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Writing Alt Text for Book Images

What Is Alt Text?

Alt text is a brief piece of text attached to the metadata of an image that describes the contents of the image verbally, in order to make it accessible to people who use screen readers or other assistive software.

The potential accessibility of ebooks is one of their biggest advantages, and implementing alt text for images in ebooks is a foundational part of that. In fact, it is a legal requirement for ebook distribution in the European Union starting in mid-2025, according to the European Accessibility Act.

How Do I Write Alt Text?

The most important thing to remember when creating alt text is that it substitutes the visual experience of its associated image for a verbal description. As the author, you are best positioned to write this text. When composing alt text, consider the following: Why did you include the image? What does it depict, and what is the significance in the context of the book?

General Guidelines

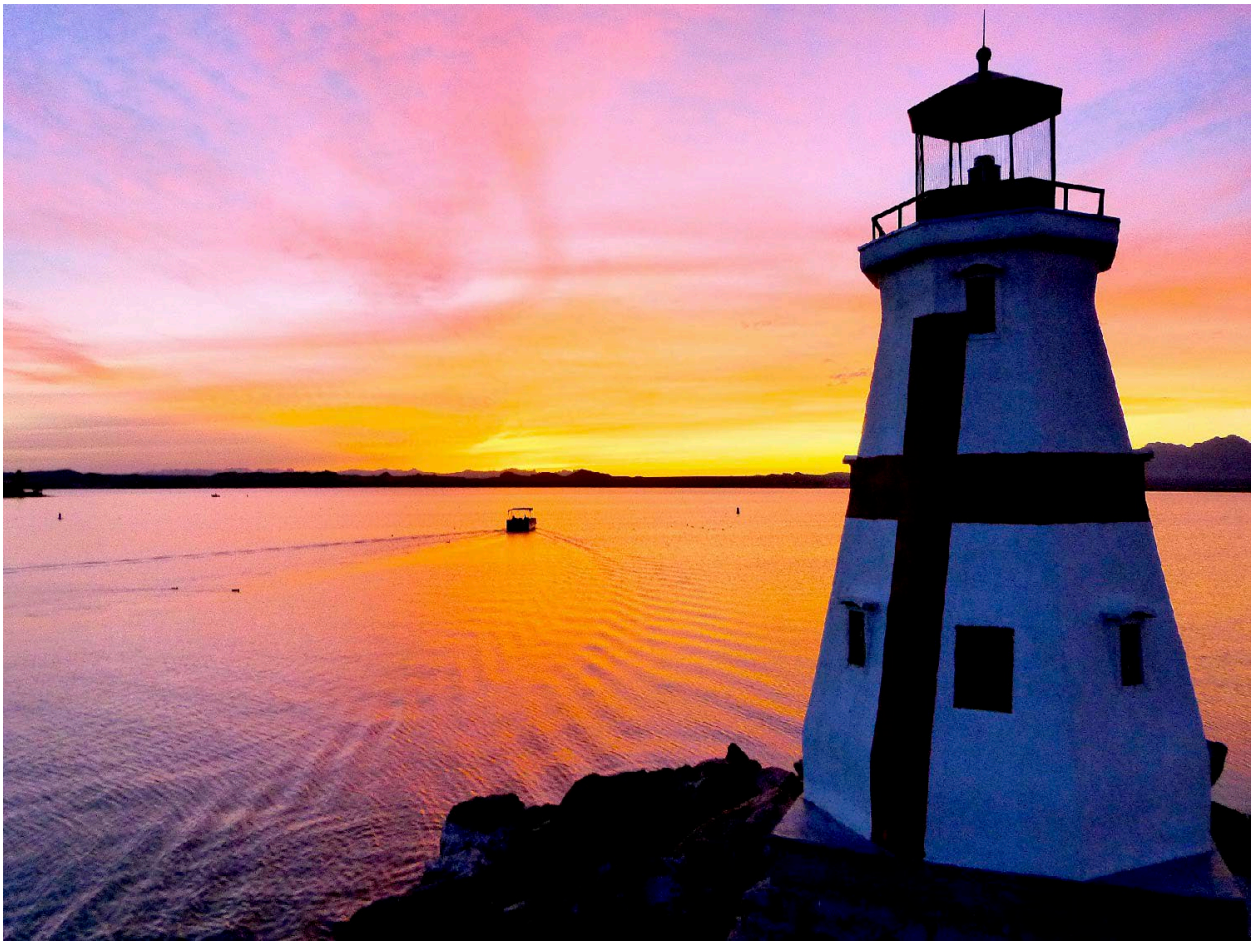
- Alt text should be concise but still descriptive enough that a reader can understand an image's purpose without being able to see it; each instance of alt text should be between 10 and 100 words in length.
- Do not start your alt text with "Image of" or similar; screen readers do this kind of labeling automatically.
- Any essential text or data within the image should be included in the alt text.
- Alt text does not preserve formatting, since it is intended to be read aloud, so avoid italics, bolded text, bullet points, etc.
    - Acronyms (pronounced as words, like NAFTA) should be written as normal, but initialisms (pronounced as separate letters, like USA) should have spaces between letters to ensure that text-to-speech doesn't attempt to pronounce them as words.
    - Use commas instead of parentheses.
    - Omit quotation marks.
    - Avoid symbols, asterisks, etc. and write them out as words instead if necessary.

