Graphic Design Best Practices

in Course Design

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY | **WRIGHT STATE ONLINE**

First
Impressions
Matter.

Well-designed materials improve comprehension, student engagement, and retention.

Course material should be consistent and organized so learners can process information easier and can distinguish what course they are in.

Poor design leads to instant cognitive overload and misunderstandings.

Wright State Online is creating an accessible, online, Quality Course Design Template to share with faculty Spring 2025.

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pilot | Quality Course Design Template

Home   Content   Communication ⌄   Assessment ⌄   Grades   Classlist ⌄   Course Admin   Help

Welcome ⌄

Welcome!

Hello Samy,

A short welcome message plays a crucial role in setting the tone for your online course. It is the first point of contact between you and your learners, serving several important purposes.

- **Creates a Welcoming Atmosphere**: A friendly and concise welcome message makes learners feel acknowledged and valued, fostering a positive learning environment.
- **Provides Essential Information**: It can quickly orient students to the course, highlighting what they can expect and what is expected of them.
- **Sets the Tone**: The welcome message can establish the course's tone, whether it's formal, informal, collaborative, etc., which helps in setting clear communication expectations.
- **Encourages Engagement**: A good welcome message can motivate students to engage with the course material and participate actively.
- **Call to Action**: A welcome message informs learners what they should do next to engage in your course. Such as inviting them to click the Getting Started button to begin their course journey.

💡 Note: References to the **Quality Matters Higher Education Rubric** that must be present in your course

Instructor Info ⌄

Include a photo of yourself to establish a connection with your learners!

Hi, I'm {YourNameHere}!

Preferred Contact Method: [Preferred contact info here]

Email: [Wright State email here]

Phone: [Phone number here]

Office Location: [Office location here]

Office Hours: [Office hours here]

The Importance of Layout

Thoughtful, well-aligned layout prioritizes the user and their experience.

- A well-structured layout should guide the user's eye through content naturally.
- It reduces cognitive overload, making information easier to process for your learners.
- Helps learners quickly find what they need without frustration.
- Supports accessibility by ensuring content is clear and easy to navigate–especially for screen readers.

The Importance of Layout

Some good practices to follow when laying out your content:

1. **Whitespace in visual design.**
   Avoid overcrowding. Give your content room to breathe.

2. **Follow a visual hierarchy.**
   Place the most important info where users will see it first.

3. **Consistent formatting and alignment.**
   Keep headings, font sizes, and spacing in your documents uniform.

   Use indentation tools properly– do not use unnecessary spaces as screen readers will pick this up.

4. **Use images and graphics thoughtfully.**
   If you are using visuals, make sure they are relevant to your material and what you are trying to convey.

Whitespace in Visual Design

Whitespace (also called *negative space*) isn't "empty" space—it's an essential design element that improves readability, focus, and user experience.

Legibility:

Mus verferit reserat recte
volorerovit eatiis ma consece
atibea plitiatis vendam sendige
ndesto occuptati restrum fugiaTur,
od maximus doloriam, comnia si
alia dolorio nsedignihit vellum

Mus verferit reserat recte
volorerovit eatiis ma consece
atibea plitiatis vendam sendige
ndesto occuptati restrum fugiaTur,
od maximus doloriam, comnia si
alia dolorio nsedignihit vellum

Clarity:

Without white space to separate elements, a design can become overwhelming. If it's not clear which elements belong together and which don't, users are in for a confusing experience. Add whitespace to help learners focus on one element at a time.

Harmony:
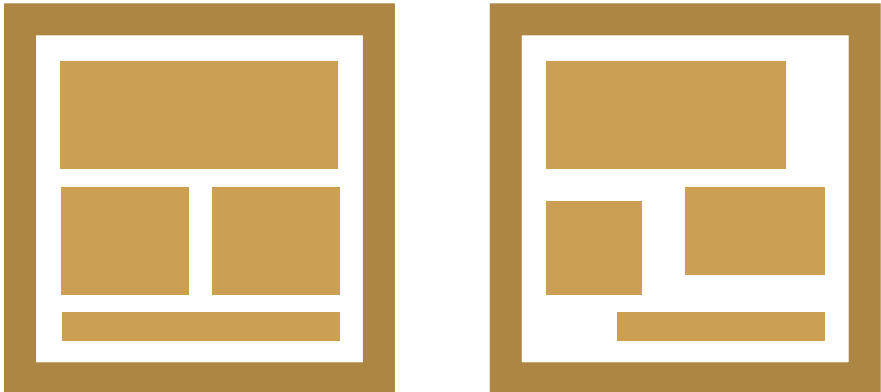
Harmony is important in design because it creates an effect of unity or completeness.

Example shows good vs. bad harmony.

Visual Hierarchy

Visual hierarchy is the arrangement of design elements in a way that naturally guides the viewer's eye through content. As a course designer, your job is to make sure learners can quickly understand what's most important by having a strong visual hierarchy.

Good Practices:

- Use large, bold headings so key sections are easy to identify.
- Use styled headings H1, H2, H3, H4, …
- Place important information at the top of a page or module, or make sure there are visual cues guiding attention towards it.

Common Mistakes:

- Do not overuse bold, or a certain color, or underline anything besides hyperlinks.
- Without variation in size, weight, or color, nothing stands out.
- If everything is bold or highlighted, nothing is actually emphasized.
- Disorganized content makes it harder for students to navigate and absorb. Remember, good harmony!
- Centering all your text isn't accessible. Left-align body text for a natural flow.

Consistent Formatting & Alignment

Good Practices:

Stick to 1-2 fonts; or 1 font–family with a wide variety of styles.
One font family may have up to 10+ styles! That's over 10 different ways to style! (Don't go overboard.)

Align text and elements neatly.
Left-align your body text. Center-alignment can be used for titles or emphasis.

Use a grid!
It's a very easy way to make sure all the elements on your screen are aligned.

Maintain a predictable structure.
Students don't want to relearn formatting in each module.

Only underline hyperlinks.
This is a consistent rule.

Common Mistakes:

- Mixing centered, left, and right-aligned text.
- Overuse of different fonts or sizes creates confusion.
- Inconsistent margins or padding make layouts look messy and unstructured.
- Images should align with surrounding content and not feel like they are floating, or out of place.

Consistent Formatting & Alignment

Working with gridlines in Powerpoint:

Gridlines help give you visual cues when you're formatting in PowerPoint.

Note: To make sure your gridlines are turned on, go to the View tab and select the **Gridlines** checkbox.
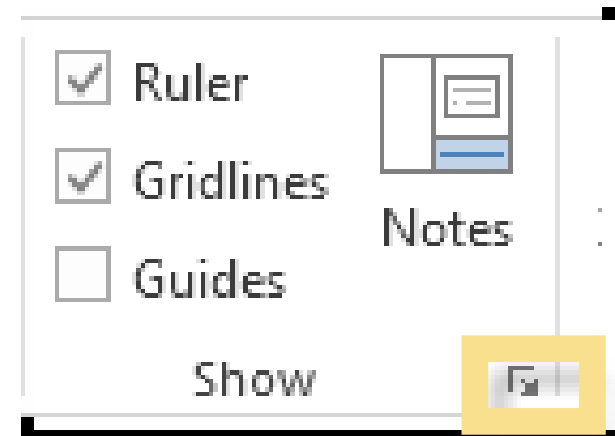
The default horizontal and vertical gridlines will make a grid of one-inch squares.

