

The MIT Press Alt Text Style Guide

This style guide is a living document and is subject to revision. What follows are suggestions based on recommendations and best practices from various alt-text guides and accessibility initiatives.

What is alt text?

Alt text is the written description of an image that is read aloud by screen-reader software to help a visually impaired reader comprehend the relevance of an image as it pertains to the content of a document or web page. Alt-text should describe what the reader sees when looking at the figure. Alt-text should not describe why the image is important or what the image means; the caption and context should do that.

General guidelines for writing alt text

- Use simple plain language.
- Be specific.
- Be objective.
- Be concise. No more than 250 characters (including spaces) will be accepted.
- Write out abbreviations.
- Use present tense/action words.
- Use correct punctuation, including a period at the end.
- Do not start alt text with “a picture of...” or “an image of...” It is not necessary, since most screen readers will recognize an image from the code.
- Alt text should not include bold, italics, or other font style features as they are not recognized by screen readers. Do not use straight quotes or <, >, &, ", '. Curly (smart) quotation marks and apostrophes are okay.
- Do not repeat the caption or an argument from the body text.

Context

Context is key when drafting alt text and should be the primary consideration when deciding how to approach the alt text description of an image. If the reason for including the image isn't obvious, consider removing the image.

Example 1

A maple leaf might represent Canada, or it might just illustrate the leaf of a tree. Alt text must provide the content and function of the image. (<https://webaim.org/techniques/alttext/>)

Example 2

An image of a stadium may need to include descriptions of the athletes, architecture, or weather included in the photo, depending on the context of the article. (<https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/describe-content-images#:~:text=Images%20as%20Links%3A%20If%20the,rather%20than%20%E2%80%9Cquestion%20mark.%E2%80%9D>)

Best Practices for Various Image Types

Graphs/tables/charts

Example 1

Bad alt text: A graph.

Okay alt text: A graph of the global child mortality rate since 1950.

Good alt text: A graph of the global child mortality rate from 1950 to 2012, showing a downward trajectory. (<https://ask.up.hcommons.org/what-is-alt-text/>)

Example 2

Bad alt text: A pie chart about migration.

Okay alt text: A pie chart showing the main reason for migration to the UK in 2007.

Good alt text: A pie chart showing reasons for migration to the UK in 2007 with “definite job” and “formal study” as the largest sectors. (<https://ask.up.hcommons.org/what-is-alt-text/>)

People

Writing about people in an image can be tricky. As a rule, the alt text describing people should be guided by relevance and context. For example, if a passage is about intersectional activism, mentioning race/ability/gender expression, etc. in the alt text might be important. However, if a passage is about a performance and the image shows a crowd of people in the audience, the race/ability/gender expression, etc. of the people in the crowd may not need to be explicitly called out.

Equations

Use MathType for equations. If a situation arises where MathType is not possible, alt text or an extended description will be used.

Decorative Images

Images that are intended to add only decoration or paragraph breaks do not need alt text.

Images of Text

In instances where text is rendered as an image, the alt text should contain the same text that is presented in the image.

Additional Resources

- From AU Presses: <https://ask.up.hcommons.org/what-is-alt-text/>
- Decision Tree: <https://www.w3.org/WAI/tutorials/images/decision-tree/>
- Still stuck? Most universities and colleges have an accessibility department. Please consider reaching out to resources offered by your institution.

Interactive tools

<https://poet.diagramcenter.org/index.html>, <https://www.textboxdigital.com/textgallery>