:** File → Accessibility → Check design accessibility → Review issues → Fix as appropriate.

6. Check and Adjust Reading Order in the Layers Panel

- **What it is:** This controls the sequence in which screen readers read the content. The reading order follows the Layers panel—from bottom to top.
- **Why it matters:** Correct reading order ensures content is understandable.
- **How to:** Press Alt + 1 → order items from bottom to top to set reading order. Remember, the layers panel includes all content, including decorative items.

7. Export as an Accessible / Shareable PDF

- **What it is:** Creates the final PDF for sharing.
- **Why it matters:** Accessibility features are preserved only if exported correctly.
- **How to:** Share → Download → PDF Standard → Match reading order to layers → Download.
- **After export:** Test PDF using multiple tools (screen reader, text reader, PAC).

Important Limitations of Canva Accessibility Checker

- Cannot detect if alt text is meaningful.
- Cannot verify plain language or reading clarity.
- Cannot fully determine reading order for complex layouts.
- Cannot identify visual-only information (color or shape alone).
- **Tip:** Always perform human review and testing after export.

Step by Step Guide for Accessible Canva Designs

Following this recommended workflow helps make sure the final PDF meets the WCAG 2.1 Level AA standards, ensuring that it works better for people who use screen readers, keyboard navigation, or other assistive technology.

1. Add a Document Title (Project Title / File Name)

NOTE: In Canva, you must use a mouse to rename a file. There is currently no reliable keyboard shortcut for this action.

People who rely on keyboard navigation may have difficulty renaming a project because the file name field is not easy to reach using the keyboard alone.

What this step is

The document title identifies your file. This title becomes the PDF title metadata when the file is exported.

Why it is important

Screen readers often announce the document title when a PDF opens. A clear title helps users understand what the document contains. Document titles also assist with Search Engine Optimization (SEO), making it easier to find documents posted online and assisting with searching for documents stored on your device.

How to do it

1. Open your design in Canva.
2. Locate the **file name in the top toolbar**.
3. Click the file name to edit it.
4. Enter a clear and descriptive title.

Example:

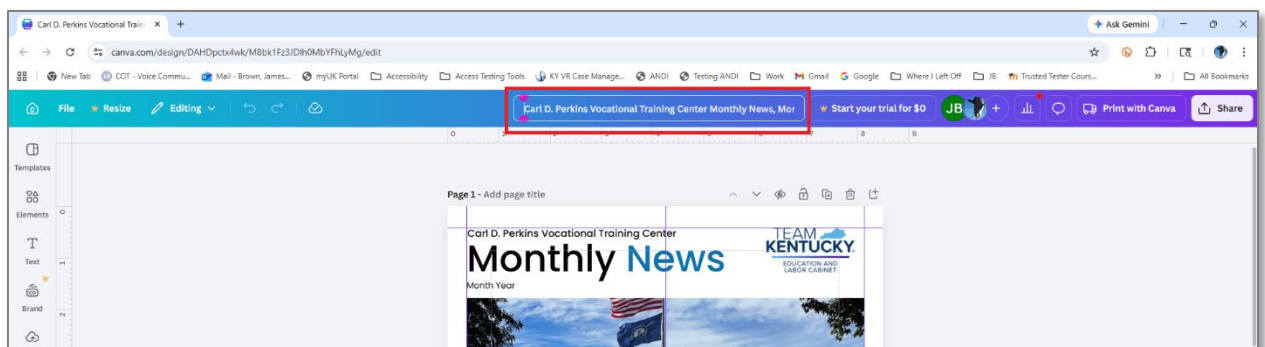
Instead of:

Newsletter_v3

Use:

*Carl D. Perkins Vocational Training Center Monthly News,
January 2026*

Figure 1: Adding a Document Title in Canva



Accessibility tips

- Use **plain language**.
- Avoid abbreviations unless they are widely understood.
- Make the title meaningful.

2. Check and Set the Document Language

NOTE: Navigation to the settings menu may require mouse use.

Canva does not yet provide strong support for multiple languages within the same document.

If part of your document is written in a language that is different from the document's main language, you can fix this after exporting the PDF.

What this step is

The document language tells assistive technologies what language the document is written in.

