

How to Use and Adjust Styles in Word/Google Docs

Rationale

Word and Google Docs have tools in place to help streamline the design process of your text documents. One of the major tools is called “Styles.” Styles are an important part of documentation design and crafting. They add a level of consistency to your document that allows your reader/user to understand the significance and relationship between elements.

Styles work in two ways: visual differentiation and back-end tagging. The visual differentiation is ultimately a simplification and consistency tool, meaning that you use the same font design for a particular level, which sends a signal to the reader/user that these things are related in specific ways.

The tools provided by Word and Google also contain tag markers for assistive devices to help facilitate a usable document for as many people as possible. Those tag markers tell the assistive technology the same information that’s being signaled by the font choices. Using Styles is an important part of getting your message across to your audience.

This guide, originally written for the CA-ROTEL Grant in 2026, is to help explain and show how to use and adjust Styles effectively when working with documents. Some of this information you may already know, but for thoroughness, each step was included.

Style Selection and Adjustment

Choosing a Style (Selection)

Below you can find some general considerations when selecting which Style you want to use before getting into some specifics with either Microsoft or Google options.

Heading Cascade

For assistive technology, it is important to ensure that the heading cascade is applied appropriately.

Your heading cascade should look as follows:

Title (if applicable; ex, “Dragon Ownership for Technical Writers”)

- Heading 1 (Ex, “Dragon Habitats”)
 - Heading 2 (Ex, “The Traditional Cave Lair”)
 - Heading 3 (Ex, “Treasure Hoarding Tips”)

- Etc.
- Heading 2 (Ex, “Lesser-Known Lairs”)
 - Heading 3 (Ex, “Treetops”)
 - Heading 3 (Ex, “Bedroom Closets”)
- Heading 1 (Ex, “Dragon Dietary Requirements”)
 - Etc...

Because assistive technologies utilize these tags for navigation and labeling, it is important to ensure that subtopics are nested appropriately within their higher topic. This ensures that readers of all kinds can find the information they need.

Font Choice

As a general rule, it is recommended to stick with sans-serif fonts that allow individuals with visual impairments such as low-vision or reading disability to engage with text in straightforward and meaningful ways.

Recommended font options:

- Arial
- Calibri
- Verdana
- Helvetica

It is okay to use serif fonts (such as Times New Roman) for items such as Headers; however, from a design perspective, adjusting the fonts too often or too widely can cause significant issues reading the signs in your document.

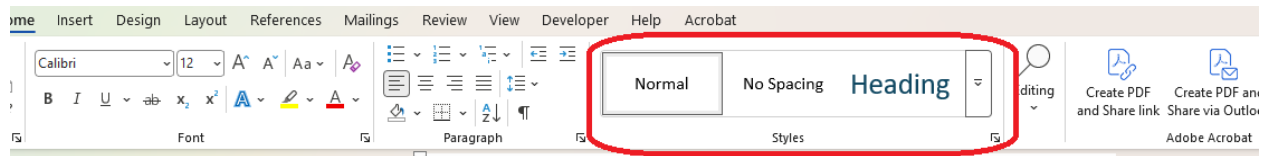
For the purposes of CA-ROTEL: We are enforcing Arial or Calibri for all Styles to avoid any conflict with LMS or 508 compliance.

For some background: Microsoft shifted their default font to a font named 'Aptos', which is a sans-serif font that is similar to Calibri or Arial, but it is proprietary. If any Microsoft 360 document is moved to another platform, the fonts won't work and (in Google's case) the platform will attempt to translate the fonts because they can't be displayed on the platform as-is. With our focus on Open, we want to ensure that the documents we place on OER Commons are available to all, regardless of subscription status with Microsoft.

Microsoft Word

Microsoft Word comes with an expansive list of Styles with the possibility of adding more custom ones to your document if appropriate. This ability to customize the document in specific ways is a powerful tool that helps documents not come across as “same-y.”

In the toolbar, there is a section under the Home tab called Styles.



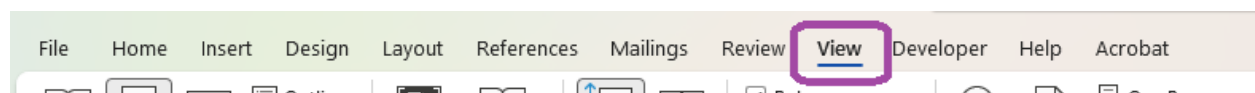
The expansion button on the right lets you visually preview the various styles, and the expansion arrow in the bottom-right corner of the section opens a simple list window with each available Style.

Navigation Pane

A useful tool in Word is the Navigation Pane. This tool allows you to quickly review the heading levels and navigate through the document in a similar fashion that assistive technology can utilize.

To turn on the Navigation Pane, go to the View tab at the top of the screen toward the right side of the tab options, next to Review. The number of tabs is determined by the available plugins and the options chosen, but Review and View should always be available in Word's default setup.

For visual illustration:



Under View, there is a “Show” portion of the menus with 3 checkboxes. By default, Ruler is checked, and Gridlines and Navigation Pane are unchecked.

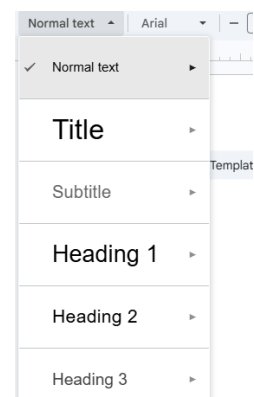
Click the checkbox next to Navigation Pane, and this will open up a side window on the left-hand side of your Word window.

