

Alt-Text Course Book

I/F

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Alt-Text as Poetry

This Course Book is associated with an interactive workshop created by Hannah Silver of [Informal/Function](#).

This workshop was developed using a combination of resources, but is primarily based on the open-source [Alt-Text As Poetry project](#) and [workbook](#). **Informal/Function strongly suggests you check out the Alt-Text as Poetry website and workbook!**

The Alt-Text As Poetry project is a collaboration between the fantastic artists [Bojana Coklyat](#) and [Shannon Finnegan](#), and is supported by [Eyebeam](#) and the [Disability Visibility Project](#).

Alt-Text Examples

From [@justnalln on Instagram](#):



justnalln

...



justnalln A sea of purple aster flowers, with round yellow centers and thick manes of straight thin lavender petals, like purple daisies. #latergram

138w



katief Is your intention to make your captions friendly to those with low vision? I love them.

138w 2 likes Reply

— Hide replies



justnalln @katief yes! to make my images accessible, and thank you!

130w 3 likes Reply



109 likes

OCTOBER 23, 2018



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Post



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justnalln

...



justnalln Selfie in a frameless mirror with scalloped edges, backdropped by a hyperlink blue wall. I hold my red phone in front of my face and wear a yellow and brown shirt with angled, hand-dyed stripes and long sleeves. A patchwork couch sits against the blue wall.

27w



austinthomasartist Looks like a painting.



27w 1 like Reply



monstahblack 💙♡💙



27w 1 like Reply



Liked by shanfinnegan and 135 others

DECEMBER 15, 2020



Add a comment...

Post

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More Context/Resources/Tips

- Alt-text is just one of many critical digital accessibility tools - check out accessguide.io/ for lots of info on others!
- [M. Sabine Rear](#) is a self-described “Blind Illustratrix” who makes comics about her experiences. [Here’s a video](#)  [of her doing image description](#) of her comic “Empathy Exercise” (which you can [buy here](#)).



- Remember that information will always be lost and gained in creating alt-text for images, and that there's no totally right way because every person who reads it has different needs and interests. Do your best to include critical information (any important text that is in the image should be written out), strike a balance between objectivity and subjectivity, and order the information with critical details first, then more nuanced, detailed, or subjective information.
- What about [different languages on web pages](#)? There might be more to the nuances of how we describe things in different languages, too! Something to think about.
- Here's a [Chrome plug-in](#) to test if your alt-text is working.
- The Americans with Disabilities Act turned 30 years old recently! That's not a very long time to have valued disabled people. I/F highly recommends the film [Crip Camp \(on Netflix\)](#) for a history of some of the amazing people who advocated for the rights we have today.
- The Internet might be visual for many people, but low-vision folks may use [screen readers](#) to navigate the Internet - so in that case, the Internet is audible, not visual. Some people use braille readers to use the Internet, which makes the Internet tactile! [This video 📺 shows how most refreshable braille readers work, and highlights some evolving technology.](#)
- Images are usually the most energy-intensive part of websites - perhaps alt-text can be used to gauge if images are even necessary. Does your image description lack depth? Why do you even have that image? [More on digital sustainability here.](#)
- [Accessible language](#) helps the 6.6 million Americans who have some form of cognitive disability that impacts their memory, concentration, or decision-making. Using straightforward language helps lots of other folks, too, like those who use English as their secondary language.

- The story of the [Supreme Court case about Domino's Pizza and digital accessibility](#)

Exercise 1: Warm-Up

INSTRUCTIONS:

- **List things** (objects, people, stuff, nouns) that are present in the image or related to the image.
- **List descriptive words or adjectives** that describe the image, a part of the image, or your response to it.
- **Share your writing and discuss with your partner:**
 - Are there words you both wrote down?
 - Are there words on your partner's lists that surprised you? Or made you notice something about the image?
 - Any other general thoughts or things you noticed about the process

