Writing Alt-Text

The purpose of alt text is to make images in your book effective for visually impaired people. Alt text is context-dependent: It should address the elements of the image that are relevant to the narrative.

The descriptive portion of alt-text should be kept short. It shouldn't repeat information that already appears in the main text or the caption, nor is it necessary to indicate "a photo of…" or "a painting of…"

Try to limit the alt-text to 20 words or fewer. Images that contain text may be longer, as they usually need to quote the text.

This document shows different types of images that might be in a book or article, with examples of alt-text for each. Each category of image has its own page. Please find what best matches your type of image, to see an example of how that alt-text could be written.

The alt-text guidelines written by the University of Illinois Press cannot be beat, and in the interest of keeping this document brief, we recommend you read them:

https://www.press.uillinois.edu/authors/alt_text.html

Examples of Alt-Text with Context:

Illustrative images (photos, drawings):

Basic content alt-text: **The Queensboro Bridge**

Contextual content example 1: **The Queensboro Bridge at night, with bright white lights along the top of the structure** — if the discussion is about the impact of city lights on bird migration, star gazing, or similar

Contextual content example 2: **The Queensboro Bridge at night, with bright white lights along the top, and golden lights at road level** — if the discussion is about lighting conditions or light temperature

Contextual content example 3: **The Queensboro Bridge as seen from Manhattan, with apartments on Roosevelt Island in the background** — if the discussion is about housing in New York City, or about Roosevelt Island in particular

Images of text:

Images of text generally should have the entire text verbatim in the alt-text, unless only a portion is important. For instance, it's not necessary to quote the entire front page of the Chicago Daily Tribune as alt-text for the famous DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN headline.
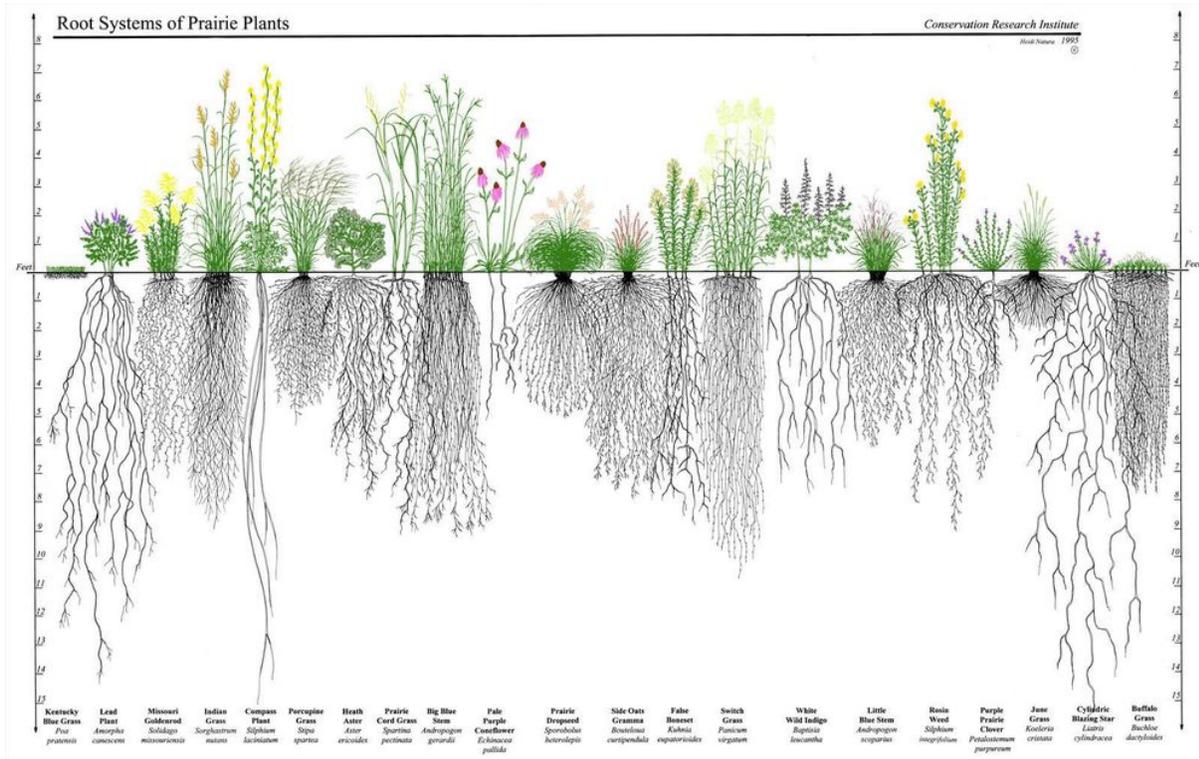

The alt-text for this image would be: **Chicago Daily Tribune front page with large headline DEWEY DEFEATS TRUMAN**

Whereas an image that is almost entirely important text—for instance, a social media post—should be quoted in its entirety. **Your computer has a function where you can open the image and it will recognize the text, allowing you to copy it** and then paste it into the Alt-Text document you submit with your manuscript. (On a Macintosh, this can be done in Preview.)

