

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

Alt text quality audit

Setting baselines to inform inline content guidance for alt text

Background & Goals

Background - inline content guidance

This work is part of discovery for the inline content guidance initiative (epic #)

Inline content guidance will provide editors with content writing guidelines directly next to the field they're editing. We hypothesize that having easy access to guidance and resources at the point of need will help editors write better quality content.

Page title *

Use sentence case capitalization.

[Learn more about capitalization](#) ▾

How to do it

Only capitalize the first word of the title as well as any proper nouns.

Example

✔ **Like this:** Apply now for GI Bill benefits

✘ **Not like this:** Apply Now For GI Bill Benefits

Full guidance

[Content style guide: Capitalization](#)

Characters remaining: 160

Prototype of the inline content guidance component

Background

The Alternative text field will serve as the test case for this component.

Approach

- Audit current alt text content to inform guideline creation and set baseline to measure future improvement in content quality.
- Create content writing guidelines (validated by Sitewide Content with consultation from accessibility experts)
- Test both the guidelines and component in future usability testing sessions.

Audit goals

- Get a snapshot of the current state of alt text quality for all content in the media library
- Establish criteria to measure baseline quality and inform guidelines
- Identify largest areas for improvement

Hypotheses - inline content guidance

- Writing quality alt text requires attention to nuance and understanding of accessibility principles. **Many editors will need support** (possibly multiple kinds: training, prompts from the interface, Knowledge Base content) to successfully write quality alt text.
- As part of a holistic strategy to increase editors' content writing skills, inline content guidance **will help increase overall quality of alt text** across the 5 identified criteria.

Methodology

Data sample

- Randomized sample of 300
- Collected from all images in the media library as of 6/9/22
- Excluded from sample: CMS Knowledge Base, Benefit Hub icons migrated in without alt text.

Evaluation criteria

What we were able to evaluate:

- Basic criteria that indicates alt text may be effective based on [WebAIM's standards](#)
 - Succinct
 - Accurate & equivalent
 - Avoids redundant phrases (“image of,” “photo of,” “logo of”)
 - Avoids images that are too complex to be represented with alt text
 - Avoids decorative content (which shouldn't have alt)

Evaluation criteria

What we weren't able to evaluate:

- Accuracy & equivalency as applied to the image's context. Since this is the biggest part of alt text quality, it's important to consider that this audit was only able to evaluate quality superficially, and identify low-hanging opportunities for improvement.
 - Can't efficiently see where an image is used until entity usage work is complete
- Whether an image is being used in multiple places
 - Alt text is context-dependent, so reuse has the potential to affect quality.

Evaluation criteria - Succinct

Criteria	WebAIM guidelines	Definition
Succinct	<p>Content (if any) and function (if any) should be presented as succinctly as possible, without sacrificing accuracy.</p> <p>Typically, only a few words are necessary, though rarely a short sentence or two may be appropriate.</p>	Alt text is 150 characters or less

Evaluation criteria - Accurate & Equivalent

Criteria	WebAIM guidelines	Definition
Accurate & equivalent	be accurate and equivalent in representing content and function.	Attempts to represent the equivalent content and function. Shows the “why” behind the image. Avoids irrelevant details.

Evaluation criteria - Avoids redundant phrases

Criteria	WebAIM guidelines	Definition
Avoids redundant phrases	Screen readers already announce "graphic" along with the alt text.	Does not contain “image of,” “photo of,” or “logo of” kinds of language.