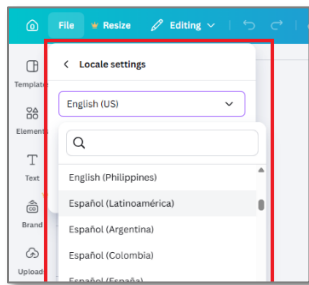
Why it is important

Screen readers use the document language to apply the correct pronunciation rules. Without this setting, words may be read incorrectly.

How to do it

1. Select **File** from the top toolbar menu.
2. Open **Settings**.
3. Select **Locale Settings**
4. Locate the **Language** option.
5. Choose the correct language for your document.

Figure 2: Setting the Document Language in Canva



Accessibility tips

Canva offers several regional options for Spanish language:

- Español (Latinoamérica)
- Español (Argentina)
- Español (Colombia)
- Español (España)
- Español (México)
- Español (Estados Unidos)

In most cases, choosing **Español (Latinoamérica)** is the best choice as it represents a **neutral, "standard" Spanish** that is understood across many different regional dialects. Another safe option is **Español (Estados Unidos)**. This setting is specifically designed for the **U.S. Hispanic population**. It accounts for the unique vocabulary and common "contact" terms (often influenced by English) that are standard in U.S.-based Spanish.

3. Add Alt Text for Images

What this step is

Alt text (alternative text) is a short description of an image that screen readers read aloud to people who cannot see the image. Alt text should describe the **purpose of the image**, not just what it looks like.

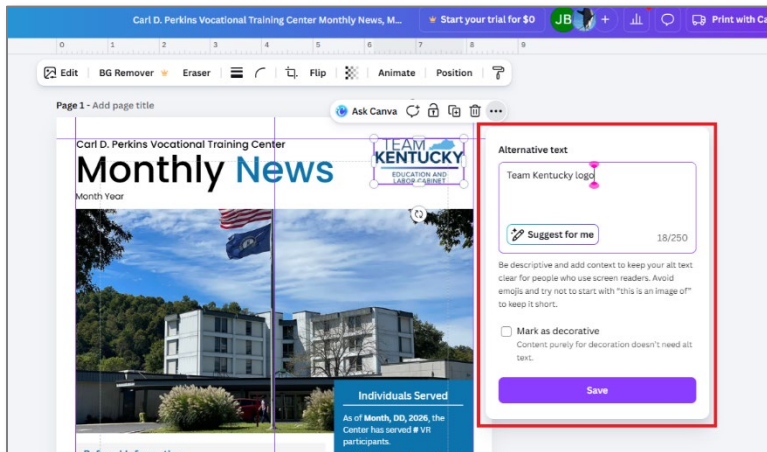
Why it is important

People who are blind or have low vision rely on alt text to understand images. Without it, they may miss important information in the document.

How to do it

1. Select the image in your design.
2. Open the **More options** (three dots) menu.
3. Select **Alternative Text**.
4. Enter a short description of the image in the Alternative text field, or select **Mark as decorative** as appropriate.
5. Select **Save**.

Figure 3: Adding alt text to an image in Canva



Example:

Instead of:

“Image of students”

Use:

“Students speaking with employers at a campus job fair”

4. Manually Set Heading Levels to Create Structure

NOTE: Navigation to the settings menu may require mouse use.

When textboxes contain mixed elements, such as headings, body text, subheadings, etc., it is important to expand the container in the text semantics tool and apply the appropriate structure to each individual element.

Before exporting the PDF, it is recommended to do a final review of the headings you assigned.

What this step is

Use headings to organize your content. Choose the heading level based on the document’s structure, not the visual appearance of the text. Do not use headings only for styling.

Why it is important

Screen reader users often navigate documents by headings. Without headings, the document can be difficult to understand or navigate.

How to do it

1. Select **File** from the top toolbar.
2. Select **Accessibility**
3. Select **Edit text semantics**. This is where you assign structure to your text, such as headings and paragraphs. A list will appear showing all text in the design.
 - Items may not be in the correct reading order at this stage, but their position does not matter yet, so that is not the focus here.
 - If a textbox container has mixed elements, such as a heading, body text, subheadings, etc., you must expand the container in the text semantics tool and apply the appropriate structure to each element separately. Otherwise, the same structural tag will be applied to all elements in the container.
4. Find the text item you want to update. Next to it, select the More options (three dots) menu and choose the correct structure, such as Heading 1, Heading 2, etc., or Paragraph.

