

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

Facility photo

Map

Logo

Graphic

Staff profile headshot

Flyer / PDF

Evaluation criteria

Scoring notes

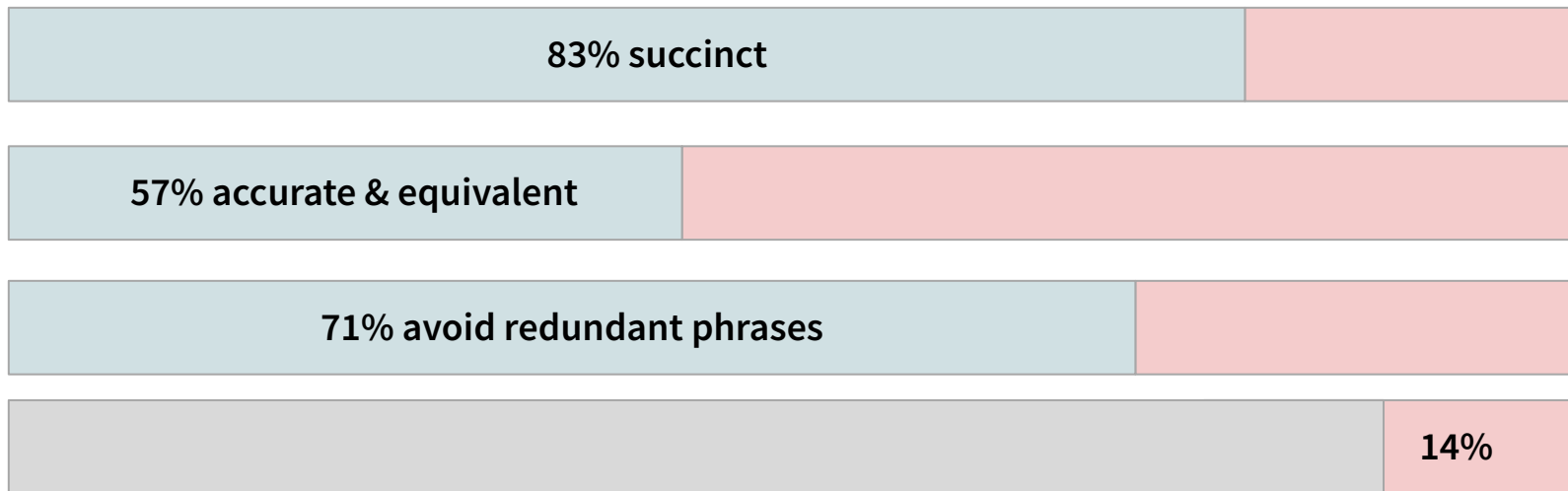
- Items that used the file name as alt text, or contained non-comprehensible text were given a “0” mark in all criteria, and were flagged as such.

Research Findings

Key Findings

1. The biggest area of opportunity for improvement is in the **accuracy and equivalency** of alt text descriptions. Since this is the part that 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.
4. There are opportunities to increase consistency or automate help text for **facility photos or staff profile pictures**, which represent over half of the audited items.

Quality by writing criteria - summary



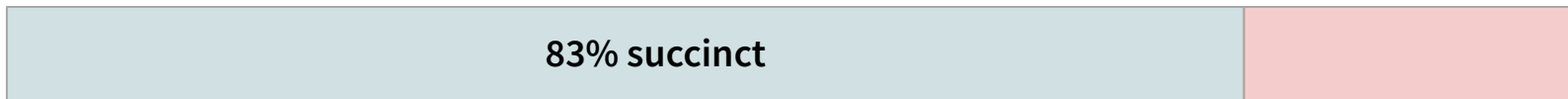
Use file name
instead of alt text

Quality by criteria - succinct

Excluding complex images:



Including complex images:**



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

✗ Excessive or irrelevant description causes frustration.

**Of the complex images, most did include alt text of an appropriate length, so could be counted as “succinct,” even though they did not meet criteria for accuracy and equivalency.

Quality by criteria - equivalent

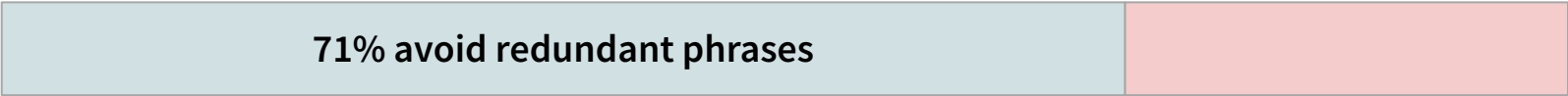


57% accurate & equivalent

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

✗ Missing or irrelevant information inhibits access.

