



Alternative Text (alt text) Best Practices Guide

This best practice guide is intended as a general overview for PSEC staff who are creating digital documents containing images such as reports, digital promotions, emails, social media, or adding images to a website, and is not intended as an in-depth resource for web developers. Additional resources are available for more detailed information.



Contents

What is alt text?	2
How do I add alt text?	2
On a website	2
In a document	3
In Adobe InDesign	3
In Adobe Acrobat	3
How to write alt text	4
Consider the context.....	4
Shorter is better.....	5
Complex images.....	5
Images as links.....	5
Avoid repetition	5
Use proper grammar	5
Don't use the title-attribute.....	5
When NOT to use alt text	6
Decorative images.....	6
Icons with text labels	6
Images with links.....	6
Captions vs alt text	6
How to treat decorative images	7
On a website or newsletter	7
In PDFs	7
In other documents and emails.....	7
Additional resources for alternative text:	7
Summary	8



What is alt text?

Alt text is a text description of an image that's shown to people who are using assistive technology or when an image doesn't load properly on a webpage. Among others, alt text helps:

- people with low vision or who are Blind
- people who have turned off images to save data
- search engines

People with low vision or who are Blind may use assistive technology, such as screen readers, to navigate the web. A screen reader transforms visual information to speech or braille. To do this accurately, your website or document images need to have alt text.

Alt text is so important that it is the **first success criterion** of the Web Content Accessibility Guideline (WCAG). The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) requires that websites and digital content follow the guidelines outlined in the WCAG.

All non-text content that is presented to the user has a text alternative that serves the equivalent purpose.
– WCAG guideline 1.1.1

How do I add alt text?

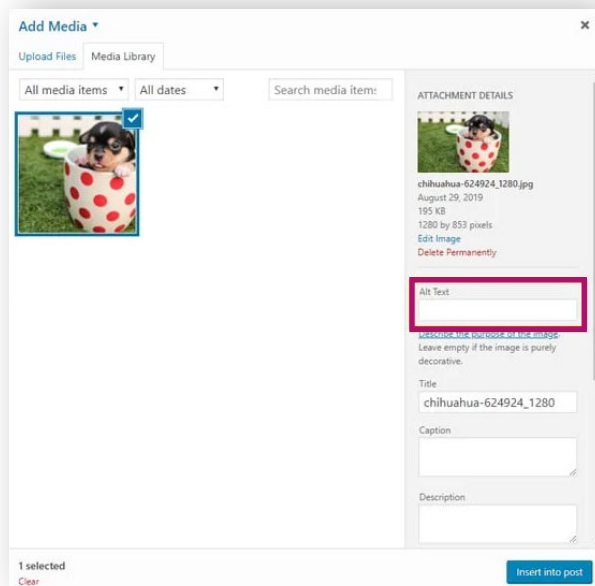
ON A WEBSITE

In html, alt text is an attribute in an image element:

```

```

Most content management systems (CMS), like Wordpress, let you create the alt text when you upload an image:

