

# Guide to ALT + Text

How to write descriptions for  
images and graphical elements



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## **ALT+Text Guide; An Overview**

Alternative text, also known as “alt-text” or “alternate description” for an image, is important for people with disabilities who may have difficulty recognizing and understanding pictures, graphics, and complex images. This includes individuals with visual impairments, cognitive disabilities, and non-native speakers. Well-written alt-text is beneficial for all these users.

It is necessary to include a text description for all images and graphics with meaning. Any image that has significance to sighted individuals should have an alternative description for those who cannot see.

## Why We Need ALT+Text.

Providing descriptions for images and graphics can aid individuals who are visually impaired. However, effective ALT+Text can also assist those with low vision and other visual challenges.

In addition, ALT+Text can benefit readers with cognitive difficulties and difficulties comprehending complex graphics. It is also mandatory for meeting the Web Content Accessibility Group (WCAG) and PDF Universal Accessibility (PDF/UA) standards.

## How ALT+Text works

ALT+Text is a descriptive piece of information associated with an image on a document or web page. This feature is recognized by assistive technology, like a screen reader, that converts text to speech.

As the AT reads and encounters an image, it will:

- First, announce the word “image.”
- Next, read the ALT+Text for that image.
- Then, immediately continue reading the text on the page.

If no ALT+Text is present, the user will not hear any description of that image or graphic after it is announced.

Incorrect ALT+Text can also pose a problem as it makes the image inaccessible and fails to communicate its intended context or purpose.

A few essential points to know about ALT+Text:

- ALT+Text is not something visible to sighted users and is not visible on a page.
- Other descriptions, such as captions, can be used with ALT+Text. However, captions should not be used as a replacement for an ALT+Text description.
- For web pages, long descriptions can be created for complex images.

## Deciding on What Needs ALT+Text.

Although ALT+Text is important for many images, some images don't need it. Determining whether an image requires an ALT+Text description is challenging and depends on its purpose, context, and the information that needs to be conveyed.

The following are types of images that require ALT+Text:

- Images with a purpose.
- Logos, official seals, banners, nameplates.
  - Any branding that is trademarked.
  - Anything that needs to authenticate the owner of the information.
- Photos, illustrations, maps, signatures, and drawings.
- Graphics and charts.
- Images of text.
- “Clickable” graphics like buttons.
- Groups of images.

## **ALT+Text for Reused Images**

It's common for images to be used more than once on a page, document, or website. However, it's important to note that the description used for one image may not work for the same image if it's used in a different context or for a different purpose. This means that ALT+Text may not always be sufficient when reusing the same image. If an image is used to introduce a topic and later used to demonstrate a point, it may require two different descriptions.



## Writing Good ALT+Text

When preparing to write ALT+Text, here are a few things you should keep in mind:

- Aim for 160 characters. Screen readers may cut off ALT+Text beyond 180 characters.
- Avoid starting with “a picture of...” or “an image of...”
- Focus on conveying the context and purpose.
- Be concise. Describe only what the user needs to obtain or know.
- Avoid editorial content. Save that for the caption. (e.g., photo by Tia Ivy via Getty Images)
- Avoid duplicating captions or information that is already present on the page when using ALT+Text.
- Always use standard sentence structure. It should sound natural when read aloud.
- ALT+Text does require correct punctuation, including periods.



## What to say first

To write good ALT+Text, keep in mind that assistive technology (AT) users will assume an image is a photo or picture. Therefore, avoid using “an image of.” However, it’s okay to include 1 or 2 words describing other graphics to help users understand the context of the image. Examples:

- A pie chart indicating...
- A technical illustration of...
- A Caricature of...
- A cartoon showing...
- A/the painting of...
- The Nike swoosh logo.



## The objective of ALT+Text:

Be short with enough detail to convey the critical information. If you believe more than 200 characters are needed, consider using a caption or data table or including a detailed description within the paragraph preceding the image.

**Think about the CONTEXT and PURPOSE all readers need to obtain.**

## The objective of ALT+Text: Continued

Describe the critical information your readers need: balance information and details, considering that screen readers can have a character limit. Finally, remember to use standard sentence structure.

Here are some tips about deciding what to say:

- First, describe the dominant visual details.
- Capture the action.
- Tell the story.
- Repeat any relevant text in the image.
- State what is noteworthy for users.
- Note what is unusual.
- Describe who is in the picture and what they are doing.
- Note the genders, races, ages, and appearances.
- Note the location if necessary.
- Describe the environment, time of day, etc.
- Set the mood or ambiance.

Do not assume that all publisher-provided ALT+Text will meet accessibility standards or align with the context and purpose of the image used.

## Captions vs. ALT+Text

Captions are text descriptions that are displayed either immediately before or after an image. Typically captions provide supplemental information about the image as well as the copyright and who created the image or took the picture.

Captions and ALT+Text can be used together. However, they should not be exact duplicates. When using a caption and ALT+Text, make sure that the caption only complements the ALT+Text and that the ALT+Text does not include any details that are not accessible to sighted readers.

Using captions is more beneficial than using ALT+Text alone because both sighted and non-sighted readers have access to descriptive information about an image or graphic, making it a Universal Design approach.