You'll want to turn on the snap-to options. This will allow elements to gravitate towards the grid or "snap to" for easier alignment.
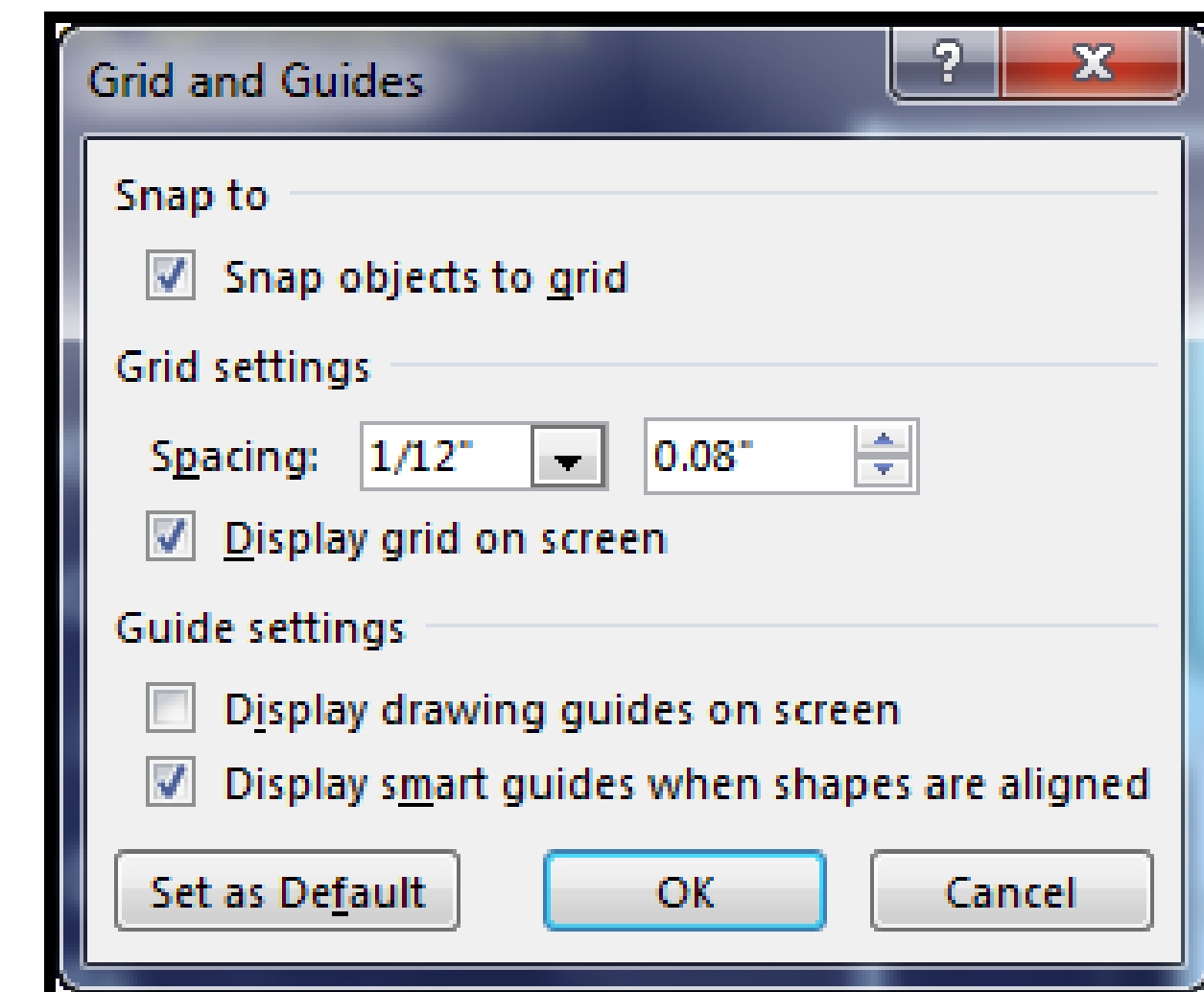
How-to turn on the snap-to options in Powerpoint:

For Windows:

1. Select **View** on the ribbon, and in the **Show** group, select the dialog-box launcher.

2. The **Grid and Guides** dialog box appears.

3. To position shapes or objects to the closest intersection of the grid, under **Snap to**, check the **Snap objects to grid** box.

4. To see the grid on your screen, under **Grid settings**, check the **Display grid on screen** box.
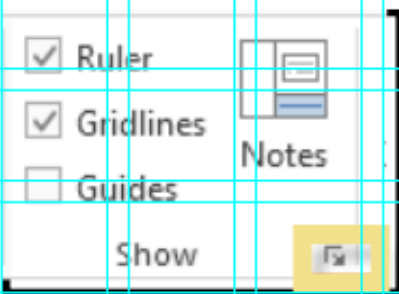
For macOS:
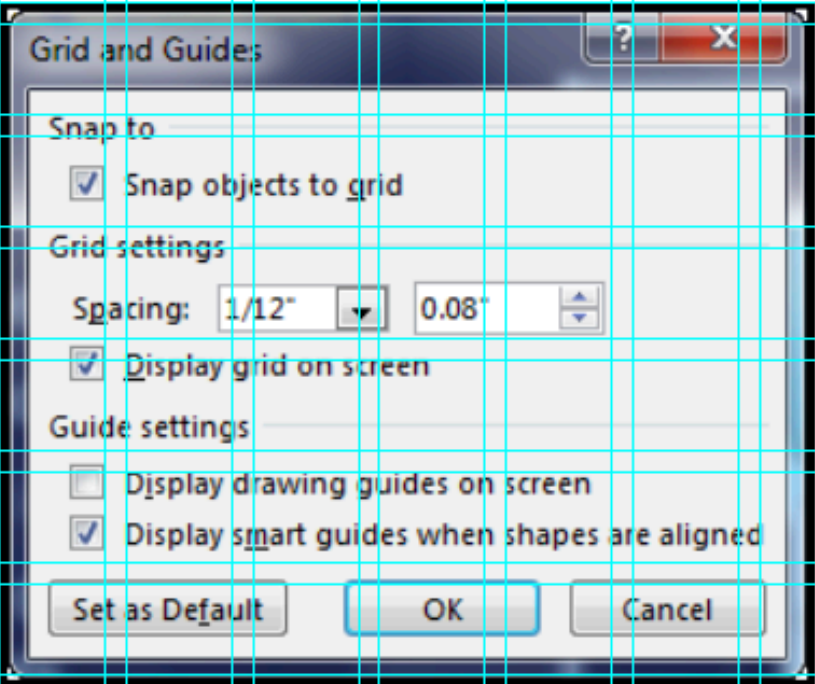
1. Select **View** > **Guides** > **Snap to Grid**.

EXAMPLE OF GRIDLINES IN ADOBE INDESIGN

Use Images & Illustrations Thoughtfully

Is it relevant? Images should support your content, not distract from it.

