

Digital Accessibility: Alt Text Writing Strategies

Introduction

Alt text (alternative text) provides descriptions for images so that screen readers can convey visual information to users who are blind or have low vision. Effective alt text makes websites, documents, and digital content more inclusive for everyone. Here's a guide to writing clear and effective alt text that applies to various professional settings.

1. Describe What's Essential

Focus on what's important about the image in its context. Alt text should convey the core message, ensuring that users understand the image's relevance to the surrounding content.

Example:

- *Image:* A chart showing sales growth over five years.
- *Alt text:* "Bar chart showing a steady increase in sales from 2018 to 2023."

2. Be Concise and Specific

Alt text should be brief but informative, ideally around 125 characters or fewer. Include essential details without overwhelming the user.

Example:

- *Image:* A conference room with people having a meeting.
- *Alt text:* "Eight people seated around a table in a conference room, discussing a project."

3. Consider the Context

Think about the image's role in its context. Describe elements that aren't covered in nearby text, and avoid redundancy.

Example:

- *Image on a webpage about sustainable farming:* A field of crops with solar panels.
- *Alt text:* "Field of crops with solar panels providing renewable energy."

4. Include Text in the Image (if Important)

If the image contains text that is crucial, make sure to include it in the alt text.

Example:

- *Image:* A flyer for a community event.
- *Alt text:* “Flyer for a community clean-up event on November 12th, 10 AM–2 PM, at Riverside Park.”

5. Avoid Phrases Like “Image of” or “Picture of”

Screen readers already indicate the presence of an image, so there’s no need to start with “Image of.”

Example:

- *Image:* A dog playing with a ball.
- *Alt text:* “Golden retriever playing with a red ball on the grass.”

6. Use Neutral Language for Describing People

When describing people, avoid assumptions about identity, feelings, or actions. Stick to observable characteristics.

Example:

- *Image:* A person in a wheelchair reading a book.
- *Alt text:* “Person in a wheelchair reading a book by a window.”

7. Be Mindful of Complex Visuals

For graphs, diagrams, or images with multiple elements, focus on summarizing the key points. This ensures that users receive the most important information without overwhelming detail.

Example:

- *Image:* A pie chart showing budget allocation.

- *Alt text:* “Pie chart showing 40% spent on marketing, 30% on salaries, 20% on operations, and 10% on research.”

Best Practices for Different Settings

1. **For Educators:** When sharing educational materials online, ensure your alt text explains diagrams, maps, or charts clearly, helping all students access the information.
 - a. *Example:* “World map highlighting countries with the highest rates of renewable energy usage.”
2. **For Web Designers:** Prioritize accessibility by describing website elements that convey key messages, such as banners, buttons, or navigation features.
 - a. *Example:* “Navigation button labeled ‘Contact Us’ leading to a form page.”
3. **For Marketing Professionals:** Include alt text that captures product features or campaign details, ensuring all users can engage with your content.
 - a. *Example:* “Smartphone with a 6.5-inch screen and triple camera setup.”
4. **For Library or Archive Staff:** When digitizing materials, describe images that reflect historical significance or detailed visuals.
 - a. *Example:* “Black and white photograph of students reading in a 1960s university library.”

Using Generative AI as an Alt Text Writing Tool

Generative AI, like ChatGPT, can be a helpful tool for writing alt text, especially when dealing with a large number of images or when you need quick, accurate descriptions. To make the most out of it, provide clear context about the image, including details like the setting, objects, people, and the purpose it serves. This will help the AI generate more accurate alt text.

For example, if you're describing an image of a campus building, mention specific elements like the building's architecture, surroundings, and any signage visible. Remember to review and refine the AI-generated text to ensure it's concise, relevant, and inclusive, as alt text is meant to communicate essential information to all users.

In summary, Generative AI can assist in crafting alt text efficiently, but human oversight ensures the final descriptions meet accessibility standards and provide value to all users.