- Do not include additional information or context that is not contained in the image itself.
- Do not repeat information already given in the surrounding text or in the image caption.
- Avoid subjective descriptors like “beautiful” or “ugly”.
- End each instance of alt text with a period.

Procedure

At the time of final manuscript submission, please include a complete list of alt text for every image in the book, following the format of the captions file. If any of the images are purely decorative or are adequately described by the caption alone, alt text may not be necessary. Describe such images as “Alt text: none” in the alt text file.

See below for examples of images, captions, and alt text.



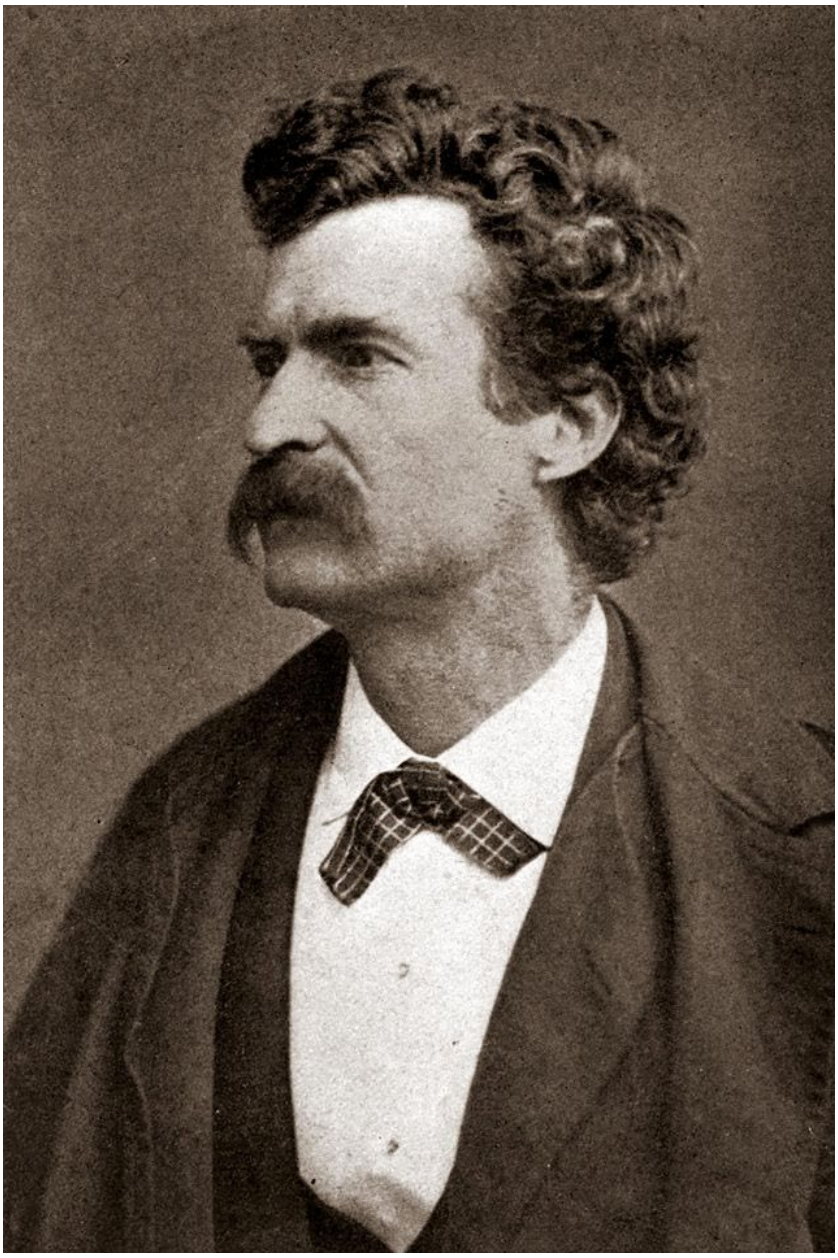
Caption: Figure 31. More than two dozen lighthouses line the shore of Lake Havasu and serve as navigational guides for boaters. Photo by Roger Naylor.