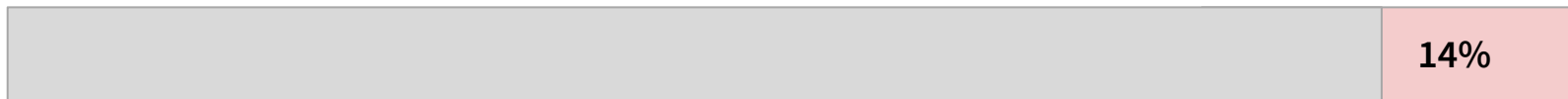
Quality by criteria - avoids redundant phrases



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 don't provide useful information

Image type summary

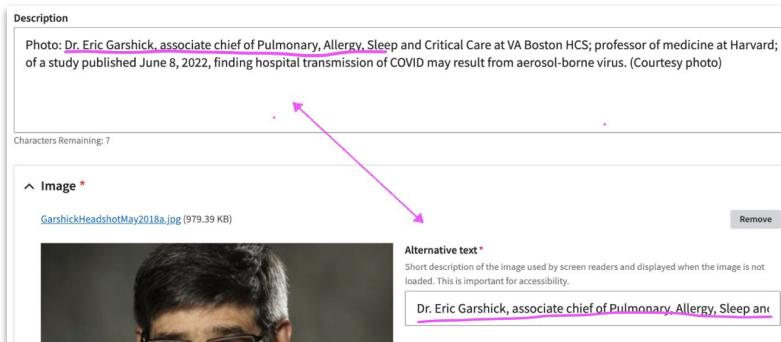
Type	Definition	% of audited items	Notes
Facility photo	Outside of buildings, likely used as a facility photo.	28%	
Staff profile headshot	Formal headshot, likely used for staff profiles	29%	
Other	Everything else. Often these are photos that are supports to story content.	21%	Most of this is story content.
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 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

It may not be possible to provide the benefit of the facility photo using alt text. For example, people with low vision may benefit from having landmarks to help with wayfinding, but alt text may not be able to deliver that effectively.

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 duplicate the caption content, which is redundant for screen readers.



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

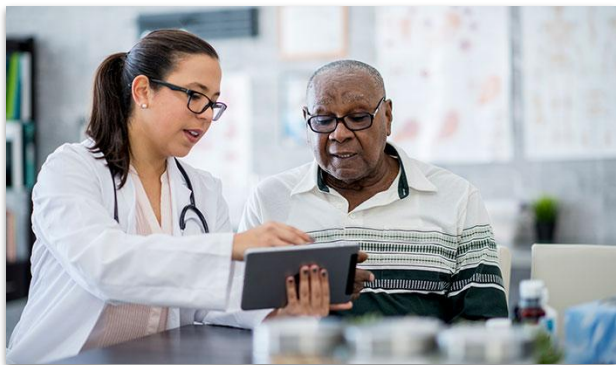
Other unquantified observations



Comerio CBOC

Plain language issues sometimes came up, mainly around abbreviations.

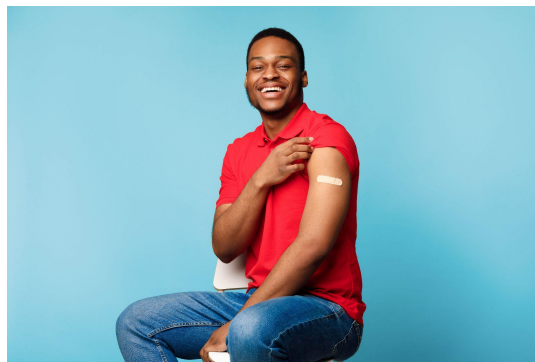
Other unquantified observations



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

Opportunity area	Proposed solution	LOE	Veteran Impact?
Alt text doesn't provide accurate & equivalent content	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inline content guidance• Established content standards (KB and/or style guide)• Training	L	L
Inconsistent approaches to facility photo and staff profile alt text	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Solve for specific needs around each type of photo. Ask, "what benefits do people get from the photo?" (solution might not be alt for facilities)	M	L
Editors using filenames as alt	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Form validation that throws an error for file extensions and underscores	?	M
Complex images can't be represented by alt	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establish standards for providing equivalent in-page content	M	M
Lengthy alt text	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Change character count from 512 to 150.	S	S

Recommendations

Opportunity area	Proposed solution	LOE	Veteran Impact
Editors frequently use the caption content as alt text, which is duplicative for screen readers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Consider whether alt is necessary for story images that have captionsIf alt text is determined to still have value, create story-specific guidelines.	?	M

Not analyzed, but worth considering

Opportunity area	Proposed solution	LOE	Veteran Impact
As a whole, the current editorial experience for image uploads is confusing and inefficient	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Remove description field● Streamline image upload workflow	?	M
Alt text may be unnecessary for many images, but our system currently requires editors to add it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Conditional fields to help editors determine if their image needs alt text● Discourage editors from uploading image content that doesn't add meaning (such as graphics, logos, decorative content).● Create clear equivalents and rules for editors considering adding complex content	?	?

Next steps

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