Figure 4: Setting Heading Levels to Create Structure

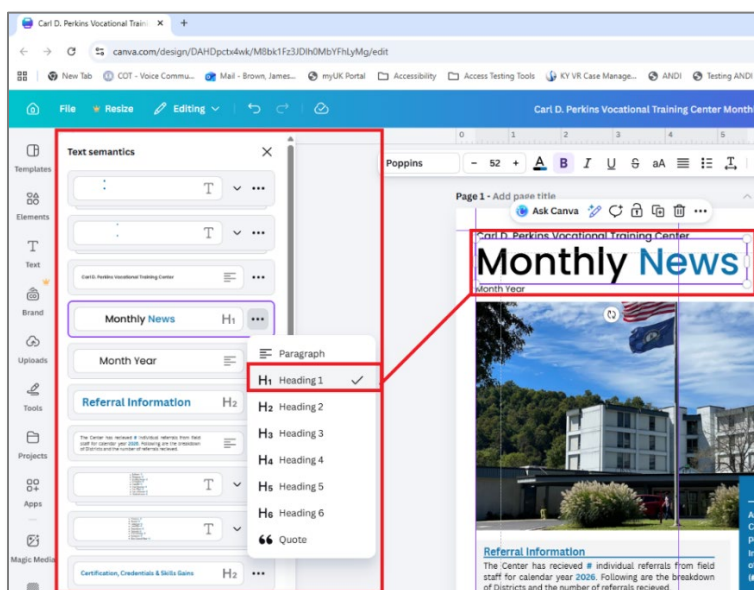
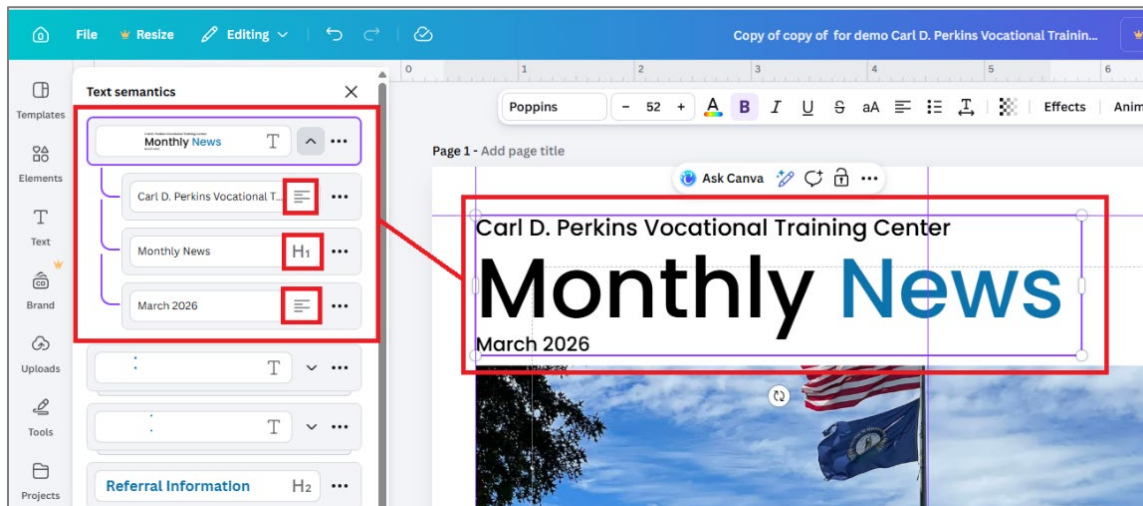


Figure 5: To assign structure in a textbox container with mixed elements, expand the container in the text semantics editor



Accessibility tip

Use heading levels based on how the content is organized in the document.

- **Start with Heading 1** for the main topic or title.
- Use **Heading 2** for **major sections or chapters**.
- Use **Heading 3** for **subsections within those sections**, and continue this pattern as needed.
- Avoid skipping heading levels (for example, going from Heading 1 directly to Heading 3).
- Use **Paragraph** for all other content, such as **regular text, lists, and tables**.

“**Quote**” is generally not used as it is not consistently announced by screen readers. There is no automatic announcement like “begin quote”, or “end quote”. Instead, users rely on actual quotation marks in the text.

Example (best practice):

As the report states:
“*Accessible documents benefit everyone.*”

The quotation marks provide the audible cue, which is more reliable than the structural tag alone.

5. Run the Accessibility Checker

Opening and interacting with the accessibility checker may require mouse interaction. Keyboard navigation to some controls may be limited.