Results

ROOM	List things, objects, people, stuff, nouns that are present in the image or related to the image	List descriptive words or adjectives that describe the image a part of the image or your response to it
	<p>Tiny birthday cake, candles ablaze, little piggy holding a message []</p> <p>Person, candles, fire, cake, card, plastic cat</p> <p>Fuzzy image of person at a table with a colorful birthday cake lit with candles and a pig.</p> <p>Cake, candle, flame, pig, Chinese text</p> <p>Woman, Cake, Chinese characters, candles</p> <p>Birthday cake, candles, toy animal holding a sign with written characters on it on top of cake, blurred person in the background</p>	<p>Silly</p> <p>Faded, colorful, Asian, birthday, multi-lingual</p> <p>Celebratory</p> <p>Soft glow of candle light. Feels celebratory. Associations with happiness and positivity. A heart is drawn above Chinese text on a notecard, which is being held by a pig on a frosted cake with sprinkles</p> <p>Dark, blurry, wish</p> <p>Birthday celebration, thinking of a wish, contrast between light and dark</p>
	<p>5 Colorful cupcakes, cake plate, extinguished candles, crumbs</p> <p>Five cupcakes, candles, tray, tablecloth, mess</p> <p>candles cupcakes platter crumbs frosting icing smoke blues pinks orange marigold</p> <p>cupcakes, smoke, platter, blue, teal</p>	<p>Celebratory, sweet, festive,</p> <p>Blue, pink, yellow and orange frosting flowers, silver tray, blue tablecloth, smoke rising from blown-out brown candles</p> <p>melancholy nostalgic forgotten neglected cakes celebratory but against a serious tone</p> <p>loneliness, sadness</p>

	Red White Blue Cake Cupcakes Stars	Patriotic Stately Tidy	Colorful, clean, bright, professional, nationalist
	sports field quarter ate birthday cake parking lot plate building	dying, sad, smooshed, crushed, smeared	mood / lonely Deserted
happy birthday written on a birthday cake white, pink and blue frosting a piece of the cake has been cut out of the cake with some on the ground blurred out building in the background	smashed birthday cake, dead brown grass, street in the background	Cold, blurry, sad, winter, abandoned	a little sad, the cake looks like it dropped, was thrown. Either way, cannot be eaten or enjoyed.
white frosted birthday cake with a piece missing on the ground of dry grass. Faded street, car and building in the background	Can of tea Can of coffee Can of sugar Cake with starry night frosting Cake dish Wooden table White wall	Calm, early day Sweet comfort Perfection	blue swirls, yellow orbs, black stretches to the sky, waves of blue and white swirls define the sky and ground
waves, sun, swirls, mountain, sky, dots Tea, coffee, + sugar canisters Starry nights themed cake Platter for cake Light wood counter White wall Number + Name of bakery on platter	Central point of light on top of cake, surrounding areas are dim The three canisters are misaligned Cake only dominant colors	I/F	

	<p>Cherries Whipped Cream D oily Plates Cake Poppies Vase Spoon Fork Table</p> <p>marischino cherries, two layers of sponge cake, whipped cream, spoon, light teal balloon, lace, forks, plates, red flowers, marble</p> <p>cake, strawberries, forks, plates, marble, cherries, lace doilies, spoons, whipped cream</p>	<p>Red Sliced Saucy Luscious Vibrant Decadent Festive Celebratory</p> <p>Curated</p> <p>delicious, decadent, mouth-watering, dense, airy, fluffy</p> <p>syrupy cherries, bright white, fluffy, decadent, floral, sweet, delicious</p>
	<p>cake, lights, plants, red, tables, stands, pastries</p>	<p>elegant, cottage core, fairy, fancy, classy, dainty</p>
	<p>Festive cake dripping in caramel.</p> <p>cake, hands, popcorn, saucer, spoon, cakeplate, caramel, burnt orange sleeves that match burnt orange icing dripping down sides of the cake like candle wax, symetrically spaced poufs of whpped cream</p> <p>A white cake stand with a white, single-tier cake and orange drizzle frosting down the sides, topped with a ring of frosting florets. A pair of hands reaches toward the cake, with long orange sleeves.</p> <p>Cake, popcorn, candy, hands</p>	<p>Caramel, cake, cream, popcorn, hands</p> <p>a weirdly unfestive image of a cake and some other party food like popcorn and caramel</p> <p>decor motif</p> <p>orange, drip effect, popcorn on cake, intentionally messy</p>