Evaluation criteria - Avoids complex images


Criteria	WebAIM guidelines	Definition
Avoids complex images	<p>When an equivalent alternative for a complex image (chart, graph, map, etc.) will not fit inside a succinct alt attribute (perhaps a couple sentences in length), then the alternative must be provided elsewhere.</p> <p>The alternative text for the image should still describe the general content of the image.</p>	<p>Does not contain complex images such as flyers or infographics that would be difficult or impossible to represent with alt text.</p> <p>Since we can't audit whether there is an equivalent alternative, this criteria should be considered lightly. High numbers of complex images likely indicates accessibility problems, but we can't know for sure without further discovery.</p>

Evaluation criteria - Avoids decorative content

Criteria	WebAIM guidelines	Definition
Avoids decorative content	<p>A "decorative" image does not present important content, is used for layout or non-informative purposes, and does not have a function (e.g., is not a link).</p> <p>Decorative images should have alt="" .</p>	<p>Non-photographic content that lacks text or representational imagery.</p> <p>Since we don't allow editors to add images without alt text, and we want to discourage content that's merely decorative, images that seem to be decorative may be affecting alt text quality</p>

Category labels

Each item was categorized with a label representing either a best guess as to how the image is being used, or what the content was. Given our highly structured content types, guesses are estimated to be fairly accurate.

- equivalent
- ☒ no-redundant ⓘ
- ☒ no-complex ⓘ
- ☒ no-decorative ⓘ
-  0-5 quality rating
- ☒ Image type

Find an option

Facility photo

Map

Logo

Graphic

Staff profile headshot

Flyer / PDF

Evaluation criteria

Scoring notes

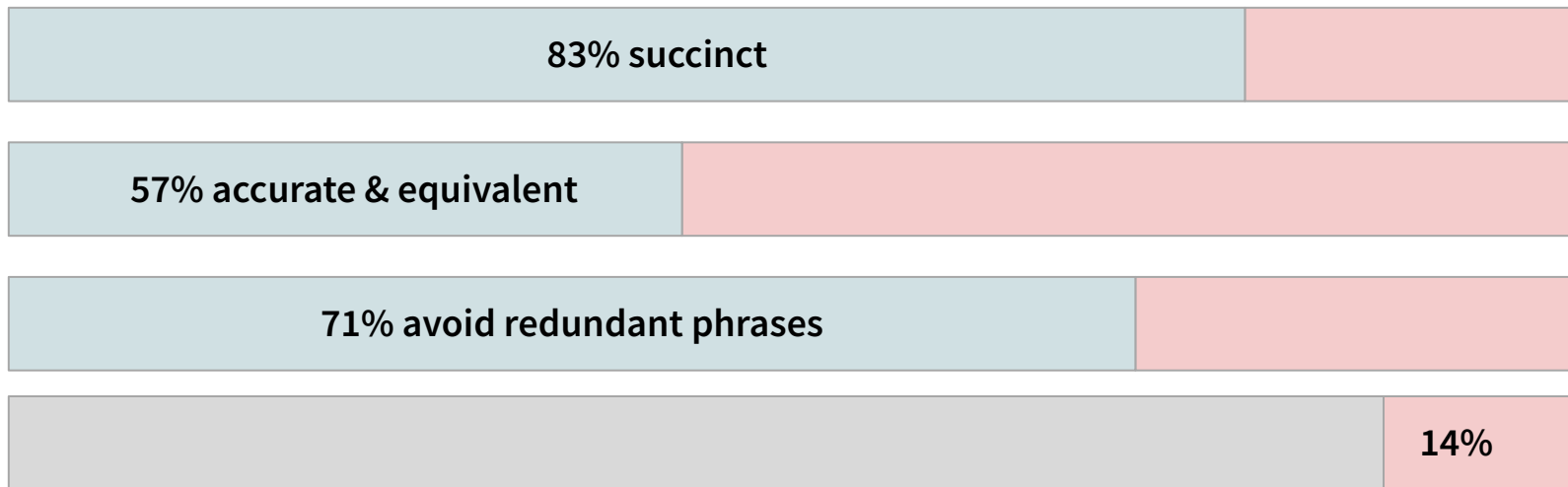
- Items that used the file name as alt text, or contained non-comprehensible text were given a “0” mark in all criteria, and were flagged as such.