Alt text: Photograph from the shore of Lake Havasu at dusk. An unlit, whitewashed lighthouse looms large in the shaded foreground, while a motorboat sends ripples across the water as it heads toward the pink and orange sunset.



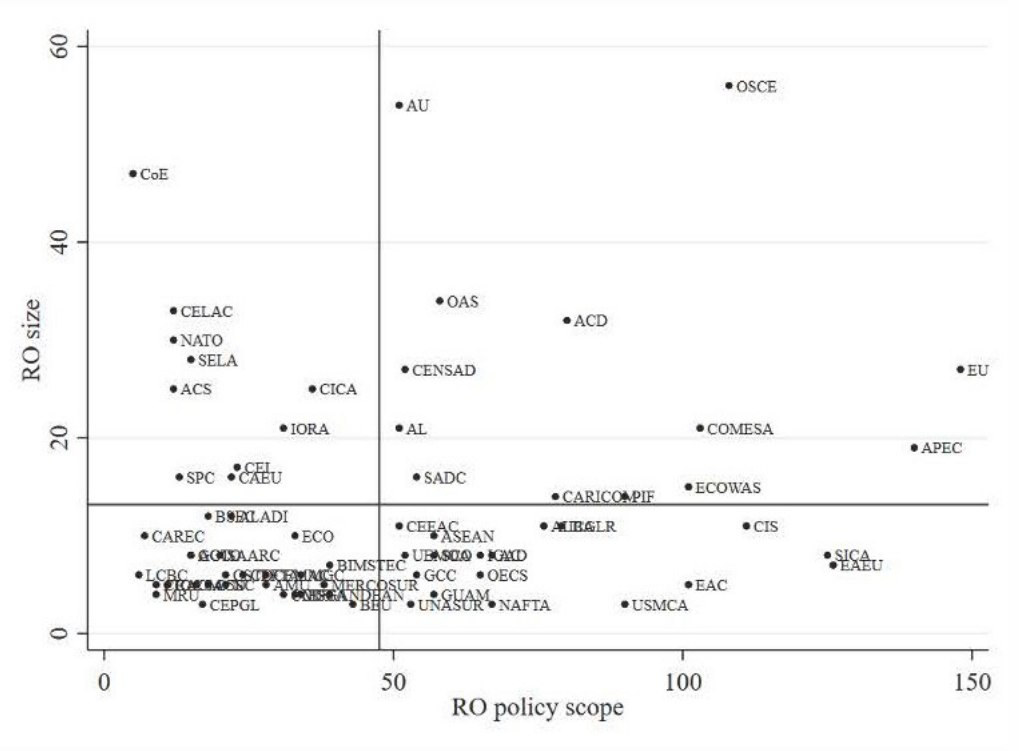
Caption: Figure 4.3. The NSCI new market building. The new market building is the first on the right of this road that connects the town to the Pan American Highway. Government/NGO-built houses are visible to the left of this major city road. (2006. Courtesy of John Hawkins.)

Alt text: Photograph of a concrete-paved street with a thin, grassy median. A person walks away from the camera on the right side of the street, and on either side are single-story buildings with terracotta tiled roofs. A small pickup truck is driving further down the street, and beyond it the street disappears over a hill beneath towering white clouds.