hand
silver cup
blueberries
black cloth

dark
earthy



Bunny, giraffe, lion, zebra, party hats,
cake, candle, balls

Cute, fun, celebratory, minimalist,
hand-made



mural
hands
cake

offering
missing

I/F



chocolate slice
layers
candles

wintery
sparkly
black

I/F

Observations + Questions

- Probably spent too much time on this, would take a long time for someone to get through what I wrote
- Cake, stars, cupcakes, and confetti were shared words in question 1. Celebratory/festive surprised me. Hard not to bring our own biases especially when related to "moods."
- My "mess" was my partner's "crumbs."
- Difficult to omit information
- Didn't know how far to go
- One of us focused on one part of the image a lot and gave beautiful detail; one of us focused on the background or whole image
- Important to describe what's there, or to convey the feeling?
- Is there a problematic aspect of [image description] that there's one person arbitrating with that mood is and then describing it that's the only one that you get and, if so, how do you fix that, how do you address that?

Exercise 2: Subjectivity + Audience

INSTRUCTIONS:

- **Pull up one of your recent photos on your smartphone or your Instagram, or find a framed photograph in your room.**
- **Describe this image as though you are a complete stranger who has stumbled across it for the first time. Pretend that you've never seen it before and have no context for the image.**
- **Describe the image as though you were describing it to your best friend, from your own perspective as the photographer or subject.**
- **Share your writing and discuss with your partner:**
 - Are the descriptions you wrote similar or different? In what ways?
 - Is there anything you noticed when writing in those two different modes?
 - Do you like one description better than the other? Why?
 - Is there a middle ground between these approaches?

Observations + Questions

- Context is super important - a lot of the background that I included in mine was not really necessary for getting the gist of the image, but was definitely good for getting the spirit of the image.
- How can we be most of service to people using alt-text? Is it to create a story and poetry? Or is it to get them the information they need right away to navigate the page?
- It feels like from a utilitarian standpoint that using metaphor might get a little bit confusing... similes are so straightforward because of that crucial word “like”... if the primary focus is to describe the image, getting into kind of hardcore tropes like that [might be confusing]. Does that defeat the purpose?

Poetry

- [Lines on the Antiquity of Microbes \(Fleas\)](#) - three words, great example of word economy
- [Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening](#) - simple/accessible language (though “queer” might be considered more complex and/or political when used today!)
- Amanda Gorman’s [An American Lyric](#) ( video) - uses simple language and metaphor to create imagery
- Why do we compare alt-text to poetry?
 - a. Careful word selection (intentionality of word selection - and it might be political)
 - b. Word economy (saying more with less)
 - c. Experimental nature, and written in scraps of time - like little stand-alone haikus

Exercise 3: Structure, Length, Priorities

INSTRUCTIONS:

- **Write a single sentence to describe the image.** The sentence should capture whatever you think is most important about the image.
- **Write a second sentence about the second most important thing** in, or about, the image.
- **Write a third sentence about the third most important thing.**
- **Share your writing and discuss with your partner:**
 - Did you and your partner structure your description in similar or different ways?
 - Are there things your partner prioritized that you don't think are as important? Or vice versa?
 - Any other things you noticed or thought about when you were writing?

Results

ROOM	Three sentence(ish) description
	<p>A room that really likes to be orange is just sitting there being modern. This is a very cool loft space that a person who likes orange would want to live in. There is a lot of furniture.</p> <p>posh lobby with bright lights in a tropical place. various textures and angular layout, the formal palm lounge vibe. one concierge left alone.</p> <p>Orange upholstered sofa and chairs in the reception area of an office located in an old warehouse building with white painted exposed beams. A person is seated at the reception desk in the background. There are other spaces in proximity that are empty.</p>
	<p>person running on a green, orange and yellow basketball court against a pastel-hued building. a tropical location, a sunny day, and no plans. two tiny figures, one walking, one running.</p> <p>person shooting basketball on a court next to a colorful, high rise apartment building. Background is a colorful high rise apartment building. Sunny day and palm trees in view.</p> <p>Half a colorful (green field, Orange freethrow and yellow key) outdoor basketball court in foreground with White basketball board and teal frame. and full bleed square and colorful apartment building windows and balconies in the background. Kid on the left in colorful shoes looking to make a lay up.</p> <p>On a sunny day, a person plays basketball on a freshly painted court by palm trees and brightly colored apartments. Muted rainbow paint covers the side of a condo in Florida/Hong Kong. A manicured basketball court with palm trees.</p> <p>A person plays basketball in front of a large rainbow apartment complex.. A person plays basketball on a brightly-colored court. Palm trees line the brightly colored scene.</p>



A birds-eye view of a lush atrium, with a towering wall of blooming greenery that's bathed in natural light. The perspective of the image looks to be from roughly 100 feet up, and we can see visitors in the atrium's ground floor. Natural light floods into the atrium from a modern, curved glass wall.

