Alt Text That Actually Helps

Writing descriptions that serve screen reader users

What is Alt Text and Why It Matters

Alt text (alternative text) is a brief description of an image that screen readers announce to blind and visually impaired users. When written well, alt text allows these users to understand visual content and participate fully in digital experiences. When written poorly or omitted entirely, it creates barriers that exclude millions of users from accessing information.

Alt text isn't just about compliance - it's about ensuring that the visual information you consider important enough to include in your design is accessible to everyone.

The Reality of Screen Reader Usage

How Screen Readers Work

Screen readers convert digital text to speech or braille output. When they encounter images, they rely entirely on alt text to understand what the image shows and why it's relevant to the content.

User Behavior Patterns

Screen reader users often navigate by images to understand page layout and find important visual information. Poor or missing alt text forces them to skip potentially crucial content.

Context Dependency

Screen readers announce alt text without visual context that sighted users take for granted. Alt text must be self-contained and meaningful on its own.

Common Alt Text Mistakes

Stating the Obvious

"Image of..." or "Picture of..." - Screen readers already announce that it's an image. Don't waste valuable description space stating what's already obvious.

Being Too Vague

"Logo" or "Graph" - These descriptions provide no useful information. What logo? What does the graph show?

Being Too Detailed

"Red button with rounded corners, 3px border, located in the top-right corner with a shadow effect" - Visual design details aren't helpful; focus on meaning and function.

Describing Irrelevant Details

"Man in blue shirt sitting at desk" when the image illustrates "remote work productivity" - Focus on the purpose, not incidental visual details.

Using Filename Text

"IMG_2847.jpg" or "hero-banner-final-v3.png" - Technical filenames provide no meaningful information to users.

Research on Alt Text Effectiveness

WebAIM Screen Reader User Surveys

Annual surveys consistently show that:

- **Poor or missing alt text** is among the top accessibility barriers
- **Users prefer concise, meaningful descriptions** over lengthy detailed descriptions
- **Context-appropriate alt text** significantly improves task completion rates

Usability Testing with Blind Users

Studies reveal that:

- **Effective alt text reduces task completion time by 40%**
- **Users abandon tasks 60% more often** when alt text is missing or unhelpful
- **Good alt text improves user confidence** and overall satisfaction with websites

SEO Impact Studies

Search engine research shows that:

- **Descriptive alt text improves image search rankings**
- **Context-relevant alt text** helps search engines understand page content better
- **Missing alt text** represents missed SEO opportunities

Writing Effective Alt Text

Consider the Context

Ask yourself: Why is this image here? What information does it convey that's important to understanding the content?

Focus on Function and Meaning

Describe what the image does in the context of your content, not just what it looks like.

Be Concise but Complete

Aim for 125 characters or less when possible, but include all essential information. Screen readers may cut off longer descriptions.

Use Natural Language

Write as you would speak - clear, straightforward descriptions that flow naturally when read aloud.

Avoid Redundancy

Don't repeat information already available in surrounding text unless the image adds critical additional context.

Alt Text by Image Type

Informational Images

Purpose: Convey specific information or data **Good:** "Sales increased 25% from Q1 to Q2, reaching $2.3 million" **Bad:** "Bar chart with colored bars"

Functional Images (Buttons, Links)

Purpose: Indicate what happens when activated **Good:** "Search" (for a magnifying glass button) **Bad:** "Magnifying glass icon"

Decorative Images

Purpose: Visual enhancement only **Good:** Empty alt="" (tells screen readers to skip) **Bad:** "Beautiful sunset background" (adds no meaningful information)

Complex Images (Charts, Diagrams)

Purpose: Show relationships or processes **Good:** Brief alt text + detailed description elsewhere
Example: Alt: "Website traffic trends 2020-2024" + Link to data table

Logos and Branding

Purpose: Identify organizations or products **Good:** "Acme Corporation" or "Acme Corporation logo"
Bad: "Logo" or detailed visual description

Advanced Alt Text Strategies

Emotional and Atmospheric Content

When mood or emotion is important to the content: **Good:** "Frustrated customer service representative handling multiple calls" **Context:** Article about workplace stress

People in Images

Focus on relevance to content purpose: **Good:** "Software developer reviewing code on multiple monitors" **Bad:** "Woman with brown hair wearing glasses at computer"

Text in Images

Include the text content when it's important: **Good:** "Sign reading 'Grand Opening - 50% off everything'" **Note:** Avoid putting important text in images when possible

Cultural and Social Context

Consider your audience and cultural significance: **Good:** "Traditional wedding ceremony in local cultural dress" **Better than:** Just describing clothing colors and details

Technical Implementation

HTML Best Practices

```html
<!-- Good -->
<img src="sales-chart.png" alt="Q2 sales up 25% to $2.3M">

<!-- For decorative images -->
<img src="decorative-border.png" alt="" role="presentation">

<!-- When image is also a link -->
<a href="/about"><img src="team-photo.jpg" alt="Meet our team"></a>
```

When Alt Text Should Be Empty

Use empty alt="" for purely decorative images that add no information:

- Background patterns or textures
- Spacer images
- Decorative borders or dividers

- Images that are purely aesthetic

Complex Images Need More

For charts, graphs, and complex diagrams:

- Provide brief alt text for the main message
- Include detailed description in caption or linked page
- Consider data tables as alternatives

Content Management and Workflow

Editorial Guidelines

Include alt text requirements in your content style guide with specific examples for different image types common to your organization.

CMS Integration

Configure content management systems to require alt text for uploaded images and provide guidance to content creators.

Review and Quality Assurance

Include alt text review in your content quality process. Have someone read alt text aloud to check if it makes sense without seeing the image.

Training Content Creators

Educate writers, designers, and content managers about effective alt text writing. This is a skill that improves with practice and feedback.

Testing Your Alt Text

Screen Reader Testing

Use actual screen readers (NVDA, JAWS, VoiceOver) to experience how your alt text sounds when read aloud.

The Phone Test

Call a colleague and describe your images using only your alt text. Does it convey the important information clearly?

Context Removal Test

Read your alt text without looking at the image. Does it make sense and provide useful information on its own?

User Testing

Include blind and visually impaired users in your usability testing to get real feedback about alt text effectiveness.

Beyond Basic Compliance

Progressive Enhancement

Good alt text enhances understanding for everyone, including sighted users who might miss visual details or view content in challenging conditions.

Content Strategy Integration

Consider alt text during content planning, not as an afterthought. Images chosen for accessibility often work better for all users.

Brand Voice Consistency

Alt text should reflect your brand voice and tone while remaining clear and functional.

Multilingual Considerations

Alt text needs translation and cultural adaptation just like other content when serving international audiences.

The Bottom Line

Effective alt text is a fundamental accessibility requirement that's often done poorly or ignored entirely. Good alt text requires understanding why images exist in your content and communicating that purpose clearly to users who can't see them.

Alt text isn't about describing what you see - it's about conveying what's important for users to understand.

The best alt text feels invisible when it works well. Screen reader users should get the same information and experience as sighted users.

Think of alt text as translation - you're translating visual information into words that serve the same purpose for non-visual users.

Remember: If an image is worth including in your content, it's worth describing well enough for everyone to understand its value.