

ALT-TEXT BASED ON PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF IMAGES

Decide the purpose and function of the image based on its relationship to content and follow these guidelines for writing good alt-text:

Eye Candy

- Decorative only, has no relationship to the content
- Can be skipped by screen readers because describing it is not meaningful to the content
- Use “” (double quotation marks) or the word “decorative” to indicate to the screen reader that it is not important to describe
- Example: a drawing of a computer next to text about filling out a form

Branding

- Used for logos and banners
- Description provides information about an entity or ownership (copyrighted or trademarked)
- Describe the image verbatim along with any pertinent visual information that conveys meaning
- Example: Banner of a document with rules for sending mail through the US Postal Service, the banner contains the USPS logo and the title of the document “How To Send Mail.” The alt-text says “Banner of United States Postal Service for a document entitled how to send mail. The Postal Service logo is in the corner of the banner.”

Window Dressing / Mood-setting

- Used to convey a mood about the content or to entice the reader
- Doesn't convey *essential* information but not eye candy either
- Tell the story of what the visuals are saying
- Example: “A happy Joan Smith is shaking hands with President Obama, who is handing her an award” next to a photo of the two shaking hands with the award in the photo
- Example: Description of a photo of a tranquil sunset - “A sunset over Laguna Beach, California, as waves quietly lap against the sand. A lone person walks her dog at the edge of the water.”

Essential

- Conveys important information and meaning/context to the content
- Graphs, illustrations, charts, maps, technical drawings provide visual presentation of crucial information
- Alt-text is limited for these important descriptions, so instead, the essential information needs to be: added to the content near the image; or in a caption; or in an accessible table; or in a linked web page that describes the graph, chart, etc. in detail and captures the meaning in addition to data

- Use a descriptive link to a web page that contains an accessible table that can be manipulated by a user of assistive technology. Some graphic representations can be linked back to the source if the source is accessible.
- Example: “Chart of temperature readings for the weeks of July 2020. Peak temperatures reached 90 degrees by July 15th.” Just below the image is a link (the link must be labeled in such a way that it tells the user that the chart is described in full by following the link).

OTHER ALT-TEXT GUIDANCE

Context is EVERYTHING! The goal is to provide a description that gives a non-sighted user the same information as what a sighted user could gather from viewing the image. It needs to convey the **purpose and function** of the image.

Balance the amount of detail - not too wordy, not too few words. Aim for a description that comes out around 200 characters; eliminate words that don't convey context or meaning to the image. Technical information that may need more detail to be understood correctly is an exception. [*this paragraph is 280 characters]

Most users assume an image is a photo. No need to use “This is a photo of...” or “Photo of...”. For other images that are not photos, use 1-2 words to announce that it is something different, such as “Illustration of...” or “Chart of...”

Don't repeat a description in the alt-text that is also in a caption. A screen reader will repeat it. A screen reader will repeat it.

Don't abbrev. words (don't abbreviate words).

Don't use ALL CAPS (except for acronyms).

End the alt-text with punctuation so that the screen reader does not run the alt-text into the body text.

In describing photos of people, if the *type* of image is important, state whether it is a portrait, drawing, painting, political cartoon, etc. This description provides context for the user.

Technical visual images require more detail that may not fit in the 200-character suggested length. Use a different method to provide the data **and meaning** to the graph, chart, map, technical drawing, etc. Tabled data must be accessible as well.

Remember, when describing an image:

- Repeat any text in the image such as a sign that reads “School Zone” (if relevant)
- Describe dominant visual details
- Capture action or story depicted in the image
- State what is noteworthy in the image
- Only describe race, gender, age, or appearance IF it is important for the user to know these things

REFERENCES

Accessibility Resource Center. Social Security Administration. (2011). [Social Security Administration Guide: Alternate text for images. Version 1.2.](#)

Chagnon, B. *Easy Guide to Alt Text (pre-publication edition)*. (2020). Maryland: BJ Chagnon Corporation.