A curved wall of steel and glass wraps around a lush arboretum and its onlookers. From a high vantage point visitors admire an arboretum. There are varied textures and shapes in the green foliage.

Garden atrium with sweeping, curved window wall and lush greenery. a group of people at the bottom, very small in scale. Water pouring from a small spout down onto the greenery.

A view from the ceiling of a bright indoor arboretum. A large open space to allow the sun to get through. People far below observing the plants and trees.



Curvy, colorful metal exterior of the Experience Music Project building in Seattle. One wall of the building reflects the other in a different color. The reflected sky in the glass section of the building is cloudy, but the sky above the building is clear.

conjoined multicolored buildings with a sky blue background. the center of the image is energetic with shades of bright orange and yellow. the building on the left has a glass bottom.

Two large building structures side by side. Right side structure is straight and reflects neon orange, purple and pink onto the left building structure, which curved with gray, white, and glass. The sky is blue behind the buildings, with the sun being the source of light and reflection.

Two curved metal building facades converge with colorful reflections. The sky is bright teal, the facade of the building on the right is an explosion of oranges, fuschias and cobalts. Triangular glass doors are at the base of the building on the left. Frank Gehry?

Where two buildings are meeting, both clad in shiny metal. One building is frank gheryesque juxtaposed over more upright partner. The straight building is reflecting a beuatiful red sky.



The stairway leading up to the entrance to the Sydney opera house at night. A person is sitting in a pool of light at the bottom of the stairs. A group of people is gathered at the top of the stairs, near the entrance.

A building's arches jut out into the sky like icebergs on a sea of steps cascading to the sidewalk. The building and stairs are vacant, with seemingly no one around. The darkness of night paired with small amounts of light, create dramatic shadows on the edges of the building and stairs.



Two people take a stroll past a body of water, one person in a wheelchair, the other pushing them along. The body of water is held in cement, in a cement courtyard, perhaps in a city. It is a bright, beautiful day.

Person pushing another person in a wheelchair. They are on a cobbled path next to a body of water. There is a bridge in the background.

Older woman in wheelchair being pushed joyously by younger woman in outdoor setting. They are by a body of water and scenic architectural structures.



A bar featuring a rusted, vintage car.

The interior of an old-fashioned diner that is decorated with red objects. There is a giant old, rusty, car sitting on top of the bar. An old red rusty gas pump is next to the shiny red bar. (I felt it was hard to describe the car on top of the bar.)



Grand hall A-frame made of white wires. People milling about on the large floor. The hall's depth makes it feel grandiose and important. Groups of people milling around on an open floor.

Bright, cathedral-esque, space scattered with visitors. A rhythm of white structure, washed in daylight. Visitors bustling in the open atrium.

Birds eye view of a spacious, white building with commuters. White long pillars on the left and right side of the building. Translucent ceiling panels are long and wide.



A bearded individual strolls past an orange building.



Lines articulate topography of a paved park with rolling hills.



Light-up arches of bright colors illuminate an urban, nighttime scene.



Mount Hood peers out of the sky behind the skyline of Portland.

Observations + Questions

- Partner noticed there was water where I thought it was light. We both mentioned people but had different orders of importance on them. Trees/plants indoors was the most important factor.
- Lots of overlap, lots of similarity
- With our powers combined our description was supreme
- It was difficult to know how much detail to include. Should we talk about the concrete architectural structures, or is that too confusing? It's an unusual setting that was hard to describe.
- My partner didn't describe the people as much and now I realize I probably shouldn't assume gender. Then my partner was better at describing the architecture. I left the third sentence blank because my description was already really long.
- Felt like the 1st/2nd sentence I had to be literal, then in the 3rd sentence I could be more poetic. But I revisited the first/second sentences to include words that elicit more emotion. I like my partner's words "rhythm, washed, daylight." Adds tone. I used words like long and wide but wanted to use more poetic words to elicit emotions.
- Context for the location/setting is important and can set up different descriptions, but the image framing (what is focused on - materials/object instead of background) tells you to focus on that in description.
- It's hard to prioritize what's important.
- My partner zoomed into the fine details and had very straight forward descriptions, while I captured the mood of the building. We were immediately made aware that our two perspectives could be bridged to create a much more balanced description.