The checker is helpful, but it **cannot catch everything**. Always manually review your document as well.

What this step is

The accessibility checker scans the document and identifies common accessibility issues.

Why it is important

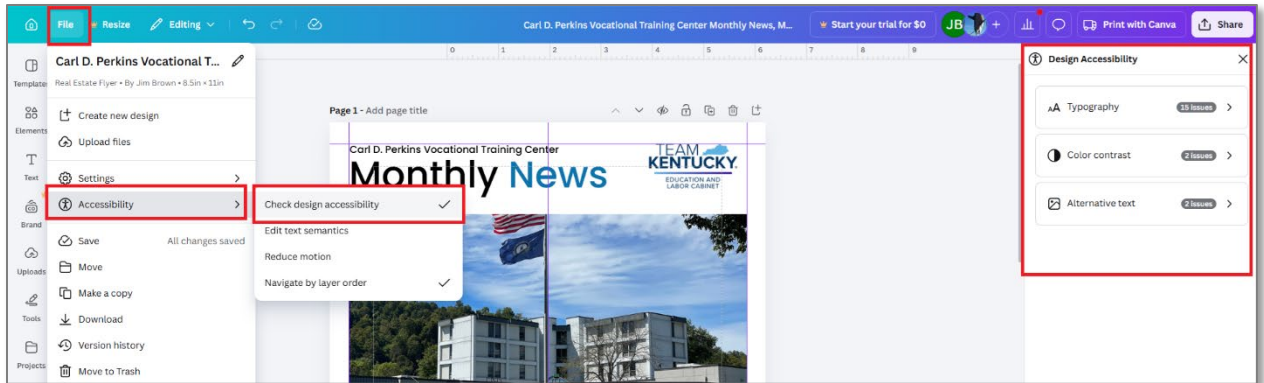
The checker helps you identify potential accessibility problems before exporting your PDF. It can highlight issues that may affect people who use screen readers, low vision tools, or other assistive technology.

Examples of issues it may flag:

- Missing alt text
- Poor color contrast
- Small text size
- Possible reading order issues

How to do it

1. Open the **File** menu.
2. Select **Accessibility**.
3. Select **Check design accessibility**.
4. Review the issues listed
5. Fix any issues listed directly in the design or by using the suggested fixes.



Accessibility tips

The accessibility checker provides **suggestions**, not absolute rules. Always review the recommendation and decide what change best fits the design and accessibility needs.

Automated accessibility checkers cannot detect every issue. They may not identify:

- Unclear or confusing alt text
- Complex or illogical reading order
- Unclear language or instructions
- Information that is only presented visually

6. Check and Adjust Reading Order in the Layers Panel

NOTE: Adjusting reading order requires drag-and-drop with a mouse; keyboard-only users may have difficulty.

Moving items in the Layers panel may accidentally hide or misplace text visually, so always verify both visual layout and reading order after adjustments.

What this step is

The reading order controls the sequence in which a screen reader reads the content. Correct reading order ensures that users hear the information in a logical sequence.

