Cornell University Press
Alt Text Style Guide

Starting with our Fall/Winter 2021 list, Cornell University Press books are required to provide alt text.

- We are committed at Cornell University Press to making sure our ebooks are accessible to the broadest possible audience.

- This guide will help authors write and copyeditors edit alt text that meaningfully describes images in order to empower our ebook users who have visual impairments. These labels will be used for screen readers and TTS (text-to-speech) devices that turn text into spoken voice output.

- Authors contribute by writing and submitting alt text for the images in their books. Our copyeditors assist by making sure it is present and refining it.

What is alt text?

Alt text stands for "alternative text." It is a written description of an image, graphic, or table. The purpose is to provide people who use assistive technology with the ability to understand what an image contains, which will help them better comprehend our ebooks.

In our ebooks, alt text is read aloud by special software. Alt text can also be useful for sighted users (for example, when an image fails to load, alt text is displayed instead of the image).

How to write alt text

Write alt text that is meaningful, specific, and descriptive by following our guidelines.

1. Try to set up the wording of your alt text as follows: (a) brief description of the image plus (b) explanation of the image. *For example: (a) A pie chart (b) indicates that four times as many students preferred in-person instruction versus online instruction.*

2. Describe the image, with a focus on what the image means, rather than just its visual characteristics. For example: What emotion is being conveyed? Is there a nuance that should be called out?

3. Be brief and avoid colloquialisms. Avoid long descriptions that will disrupt the reader's concentration on the main text. Keep to 25 words if possible, 50 words maximum.

4. Write in complete sentences when possible, and use present tense. Always start with a capital letter and end with a period, even if it is not a complete sentence. Please avoid all caps, all lowercase, emoticons, emojis, and other common digital shortcuts.

5. Do not start with the words "photo of" or "image of."

6. Capitalize acronyms so the screen reader reads them as letters and not a word (e.g., "OMG" instead of "omg").

7. Remember: even if the main text or the caption already describes the informative image, you still need alt text to supplement for content that is lost when someone is not able to view the image. Be careful not to duplicate content between the caption and alt text unnecessarily. The user will hear both.

8. Skip images that are purely decorative, such as an ornament or design motif.

9. For complex tables and graphs, alt text should be used in tandem with the caption to convey the main thrust of the data presented.

10. If an image contains text, such as labels, repeat that text verbatim in the alt text.

Special note:

AVOID AUTOMATIC ALT TEXT: Although some software programs provide automatic alt text, the results are not satisfactory. We ask that our authors write the content themselves.

PREPARE A MANUSCRIPT AND SUBMIT IT WITH YOUR OTHER BOOK FILES: Alt text should be presented in the same manner as a caption manuscript, with numbered items in a separate Word document. Word allows the embedding of alt text under Format Picture and Tables Properties, but please do not use these options.

Examples of alt text

Remember, the primary purpose of alt text is to describe images to users who are unable to see them. This includes screen readers and browsers that block images, but it also includes users who are sight-impaired or otherwise unable to visually identify an image.

