

THE CLEAR FRAMEWORK: ALT TEXT FOR IMAGES

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WHAT IS ALT TEXT?

Alt text—short for “alternative text”—is a written description that communicates the content and purpose of an image to individuals who cannot see it. While it may appear simple, alt text plays a critical role in ensuring that digital content is inclusive, accessible, and meaningful to everyone—regardless of how they access it.

When screen readers encounter an image, they rely on the alt text to describe what’s visually present. If an image doesn’t have alt text, that information is lost. Whether you’re uploading a chart in Blackboard, inserting a picture into PowerPoint, or designing a webpage, including thoughtful alt text allows all users to access the full learning experience.

WHY IS ALT TEXT IMPORTANT?

We live in a highly visual world, but not everyone experiences visual content in the same way. Here’s why alt text matters:

- 1. **Accessibility First:** For people who are blind or have low vision, alt text is the gateway to understanding what sighted users see. Without it, images become silent and invisible barriers.
- 2. **Comprehension and Context:** Images often carry vital meaning—think of a graph showing student achievement trends or an infographic summarizing a complex idea. Without alt text, that meaning is lost for users who can’t see the visual. Effective alt text describes both the content and the *function or context* of the image.
- 3. **Compliance and Commitment:** Legal standards such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and WCAG 2.2 require that digital content be accessible. But beyond compliance, using alt text demonstrates your commitment to equity, inclusion, and universal design.
- 4. **Inclusive Learning:** Students engage with material in diverse ways. Alt text supports learners with disabilities, neurodiverse students, multilingual learners, and even those accessing content on slow internet connections where images fail to load.

In short, alt text isn’t optional. It’s essential. By describing every image, we create a learning environment that values equity, understanding, and full participation. Alt text may be invisible to most, but for those who need it, it makes all the difference.

WHO BENEFITS FROM ALT TEXT?

While alt text is a requirement for accessibility, its benefits extend to everyone. Consider the following:

- **Blind or low-vision users:** Alt text makes images and visual content accessible through screen readers.
- **Students in mobile or low-bandwidth environments:** When images don't load properly, alt text ensures content remains available.
- **Multilingual learners:** Alt text can reinforce language learning by pairing concise, descriptive text with visual content.
- **Neurodiverse learners:** Those who process information differently can benefit from an additional layer of context and clarity.
- **Content creators:** Writing alt text forces you to clarify the instructional purpose of your visuals, enhancing overall teaching and learning quality.

HOW TO WRITE EFFECTIVE ALT TEXT

Writing alt text is both an art and a skill. Think of it as telling a story in a sentence—providing enough context for someone to understand the image's message, without overwhelming them.

Here are some best practices:

- **Be concise, but descriptive.** For simple images, one brief sentence may suffice.
 - *Example:* "Student sitting under a tree reading a book."
- **Avoid redundancy.** Don't write "Image of..."—screen readers already announce the presence of an image.
- **Capture function and purpose.** If the image has a function (like a button), describe what it does:
 - *Example:* "Search icon with magnifying glass."
- **Handle complex visuals thoughtfully.** For charts, graphs, and infographics, summarize key takeaways in the alt text and provide a longer description in the surrounding text or as a caption.
- **Mark purely decorative images correctly.** If an image adds no content value (like a border or flourish), it should be marked as decorative (alt="") so screen readers can skip it.

DO/DON'T SUMMARY TABLE FOR WRITING ALT TEXT

Use this quick-reference table to guide your alt text creation:

Do	Don't
Describe the image's content and purpose in one clear sentence.	Use vague descriptions like "image" or "graphic."
Focus on what the image conveys that's essential for understanding the content.	Include unnecessary visual details (e.g., colors or layout) unless relevant.
Mark decorative images with alt="" or select "decorative" in your platform's settings.	Leave decorative images untagged or give them empty or misleading alt text.
Provide extended descriptions or context for charts, graphs, and infographics.	Assume users can interpret visuals without explanation.
Use plain language and consider diverse audiences.	Use jargon, abbreviations, or overly technical terms without context.

HOW TO ADD ALT TEXT IN COMMON PLATFORMS

Alt text should be part of your content creation routine, just like checking spelling or adding a title slide. Here's how to add it:

- **Microsoft Office:** Right-click the image -> "Edit Alt Text" -> Enter your description or mark as decorative.
- **Google Docs/Slides:** Click the image -> "Format Options" -> "Alt Text."
- **Blackboard:** In the image editor, enter a description in the "Image Description" or "Alt Text" field.
- **Web Platforms (WordPress, Drupal, etc.):** Use the "Alt Text" field when uploading media.
- **Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram):** These platforms support custom alt text—look for "Edit Alt Text" when uploading images.

Pro Tip: If you're copying and pasting images across platforms, check to ensure the alt text carried over. Some systems strip it out!

TIPS FOR HIGH-QUALITY ALT TEXT

1. **Consider the image's purpose.** Ask: "What information does this image convey that a student must understand?"
2. **Use plain language.** Make it understandable to a broad audience—including students whose first language may not be English.
3. **Describe tone or emotion, if needed.** If the image conveys an emotion (e.g., a person celebrating), capture that.
4. **Add additional detail in context.** Use captions, figure descriptions, or surrounding text to elaborate on complex images.

