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Writing Alt Text for Interior Images: A Guide for Authors

Alt text: What is it?

Alt text is a short description (often 200 characters or fewer) of a specific visual resource. Alt text is not displayed on the page but is embedded in the electronic book or online resource and can be accessed via assistive technology. A reader who is visually impaired or uses assistive technology for any reason can have the alt text read to them, thereby allowing them access to a publication's visual content. A longer version of alt text can be supplied in addition to the short description if the image conveys complex information or an accurate description cannot easily be expressed in 200 or fewer characters. This version of alt text, however, should be used sparingly. In addition, alt text is important for search engine optimization. Search engines use alt text to understand the content of images, which can improve the visibility of your work in search results.

Alt text: How to write it

Below are some guidelines to keep in mind when writing alt text.

1. *Alt text is not a repeat of the image caption.*

   Alt text is similar to a caption but is intended to describe the visual content of an image and will be read aloud using assistive technology.

2. *Be a subject matter expert.*

   Write for the context: Depending on the context you're writing alt text for, more or less detail may be appropriate. For example, the alt text for an image of a scenic landscape painting used on a website for a college admissions office would be different and much shorter than it would be if the same image was displayed in a book about landscape paintings, where it may be relevant to include details like medium, color, or composition.

When writing alt text for **fine art,** mention the medium of the art, or any other unique materials used. Consider the context in which the image appears; what about it is important to the nonsighted reader that isn't included in the caption?

For musical examples, briefly indicate how the example amplifies your argument or discussion. For example, if the caption reads: "Opening score for Dvorak's Cello Concerto," the alt text could read: "Four sheets of musical notation showing how the recurrent theme is introduced by several instruments before the soloist begins."

When writing alt text for **diagrams, charts, and graphs**, you most likely will need to provide a longer description. See the **Additional Resources** below for guidance on writing extended, or long, descriptions for these more technical illustrations.

3. *Be specific and succinct.*

   Alt text should convey the content and the purpose of an image in a concise and unambiguous manner. The alt text shouldn't be longer than a sentence or two and should include only what is important about an image within the context of its surrounding content. For example, important details may be the setting, the emotions on people's faces, the colors, or the relative sizes of objects.

   Don't overthink it. Describe the image like you would to someone over the phone. Alt text should provide context and indicate the purpose of the image but doesn't need to be overly descriptive or include unnecessary detail.

4. *Be objective.*

   Strive to be as objective as possible and avoid adding your own opinions, thoughts, or feelings about an image. Alt text isn't the place for commentary or interpretation. However, alt text may convey nuances, details, and emotions if they are relevant to the user experience. Describe the content of the image without editorializing. Say what you see—don't make assumptions about ethnicity or gender, about what is happening outside the image, or about a subject's motivations. Do discuss gender, race, or ethnicity, however, if it is integral to the meaning of the image or important in the context of the publication.

5. *Don't add alt text to purely decorative images.*

   Alt text is necessary for **illustrative** images, which include things like photos illustrating a building's architecture, or screen captures from a movie you are discussing in the text. Illustrative images help to convey information, in context. **Decorative** images, however,

can be things like page dividers, typographic ornaments, or brand graphics like logos. Because decorative images don't have any contextual significance or meaning, alt text is not needed.

6. ***Include details*** *in your alt text **if** they are 1) important to the context and 2) not already given in the caption. For example:*

   - Placement or relative sizes of objects in the image
   - Image style (painting, graph, sculpture, photograph)
   - Surroundings or setting
   - Colors
   - Names of people
   - Clothing
   - Legible text included in the image and the placement of the text itself
   - Visible expression of emotions, such as a person smiling or yelling

7. *Use only **characters** or **symbols** that can be read by screen readers.*

   - Screen readers consistently read out these symbols correctly:
     £ € ¥ $ & @ / %

   - The following symbols can be read by assistive technology but create a pause effect when read so they may be inaudible to the listener:

     . , : ; ? !

   - Some of the following symbols work fine on most screen readers but not on all. Avoid them if you can:
     - – … ( ) [ ] " " ' '

   - These symbols **cannot** be read by screen readers and must be spelled out:
     + - × ÷ = *

   - Emojis cannot be read by screen readers.

8. *Finally, **some do's and don'ts.***

   Do:
   - Keep it brief: 200 characters or fewer is recommended.
   - Tailor your description to the context of your writing: what important information do you seek to convey with this image?

- Add information about the medium in or at the end of your alt text if it describes a specific type of image or is otherwise important to convey to the non-sighted reader, e.g.: "Cat playing with ball of yarn. Illustration." "Vase of sunflowers painted with thick impasto."
- End your alt text with a period: this will prompt the reading technology to take a brief pause.
- Transcribe text that is part of the image if it is legible and important. Example: a photograph of a protestor and their sign. If transcribing visual text would make the alt text too long, do include a *longer description* in addition to your alt text.
- Include an extended or long description with your alt text when you have complex information to convey, such as in graphs or diagrams.
- Learn more about writing alt text for complex images such as graphs, charts, maps, and diagrams: see our list of Additional Resources below.

Don't:
- Start your alt text with "Picture of" or "Image of." This would be redundant, since assistive reading technologies will automatically announce "graphic" along with the alt text.
- Repeat your caption or the image copyright/credit. Your caption will already be read by the assistive reading technology.
- Focus on details that are not crucial to the meaning of the image in the context of your writing.
- Explain obvious or overly basic details that could otherwise be inferred (e.g., "The car has four wheels").

Additional resources:

For examples of **textual descriptions** (alt text, long descriptions, body text, and captions) for illustrative materials, see:

Sample Textual Descriptions for Illustrative Materials includes examples of abstract art, diagrams, graphs, maps, page images, paintings, photographs, portraits, posters, stills, and tables.
https://www.press.umich.edu/authors/SampleTextualDescriptionsforIllustrativeMaterials-2019.pdf

For examples of **alt text for art, photos, cartoons, diagrams, graphs, maps, math**, see:

Guidelines for Describing Visual Resources in Arts and Humanities Publications
https://describingvisualresources.org/guidelines/

[DIAGRAM Image Guidelines](http://diagramcenter.org/table-of-contents-2.html) provides guidance on describing tables, charts, diagrams, and other informational image types common in scientific disciplines.
http://diagramcenter.org/table-of-contents-2.html

[Existing Resources to Support Description](https://describingvisualresources.org/existing-resources/) includes detailed and discipline-specific guidance on describing particular genres of images.
https://describingvisualresources.org/existing-resources/

For examples and instruction on **writing long descriptions**, see:

[Guide to Writing Long Descriptions](https://www.accessiblepublishing.ca/guide-to-long-descriptions/)
https://www.accessiblepublishing.ca/guide-to-long-descriptions/