

Your Awesome Guide to Amazing Alt Text

Last revised: October 2018

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They say a picture is worth one thousand words. Thankfully, you won't need that many to write effective alternative text descriptions!

Images are powerful punctuations to help draw your reader into your content and create an experience that promotes interaction and engagement. But what if your reader can't see your visual? That's where alternative text descriptions enter the mix.

What is alternative text?

Alternative text (often called "alt text" or "alt description") is a textual representation of a visual depicted on screen. Derived from the alt attribute used to tag a text description in HTML code, alternative text is announced by screen reading apps when a user encounters an image in your content, website or app.

For example, when a screen reader user navigates to this image on the website, this is what is announced by JAWS for Windows:



Graphic Joe Quintanilla with the Boston Renegades dives head first into a base.

Notice that JAWS announces “Graphic”, which indicates to the screen reader user there is an image in the content. Then, automatically, JAWS reads the alt text to provide context for the visual.

Anatomy of awesome alt text

Effective alt text thrives on being clear and concise, while also being complete. Visuals offer tremendous punch to the meaning and takeaway of the experience, which is why you want to capture the power and intent of the graphic with your text equivalent.

As a storyteller, I use alt text as a means of drawing my nonvisual reader into the story in the same way my image would. Why did I use a picture of an athlete diving head first into a base? Because it captured an emotion and a feeling that made my story even richer. That’s what alt text must accomplish in a similar way for people who are blind or visually impaired.

Quick Tip: How would you describe it over the phone?

I find that the easiest way to craft alt text is to think about how you would describe your image to a friend over the phone.

Your friend can't see the picture, so you have to paint an image with your choice of words. Imagine you have 15-20 seconds and you need to verbalize the key aspects of what you see in that short time. What would you say?

Alt text is AMAZING when it tells a story without inserting details that aren't obvious when looking at the image. Capture the highlights, paint the picture and be concise. Some say that's a tall order... I say it's a creative challenge!

The do's and don'ts of alt text

Alt text is a blend of science and art. Yes, there are overarching guidelines that state what alt text should be (at a minimum.) But good alt text... the kind that grabs your reader's attention and paints a masterpiece in the mind's eye... that takes creativity and artistic know-how.

Here are some things to consider when crafting alt text for your visuals:

- DO mention information which describes the intent of your image.
- DO indicate the subject or primary focus of your image.
- DO describe key aspects of your image (when applicable to its intent), such as actions, clothing, facial expressions and scenery.
- DO note text shown in an image if the text is essential to the meaning of the visual.
- DO keep your alt text under 125 characters.
- DO consider using a longdesc (or long description) if you are describing complex images or data-heavy graphics. (Longesc is for another time and place.)

- DON'T open your alt text with "An image of" or "A picture of...". This is easily implied because... it's an image description.
- DON'T write a novel. Cash in those fancy words while crafting your content.
- DON'T provide alt text for decorative images. (You can achieve this by leaving the alt attribute blank.)
- DON'T try to do too much with your alt text. Keep it simple, to the point and focused on the meaning of the image.

But what if there isn't an alt text field available?

This is where you get to be a little crafty. Many social media sites allow you to upload images, but don't yet provide an alt text field to supply your description. No worries!

You can easily add your image description to the main caption or post content area for your visual. For example: Instagram doesn't offer an alt text field for images, but you can include your image description toward the end of your caption. I recommend you set off your image description in brackets and include the text "Image description:" just before your alt text. You can see several examples of this on the Texas A&M University Instagram account.

Just because a platform or tool doesn't offer native support for alt text doesn't mean we're off the hook for including everyone in in our content.

Wrapping up

Alt text is one of the best ways you can support those who navigate the web nonvisually. By describing your images for those using screen reading apps, you add another layer of meaning, excitement and intrigue for those who can't see them.

References and Resources

- [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\), Success Criterion 1.1.1](#)
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