Guidelines for Writing Alt-Text

What Is Alt-Text and Why Do We Need It?

Alternative text (or alt text) is a short description that is digitally attached to illustrations in an e-book or online. It conveys the content of an illustration with words instead of visuals.

Alt-text is important for three reasons:

1. It ensures your images are accessible to all users, regardless of their visual ability, because it can be read aloud to users by screen reader technology.

2. It is indexed by search engines, allowing your images to appear in online search results and directing more visitors to your content.

3. It will appear on a webpage even if an image fails to load due to a user's low bandwidth connection.

In short, alt-text makes your e-book comprehensible and accessible, creating a better reader experience for all.

Which Types of Content Benefit from Alt-Text?

In a book, several types of content typically benefit from alt-text to enhance accessibility and usability:

1. **Photographs and Artwork**: All images, whether decorative or illustrative, should have alt-text to explain their relevance or content.
2. **Graphs and Charts**: These should include alt-text that summarizes the key information or trends represented.
3. **Diagrams and Infographics**: Alt-text should describe the essential information conveyed by these visual elements.
4. **Maps**: Provide a brief description of what the map shows, including regions or locations highlighted.
5. **Tables**: Although tables typically have their own headers and structure, complex tables might require a summary as alt-text. The alt-text should provide a brief but clear description of the table's content and context. Rather than describe every individual data point, it should summarize the table's purpose, structure, and key findings.

For all cases, the alt-text should be concise yet sufficiently descriptive to convey the essential information or function of the image, helping users who rely on screen readers understand the content fully. It's important to consider the role of the image in the narrative when crafting alt-text.

Basic Instructions

- In a Word document, prepare a list of illustrations in your manuscript and the alt-text associated with each. List illustrations by figure number.
- Include any artwork or photos that will appear on your book's cover.
- Do not include image thumbnails or captions in your document.
- Label the file "Author name_alt-text."
- Include your alt text file with your manuscript submission.
- Within this document, list all languages that appear in your manuscript; this will help the e-reader with proper pronunciation.

Best Practices

- **Be descriptive but not interpretive:** Factually describe what a viewer may see in an illustration. What is it intended to convey? Refrain from interpreting or analyzing the material; allow readers to form their own opinions.
- **Be concise:** A good rule of thumb is to write text that is under 100 words but more than 10 words (average length 25-30 words).
- **Keep it contextual:** describe the most important details that convey an image's function and meaning and situate it within the proper context.
- **Keep it readable**: avoid abbreviations and truncated text.
- **Be specific** if describing the source media: "a bar graph," "an oil painting," but not "an image."

What to Include in Alt-Text

- Include text (e.g., a street sign) that appears in the image.
- Do not repeat text contained in the caption or main text.
- Summarize graphs and charts using language that supplements the caption.
- Avoid AI-generated alt text, which is generally unsatisfactory because it can lack context.

For more guidance and examples of well-written alt-text, see the following further resources:
https://press.princeton.edu/resources/alt-text-guidelines
https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/describe-content-images
Image Description Guidelines - DIAGRAM Center