Good Practices:

- Use high-quality, relevant images.
- Choose clear, professional images that reinforce key concepts and do not clutter content.
- Stick to similar colors and/or illustration styles for a cohesive look.
- Use alt text and describe your image thoughtfully. What is the image trying to convey in your material?
- Avoid placing text over images and if you are, use an overlay that provides proper text contrast.
- Follow copyright guidelines and attribute all images, including printed materials.

Common Mistakes:

- Too many visuals can be overwhelming.
- Using low-res or stretched images. If your student cannot see what's relevant, probably best not to include it.
- Ignoring accessibility. Big NO-NO. Images without alt text exclude visually impaired learners.
- Relying on clipart or overly cartoonish graphics. Images should align with surrounding content and not feel like they are floating out of place.

Consistency is Key

Some good practices to ensure consistency throughout your course:

1. **Consistent Colors, Fonts, and Styles.**

    Stick to a predefined color palette, as well as font(s) and styles throughout all your course materials. We'll talk more about which fonts are recommended here shortly.

2. **Consistent Iconography.**

    If using icons in your materials, make sure the line weight and colors are consistent.

3. **Keep a Similar Layout Across Modules.**

    Maintain a familiar structure for easier navigation for students.

Consistent Colors, Fonts, and Styles

Use the same colors, fonts, and styles throughout.

Take advantage of color palettes already made and use the same hex codes to make sure colors are aligning throughout all modules and assisting material.
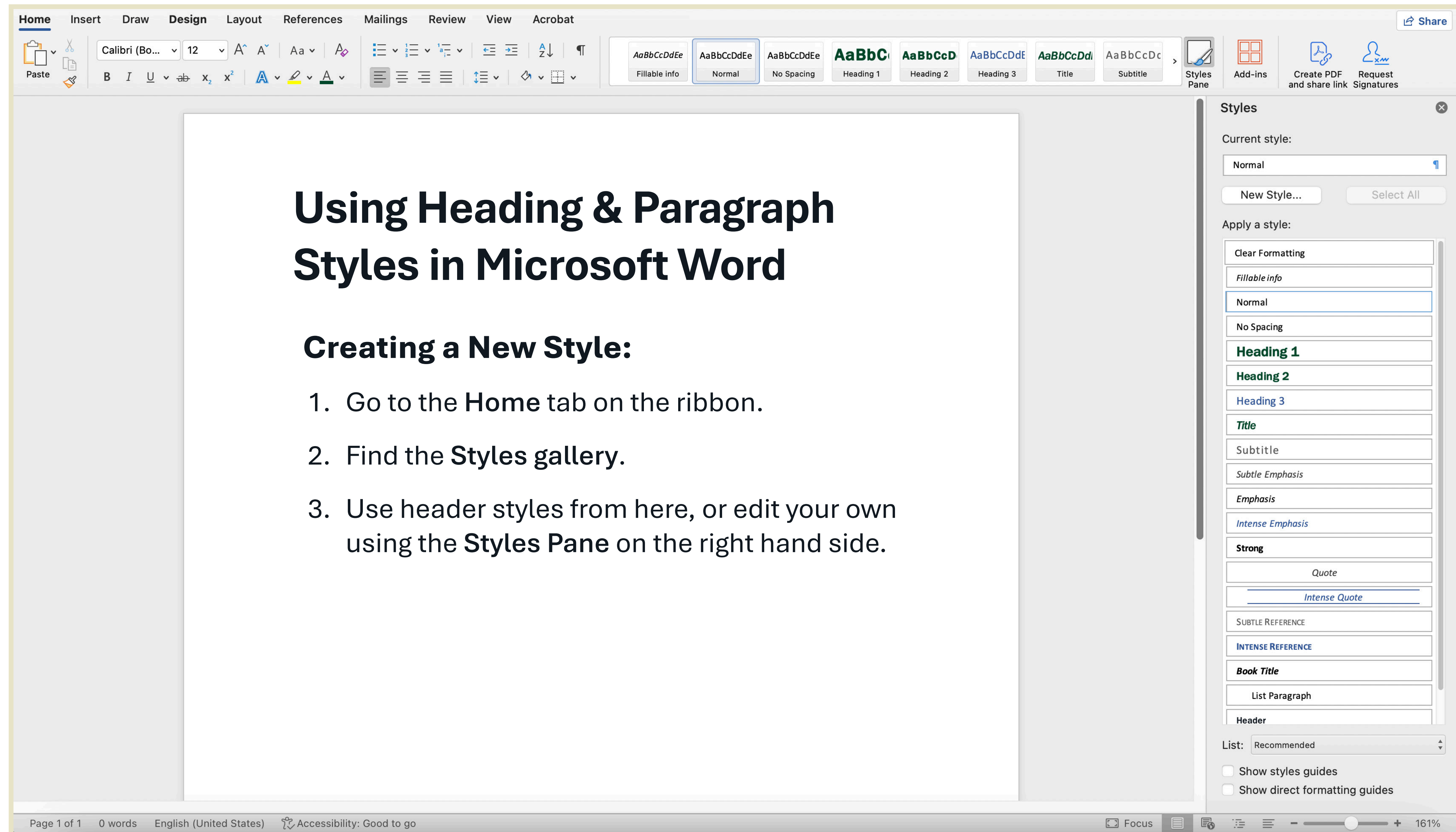
What the hex is a hex code?

A **hex code** (hexadecimal code) is a six-digit alphanumeric code (starting with a "#") used to represent colors especially in web design and coding.

#RRGGBB

#046A38

Consistent Colors, Fonts, and Styles

Consistent Colors, Fonts, and Styles

Creating Heading & Paragraph Styles in Microsoft Word, Ctd.

Adding to the Styles Gallery (Optional):

- If you want quick access to your new style, right-click it in the Styles gallery, click Modify, and then select "Add to Styles gallery" at the bottom of the dialog box.

- You can also choose to have the style appear in all new Word documents by selecting "**New documents based on this template**" in the same dialog box.

Save as a Template (Optional):

- If you want to save your styles as a template for future use, go to **File** > **Save As**.

- Select "**Word Template**" from the "**Save as type**" drop-down menu.

- Give the template a name and click **Save**.

Consistent Iconography

Use consistent icons in your course materials.

Stick to either outline, solid, or flat icons—don't mix styles.

- Icons should be proportional and not overpower the supporting text.
- They should be universally recognized (for example, a magnifying glass for search).
- Provide text descriptions for clarity and accessibility.
- NounProject.com is a great resource for free icons!

🏅 **Brand**	📇 **Business cards**	🎨 **Colors**
📖 **Editorial style**	✉️ **Email signature**	**A** **Fonts (typography)**
✉️ **Letterhead**	➕ **Logos**	**Name badges**
🖼️ **Photos in SmugMug**	🖥️ **PowerPoint templates**	📱 **Social media assets**

Keep a Consistent Layout Across Modules

Structure modules with the same format so learners know where to find materials each week. Predictable structure helps students focus on content rather than figuring out where things are.

Place key elements in the same spot, and keep your Pilot module titles uniform by naming your materials properly.

