

Web content format – HTML, Word or PDF?

When writing for the web, you will likely need to decide which format to publish in. Obviously, websites will comprise mostly webpages – probably as HTML (at least they should!). But is it ok to upload PDFs or Word documents? This quick guide will help you to understand the best format for your content.

The best thing to do is listen to your users. User research will help you to understand which format is best. This will depend on the type of information they are accessing and how they want to use it. This table outlines some of the advantages and disadvantages of each format.

Format	Advantages	Disadvantages	Good for
HTML	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content is findable for search engines Easy to make responsive for viewing on desktop or mobile Easy to update Accessible for people with disability and those using assistive technologies Loads faster than other formats, and can be viewed without downloading Supports interactive content Can use Google Analytics (or similar) to understand users' behaviour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May not look good if printed May be harder for users to know when the content was published or updated Cannot be accessed without an internet connection New content must be planned for and fitted into the existing information architecture Appearance (text flow, image sizes and so on) will change with users' web browser choices and configurations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Most of your web content Interactive content Content that needs to be updated often
Word (.docx)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Easy to produce and update Easy to include publication dates Users can download and/or save to their own device if they want to refer to the content often Once downloaded, does not need an internet connection to view Easy for users to print 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not as easily findable by search engines Slower to access; needs to be downloaded to view Harder for users to navigate back to other web content and may affect the user experience Will not integrate with other technologies or add-ons Requires specialist knowledge and careful planning to ensure it is accessible Not interactive Users can edit it (unless it is locked) Appearance may depend on version of Word, fonts installed and so on Google Analytics can track if it is downloaded, but you won't gain any other insights about users' behaviour Is not responsive and may look different when viewed on a mobile device than on a desktop Can result in developers uploading a file because it is more convenient, even though it would be more appropriate for content to be incorporated into the website as webpages Old, outdated Word documents and PDFs must be archived, otherwise, they can linger on a website and confuse users 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content that users will need to print Forms
PDF	<p>Same as for Word, plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looks good if printed, especially if professionally formatted or designed Appearance is consistent across devices 	<p>Same as for Word, plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> More difficult to update if content needs to change, especially if professionally designed using design software 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Long reports or documents that will not change often Content that users will need to print Forms