Intro to Writing Alt Text

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What is alt text?

Alt text is short for "alternative text". It is a text description of an image, used to give information about the image to anyone using assistive technology who may not be able to perceive the image itself.

There is no character limit to alt text, but it is best to keep alt text short - within 150 characters if possible, or one to two sentences. This is because screen readers don't treat alt text like other text - the user has to hear all of it at once, and it can be hard to navigate or understand when alt text is too long.

Alt text, caption, or image description?

These are similar concepts with slightly different use cases.

Alt text is supplied programmatically to assistive tech. Most users who are not using screen readers will not encounter alt text, though it may be visible on hover depending on the program, site, or user settings.

Captions generally appear close to an image and provide information to all users. If the caption sufficiently describes the image, you don't need alt text also. (Tip: check a "decorative image" box in your program, or type two quotation marks: "" in the alt text field and screen readers will skip the image.)

Image descriptions are often included in things like social media posts by people who are trying to make their content more accessible. An image description is often used when the description is too long to make sense as alt text. This can be instead of or in addition to alt text defined programmatically. It is best practice not to include the exact same info in both the alt text field and in an image description, because this is redundant and annoying to screen reader users. If a long image description is present, the alt text can say something simple like "[extremely brief description]: detailed description in [location]."

How do I write alt text?

Step 1: Do I even need to write alt text?

Think about what you are trying to convey with the image. If the entire purpose of the image is also conveyed in text, then you do NOT need to write alt text. If the entire purpose of the image is to serve as decoration, then you also do NOT need to write alt text. If the program lets you mark as decorative, artifact, background, etc, do so, otherwise enter "" for the alt text.

Examples of decorative images:

- A section separator line
- A photo used as background texture in a poster
- Clip art or line drawings used for artistic or visual flair, that don't convey meaning that isn't also conveyed by text

Step 2: Yes, I need alt text

Go back to what you are trying to convey with the image. Write a description that allows your audience to understand that purpose. Keep it short, but make sure to convey the key details. If you have text within the image, you usually want to include that text in the alt text, unless it is also present in the main text of your content. Context is key - the same image can convey different things in different contexts.

Examples of alt text for different contexts

Context 1: an "about me" page of a personal website, sharing a picture of a dog.
- Alt text: "My dog, a tricolor husky named Chewy, resting happily on a walk near the water"

Context 2: a social media post about dog safety
- Alt text: "A large husky resting alone at the park with his leash held (off camera) by his owner"

Context 3: an email on a listserv about pet groomers
- Alt text: "A large husky malamute mix in a park with freshly brushed shiny fur and white face and chest"

Controversial alt text topics

Describing people is tricky! Questions like "should I describe skin color, gender, disability, etc." can be controversial. My stance is this: alt text should give the user the same information that a sighted person has when looking at it. Choosing not to describe something can impart just as much bias as choosing to describe it. When possible, I think it's best to describe people with attention to physical characteristics that people make judgments on, but not to impart your own assumptions about identity. If you know the identity of the people in question, it's fine to share. Otherwise, describe characteristics to the extent that it is relevant to the image and why you are sharing it. For example, I might describe someone as "a person with long hair and light skin" instead of "a white woman".

Want to learn more? Need specific help? Schedule a free 20 min conversation! If this resource has been helpful, feel free to drop me a tip!