There are examples of alt-text for social media posts later in this document.

Incidental text in images:

If an image has incidental text that is expanded on in the main text or caption, you do not need to include it in the alt text. For example:

For this image, the caption would indicate "Root Systems of Prairie Plants" and the source credit, so those don't need to be in the alt-text.

The specific descriptions of individual plants and what their root systems look like would not be necessary if they are explained/discussed in the main text of the book or article.

Efficient alt-text: **A diagram showing the various root structures of prairie plants.**

Contextual alt-text with more detail: **A diagram showing the root structures of prairie plants. They vary from shallow to extremely deep. Some are minimal, while others branch into elaborate root networks.**

Charts and Tables:

A chart that is mostly text but where the specifics aren't immediately important, or will be discussed in the main text, can be given a summary in the alt-text. Example:

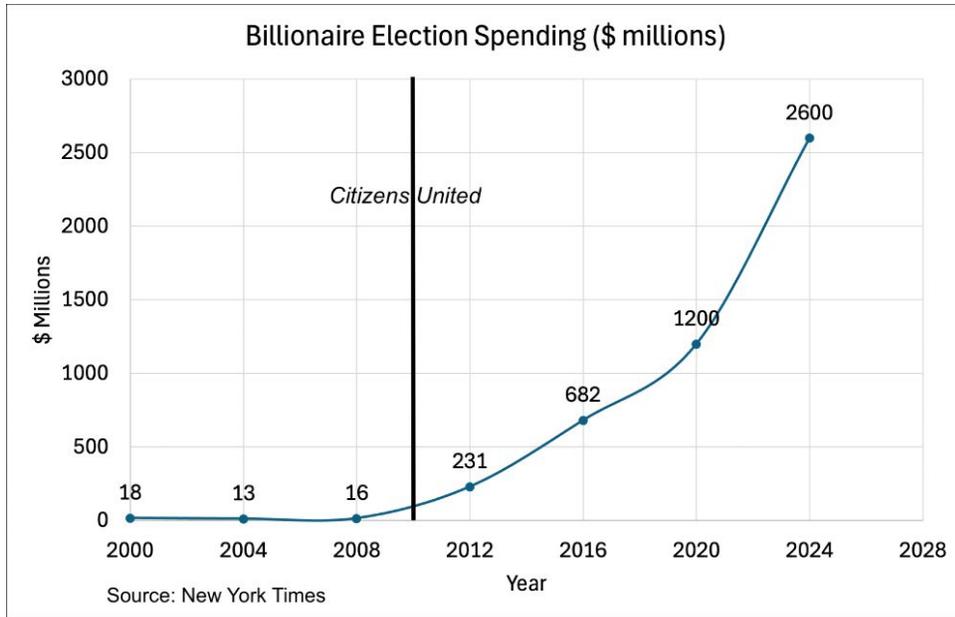| Deaths from Disease Accidents during the year 13th December 1720 to 12th December 1721					
Abortive	111	Infants	30	Surfeit	11
Aged	2309	Inflamation	4	Swelling	1
Ague	18	Leprosie	1	Teeth	1595
Apoplexy	88	Lethargy	8	Thrush	79
Asthma	167	Livergrown	5	Tissick	511
Bedridden	5	Looseness	42	Twisting of the Guts	46
Bleeding	2	Lunatick	44	Tympany	12
Bloody-Flux	10	Malignant Fever	1	Vomiting	16
Bursten	12	Measles	238	Water in the Head	128
Cancer	71	Mortification	182	Worms	91
Canker	17	Pain in the Head	1		
Childbed	299	Pain in the Limbs	1	Casulties	
Chin-cough	3	Palsie	43	Broken Leg	3
Chrisoms	43	Planet-struck	4	Bruised	3
Colick	71	Plurisie	31	Burnt	5
Consumption	3188	Purples	39	Concussion in the Brain	1
Convulsion	6876	Quinsie	12	Drowned	86
Cough	10	Rash	18	Excessive Drinking	17
Diabetics	5	Rheumatism	43	Executed	13
Dropsie	903	Rickets	119	Found dead	33
Evil	36	Rising of the Lights	133	Killed Accidentally	34
Fever	3331	Rupture	19	Killed by Falls	25
Fistula	18	St. Anthony's Fire	10	Killed with a Sword	4
Flux	12	Scald Head	1	Made away with themselves	52
French Pox	66	Scarlet Fever	2	Murded	11
Gangrene	1	Scurvey	3	Overlaid	67
Gout	56	Small-Pox	2375	Scalded	4
Gravel	5	Sores and Ulcers	30	Shot	3
Grief	12	Spleen	4	Smothered	3
Griping in the Guts	697	Spotted Fever	84	Strangled	1
Head-mould-shot	65	Stilborn	617		
Hooping Cough	20	Stone	67	Disease Total	25774
Horseshoehead	63	Stoppage in the Stomach	176	Casultiy Total	365
Jaundies	114	Strangury	9		
Imposthume	65	Suddenly	119	Total for the Year	26139