This helps the learner navigate quicker throughout the course and become familiar with the course shell and modules.

Maintain your visual hierarchy.

Use consistent headings, fonts, and spacing across all modules.

Test for usability!

Is your course user-friendly? **View your course as a student to ensure the layout makes sense.**

WSU Brand Color Palettes

Keep the WSU Brand in mind when designing your content.

When designing your digital media, you'll want to adhere by the WSU Brand Resources.

The **Primary Color Palette** consists of Wright State Green #046A38 & Wright State Gold #CBA052.

#046A38	#CBA052

The **Accent Color Palette** should only be used to support and complement the primary color palette. Do not build a layout around accent colors. The Wright State colors and brand must be recognizable and prominent.

#00482B	#AE8643	#F8E08E	#719949	#DCD59A	#101820	#E7E3C6	#F2F1F0

Color Palette Platforms

Two favorite color palette platforms, both let you browse, find, and easily click & copy the hex codes all in 1–click!:

Coolors

Coolors takes an interactive approach with their **Color Palette Generator.**

The generator fills the entire screen with a color palette that will refresh at every touch of the space bar. You can lock colors, favorite colors, and copy hex codes with one click. You can also explore their trending palettes voted on by thousands of other users.

Coolors also offers a **Contrast Checker**.

Color Hunt

Color Hunt is a site tailored to designers and artists showcasing a multitude of hand-picked palettes. The site allows you to create a free account and save palettes to your own collection for future inspiration.

Ways to Incorporate Consistency

Use the same fonts throughout your materials.

If using the typeface **Lato** in the LMS, perhaps you do the same with documents built outside of Pilot.

The university has recommendations for both a serif and sans-serif for use in your materials, which we'll cover next.

What's the difference between *serif* & *sans–serif*?

Serif fonts have decorative strokes, or 'little feet'. They are traditional, formal, and usually tailored towards printed materials such as brochures, books, and professional reports.

Sans-serif fonts do not have these embellishments and have a clean appearance. They are easier to read on screens, especially at smaller sizes.

Best Practice: Use a sans-serif when designing for online content.

Recommended Typography

Wright State recommends these fonts for use in your materials:

FOR HEADINGS:

Univers LT Standard

Univers is a contemporary sans serif font, and is useful as headlines, call-outs, sidebars, etc.

Source Sans Pro

Source Sans Pro, now known as **Source Sans 3** is an alternative to Univers and is free from Google.

Download Source Sans 3 here

FOR BODY TEXT/PARAGRAPHS:

Minion Pro

Minion Pro is most often used as body copy in brochures and printed material. It is a serif font which makes reading paragraph copy easier to read. The little "feet" help lead the eye from character to character, word to word, and is what makes this typeface a serif font.

Typography

Typography isn't just about choosing a nice font—it directly affects how well students engage with and comprehend course materials.

- Poor font choices can cause eye strain and make learning frustrating.
- Properly chosen fonts, sizes, and spacing improve accessibility and readability for everyone.

Typography– Best Practices

Use Sans-Serif Fonts for Digital Content.
Fonts like Source Sans 3, Verdana, Open Sans, or Lato are easier to read on screens.

Keep Line Length Between 50–75 Characters.
Prevents eye fatigue and helps with readability.

Use Hierarchy Effectively.
Headings should be tagged as such for screen readers. They should be larger and bolder, with body text smaller and regular weight.

Left-Align Your Text.
More natural for reading than centered or justified text.

Maintain Consistent Typography.
Stick to one or two fonts throughout course materials.

Choosing a font with many styles such as condensed, black, display, etc., lets you get creative while staying consistent.

Use Adequate Line Spacing.
A good recommendation is usually 1.5x line height. This improves readability, especially for students with dyslexia or visual impairments.

Ensure High Contrast.
Dark text on a light background (or vice versa) for accessibility compliance.

Typography– Common Mistakes

NO-NO: Using Decorative or Script Fonts for Body Text.
Hard to read, especially on screens.

NO-NO: Using Text That's Too Small.
Usually anything under 10pt for body text makes reading difficult.

NO-NO: Overloading Slides with Text.
Keep content concise to maintain engagement.

NO-NO: Center or Justified Alignment for Large Blocks of Text.
Creates uneven spacing and reduces readability.

NO-NO: Too Many Different Fonts.
Creates a cluttered and unprofessional look.

NO-NO: Using Underlines for Emphasis.
Underlines should only indicate hyperlinks. Bold works.

NO-NO: Poor Contrast (Gray Text on White, Neon Colors).
Makes reading difficult and fails accessibility compliance.

Installing Fonts

Once you've downloaded your new font, you'll need to know which file directory to put it in to ensure it will show up in all of your apps when designing.

(You'll want to make sure the file of your new font is properly placed into the directory required by your system.)

macOS

System font location: Macintosh HD > Library > Fonts

Apple makes the process easy with its built-in font manager app, **Font Book.** It is located under Applications, and can easily be pinned to your dock for future use. Text downloads can be placed into the application for a quick upload.

Windows

System font location: C:\Windows\Fonts

If you find you're unable to move fonts to that location, use C:\Users\Username\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Fonts\ to install fonts that can only be accessed by your username.

 *Adobe offers a [Troubleshooting Guide for Font Issues](#) if you run into any tricky situations.

Contrast and Readability

Proper contrast and readability are essential for ensuring that all learners—including those with visual impairments or difficulties reading—can access the content.

- Following contrast guidelines helps meet ADA & WCAG standards, making content readable for all learners, including those with low vision or color blindness.
- Poor contrast makes reading difficult, reducing comprehension and retention. It is straining on the eyes.
- Avoid color-only distinctions. Use bold, icons, or patterns in addition to color to convey meaning for colorblind users.
- Check contrast ratios. Ensuring at least a 4.5:1 contrast ratio for regular text and 3:1 for large text (use a contrast checker tool).
- Avoid busy, patterned backgrounds and neon colors.

Contrast and Readability

Good Practices:

High Contrast.
Black or dark gray text on a white or off-white background provides optimal readability.

Use colorblind-friendly palettes.
davidmathlogic.com/colorblind 10/10

Limit your palette to 3–5 colors.
The content is what's important. Not illustrating your presentation.

Common Mistakes:

Low Contrast.
Light-colored text on a light background.

Too many bright/neon colors
This is distracting!

Keep Backgrounds Simple.
This prevent distractions and maintain legibility. White background works best.

Overcrowding a page.
Keep line length 50-75 characters per line (including spaces).

Contrast and Readability

The graphic on the right gives a glimpse into what a colorblind user may see compared to someone with normal vision.

