Quick Fix Guide for Tables & Data[1]

Make any data table accessible in under 5 minutes.

Step 1: Is This Really a Table?

Use a data table when:
- Information has clear row and column relationships
- Data needs to be compared across categories
- Headers describe what's in each column/row

Don't use a table when:
- You just want content to appear side-by-side
- You're arranging text for visual appeal
- Examples of when not to use a table: Two-column layout, image gallery, navigation menu

Step 2: The 3 Must-Haves

✓ **Header Row**
- First row should identify what each column contains
- Mark headers properly (use <th> in HTML or "Header Row" in Word/LMS)
- Headers should be concise but descriptive

✓ **Scope Attributes**
- Tell screen readers whether headers apply to columns or rows
- In HTML: <th scope="col"> or <th scope="row">
- Most platforms handle this automatically when you designate header rows

✓ **Caption/Title**
- Every table needs a brief description of its content
- Place caption above or directly below the table
- Example: "Table 1: Course Assignment Due Dates by Week"

Step 3: The 3 Never-Dos

✗ **Merged Cells for Layout**
Merged cells confuse screen reader navigation; if you need to merge for design, choose a different layout

✗ **Blank Header Cells**
Every column and row needs a meaningful header; if you can't name it, it probably shouldn't be a column

✗ **Tables Within Tables (Nested Tables)**
Creates impossible navigation for assistive technology; break complex data into multiple simple tables instead

Platform-Specific Quick Tips

Microsoft Excel:
- Add headers: Insert → Table → Check "My table has headers"
- Keep headers visible while scrolling: View tab → Freeze Panes → Freeze Top Row (Helps all users maintain context in large datasets)
- Name your table (Table Design → Table Name) for screen reader context
- Avoid merged cells—use "Center Across Selection" instead (Format Cells → Alignment)

Google Sheets:
- Keep headers visible while scrolling: Format → Freeze → 1 row (Helps all users maintain context in large datasets)
- Keep one data table per sheet—avoid multiple tables on same sheet
- Add sheet descriptions: Right-click sheet tab → Rename with descriptive name
- Avoid only doing color-coding—add text labels or patterns for users who are color blind

Learning Management Systems (Canvas, Blackboard, D2L):
- Use Insert Table from the editor toolbar (avoid pasting from Word/Excel)
- Designate first row as header row (look for Table Properties or Header options)
- Add caption as text directly above the table
- Keep table structure simple for best cross-platform compatibility

Microsoft Word:
- Table Tools → Layout → Check "Repeat Header Rows"
- Right-click → Table Properties → Alt Text → Add description
- Avoid "Draw Table" feature—use Insert Table instead

Google Docs:
- Format → Table properties → Check "Header row"
- Keep tables simple—complex formatting often breaks accessibility
- Add descriptive text directly above table (use bold for emphasis)

PowerPoint:
- Avoid tables in slides when possible (use charts with robust alt text or bulleted lists instead)
- If needed: Insert → Table (not text boxes arranged as tables)
- Keep to 3-4 columns maximum for readability
- Note: PowerPoint table accessibility is limited; consider providing data in an accessible document format