Research Findings

Key Findings

1. The biggest area of opportunity for improvement is in the **accuracy and equivalency** of alt text descriptions. Since this part involves the most nuance and writing skill, this outcome wasn't surprising.
2. A high number of audited items simply **used the filename instead of alt text**.
3. Editors uploaded **some number of complex images** (pdf or flyer-like content with a lot of text) that could not be represented with alt text.

Quality by writing criteria - summary



Use file name
instead of alt text

Quality by criteria - succinct



83% succinct

✓ Concise alt text helps screen reader users focus on the information that matters.

✗ Excessive or irrelevant description causes frustration.

Quality by criteria - equivalent

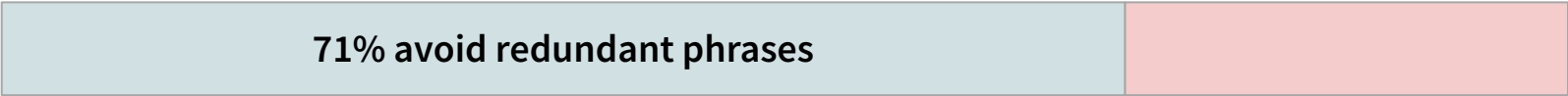


57% accurate & equivalent

✓ Clear, descriptive text ensures screen reader users get the full meaning of the content.

✗ Missing or irrelevant information inhibits access.

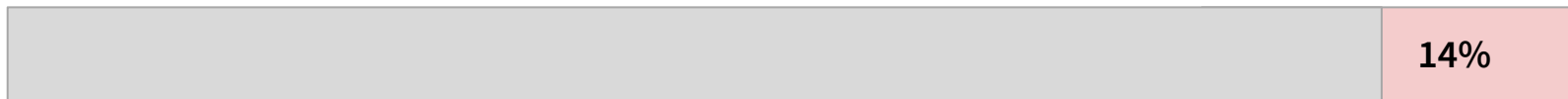
Quality by criteria - avoids redundant phrases



71% avoid redundant phrases

- ✓ Omitting “image of” phrases cut down on frustration
- ✗ Repetition causes annoyance and slows down reading

Quality by criteria - use file name instead of alt text



**Use file name
instead of alt text**

- ✓ Alt text descriptions should be written with intention
- ✗ Filenames are read out letter by letter, causing frustration

Image type summary

Type	Definition	% of audited items	Notes
Facility photo	Outside of buildings, likely used as a facility photo.	28%	
Staff profile headshot	Formal headshot, likely used for staff profiles	29%	
Other	Everything else. Often these are photos that are supports to story content.	21%	Most of this is story content.
Graphic	Any image that had been combined with text but was short enough to be reasonably represented by alt text. Many of these seemed to be pulled from content prepared as email headers.	11%	A lot of these seemed to be content editors prepared for social media or email marketing.

Image type summary

Type	Definition	% of audited items	Notes
Flyer / content with extended text	Content with too much text to be reasonably represented in alt text. Usually adapted from materials prepared for print.	5%	It's likely that at least some of this content does not have an on-page text equivalent, but more discovery would need to be done to determine if this content is accessible.
Logo		4%	
Map		3%	Mostly facility maps or transportation maps.

Project Title

Other unquantified observations


Description

Photo: Dr. Eric Garshick, associate chief of Pulmonary, Allergy, Sleep and Critical Care at VA Boston HCS; professor of medicine at Harvard; and co-author of a study published June 8, 2022, finding hospital transmission of COVID may result from aerosol-borne virus. (Courtesy photo)

Characters Remaining: 7

Image

[GarshickHeadshotMay2018a.jpg](#) (979.39 KB) Remove



Alternative text
Short description of the image used by screen readers and displayed when the image is not loaded. This is important for accessibility.

Dr. Eric Garshick, associate chief of Pulmonary, Allergy, Sleep and Critical Care at VA Boston HCS; professor of medicine at Harvard; and co-author of a study published June 8, 2022, finding hospital transmission of COVID may result from aerosol-borne virus.