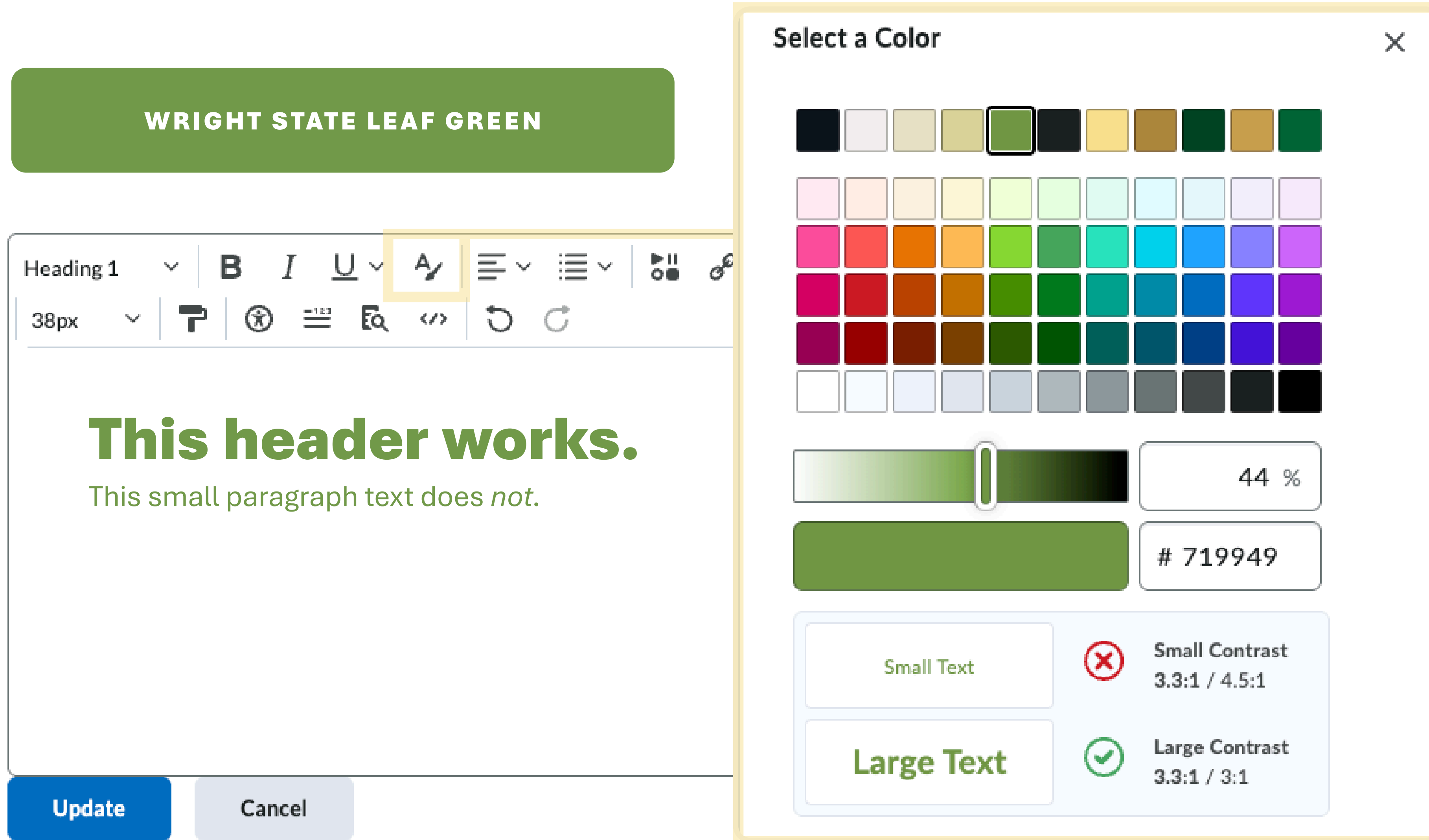Thankfully, contrast checkers like [WebAIMs Color Contrast Checker](#) exist to assist us as we design.