- We both focused on the people in the image first, then we zoomed out to different things.
- Describing the wheelchair in Image 6 was more about the relationship of one person pushing the other - there appears to be an implied connection between them, and it felt important to highlight that.
- We both looked at the same picture and assumed different genders.

Exercise 4: Identity + Representation

INSTRUCTIONS:

- **Describe yourself as you are today in 3–5 sentences.** What would be important for your partner to know if they couldn't access visual information about you? If it is helpful to work from an image, take a quick selfie, and describe that.
- **Discuss with your partner:**
 - Chat about the process of writing these descriptions.
 - Were there things you felt comfortable describing about yourself that you didn't feel comfortable describing about someone else? Or vice versa?
 - What are some of the ways your identity and your politics impacted your approach to these descriptions?
 - In disability spaces, people are often asked to self-describe images of themselves. What are some pros and cons to this approach?

Observations + Questions

- Not describing a person's race could either be interpreted as "it's not important to know" or "whatever this person is = the norm"
- When to discuss race, gender, etc in alt-text: when it's RELEVANT, KNOWN, and CONSISTENT - [Alex Chen explains this](#)
 - We looked at the below image from [Disabled and Here - check out their gallery](#) for lots more open source, diverse stock images with pre-written alt-text!



- Sins Invalid's staff page also has [interesting examples of self-description](#)
- Self-describing appearance can help bridge the subjective/objective approaches
- Might be uncomfortable to describe home setting or accessories (others might find this to be more objective or easy)
- Certain characteristics - height, race, gender - can't be assumed from a photo

Q: What are some personal/professional next practices?

BUILT ENVIRONMENT PROFESSIONS

- Put people with disabilities in my renderings.
- Ask architects to describe photos of their work to keep on hand for marketing.

ANY/OTHER PROFESSIONS

- Talk to our clients who give us Instagram content to post - put the onus on them to get self-descriptions from models in the photos, etc - so it's not on us to develop the content and have to make assumptions about what's happening in the image.
- I work with a lot of content designers and this is not currently part of our conversations. Which is wild now that I think about it!
- Practice for me, I am going to start using this on my Instagram.
- Invite a colleague or client to take this course ([sign up for I/F email updates so you know when it's being hosted again!](#))
- Since most of us work alone on projects, and since alt-text is the last thing in the process (or handed off to a developer with no client engagement), we just give it our best college try without feedback. How can we build this into how we bill clients? As stewards of the

brand, how do we advance their presentation of themselves to the world and make it clear that alt-text is not just a nice add-on? How can we get a buddy on writing projects? How can we impact that bottom line? Use Slack or other tools within teams to share the work, what else?

- Think about if our organization as a whole is diverse + representative of the spectrum of disability - use [Inclusively](#) to post job openings so we can connect with more diverse folks

Q: What are the qualities of an inclusive digital aesthetic?

- Diversity
 - Who creates the content?
 - For which senses/needs do we design? Is there something for everyone?
- Plain-spoken, clarity
- Direct
- Not an afterthought, thinking about it from the beginning

Additional Resources

PRINT

- [A Kid's Book About Disabilities](#) by Kristine Napper - the A Kid's Book brand is a Black-owned media company bringing important conversations to kids and their caregivers
- [Mismatch: How Inclusion Shapes Design](#) by Kat Holmes
- [Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice](#) by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha - insight into diverse disability experiences and communities of care that arise to meet individual and collective needs not met by current societal norms and systems
- [Accessible America: A History of Disability and Design](#) by Bess Williamson

WEB

- Use [The Universal Score](#) and [Cards for Humanity](#) as tools to analyze any designed product or experience through an inclusive design lens

INSTAGRAM

- Bojana Coklyat, co-creator of Alt-Text as Poetry [@bojana_coklyat](#)
- Shannon Finnegan, other co-creator of Alt-Text as Poetry [@shanfinnegan](#)
- Jen White Johnson, proponent of Black autistic joy and creator of beautiful design [@jtknoxrox](#)s
- Alice Wong, major name in disability justice [@disability_visibility](#)