



Alt Text Style Guide

Beginning in June 2025, all ebooks must comply with the European Accessibility Act in order to be available in the European Union. One of those provisions requires that ebooks include alt text for illustrative materials.

Beyond the legal requirements, however, you want your book to include alt text for numerous reasons, as do we. Alt text makes your book available to a wider audience, because it makes your book more accessible—for example, to readers who are visually impaired or to readers whose ebook reading device does not support a given graphic. Alt text also aids in search engine optimization used by vendors such as Amazon and Google.

What is alt text?

Alt text is short for “alternative text.” It is a written description of an image, graphic, or table that replaces an illustration when it is not available. Alt text is particularly useful for text-to-speech devices that turn written text into spoken word, a technology that frequently serves the visually impaired.

How to write alt text

Although one could say that alt text is a description of the image, good alt text conveys much more than that through its description by taking into account the purpose and context of the image. When writing your alt text, think about how you would describe the image to an associate over the phone. Consider the following: Why are you including the image? What information are you trying to convey? Employ the following formatting guidelines:

- Include [a] a brief description in addition to [b] an explanation of the image.

EXAMPLE: [a] A bar graph [b] indicates that the greatest number of foreclosures occurred in California and Florida.

- Focus on what the image means rather than just its visual features. Is there a tone you wish to communicate?
EXAMPLE: Richard Simmons, smiling overenthusiastically, poses in front of three women in jogging suits.
- Keep to twenty-five words if possible, fifty words maximum.
- Write in complete sentences when possible, and use present tense.
- Start with a capital letter and end with a period, even if it is not a complete sentence.
- Avoid special symbols and abbreviations.
- Do not start with the words “photo of” or “image of.” Avoid such redundancies.
- Capitalize acronyms so that the text-to-speech technology knows to read them as letters rather than as a word.
EXAMPLE: “AKA” instead of “aka.”
- Spell out contractions and smaller numbers.
- If an image contains text, such as labels, repeat that text verbatim in the alt text.
EXAMPLE: A sign in front of the store reads, “Open twenty-four hours.”
- For complex tables and graphs, alt text should be used in conjunction with the caption to convey the main thrust of the data presented.
EXAMPLE: Table title: State of Georgia Births by Year, 1900–1990.
Alt text: The highest number of births fall between the years 1946 and 1960, the lowest during the 1930s.
- Place the alt text in a separate double-spaced document, keyed by number to the corresponding illustrations.

When not to write alt text

- The main text or caption already describes the image in an informative manner. In this case, indicate that the particular item does not need alt text in your alt text manuscript.
EXAMPLE: No alt text needed—described in caption.

- The image is decorative only. Again, indicate that the particular item does not need alt text in your alt text manuscript.

EXAMPLE: No alt text needed—decorative.

Note: Consult with your acquisitions editor before including decorative images. The use of decorative illustrations is generally highly discouraged, especially in scholarly monographs.

Examples of Alt Text

EXAMPLE 1

Caption: Joseph-Francois Lafitau

Alt text: An oil painting shows a man in eighteenth-century ecclesiastical clothing.



EXAMPLE 2

Caption: Open barrel of wild ginseng roots being inspected by the USDA.

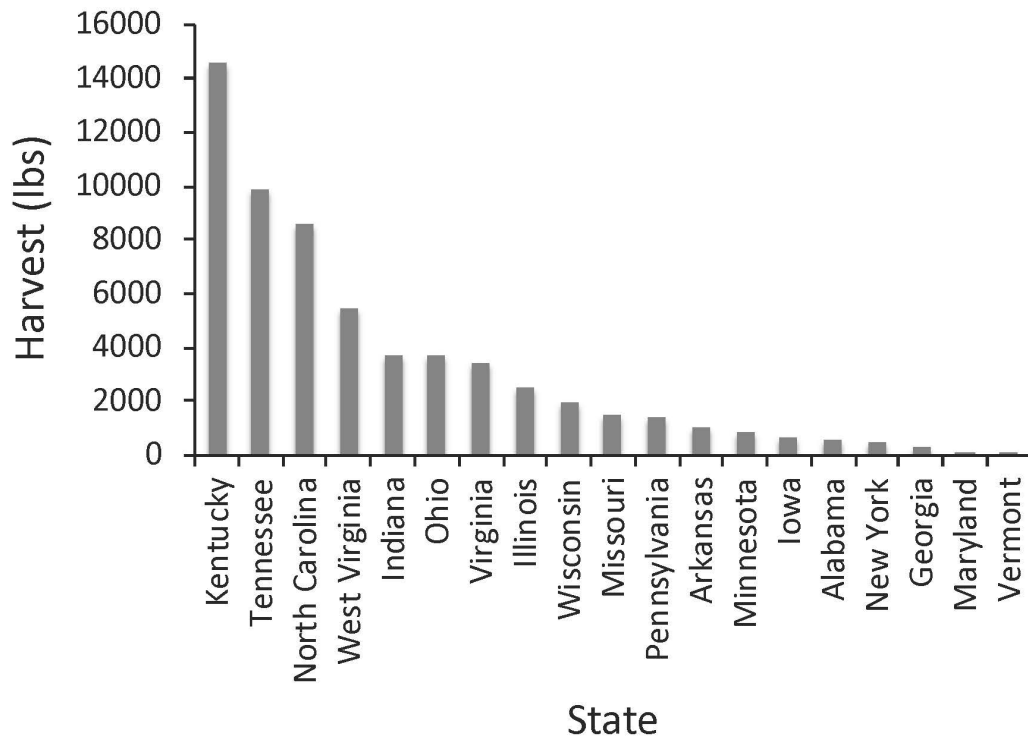
Alt text: No alt text needed—described in caption



EXAMPLE 3

Caption: Average ginseng harvest per year (2004–2013) from states where harvest is allowed.

Alt text: A bar graph shows that harvest is highest in the upper South states of Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, and West Virginia.



EXAMPLE 4

Caption: Shipley Do-Nuts offered an attractive location for hanging out.

Alt text: A clean, well-lighted storefront with a Shipley Do-Nuts sign above and patrons inside features a sign to its left that reads, “Open twenty-four hours.”