When designing your modules and announcements in Pilot, make sure to use the built-in color contrast checker before publishing your content. We'll take a look at some examples.
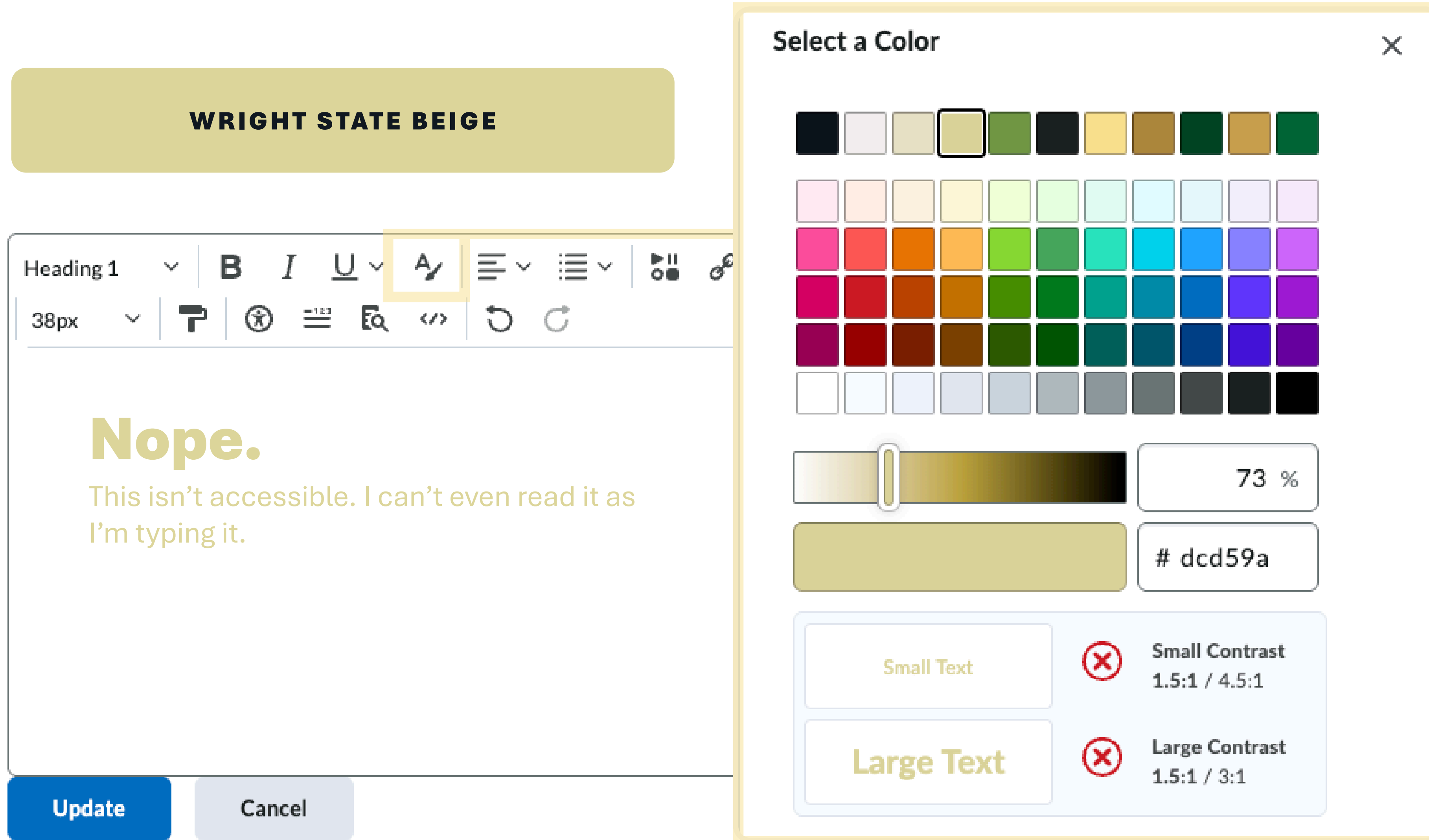
[davidmathlogic.com/colorblind](#)
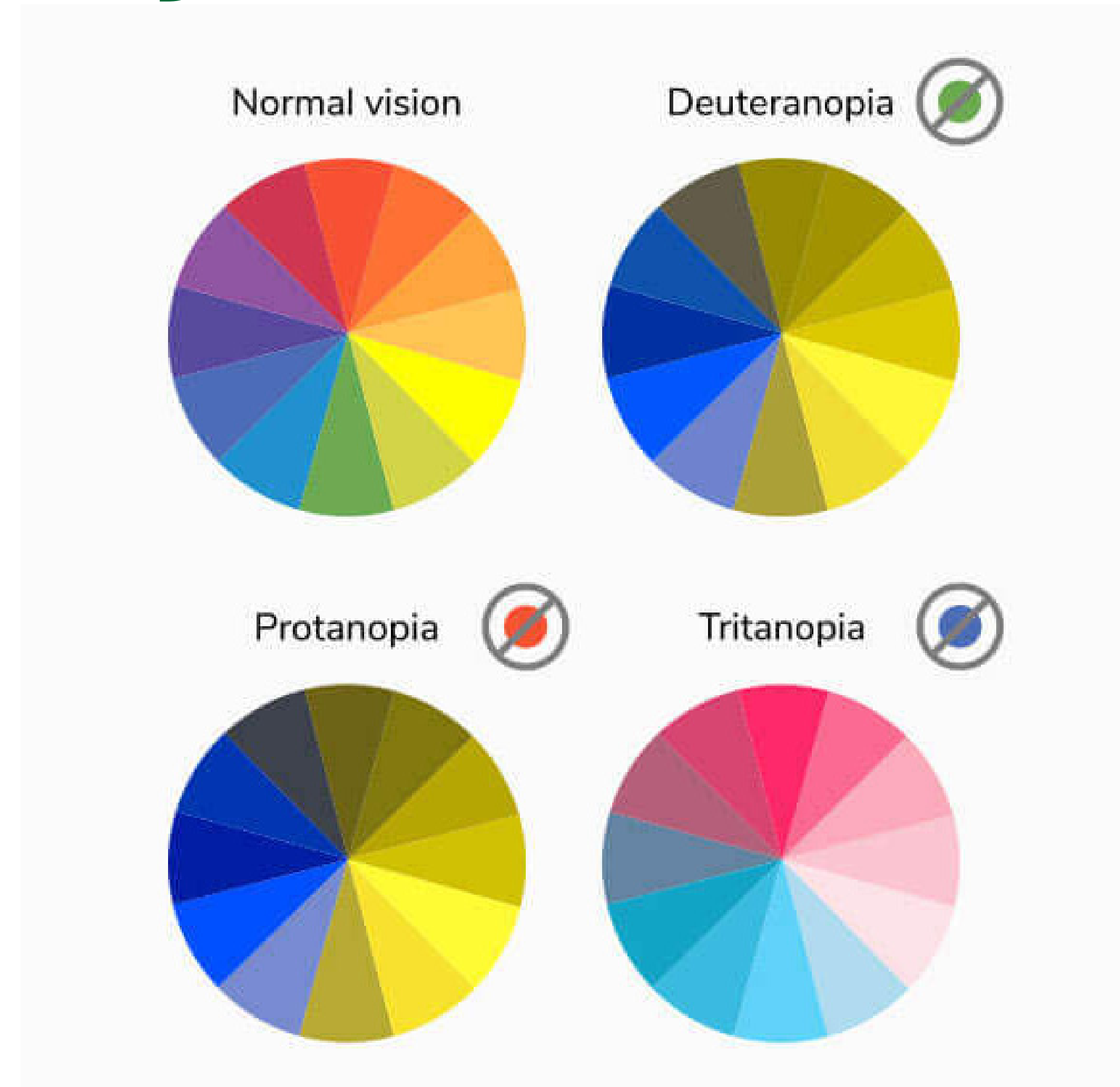
Infographic showing the different colors seen for those who are colorblind.

EXAMPLE OF PILOT'S BUILT-IN COLOR CONTRAST CHECKER

WRIGHT STATE LEAF GREEN

Heading 1 | **B** | *I* | U | Aʏ | ☰ | ☰ | ☰⏸

38px | | | | | |

This header works.
This small paragraph text does *not*.

Update   Cancel

Select a Color   ✕

44 %

719949

Small Text   ❌ Small Contrast
                      3.3:1 / 4.5:1

Large Text   ✅ Large Contrast
                      3.3:1 / 3:1

EXAMPLE OF PILOT'S BUILT-IN COLOR CONTRAST CHECKER

WRIGHT STATE BEIGE

Heading 1

38px

Nope.

This isn't accessible. I can't even read it as I'm typing it.

Update   Cancel

Select a Color   ✕

73 %

dcd59a

Small Text   ✕   Small Contrast
                         1.5:1 / 4.5:1

Large Text   ✕   Large Contrast
                         1.5:1 / 3:1

**EXAMPLE OF PILOT'S BUILT-IN COLOR CONTRAST CHECKER**

BrightSlide Color Contrast Report for PPT

Free for Windows & Mac

Following Federal 508 Compliance Guidelines, this add-on will produce a **Color Contrast Report** using all the theme colors in your presentation.

