

## GUIDELINES FOR WRITING ALTERNATIVE TEXT

*If you have any questions regarding alt text, please contact Production Assistant Alec Loganbill (atloganbill@ku.edu), Managing Editor Kelly Chrisman Jacques (kjchrism@ku.edu), or Production Editor Erica Nicholson (ericanicholson@ku.edu).*

### WHAT IS ALT TEXT?

Alternative Text (alt text) is a short text description of a specific photograph, map, graph, or other figure that is embedded (i.e., not visible on the page) in an eBook and used by assistive technology, such as a screen reader. Alt text is an essential tool that allows persons with a visual impairment or print disability to access your book fully and equitably. Alt text is meant to describe the nature, context, and purpose of an image so that someone can know what is displayed and why it is relevant to the text at hand without actually seeing the page.

The inclusion of alt text in your book is critical to making your book have the broadest possible impact. First and foremost, alt text allows many people with disabilities that affect reading to access, understand, and enjoy your work. Beyond this, these descriptions interact with indexing software and other helpful technologies and enhance the general discoverability of your work through improved search engine optimization with companies like Google and Amazon. Finally, after June 28, 2025, eBooks sold in the European Union will be required to comply with the European Accessibility Act, which requires, among other things, the inclusion of alt text for every image.

### WRITING ALT TEXT

Alt text is not a rote description of an image, nor is it the same as a caption, which is used to provide information to supplement what is visually apparent in the image. Alt text descriptions must describe the key elements and meaning of a figure in a way that every user can understand them, especially a user who cannot visually see the image.

When composing alt text, ask yourself:

- Why is this visual element here?
- What new information (i.e., not elsewhere in the text) is displayed?
- If the image were removed, how would I convey the same information?

Successful alt text follows a few general rules.<sup>1</sup> Alt text should be:

- **Concise.** Using a screen reader is time-consuming and unnecessarily long descriptions can create a burden on the user. Alt text should strive to be about 140 words and less if possible.
- **Targeted.** Descriptions should reflect the context and intent of the image, matching the focus of the text, chapter, and title. The alt text may have different descriptions depending on its purpose in a work.
- **Unique.** Do not repeat descriptions or text already provided in the caption or the surrounding text. When images are completely described by their caption or surrounding text, simply identify that an image is present.
- **Clear.** Spell out all contractions, numbers, and non-Latin letters and present the information in a logical and consistent order.
- **Simple.** Screen reading software does not read formatting in alt text, so do not use formatting, such as bullet points, in alt text descriptions.
- **Consistent.** Use the same level and style of language used within the main body of text.
- **Equitable.** Alt text should provide sight-disabled users the same experience that a sighted user would achieve from the image. Neither the image itself nor the alt text description should include more or less information, discussion, analysis, etc. than the other.

## WHAT TO INCLUDE AND EXCLUDE

### Writing Alt Text for Photographs:

Photographs are often the most straightforward types of figures for which to compose alt text. Please keep in mind the considerations listed above. Usually, you should lead with what sort of image it is (i.e., photograph, painting, newspaper clipping, etc.).

### Writing Alt Text for Maps:

When composing alt text for maps, carefully consider what key information your map is providing, why it is relevant to the surrounding text, and what of that information is also included in that main text. For example, if you describe specific troop movements on the battlefield in the main text and then include a map to visualize those movements, it is unnecessary to repeat those specific details in the alt text. Instead, a simple description of a map that shows troop movements will do fine. On the other hand, if a map depicts voting patterns in

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<sup>1</sup> General rules adapted from <https://www.routledge.com/our-customers/authors/publishing-guidelines/accessible-content/guide-to-writing-alt-text#>.

the United States and offers information that is not included elsewhere, more specific details will be necessary to include in the alt text.

### **Writing Alt Text for Graphs and Data Presentation:**

In addition to the rules and guidelines provided above, several considerations must be made for alt text attached to graphs and other visual presentations of data. Be sure to include the chart type (line graph, bar graph, scatter plot, etc.) and what data the graph is presenting (including the labels of X and Y axes, if applicable, is often helpful). Importantly, include specific data points, relationships, and trends that speak to why this figure is significant and relevant to the surrounding text. It is not always necessary to name every single data point—this may confuse the user more than clarify and inform. Remember, the primary users of alt text are persons who are having the alt text read to them and cannot see the page before them.

### **SUBMITTING ALT TEXT TO UPK**

Please include all of your alt text descriptions in the same document as your figure captions.

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON ALT TEXT**

[Describing Visual Resources Toolkit](#). The Background and Authors sections are particularly helpful.

[Sample Textual Descriptions for Illustrative Materials](#). Examples of alt text (alongside the image, caption, and surrounding text) of graphs, maps, photographs and portraits, page images, and other figures. *NOTE:* You may disregard any warnings your browser may prompt you with upon clicking this link; the document which is linked here is safe to view and download.