



# The Everyday Alt Text Guide



Brought to you by Bender Consulting Services, Inc.'s Digital Accessibility Testing Team

## What is alt text?

Alt text or alternative text is a label added to images that provides non-visual representation or written copy as an alternative to the image, meaning it only uses words.

## Who benefits from alt text?

Alt text allows screen reader software to recognize the image and provide a description to someone who has low vision or is blind. Although alt text is a component that is required to make documents and websites accessible for screen reader users, it is important to recognize that everyone benefits when alt text is used correctly. Alt text appears in place of images when the graphic fails to load on a user's screen. Websites that use alt text successfully also become higher ranked in results provided through search engines, as the alt text is factored in when search engines conduct content analysis of websites.

## Is alt Text a requirement?

Yes. There are legal requirements in the United States requiring that the digital environment be accessible. Some laws and guidance around digital accessibility include:

- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973
- Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973
- Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.x
- The HTML5 specification

## When do I use alt text?

Alt text should be used any time there is an image applied to a website or document.

## Five Simple Steps to Employing Meaningful Alt Text

### Step 1: Identify Image Type

The first step to ensuring the correct use of alt text is understanding the type of images that are used in documents and websites. Images fall into three categories, essential, decorative and tapestry, which define the purpose of the image. Understanding what the image is being used for will ensure that alt text is applied in a way that is beneficial to someone using a screen reader.

### Essential

An essential image is an image that communicates knowledge to the audience that is not available in some other way. This could be data, content, the meaning of an icon with a link or anchor used for document or site navigational purposes, logos, or other visual representation of information.

## Decorative

A decorative image is an image that is added to provide a visual component to the document, rather than an informative component. Decorative images are typically used to compliment content, but not to add essential information. This could be a visual representation of a product or people using a product that does not include steps for operation, an image to associate with the title of a section of content, clipart, or other picture that does not communicate important knowledge to the audience.

## Tapestry

Tapestry refers to elements within a document that are used for the purpose of adding aesthetic value only. These visual elements include items such as borders or page textures. Tapestry does not communicate knowledge to the audience.

## Step 2: Determine What to Put into Alt Text Field

All images should have alt text. It is not necessary to use the terms image, graphic, or picture; a screen reader provides this information inherently. This means that providing this label creates a duplication of information, such as 'image image' for the screen reader user. The type of image determines what is appropriate to include.

## Essential Images

When determining Alt text for an essential image, be purposeful about how the image is described. Any written content relayed in an image will be invisible for a screen reader user unless it is also provided in alt text. Only the essential information associated with the image needs to be reported in the alt text. Long descriptions of the image can distract from the primary content on the page and lead to a negative user experience. The aesthetics of an essential image does not need to be described. Images or icons with hyperlinks or anchors should have unique names for each destination. Avoid stuffing alt text with searchable keywords as this does not relay meaningful information to a screen reader user and can cause your site to be registered by search engines as spam.

### *Key Takeaways for Creating Meaningful Alt Text for Essential Images*

- ✓ Focus on creating useful, information rich content
- ✓ Ensure all text in the image is included
- ✓ Use keywords appropriately and in context with the page content
- ✓ Limit to 125 characters
- ✓ Apply unique names to hyperlinks and anchors

## Decorative Images & Tapestry

Decorative images and tapestry should include blank alt text. Blank alt text is not the same as having no alt text. Having blank alt text removes the image from the screen reader view of the webpage. Blank alt text is typically created by typing ["" ] into the alt text field or labeling the image as 'decorative' if the program offers that solution.

## Step 3: Add Alt Text

How you add alt text to images will change depending on what you are using to create the document or website. Some interfaces and software may attempt to auto-populate alt text. This is usually determined by

the image file name or an embedded link. One way of helping these tools to be more successful is to ensure meaningful file names when saving images or providing descriptions to images held in libraries. However, these tools do not replace the need to manually check and create alt text. It is important to always ensure that alt text is meaningful and relevant. Below are some commonly used tools with direction on how to apply alt text.

## MS Office

The option to add alt Text to images for MS Office programs can be found within the 'picture format' tools. This will allow you to describe the image or mark it as decorative.

## Adobe

To add alt text to images when creating a PDF in Adobe, access the 'accessibility tools' option. This will automatically cycle through all document images allowing you to add alt text or mark images as decorative.

## Google Docs and Slides

After adding the image, highlight the image and 'right click' or press 'Ctrl+Alt+Y' and a menu will appear that allows you to select to add/edit alt text. This will open a dialog box that will allow the alt text description field to be edited.

## Web Environment

### *HTML*

When writing HTML code, the correct syntax for an HTML image is:

```

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The "text description" is the information displayed about the image in alt text.

### *WordPress*

Alternative text can be added as soon as an image is uploaded into WordPress via the media library. Do not confuse alt text with the Image Title Attribute in WordPress. The Alt Text and Image Title Attributes can be added/changed within image details during the edit process.

## Social Media

### *LinkedIn*

Select Add Description. This should be located at the top right corner of the image. The option to Add and Edit Alt Text is not available when using mobile devices, so this step should be done from a computer.

### *Facebook*

When adding a photo to the News Feed, select the Edit Photo option. Then select Alt Text from the Edit Photo menu options. The automatically generated alt text will appear and can be edited here.

### *Twitter*

To be able to add alt text to images in Twitter, start with ensuring alt text is enabled in the accessibility settings. In the Twitter app, go to the account settings, and select 'Compose image descriptions' from the menu. The next time an image is shared or 'tweeted,' the option to add a description will be laid over the image. Selecting to add a description will allow alt text to be added to the post.

## *Instagram*

Adding alt text to images in Instagram occurs during the uploading and editing process. After selecting the filter and editing the image, select next. Then select Advanced Settings at the bottom of the screen. From here, select Alt Text and edit the content.

## *Constant Contact*

When selecting an image from the media library or uploading an image from the computer, a box will appear below the image file name. The box will show the 'description' for the image. This is where alt text can be added or edited as appropriate.

## **Step 4: Check Alt Text for Typos**

Just like spell check features do not check for errors of words within images, Alt text is not included when using document spelling and grammatical check features. This means someone should manually review alt text to ensure that there are no typos, spelling or grammatical errors. A tip that some people use is to build descriptions in a separate document, use spell check and grammar check, and then paste into the alt text field.

## **Step 5: Perform an Accessibility Check**

Many commonly used software packages, such as MS Office and Adobe now have accessibility checker features. These features are useful in identifying accessibility errors, including missing alt text. These tools, while valuable, should not be the only thing used to ensure alt text is correct. Someone should proofread the document for missing or incorrect alt text.