GOING BEYOND THE BASICS: HANDLING COMPLEX VISUALS

While simple images can be described in a sentence or two, complex visuals—like charts, graphs, infographics, diagrams, and instructional images—often require more care. These visuals often carry critical information, so their descriptions must be accurate, meaningful, and complete.

Alt Text for Charts and Graphs

Charts and graphs present data visually, and your goal with alt text is to summarize the *insight*, not just the visual layout.

- **Do:** Summarize the trend or takeaway.
 - *Example:* "Bar chart showing that online enrollment doubled from 2020 to 2024."
- **Don't:** Describe every axis or label unless it's essential.
- Use a figure caption or nearby text to offer deeper analysis.

Additional Explanations for Complex Images

Some images—like infographics or instructional diagrams—require more than a single sentence. In these cases:

- Provide a high-level summary in the alt text.
- Offer detailed explanations in figure captions or surrounding text.
- Link to a longer description if needed.

Example: "Infographic showing six stages of the research process. Each stage is described in the paragraphs below."

Regular Review for Clarity

Alt text should be revisited regularly to ensure it's still effective. During course updates, ask:

- Does the image still serve a purpose?
- Is the alt text clear and meaningful?
- Could another user understand this image just by reading the description?

Quick Tip: Consider asking a colleague or student using assistive tech to review your content for clarity.

COMMON MISTAKES WHEN WRITING ALT TEXT

Even with good intentions, alt text can miss the mark. Here are common pitfalls to avoid:

- **Starting with "Image of..."** – Screen readers already announce it's an image.
- **Describing appearance instead of meaning** – Focus on **WHY** the image matters, not how it looks.
- **Forgetting decorative images** – Always mark them as decorative so screen readers can skip them.
- **Ignoring complex visuals** – Charts, graphs, and infographics require summaries or extended descriptions.
- **Copy-pasting images without checking the alt text** – Not all platforms retain alt text during copy-paste.
- **Using overly technical language** – Keep it clear and plain for broad accessibility.

Tip: When in doubt, ask yourself, "If I couldn't see this image, what would I need to know to fully understand it?"

Sample Alt Text by Image Type

Image Type	Example Alt Text
Icon	"Trash can icon used to delete a file."
Chart	"Line graph showing steady increase in student retention from 2019 to 2023."
Photograph	"Student presenting a robotics project at the campus showcase."
Decorative	alt="" or marked as decorative using built-in tools.
Infographic	"Infographic outlining five steps of effective study habits. Detailed steps listed below."

USING AI TOOLS TO ASSIST WITH ALT TEXT

AI-powered tools can be helpful in drafting alt text, especially for large volumes of images or content updates. These tools can scan images and provide a suggested description, giving you a starting point for manual refinement.

- **Microsoft 365:** Offers suggested alt text for images in Word and PowerPoint.
- **Adobe Creative Cloud:** Some applications use AI to generate accessibility tags and descriptions.
- **Facebook and Instagram:** Use automatic alt text, which can be manually edited for accuracy.

- **Free AI-based tools** (like Microsoft's Azure Cognitive Services or Google's Cloud Vision): Can generate labels or captions.

AI tools like Microsoft 365, Google Cloud Vision, or Facebook's automatic alt text can offer helpful starting points—but they're not foolproof. Consider the following when using AI-generated alt text:

- **Lack of Context:** AI doesn't understand the instructional purpose or relevance of an image in your content.
- **Missed Nuance:** It may fail to capture emotion, symbolism, or cultural references.
- **Inaccuracy:** AI sometimes misidentifies images, especially with low contrast or busy visuals.
- **Overgeneralization:** Descriptions can be too generic to be helpful (e.g., "person smiling" without context).

Best Practice: Use AI to draft alt text, but always review, revise, and refine to align with your audience, subject matter, and accessibility goals.

CLEAR FRAMEWORK SELF-ASSESSMENT

Yes/No	Mechanical Level <i>Basic Alt Text</i>	Routine Level <i>Descriptive Alt Text</i>	Refined Level <i>Comprehensive Visual Descriptions</i>
CLEAR Framework Component: Describe Every Image	Alt text is present but inconsistent or vague. Decorative images are not always marked.	All images include descriptive alt text. Decorative images are correctly marked. Charts and graphs have brief descriptions.	Complex visuals include extended descriptions or contextual explanation. Alt text is reviewed and updated regularly.
WCAG 2.2 Alignment	1.1.1 (Non-text Content), 1.3.4 (Orientation)	1.4.5 (Images of Text)	3.3.7 (Redundant Entry)
Instructor Tip	Add alt text to all instructional images.	Use meaningful, descriptive text for visuals and charts.	Refine and regularly update alt text to ensure clarity and usability.
Checklist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every image has alt text • Decorative images inconsistently marked 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detailed descriptions for all visuals • Decorative images clearly identified 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charts and graphs include explanations • Alt text is reviewed regularly for effectiveness