Tip: Use the Navigation Pane window when editing and writing to ensure that your styles are being reflected appropriately. You can turn the Navigation Pane on when loading a new document to avoid having to go back and fix things later. Being able to see the hierarchy as you go is helpful!

Google Docs

Google Docs comes with far fewer options for Styles, prioritizing simplicity and universality over customizability and individuality. This approach streamlines the accessibility of documents in the sense that it becomes exponentially easier to access documents created and edited in Google Docs than in Word formats, regardless of operating system or browser.

To see the Styles available to you in a Google Doc, you select the arrow next to “Normal Text” in the menu ribbon.

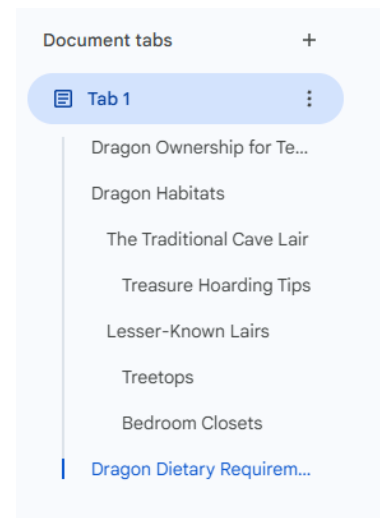


Higher numbered heading levels in Google Docs are not inherently visible in this drop-down menu. If you have need of, for instance, heading 4, you can use the key combination of alt-ctrl-4 (for Microsoft Windows) or Command-Option-4 (for Mac). This will put Heading 4 in the Styles menu, making it selectable.

Tabs and Outline

Google Docs comes with the feature to create multiple documents (tabs) within a Doc file as well as view the outline for those tabs.

On the left side of the browser window, documents will either default to displaying the Tab and Outline view or there will be an icon with three bullet lines that can be selected to open the view. Once looking at the view, an indented list shows the nested headings in relation to one another. This is a good check to see if your document is following the Heading Cascade rules.



How to Change a Style

There are a couple of ways to change what a Style *looks like* within the document. We can call them working forward and working backward.

If you are already aware of the specifics and are working in Microsoft Word, the **working forward** method saves you time and energy later. However, if you're unsure, then this can lead to a lot of tweaking and back-and-forth. In that case, I would recommend **working backward**, where you adjust the Style to match what you want to do visually in the document.

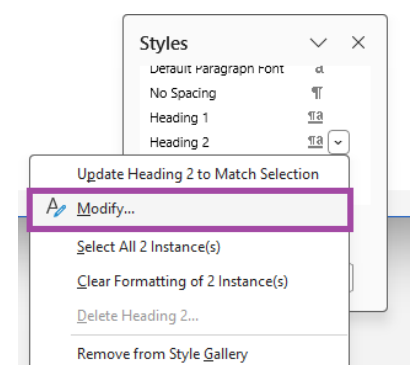
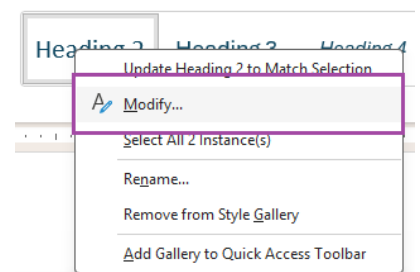
Google Docs only allows for working backward, and this stems from their approach for universality.

Working Forward – Microsoft Word Only

This method allows you to pre-determine what your document Style parameters are. When working forward, you'll want to go in and adjust the fonts preemptively and apply them to the Styles. If you use the visual guide in the tab menu, you can simply right-click the Style you want to use (in this case, Heading 2) and select "Modify..."

If working with the Styles in the list version, a similar option is available when selecting the submenu for the specific heading.

From either option, you will be able to modify the Style specifications from the window that appears. This window has a visual preview that allows you to preview how it will look within the document.



Working Backward

This method allows you to adjust your active text in the document and then save those settings for each iteration of the Style you use as you go. When working backward, you make adjustments to your text first (such as font, size, etc.) and then apply them to the Styles tool.

For example, working with Heading 4 for this document.

The default looks like this¹: *Heading 4*

- Font Type: Aptos (Body)
- Font Size: 12 Pt
- Font Decoration: Italicized
- Font Color: Dark Teal

We can then adjust the specifics of the font to look like this: *Heading 4*

- Font Type: Calibri
- Font Size: 14 Pt
- Font Decoration: Italicized
- Font Color: Dark Teal

Microsoft Word

After adjusting the font to how we want it to look, we can highlight the updated text for Heading 4 and, under the Styles menu, right-click the visual or list option for Heading 4 and select “Update Heading 4 to Match Selection.” This will then apply those formatting selections for each instance of the document that has been tagged with “Heading 4.”

Google Docs

After adjusting the font to how we want it to look, we can highlight the updated text for Heading 4 and navigate to the listing for Heading 4.

Important note: Heading 4 is one of the headings that is not visible by default. You will need to prompt Google to add it to the document listing by, for example, utilizing the key command mentioned:

alt-ctrl-4 (for Microsoft Windows) or **Command-Option-4** (for Mac)

Use a spare line to select for heading 4, and then you can remove/reset it.

Select the Styles submenu in the ribbon or under the Format menu, hover over the Paragraph styles submenu. This additional submenu will have two options. One to apply a style and one to update the style to match. Simply select the Update Style to Match option.

This will then apply those formatting selections for each instance of the document that has been tagged with “Heading 4.”

¹ This is an image as a reflection of the comments at the start of the document about Aptos being proprietary. The image is illustrative to the differences only.