The chart title would include "Deaths from Disease Accidents during the year 13th December 1720 to 12th December 1721", so it isn't necessary to include verbatim in the alt-text. However, it is necessary to at least sum up the chart:

Efficient alt-text: **Chart listing nearly 100 causes of death, and the number of people who died from each.**

Whether you need to list in the alt-text particular causes or numbers depends on how much the chart is discussed in the text. That will be context-dependent, relative to the purpose of the chart in the book or article.

Graphs:

Graphs are similar to charts and tables. A summary is required, but not every data point. It is best practice to include the X- and Y-axis heads, and a list of the different lines being graphed. For example:

Efficient alt-text: **Graph. X-axis: Years listed from 2000 to 2028 in increments of 4 years (presidential election years). Y-axis: $Millions, from 0 to 3000 in increments of 500. The year 2010 is marked to indicate *Citizens United*. A line with a data point at each 4-year mark shows relatively flat before 2010, and then sharply climbs.**

The title and source of the graph would be in the regular caption. Presumably the main text would discuss specific numbers. If it did not, it's important to include the numbers in the alt-text.
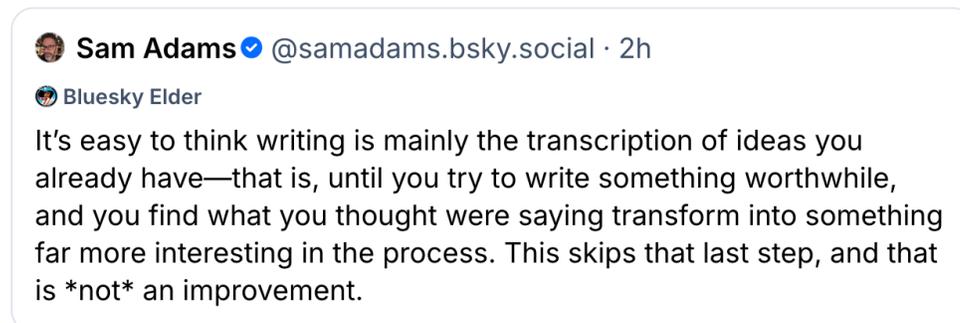
Screenshots of social media posts:

These contain text and thus will need the post text quoted in its entirety. Tags and similar cruft included by the media platform can be excluded unless they are the subject of the main discussion.

Please note: Your alt-text document will be copy edited. The editor will preserve misspellings or quirks of grammar that appear in the original image, just as they would any other directly quoted source.

Because of the nature of social media, it is important to put the statements into chronological order, even if the visual representation is not, e.g., because of a "quote post" function. For example:

⇄ Reposted by Wendy N. Wagner 🎃

Kevin M. Kruse ✔ @kevinmkruse.bsky.social · 2h
🧑 Montgomery Bell Academy   🧑 Private School   🌐 Bluesky Elder

Writing is thinking.

It's not some marginal boring task you can skip. It's the heart of it.

> 🧑 **Sam Adams** ✔ @samadams.bsky.social · 2h
> 🌐 Bluesky Elder
>
> It's easy to think writing is mainly the transcription of ideas you already have—that is, until you try to write something worthwhile, and you find what you thought were saying transform into something far more interesting in the process. This skips that last step, and that is *not* an improvement.

Efficient alt-text: **@samadams.bsky.social: "It's easy to think writing is mainly the transcription of ideas you already have—that is, until you try to write something worthwhile, and you find what you thought were saying transform into something far more interesting in the process. This skips that last step, and that is *not* an improvement." @kevinmkruse.bsky.social comments: "Writing is thinking. It's not some marginal boring task you can skip. It's the heart of it."**

Images with text and images:

If an image has both text and image, the alt-text must account for both. It should quote the words and describe the image. (If the words are noted in the main text of your book or article, it isn't necessary to include in alt-text.)

(You deserve a photo of cute kittens and a bad pun.)

Alt-text: **Three sleeping kittens curled together in a spiral. Text reads in all caps: Rare pic of a cat-egory 3 purricane!**