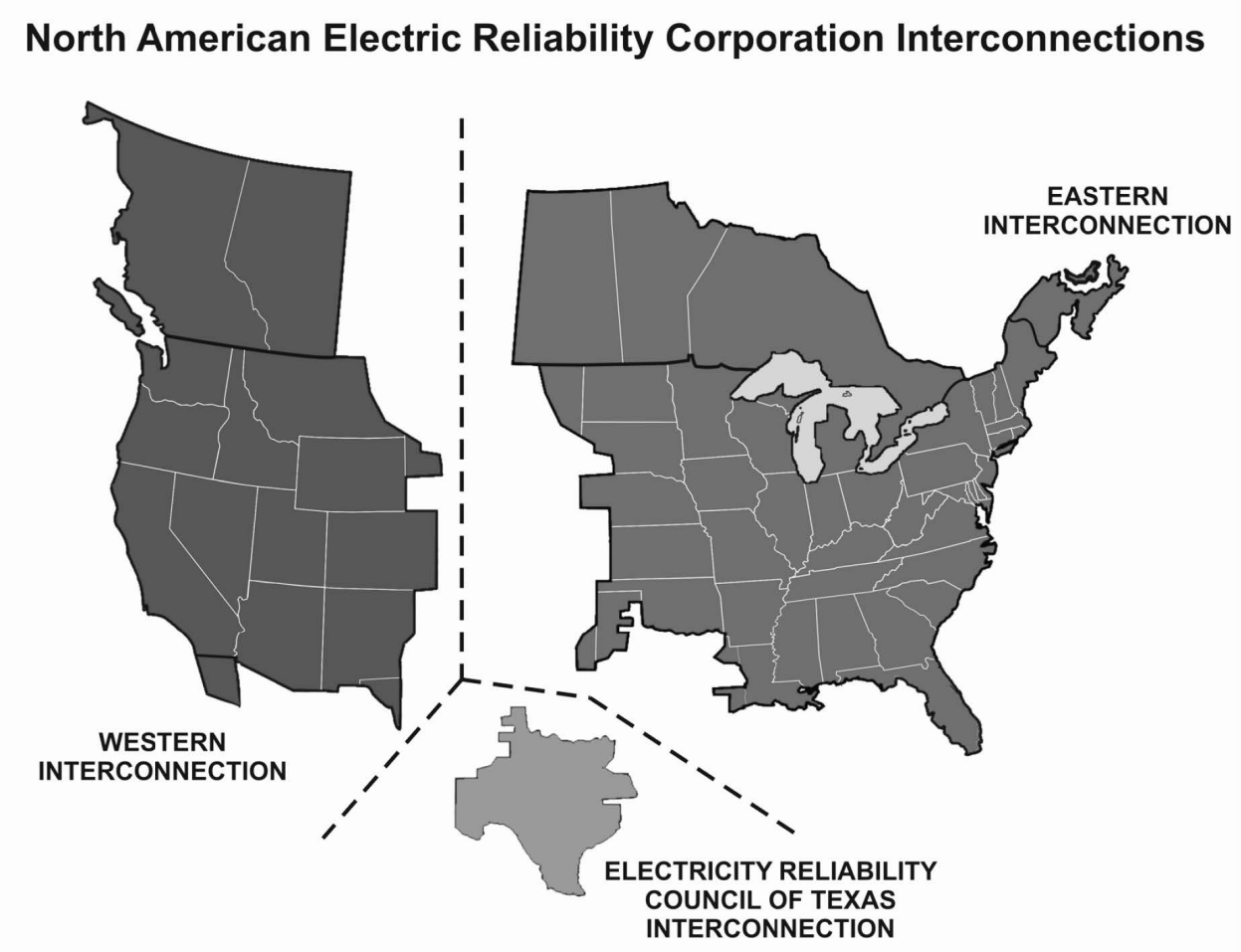
Caption: Figure 9. Mark Twain, 1872. Wikimedia Commons.

Alt text: Grainy, sepia-toned photograph of Mark Twain in three-quarter profile, wearing a dark suit with a white shirt and checkered tie. He has dark curly hair, bushy eyebrows, and a large handlebar mustache and is looking to the left with a serious expression.



Caption: Fig. 9.1. RO Policy Scope.

Alt text: Graph depicting the R O policy scope along the x axis and R O size along the y axis. The x axis ranges from 0 to 150 and the y axis from 0 to 60. All data are approximate. The graph is divided into four segments with a vertical bar at 48 R O policy scope and a horizontal bar at 15 R O size. The upper left segment comprises NATO, C I C A, and so on. The upper right segment comprises E U, CENSAD, and so on. The lower left segment comprises ACTO, ECO, and so on. The lower right segment comprises NAFTA, C I S, and so on. Outliers include C of E, in the upper left quadrant, at 48 on the x axis and 5 on the y axis; A U, in the top center, at 55 on the x axis and 55 on the y axis; O S C E, in the top right quadrant, at 110 on the x axis and 57 on the y axis; and E U on the far right, at 145 on the x axis and 27 on the y axis.



Caption: Figure 7.1. North American Electric Reliability Corporation Interconnections.

Alt text: A map showing the contiguous United States and southern Canada divided into three regions separated by dotted lines. The left-hand portion is labeled Western Interconnection, and includes the states west of the Rocky Mountains and the El Paso region of Texas, as well as part of Baja California and all of British Columbia and Alberta. The right-hand region is labeled Eastern Interconnection, and includes Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and all states east of the Rocky Mountains except for the majority of Texas. The bottom region is labeled Electricity Reliability Council of Texas Interconnection, which includes most of Texas.