Example 1
CAPTION: Maureen Kadri, RN, night nurse-manager: What a real nurse looks like when she's troubleshooting. Photo by Earl Dotter.
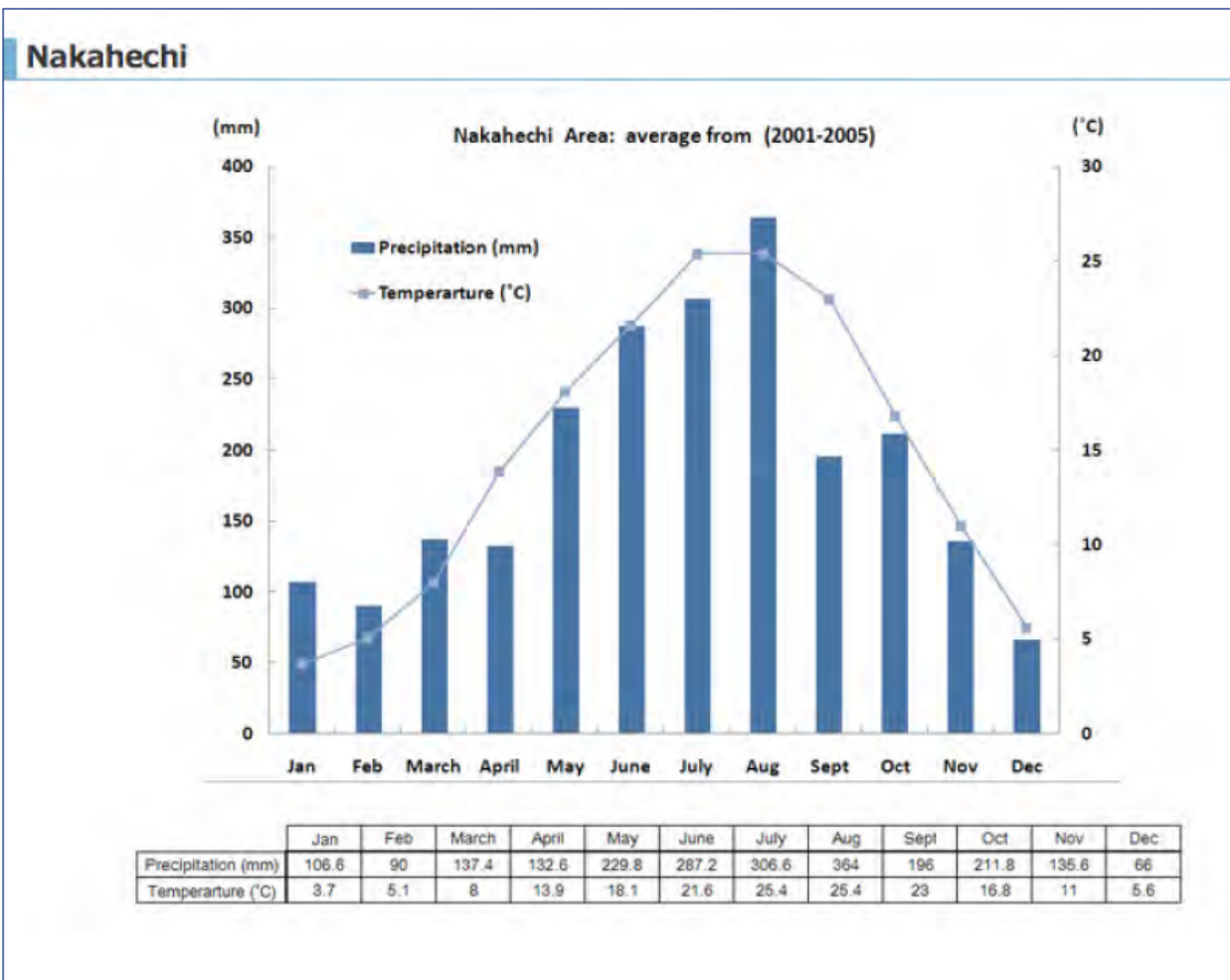**ALT TEXT:** A nurse with a serious and concerned facial expression wears a paging device attached to a lanyard around her neck and talks on one phone with one hand and holds a second phone in her other hand. (37 words)
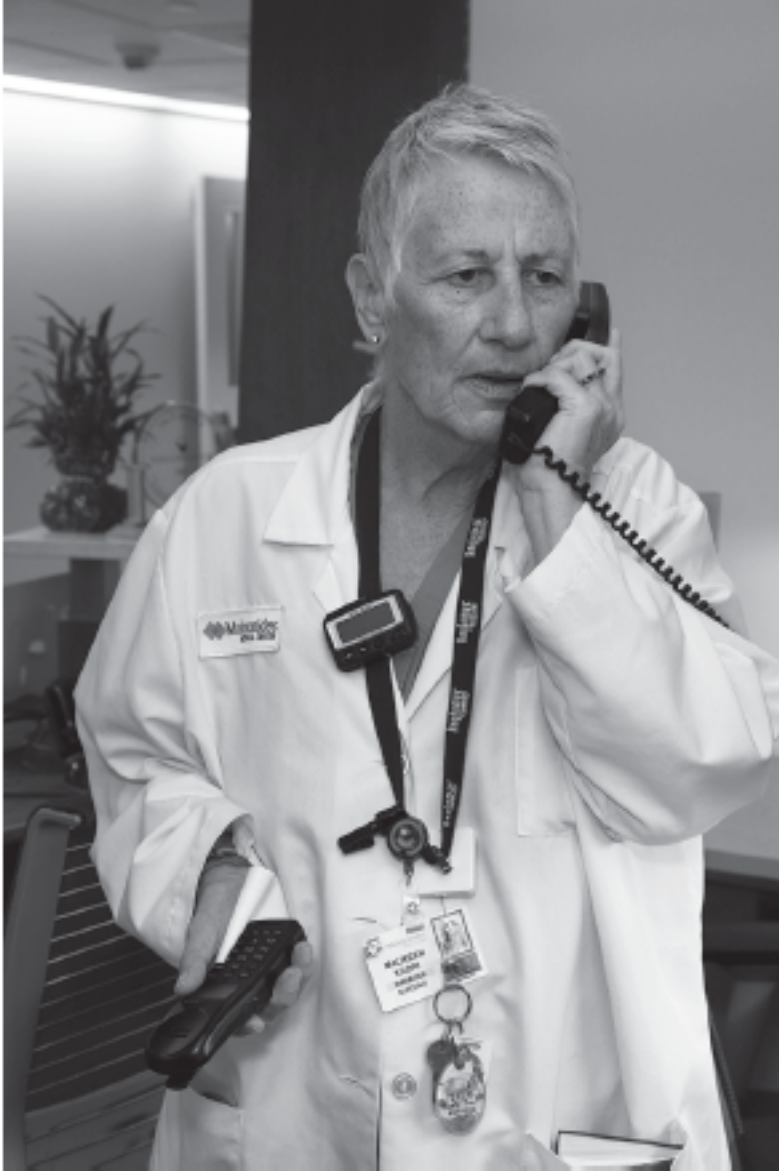
Example 2
CAPTION: Average rainfall and temperature by month in the Nakahechi Area. Data are from 2001 through 2005.
ALT TEXT: A bar graph shows that temperature and rainfall track closely, with the coolest months (January to March) being driest, and the hottest months (June to August) being wettest. Three months deviate from this pattern: among warmer months, April and September run especially dry, while among cooler months, January runs especially wet. (51 words)

Nakahechi

Nakahechi Area: average from (2001-2005)

- Precipitation (mm)
- Temperarture (°C)

	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Precipitation (mm)	106.6	90	137.4	132.6	229.8	287.2	306.6	364	196	211.8	135.6	66
Temperarture (°C)	3.7	5.1	8	13.9	18.1	21.6	25.4	25.4	23	16.8	11	5.6

Example 3
CAPTION: Telling Amanda a joke at our wedding. Photo by Mary Rogers.
ALT TEXT: A bride laughs happily as her groom whispers something in her ear. (12 words)

Example 4
CAPTION: Western Columbine, Long Ridge Open Space Preserve, California.
ALT TEXT: A red and yellow flower hangs downward. Its red outer part is a ring of five upright cones alternating with flat red petals. The mouths of the cones are yellow, and from among them descend long yellow stamens. (38 words)

Resources

For more instructions on writing alt text, see these resources:

Diagram Center Image Description Guidelines
http://diagramcenter.org/making-images-accessible.html

Describing Visual Resources Toolkit
https://describingvisualresources.org

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