

Writing Effective Alternative Text (Alt Text)

What is Alt Text?

Alternative text, commonly known as alt text, is a short description of an image that is read by assistive technologies or displayed if an image does not load. Users typically do not see alt text unless using screen readers or browsing with images turned off.

Every meaningful image should have alt text, making it essential to know how to write descriptions that are accurate, concise, and purposeful — without being overly detailed.

Alt text is different from a caption.

If an image includes a caption within the graphic, remove the embedded caption and instead provide it properly through your webpage system (such as Drupal) or directly in the page's HTML.

How to Write Good Alt Text

Good alt text communicates the essential information or function of an image in a clear, straightforward way. It should not overwhelm users with unnecessary details.



Example: Image: *Female student browsing apparel in the university bookstore.*

- **Poor alt text:** Student
(Too vague; it doesn't describe anything meaningful.)

- **Poor alt text:** Female student with brown hair standing in the University of Kentucky bookstore browsing sweatshirts with the word Kentucky written in uppercase blue text.
(Too detailed; overwhelms the user with minor, irrelevant information.)
- **Effective alt text:** Female student looking at apparel in the University of Kentucky bookstore.
(Clear and focused on the essential purpose of the image.)

Including relevant context can also help with search engine optimization (SEO). Users often search by institutional names, making your media easier to find.

Alt Text Best Practices

- Keep it concise and accurate — ideally under 125 characters.
- Make it meaningful — focus on the purpose, not decorative aspects.
- Don't duplicate captions — captions and alt text serve different functions.
- Skip alt text for purely decorative images — if the image doesn't add information, insert an empty alt attribute (`alt=""`) so screen readers ignore it.

Most images, however, add value. If an image is present on a page, ask: Does it contribute meaning? If so, it should have alt text.

Complex Images

When dealing with complex visuals (like detailed infographics or data-heavy charts):

- Use an empty alt attribute (`alt=""`) for the image itself.
- Provide a full text description of the information within the body content of the page, email, or document.

This method ensures users get the critical information without relying on the image, improving both accessibility and SEO. It also helps with usability — for example, if users view your content on a small mobile screen or if images fail to load.

Images Containing Text

In general, avoid using images that include important text. However, if text must be part of an image:

- Provide the **full text word-for-word** either within the alt text or, preferably, in the surrounding page content.
- Make sure users who cannot view the image can still access all the necessary information.

Key takeaway:

Effective alternative text ensures that all users, regardless of how they access your content, receive the same essential information — and strengthens the usability, accessibility, and visibility of your content.