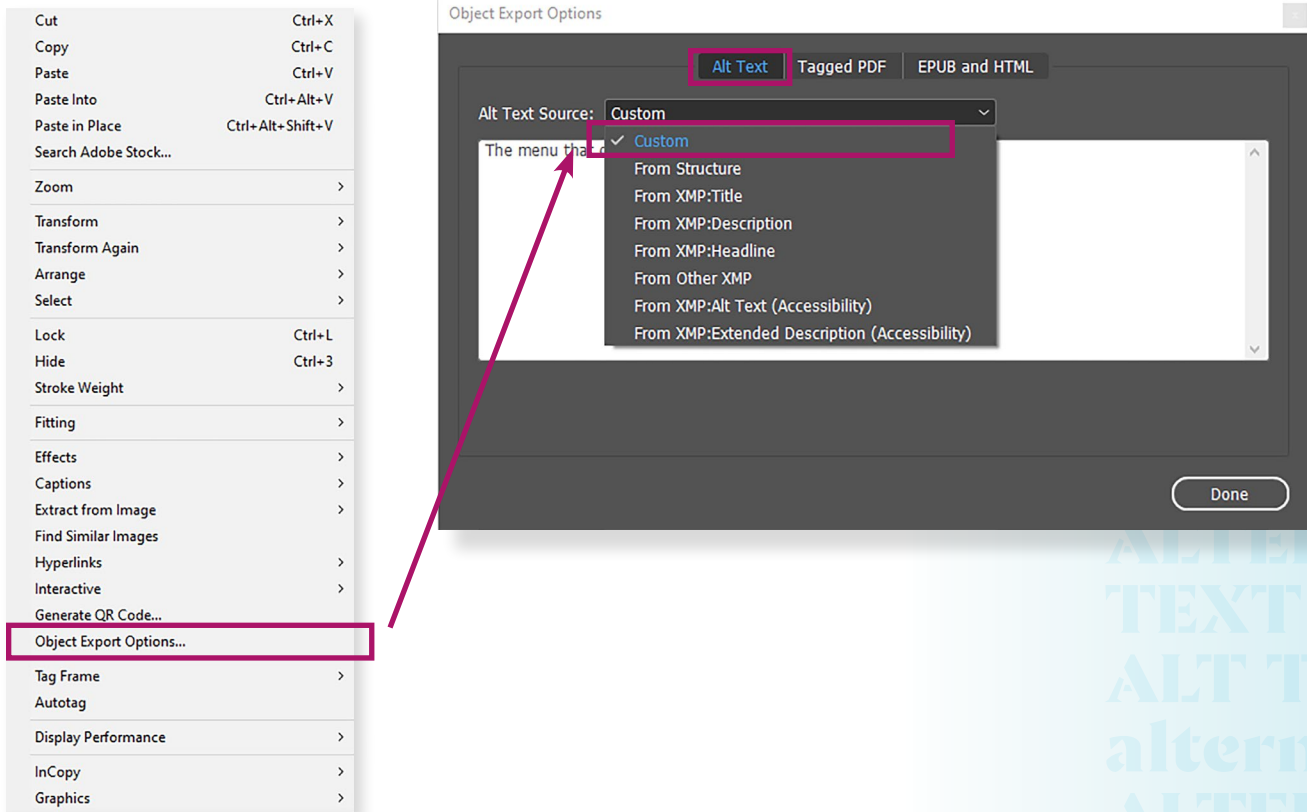


IN A DOCUMENT

In most Microsoft programs, alt text can be added by right-clicking an image and selecting “View Alt Text” from the drop-down menu.

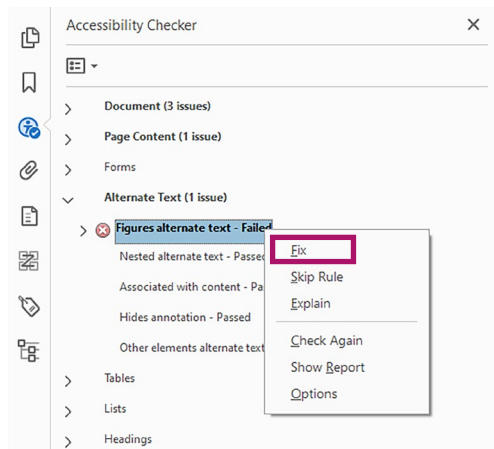
IN ADOBE INDESIGN

In Adobe InDesign, alt text can be added by right-clicking an image and selecting Object Export Options, and then selecting Alt Text. For the Alt Text Source, select Custom, then type your alt text in the box available.



IN ADOBE ACROBAT

You can use the Accessibility Checker in Adobe Acrobat to identify missing alt text, then right click the flagged issue and select “fix” which will open a window where you can input your alt text.



How to write alt text

Follow these simple steps to write better alt text.

Begin by simply describing the image with as few words as possible. For example:

“A group of students playing soccer.”

“A happy baby in a swing.”

“A dog fetching a ball in a park.”