According to WCAG 1.1.1, it's not mandatory to use the alt= attribute for an image file. What's required is to provide a text alternative for non-text content like images. This can be achieved through captions, but only if they convey the context and purpose of the image to all readers as intended by the author.

## When an image needs a caption

Captions should be used for:

- Citing copyright and ownership.
- Images that require a heading to convey contexts, such as a portrait or location.
- Images that require supporting information.
- Complex images where all readers need to understand specific data points. Excessive data points can be provided in additional documents or spreadsheets as more effective alternatives. Other important information can be conveyed in the paragraphs before or after the image.
- In place of a long description for programming languages that cannot handle the `<longdesc>` attribute.

The `alt=` attribute should be included when using the `<figure>` and `<figcaption>` elements.

## Types of Images

The W3C uses the following seven categories of images regarding ALT+Text.

## **Informative Images**

Typically, pictures, photos, and illustrations, these images represent concepts and information. Therefore, the descriptions for these images should convey the essential information, mood, or impression that all users should get.

## Decorative Images

Decorative images have no relevant purpose and therefore are purely decorative. Removing these types of pictures or graphics will keep the information and mood of the page the same.

Decorative images do not require a description. These images provide no context or additional information to users. When an image can be removed from the page without altering its information or content, it may be decorative.

Care should be taken when deciding if an image is decorative or not. Marking an image as “decorative” will cause screen readers to skip these images.

In Word or Adobe, images can be marked as decorative by checking a box wherever the ALT+Text is entered or in HTML using the alt="" attribute.

Decorative images are sometimes called background, artifact, or null images.

Decorative images examples:

- Colored boxes in headers and footers.
- Colored boxes or shapes with no text.
- Separation lines.
- Images whose ALT+Text would duplicate text that is already on the page.
- Complex images which are explained within the text on the page or described in detail via an additional document.



## Eye Candy (Window dressing, mood-setters)

These types of images are often mistakenly marked as decorative. However, they may require ALT+Text if they serve a purpose for sighted users. For example, images that help set the mood of a blog, article, or story should provide the same context to non-sighted users as they do for sighted users. Images require ALT+Text if they:

- Are eye-catching or provide a visual improvement for sighted users.
- Are also not purely decorative; they have a purpose.
- Set the mood.
- Reinforce a message.
- Entice readers.

Images may not require ALT+Text if they:

- Do not convey essential information.
- They can be removed from the page and not affect the tone.

## Functional Images

These can be shapes used for buttons or text used for hyperlinks.

Examples include icons representing a save, print, or search function. These do require a description that should describe the function, destination, or event that will happen because of activating the function.



## Images of Text

Whenever possible, images of text should be avoided. If an image of text must be included, the description should contain the exact words as in the picture.

Logos containing text images are permissible and should be identified as such in the description, as these can be required for trademark protection.

Word art in MS Word should include the correct ALT+Text description by default. However, this should always be checked. Watermarks should be described to convey their existence to all readers. For example, in MS Word, watermarks are read as part of the header.

## Complex Images

Complex images such as charts, diagrams, and illustrations require ALT+Text. While it may seem impossible to describe all the details within 160 characters, this can be accomplished by utilizing the ALT+Text description in conjunction with other methods.

Here are some strategies for dealing with complex images:

- Focus on the purpose of the chart or graphic.
- Use the surrounding text to deliver details and additional information.
- Describe the significant data points or trends the user needs to know.
- Provide essential information.
- Avoid duplicating information already on the page.
- For web pages, utilize a long description attribute.
- Providing a text-only version for charts or graphics with large amounts of data points is appropriate.
- Images with layers should be combined into a single image.



## Groups of Images

If multiple images convey the same point or piece of information, the first image should be given the description, and the rest should be marked as decorative. The ALT+Text description should identify that it is serving multiple images.

## Image Maps

Alternative text used for maps or images of maps that contain clickable points (Google Maps) should describe the overall context of the links or map. In addition, each clickable area of the map/image should have alternative text that identifies the purpose of that link.

## What to Avoid with ALT+Text:

Well-written ALT+Text should sound natural when read aloud since that is what a screen reader will replicate. However, some AT readers sound more realistic than others, so care should be taken to ensure the text-to-speech process can accurately convey the ALT+Text.

When writing ALT+Text:

- Never use the image file name (e.g., 12345.jpg).
- Avoid clipped or harsh language.
- Avoid abbreviations.
- Only use ALL CAPS for acronyms.
- Use correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
- Failing to end with a period or punctuation may cause the reader to run on to the next readable item.
- Avoid including editorial information (Use a caption).
- Avoid Information about the copyright of an image.
- Do not include a hyperlink within ALT+Text.

## ALT+Text Tips for SEO

Including ALT+Text descriptions for images can improve the SEO performance of a website. In addition, when used correctly, alternative descriptions can improve the accessibility of a website, and this can be reflected in the SEO score given to a website or page.

However, some marketing and web developers have misused alternative descriptions to manipulate their sites' SEO performance because automated scanning cannot discern between correct and incorrect descriptions.

Avoid these SEO-driven practices:

- Specifically adding ALT+Text to decorative images to add more content to a page.
- Stuffing keywords into descriptions.
- Creating descriptions with hundreds of words.
- Using alternative text that is inaccurate and not descriptive of the image.
- Using text that is not related to the image in any way.

More information can be found at this link for the [W3C tutorial on images](#).



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