The example shows Powerpoint's default palette and which ones are passing on the left-hand side there with that 4.5:1 contrast.
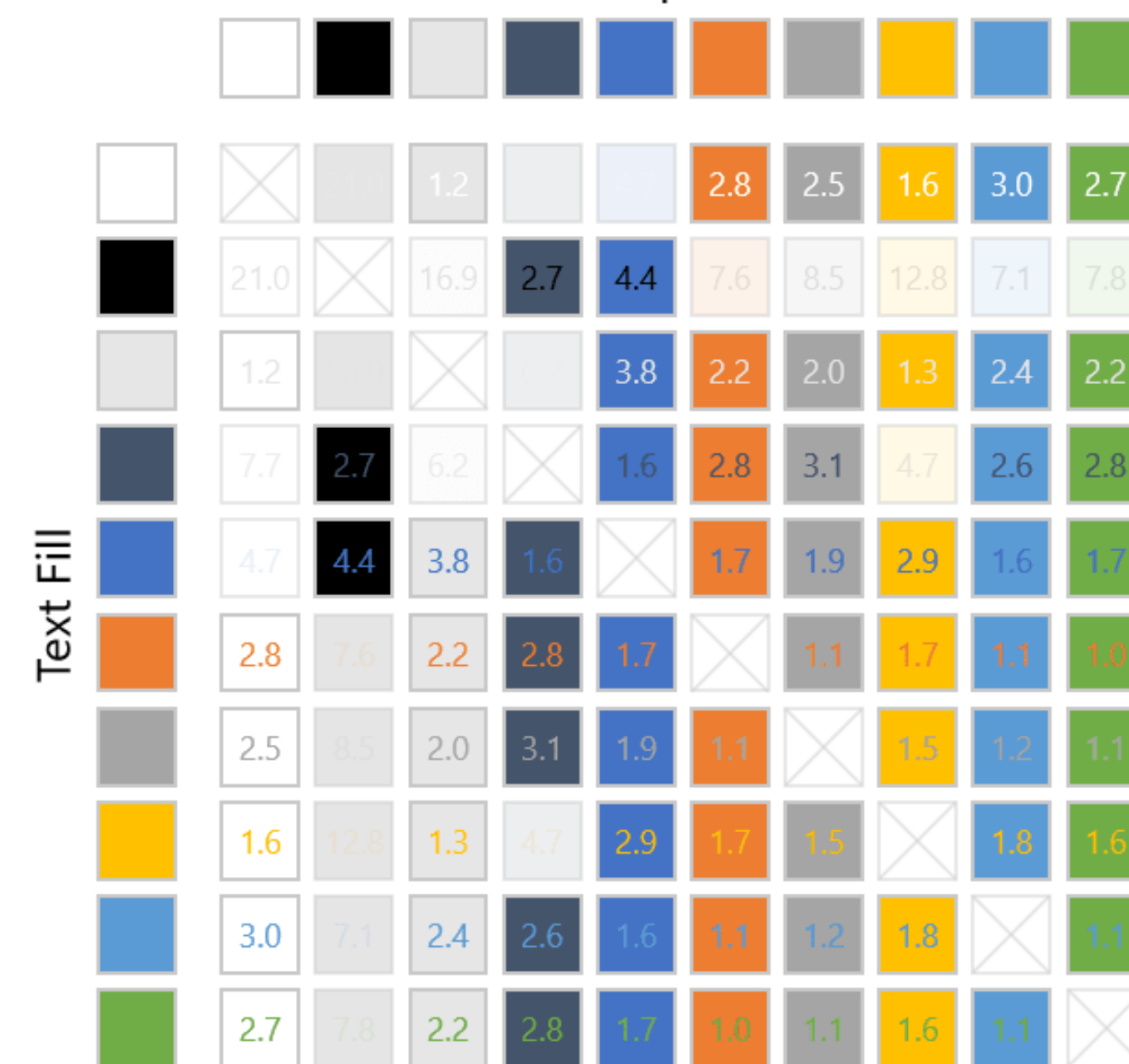
Download Powerpoint BrightSlide Add On
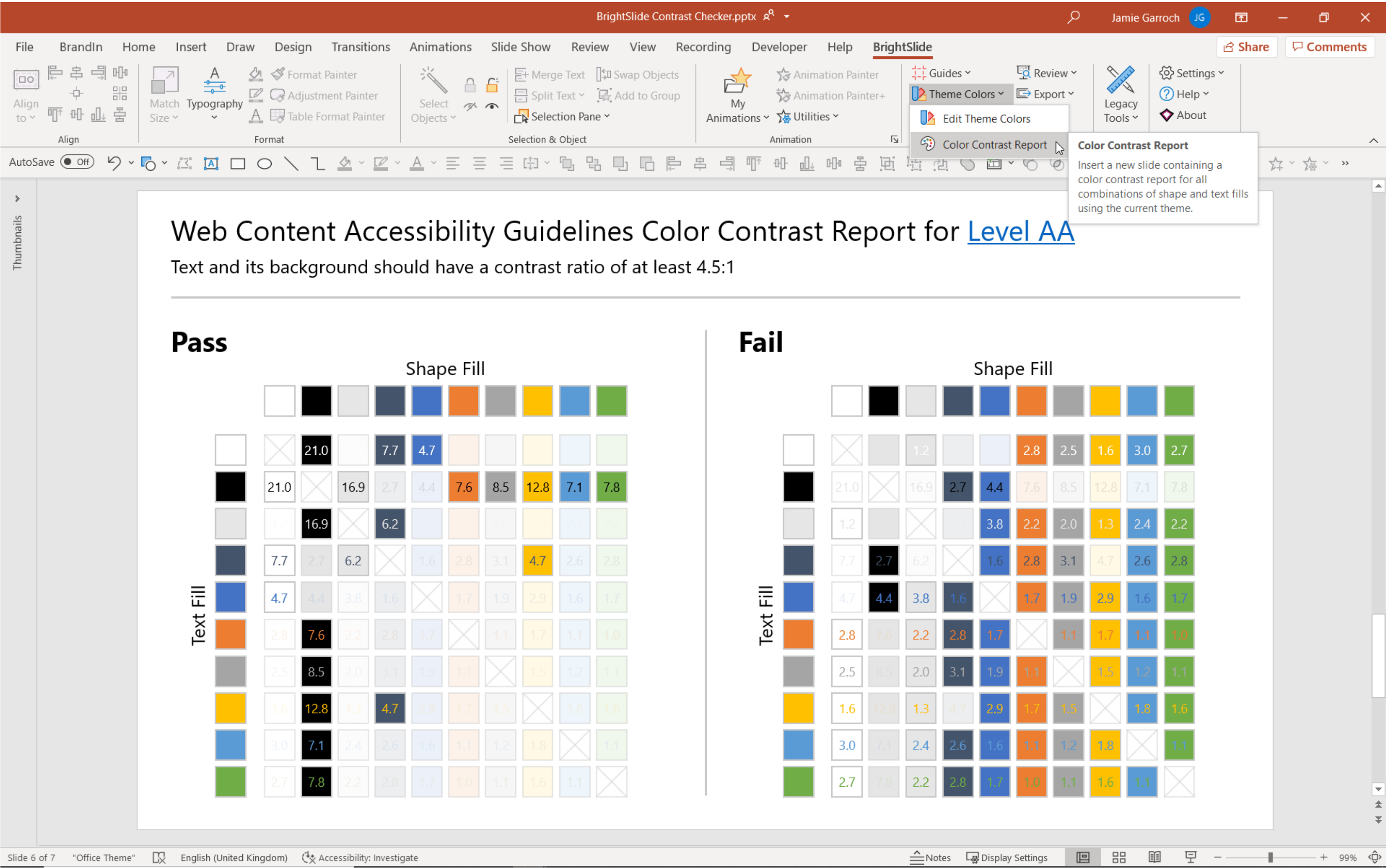
Stock Imagery

Adobe Stock

Adobe Stock is a vast library of royalty-free images, illustrations, videos, templates, and more that can be used to enhance course materials, presentations, and online modules.

It is integrated with Adobe Creative Cloud and is included with your WSU Creative Cloud account.

Pexels

Pexels is a free stock photo and video library that provides high-quality, royalty-free visuals for use in educational materials, course pages, presentations, and more.

Unlike paid stock services, all content on Pexels is available at no cost and can be used without attribution (though crediting creators is encouraged).

WSU Online Photography Store

Wright State offers our own photography online at the [Wright State Photography Store](#) through SmugMug.

The Wright State community can [request digital files free of charge](#) through a Service Now request to Marketing through their website.