Things that **do not** belong in alt text are:

- Caption information, including the name of the photographer, image source, names of people, or any information that is not visible in the image.
- Keywords for search engine optimization. While alt text can help with SEO, that’s not what it is for, and filling it with irrelevant words is confusing to your users.

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT

Keep it relevant

How you describe an image depends on its context. This the “why” of the image, and how it’s relevant to the page content.

For example:



If the image above was featured in an article about construction equipment, the alt text might be:

A red and yellow front-loader moving dirt outside a building.

If the image were on a website about the U of T Landmark Project construction of Alumni Plaza, the alt text should be relevant to that project:

South view of Convocation Hall and the new Alumni Plaza, during construction.

If the image were on a page about U of T accessible infrastructure at King’s College Circle, the alt text should be relevant to that topic:

Visual impairment markers being installed where paths intersect King’s College Circle.

Remember to write alt text that is as meaningful as possible for the user in the context they’re in.

SHORTER IS BETTER

Keep it concise

Try to convey the necessary information in a short, concise and relevant way, no longer than 120 characters.

Sighted users can see more details in the sample image at a glance, such as the shape of the building, the number of ionic columns, the colour of the door and the weather. However, those details would take much longer than ‘a glance’ to be read by a screen reader, and if they’re not relevant, they can become distracting verbal clutter.

COMPLEX IMAGES

Use text equivalents

But what if your image has text on it or conveys complex information like a chart, infographic, or invitation?

In this case, the best practice is to provide a text equivalent by repeating all the information in text near the image, and keep the alt text concise. [This accessible infographic from WebAIM](#), is a great example.

If the image-based text cannot be repeated in a text equivalent on the page near the image (in the case of a web banner for advertising or promotion) the alt text should contain the same words as the image.

IMAGES AS LINKS

Describe the destination

If the image links to another page, describe the destination, not the image. For example, the U of T logo on utoronto.ca has the alt text “Home” not “U of T logo.”

AVOID REPETITION

Don’t use the word ‘image’

The screen reader already states “image” or “graphic” before reading your alt text in a document. So if you write “photo of” or “image of” in your alt text the user may hear “Graphic. Image of.”

If it’s a special type of image, like an illustration, that can be noted:

Dog jumping through a hoop. Illustration.

USE PROPER GRAMMAR

End with a period.

The more natural your alt text is, the more natural it will sound. Use proper grammar and end with a period. Ending with a period allows the screen reader to pause after the last word in the alt text, which creates a more pleasant experience for the user.

DON’T USE THE TITLE-ATTRIBUTE

If your interface has a field for adding a title to your image close to where you add alt text, skip it. The title attribute doesn’t work well, and you just don’t need it.

When NOT to use alt text

It's true! Images don't always require alt text. Sometimes image alt text isn't useful, and can be redundant or distracting for a user.


DECORATIVE IMAGES

When an image doesn't provide meaning to a user, it is considered decorative. For example:

- Visual styling such as borders, spacers, and corners;
- Icons or images above or beside link text to make the link more appealing or increase clickable areas. Find more info on **icons with text labels** and **images with links** below.
- Images that are identified or described by surrounding text, **such as captioned images**, or complex images with text equivalents.

Alt text for these types of images would add audible clutter to screen reader output or could be simply distracting from the page content.

ICONS WITH TEXT LABELS

You should **always have text labels next to icons**. Assuming you do, the icon should not have an alt text, because the screenreader will read  Facebook both, which would be the same. E.g. "Facebook Facebook."

IMAGES WITH LINKS

An image is often used to draw attention to a linked headline, but the image does not add contextual value to the content. Best practice is to leave the alt text blank on this type of generic image (or on a web page use alt="").

This type of image is often linked to the same location as the link text found directly below it. While it is **not** the best practice to repeat links, it is a common practice in this scenario. If you must make the image a link, then the alt text should **describe the link destination**, not the image. Eg. News story on U of T World University Ranking.



