Headings

What is it for?

Most people are familiar with headings, whether that's a title in a document or a title sheet on a slide deck. But what some people aren't aware of is that headings are important for more than just making an impact.

Headings are especially important for the following:

- People who use screen readers
- People with cognitive difficulties
- Search engines

How to support it

Headings are simple to get right, but are often misunderstood. To start with, headings shouldn't be used for styling. Using a 'Heading 2' in your Word doc for some large, bold text might give you the right font size and font weight (how bold it is), but it also tells a screen reader that your text is a heading. This meaning may not be accurate. The 'meaning' here is called 'semantics'. Semantics are often referred to as 'building blocks' - without them, everything falls apart!

The examples below refer to the code elements of headings and the heading style names in Word and Google Docs. However, the principle applies to everything.

To start with, there should only be one title (or `h1`) per document, slide, or web page.

After that, headings should follow in a sequential order. So a Heading 1 (`h1`) should be followed by a Heading 2 (`h2`). A Heading 2 (`h2`) should be followed by a Heading 3 (`h3`). A Heading 3 (`h3`) should be followed by a Heading 4 (`h4`), and so on. You can return to previous heading levels, but you should never skip a heading level on your way down (so Heading 4 (`h4`) to Heading 2 (`h2`) is perfectly fine, Heading 2 (`h2`) to Heading 4 (`h4`) is not).

You shouldn't use a heading to get a certain font size or styling. Instead, style it yourself. Headings convey meaning to screen readers and search engines, so you

should only use headings for text that is necessary as a heading; other text should have the styling changed to match designs.

Search engines are effectively 'blind'. They don't see visually; instead, they scan through the code of what they are given. If you're using headings incorrectly, search engines will get the wrong information, and search engine optimisation (SEO) can suffer as a result.

Useful links

- How to: Accessible heading structure
- Arizona State University: Accessible headings
- World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) WAI: Headings tutorial
- Home Office Design System: Headings