A purple arrow points from the description text to the alternative text field.

Description field seems to be diluting the intent of alt text / editors are getting confused about the purpose of each.



Inconsistencies in **facility photo** alt text

Examples:

- [facility name]
- Entrance of [facility name]
- [facility name] building

Other unquantified observations



Firefighter Thomas Green and Fire Medic Anthony Williams assisted the Tallassee Fire Department in extinguishing a mobile home fire, ensuring the local community was safe. (Photo by Tramel Garrett, CAVHCS Public Affairs)

In alt text for **Story images**, editors frequently write alt text as if it were a caption.



Ellyn Schill, Pharm.D., BCPS

Inconsistencies in **Staff Profile photo** alt text

Examples:

- Adding credentials to the person's name
- Using credentials or titles only (Assistant Medical Director)
- Using name only

Project Title

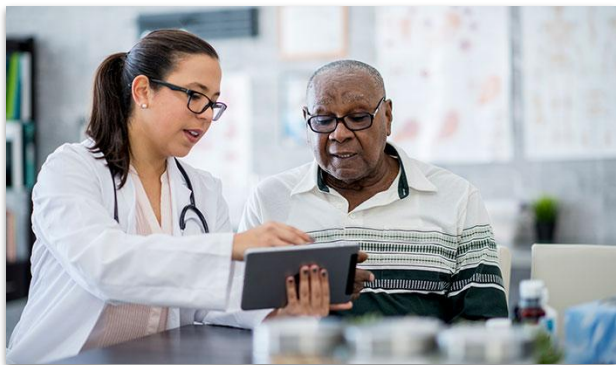
Other unquantified observations



Comerio CBOC

Plain language issues sometimes came up, mainly around abbreviations.

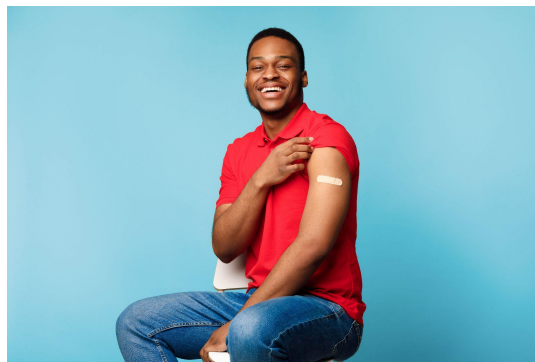
Other unquantified observations



Female doctor talking to male patient

(Gender identity isn't relevant to the topic of the [page where this image appears](#).)

Editors may be making subjective choices about **when to identify the race or gender of people** in an image.



An African American male displays his band-aid after receiving the COVID-19 vaccine

(Racial and gender identity may be relevant to the topic of [the page where the above image appears](#), since vaccine hesitancy correlates to race and gender)

Recommend exploring guidelines about when it's appropriate to include descriptions of social identity, and when it's best to omit them. Also consider guidelines for gender identity.
(~~African American male~~ African American man)

Recommendations

Recommendations

- Provide content writing guidance on how to make alt text accurate, equivalent, and context-appropriate.
 - Establish standards and guidance in VA content style or KB article
 - Try inline content guidance component for alt text
- Enforce a smaller character count for alt text field
 - Current limit: 512 characters
 - Recommended limit: 125 - 150 characters
- Consider content-type-specific standards for common images such as facility photos and staff profiles.
 - Field-specific guidelines or programmatically implemented alt text.

Recommendations

- Improve UI for image uploads to avoid confusion with description field.
- Explore creating guidelines about about when it's appropriate to include descriptions of social identity, and when it's best to omit them.
- Repeat audit using same criteria after implementing measures to increase alt text quality.

Next steps

- Write inline content guidance guidelines and validate with Sitewide Content and Accessibility experts.
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