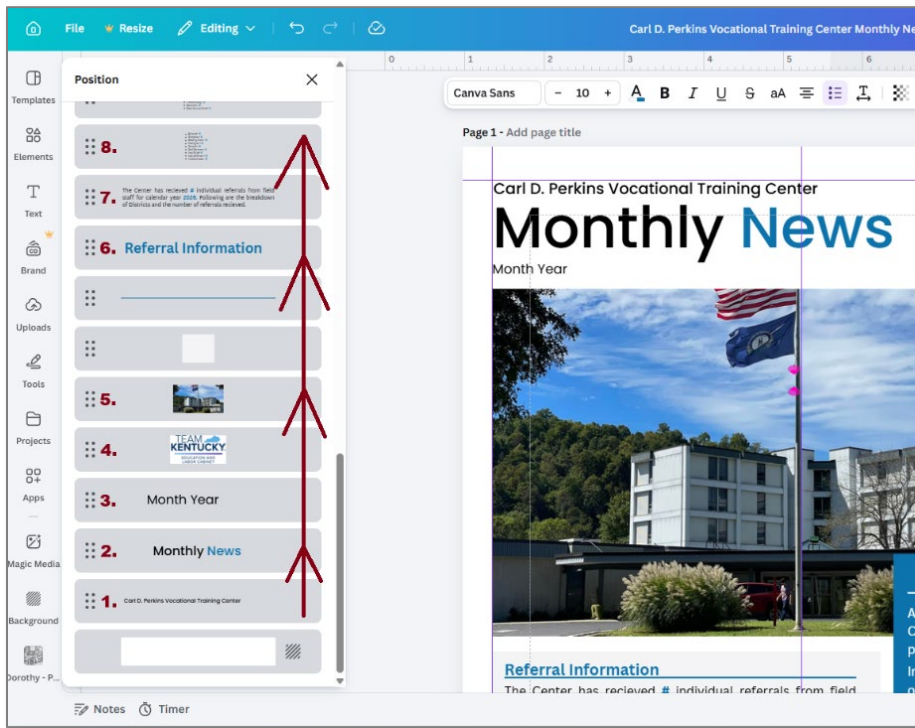
Why it is important

If the reading order is wrong, screen readers may read content in a confusing or meaningless sequence, which can make the document difficult or impossible to understand.

How to do it

1. Use the keyboard command **Alt + 1** to open the **Layers** panel.
2. Review all items in the panel. The panel includes **all content**, including decorative items.
3. Adjust the reading order
 - a. **Important:** In Canva, content is read **from bottom to top** in the Layers panel, so the **lowest item in the list will be read first**.
4. Drag elements to reorder them.

Figure 6: Adjusting reading order in Canva. Reading order flows from the bottom to top in the Layers panel.



Caution: Moving items can affect **visual layering**. Text or objects may appear to disappear if layered incorrectly. Always double-check your design after adjusting.

7. Export as an Accessible / Shareable PDF

NOTE: The export process usually requires mouse interaction.

Some accessibility features may **not transfer perfectly** to the PDF, always test the exported file.

What this step is

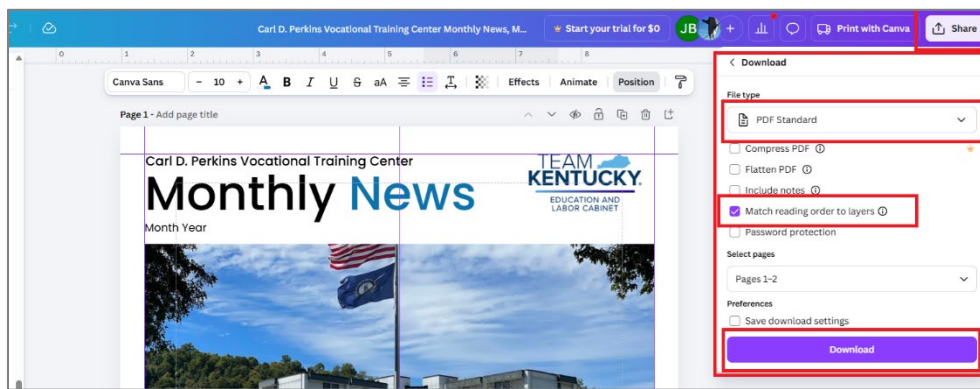
This step creates the final document that people will read or share.

Why it is important

Accessibility features such as headings, alt text, and reading order are only included if you export the file correctly.

How to do it

1. Select **Share** in the top right corner.
2. Choose **Download**.
3. Select **PDF Standard**.
4. Select the **Match reading order to layers** checkbox.
5. Download the file.



Accessibility tips

After exporting the PDF, test it using:

- a **screen reader**, such as JAWS or NVDA
- a **text reader**, such as Read Out Loud in Adobe Acrobat
- **PDF accessibility checker (PAC)**

Additional Accessibility Tips

Use Plain Language

Write short sentences and clear instructions.

Provide Alt Text for Images

Describe the **purpose of the image**. Do not start with phrases like “**picture of**” or “**image of.**” Screen readers already announce that the content is an image when reading the alt text.

Example:

Instead of

“Image of students”

Use

“Students speaking with employers at a job fair”

Check Color Contrast

Ensure text stands out clearly from the background.

Avoid Text in Images

Screen readers cannot read text that is part of an image. If the image must contain text, include the same text in the **alt text** so screen reader users can access it.

Test the Final PDF

Always check the final document using accessibility tools. At a minimum, test it with all of the following:

- A screen reader, such as JAWS or NVDA
- A text reader, such as Read Out Loud in Adobe Acrobat
- The PDF Accessibility Checker (PAC)