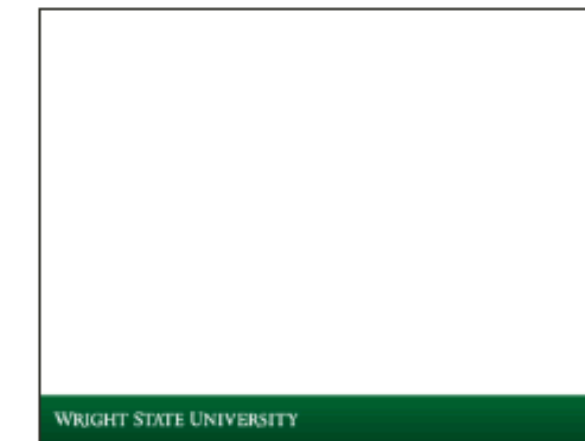You will want to make sure you have the file number associated with the images you are ordering.
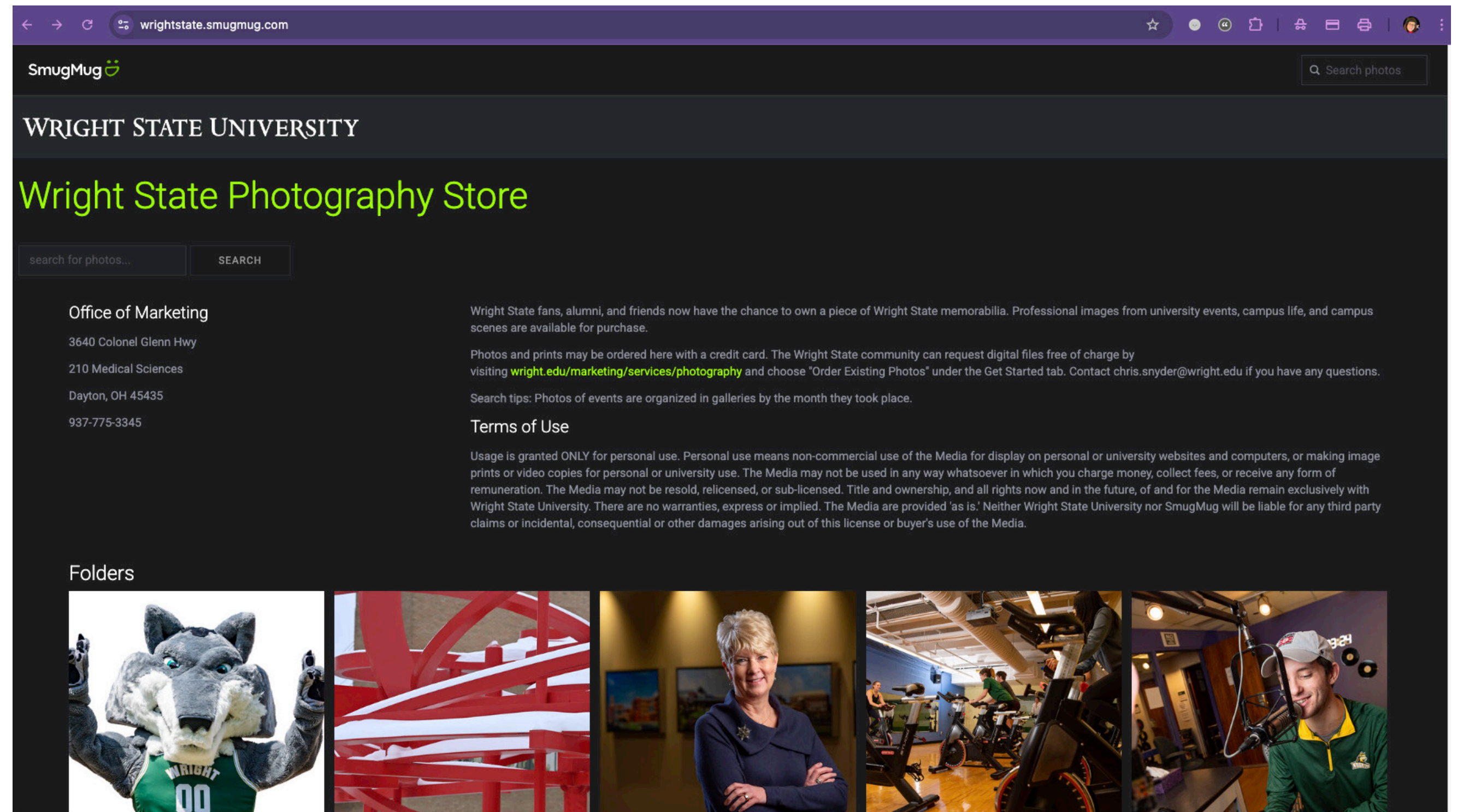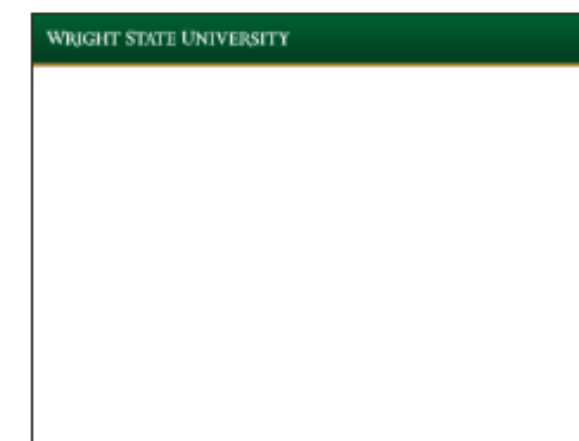
WSU Branded Templates

The University supplies a [PowerPoint Template (PPTX)](#) for free use.

The template includes six cover designs and two inside slide designs. Instructions on how to navigate the template are included in the download.

WSO Resource Library

Wright State Online offers ongoing online support with our **Online Resource Library** including guides, trainings, and more, to ensure our faculty receive tools to help design an inclusive course for Wright State's learners.

Stay updated with WSO on furthering Accessibility and Course Design topics as we continue the effort to improve all learners' experiences!

WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY | **WRIGHT STATE ONLINE**

References, Credits, & Links

References:

• https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/work-with-gridlines-and-use-snap-to-grid-in-powerpoint-84ed7394-5b37-4326-b13d-60fbc845e096

• https://community.d2l.com/brightspace/kb/articles/3652-about-brightspace-editor

• https://www.flux-academy.com/blog/the-importance-of-whitespace-in-design-with-examples

Logo Credits:

• Art Design by Tippawan Sookruay from Noun Project

Links:

• **WSU Brand Resources:** https://www.wright.edu/enrollment-management/marketing/brand/brand-resources
• **WSU SmugMug Store:** https://wrightstate.smugmug.com/
• **WSU Order Photos Service Now:** https://wrightstate.service-now.com/sp/nav_to.do?uri=%2Fcom.glideapp.servicecatalog_cat_item_view.do%3Fv%3D1%26sysparm_id%3Da9eed2ad1392e7005e7d7d346144b0f2%26sysparm_link_parent%3D80dc6cb3134a63005e7d7d346144b0ee%26sysparm_

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