March 27, 2023

U of T scores top marks in QS World University Rankings by Subject

CAPTIONS VS ALT TEXT

A caption is used to provide information ABOUT an image, such as the date, location, photographer, subject names etc., which are not visible in the image. This information should not be in the alt text.

You may choose to describe the image in the caption as well, in which case the image does not need alt text. If you use both alt text and a caption be careful to avoid repetition.

How to treat decorative images

ON A WEBSITE OR NEWSLETTER

Use an alt tag with a space in it, known as an empty alt tag (`alt=" "`) so the image can be ignored by assistive technologies, such as screen readers. Leaving out the alt attribute is not an option because when it is not provided, some screen readers will announce the file name of the image instead.

Adding the space in the empty alt tag may require you to access the html code of your webpage or newsletter. Do not type "" into the alt text box as assistive technologies may read "quote quote."

IN PDF

Decorative images can be tagged as an Artifact to be ignored by assistive technologies by using the accessibility assistant in Acrobat reader, or in InDesign by right clicking an image and using the Object Export Options.

IN OTHER DOCUMENTS AND EMAILS

You can leave the alt text blank, or provide a short description of the purpose of the image. For example, if you are including an image of an invitation or event promotion in an email, the full text of the invitation or event details should also be in the message. The image is now decorative and may be described as "Promotional banner for X event."

Note: if the image is a link to register for the event or RSVP, be sure to describe the destination of the link in the alt text instead. eg. `alt="RSVP form for X event."`

Additional resources for alt text:

- [Writing alt text based on the purpose of the image](#) (W3C)
- [Review a decision tree to help you decide when to use alt text](#) (W3C)
- [How to write good alt text](#) (Harvard University)
- [Accessibility: Image alt text best practices](#) (Siteimprove)
- [Making Images Accessible](#) (a collection of resources from the DIAGRAM Center for describing complex images)
- [Understanding SC 1.1.1—Non-text Content](#) (WAI)
- [Example of an accessible infographic](#) (WebAIM)

Summary

FOLLOW THESE SIMPLE STEPS TO WRITE BETTER ALT TEXT.

1. Consider the context.

Describe what is relevant in the image, as it relates to the content of the page it appears on.

2. Keep it short.

Try to convey the necessary information in a concise and relevant way, no longer than 120 characters.

3. Use text equivalents for complex images.

Have a lot of information in your image? Repeat complex information in text near the image, not in the alt text. Can't repeat the information in text? Then include all the same words in your alt text.

4. Describe the destination

If your image is being used as a link, use the alt text to indicate where the link goes, and not what the image is.

5. Use proper grammar

Include a period and proper grammar to make your alt text sound more human.

6. Prevent repetition

Consider the surrounding text. Don't repeat the title, caption, or text that's in the surrounding copy, and don't use the phrases "image of," "photo of," or "graphic of."

7. Use captions instead

Use a caption, instead of alt text, to relay information that is not in the image or surrounding text, such as the location, subject names, or photographer.

8. Leave out decorative elements

Leave alt text blank if the image is just for attention or aesthetics.

How to write *better alt text*



CONSIDER THE CONTEXT

Describe what is relevant in the image, as it relates to the content of the page it appears on.



KEEP IT SHORT

Convey the necessary information in a concise and relevant way, no longer than 120 characters.



USE TEXT FOR COMPLEX IMAGES

If you have a lot of or complex information in an image, repeat it in text near the image, not in alt text. If that is not possible, include all the same words in the alt text.



DESCRIBE THE DESTINATION

If your image is being used as a link, use the alt text to indicate where the link goes, and not what the image is.



USE PROPER GRAMMAR

Include a period and proper grammar to make your alt text sound more human.



PREVENT REPETITION

Consider the surrounding text. Don't repeat the title, caption, or text that's in the surrounding copy, and don't use the phrases "image of," "photo of," or "graphic of."



USE CAPTIONS INSTEAD

Use a caption, instead of alt text, to relay information that is not in the image or surrounding text, such as the location, subject names, or photographer.



LEAVE OUT DECORATIVE ELEMENTS

Leave alt text blank if the image is just for attention or aesthetics.