To PDF or Not to PDF: That is the Question

Portable Document Format (PDF) files are digital representations of a printed document. The format is an excellent choice for a few purposes, but a poor option for most online presentation.

Does It Need to be a PDF?

Question	Comment
Will this content be printed, faxed and mailed?	Forms and applications meet this test.
Is the document more than eight pages?	A manual with chapters and sections may work best as a PDF.
Is the author simply saving time by converting Word to PDF?	PDFs are easy to create, but they can be difficult to use.
Will the content be shared on social media?	Facebook and Twitter, among others, do not handle PDFs.
Can the text be searched and copied?	PDFs made by scanning print documents (images of text) are very user-unfriendly.
Does the content need to be password-protected?	Password-protection is much easier in PDF than HTML.
Will this content be frequently updated?	Editing PDFs is difficult. Tracking down source documents can be time-consuming.

## Better Methods

Method	Advantages
Web page	Highly editable	Displays content well on all devices	Easily indexed by search engines	Easily shared on Facebook and Twitter	Multimedia-friendly
News story	A news story on today.stcloudstate.edu is highly distributable	Displays photo galleries, audio and video well
Social media	Facebook Event offers audience interaction	Facebook Timeline can display video and animated GIFs	Editable
Events Calendar	Easily linked on unit websites, social media, SCSU-Announce	Can feed calendars on unit websites	Potential for front-page .edu display
Local server	Websites are not file cabinets; PDF documents can be stored on office servers

PDF Best Practices

- Include our logotype, our non-discrimination statement and Minnesota State logo
- Always label a website URL that links to a PDF
- Provide alternative text for form fields, images and multimedia; caption photos
- Add metadata, including title, author, subject and keywords
- The best PDFs are tagged PDFs:
    - Easy extraction of text and graphics
    - Auto-reflow of text and images to fit varying screen sizes
    - Text can be searched, indexed and spell-checked
    - Accessible to people who use assistive technologies

The Metadata Difference

With metadata, your PDF becomes much more searchable. Do Google, Bing and your audience a favor: Add title, author, subject and keywords. In Acrobat, click **File/Properties**:
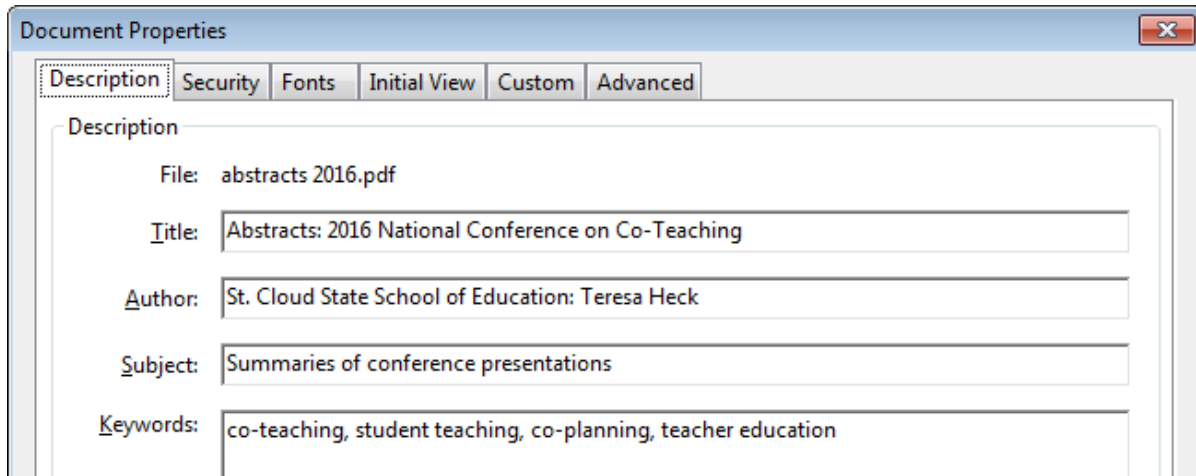
Adding Tags to an Existing PDF

A mobile device needs tags to reflow a PDF correctly in its viewport. Assistive technologies need tags to make sense of reading order, form fields and images. Click **View/Tools/Accessibility:**

"Free the content! PDFs are not web pages.”

-- Rachel Carden, Disney software designer

“Tri-fold brochure PDFs require users to perform mental origami.”

-- Anonymous, Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences