Alt-Text as Poetry Workbook




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- This workbook is available as an audiobook, Word Doc, Google Doc, and in Spanish → https://alt-text-as-poetry.net/

Section 1: Before You Start

Intent

The purpose of this workbook is not to tell you how to write alt-text. There are many existing resources that provide guidelines and how-tos (you can find a few listed in the Tools section). Our primary intent is to put alt-text on your radar (if it wasn't already), to get you thinking about it creatively, and to explore a few of the key questions that come up when translating images into text.

We hope these exercises make clear that, like all accessibility practices, writing alt-text requires ongoing practice, learning, and collaboration.

The needs and wants of blind and low vision people in your community should take priority over a workbook like this. And certainly, if you are part of an organization or institution, you should be hiring disabled people (both for access work and throughout your organization including leadership roles). We also want to note that our thinking about alt-text is shifting and changing all the time. And of course, people have lots of different opinions about how to approach alt-text. So take all of this with a grain of salt, seek out alternate viewpoints, and feel free to disagree.

Section 2: Reading

What Is Alt-Text?

Alt-text (or alternative text) is a written description of an image posted online. It has multiple uses, but we are focused on its role as an essential part of web accessibility. Alt-text allows visual content to be accessible to people who are blind, have low vision, or have certain cognitive disabilities.

Blind people often use software called screen readers to access digital displays. The screen reader outputs the text on the screen to a synthetic voice or refreshable braille display. On a website, a screen reader might readout options in the navigation bar, followed by the title, the first paragraph, the second paragraph, etc. When a screen reader encounters an image, it's unable to "read" it. So instead, it looks for the alt-text — an associated description of the image, embedded in the code. This is how alt-text functions as a non-visual alternative to an image.

Alt-Text and You

Alt-text is not visually displayed on a website, so if you aren't a web developer or a screen reader user, you mostly interact with alt-text by writing it and adding it to your images through designated form fields during the image upload process. When you include alt-text with your images, you contribute to making the internet a more accessible place.

You have the option to add alt-text to your posts on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Depending on the platform you use, it may be possible to add alt-text to your personal website or blog (and if the platform doesn't include a field for entering alt-text, you can usually work around that by including an image description in the caption or somewhere else adjacent to the image).

It is important to note that alt-text is only one part of web accessibility. Don't assume that because you've added alt-text a website is fully accessible.

You may be able to influence the accessibility practices where you work or volunteer. Even if the organization's website or social media aren't directly your responsibility, it's worth asking

questions about accessibility practices to make sure that people are aware of alt-text.

If you are looking for instructions about how to add alt-text to a specific platform, you should be able to find a step-by-step guide by searching online. For example, search “how to add alt-text to twitter.”

Writing Alt-Text

Wikipedia's style guide offers these questions to ask yourself when you are writing alt-text:

→ Why is this image here?
→ What information is it presenting?
→ What purpose does it fulfill?

Though alt-text is usually thought of as part of the nuts and bolts of a website, it has tremendous expressive potential. How to translate visual information into text is a complex and interesting task.

That said, when thinking about its expressive potential, it is important to stay rooted in alt-text as an accessibility practice. When writing alt-text, work in a way that centers the experience of someone who has limited or no access to the visual information in the image.

A Note About Alt-Text vs. Image Description

In this workbook, we use alt-text and image description interchangeably to refer to a description of an image, but it is important to note that they have slightly different meanings.

Alt-text is a type of image description, but not all image descriptions are alt-text.

From Rooted in Rights: "Alt-text is a type of 'hard-coded' metadata associated with an image that exists as HTML. It is most often included in an 'Alt-text' field when uploading an image."

"Image description" is a more general term — it refers to any description of an image, including one that is included in the body of a post or the caption field of an image.

You may also have heard the terms "audio description" and "verbal description." "Audio description" is audio-based and usually refers to the description of visual information in the context of video, film, television, or live performance. For example, movie theaters may offer headsets for audio description. "Verbal description" usually refers to longform description in a museum context. For example, a "verbal description tour."

Alt-text, image description, audio description, and verbal description are a related set of practices. While this workbook is focused on alt-text, our approach could also be adapted to other forms of description.

Artists for Alt-Text

We have been particularly interested in artists that are involved in the description of their own work, either by writing the description themselves, or otherwise orchestrating the description process. Some people feel artists are not good describers of their own work — that they describe in ways that align with their intent rather than the impact (intended or not) of what they've created. This can certainly be true, and it may make sense for an artist to bring in collaborators or editors to mitigate this tendency with another point of view.

We feel that artists bring an interesting perspective to the description process and can help make the description feel like an integral part of the creative work rather than simply an add-on. As Georgina Kleege advocates in her book, More than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art, an artist's process can be a valuable source of information for the description.

We also feel cautious about suggesting that artists describe their own work because most are already so under-resourced. It is often not possible for an artist to take on the role of access worker without support structures in place (compensation, support for their own access needs, training, etc). Importantly, we

do believe that artists who work visually should acknowledge that this creates barriers for certain audiences to engage with their work. If it is important to the artist that people who are blind and low vision are part of their audience (and it should be), then they might need to be part of creating that access.

Depending on an artist's identity and the circumstances of when and how they present their work, they have different levels of agency, power, and resources. When working with organizations and institutions, artists can sometimes leverage their power to ask for access. Institutions are sometimes more responsive to artists' requests than they are to those of their own access workers.

One example that we've been thinking about is when an artist sends an image to an organization or institution to be used in marketing or promotional materials. These images usually travel with a standard set of text-based information (photographer credit, title, year, materials, dimensions, etc). By also sending alt-text with this information, an artist may prompt discussion within the organization about their digital accessibility practices and whether or not they have a place or infrastructure for that alt-text.

Why Think of Alt-Text as Poetry

Framing alt-text as a type of poetry allows us to approach it with some of the ideas and strategies that have been developed by poets.

That said, we're not interested in producing alt-text poetry that exists outside of making the internet more accessible. We recognize that others have used alt-text and code as inspiration and media for poetry, but for us, increasing website accessibility remains the first and most important condition of alt-text's poetic potential.

Here are three ideas from the world of poetry that we have found to be particularly helpful when writing alt-text:

→ Attention to Language
Simply by writing alt-text with thought and care, we shift the process. What words are we using? What are their connotations? What is the tone of our writing (the way in which we're doing the writing)? What is the voice (who the reader hears)? How do these align with, or contrast, the tone and perspective of the image?

→ Word Economy

People who are new to description have a tendency to over-describe images. While there are times for long and lavish descriptions, alt-text usually aims for brevity. For most images, one to two sentences will do. Poetry has a lot to teach us about paring down language to create something that is expressive, yet concise.

→ Experimental Spirit

We have so much to learn from poetry about being more playful and exploratory in how we write alt-text. We are not interested in experimentation for experimentation's sake — we want a kind of experimentation that moves towards better and more nuanced accessibility for alt-text users. There are lots of complex and interesting questions that come up when translating visual information into text. We need to try out different ways of doing this, learning from each other's strategies and techniques.

Alt-Text as Translation

Writing alt-text is also related to the field of translation. It can be thought of as a translation of visual information into text. These are a few things we think alt-text can learn from the field of translation:

→ Information is both lost and gained. Alt-text won't describe all of the information in the image, but the act of describing also adds information.

→ There is no single correct answer. If you ask ten people to describe an image, you will get ten different descriptions. The same person might describe an image differently based on what's on their mind or what context they are writing for. Better understanding the variety of ways to describe an image is part of the ongoing work of honing our craft as describers.

→ It always involves creative decisions. Every time you describe an image you are making creative decisions — what you describe, the order in which you describe it, the language you use to describe.

Here are a few examples from Instagram of poetic alt-text.

→ Dealth Valley National Park
↳ @dealthvalleynps
Twisted wood branches in the foreground with an arc of stars in the sky above a dark distant mountain.

→ Candystore
↳ @agaywhitemale
Candystore, a white non-binary body, stands on a urinal wearing black boots, black jeans, a black leather jacket, a black faux leather hat from a gas station stuck with a black raven's feather, a shadow cast over half shimher face, sibylline.

→ Madison Zalopany
↳ @mzalopany
A screenshot of me being very impressed by my nephew Harry's new hat. The hat is a plastic green roof taken from a doll's house.

→ Justin Allen
↳ @justnalln
A sea of purple aster flowers, with round yellow centers and thick manes of straight thin lavender petals, like purple dasies.

People who are new to alt-text often feel like they are learning a totally new skill, but in fact, most of us engage with description all the time — talking on the phone, in literature, hearing about a friend's travels, in art history and art criticism.

As one example, this is from Donald Judd's 1959 review of Yayoi Kusama's first solo exhibition in New York and it is quite descriptive:

"[There are] five white, very large paintings in this show. The space is shallow, close to the surface and achieved by innumerable small arcs superimposed on a black ground overlain with a wash of white. The effect is both complex and simple... The total quality suggests an analogy to a large, fragile, but vigorously carved grill or to a massive, solid lace."

Here is another example from The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy:

"...a silver-framed black-and-white wedding picture of Chacko and Margaret Kochamma. It was snowing a little. The first he was dressed. Like someone at a fancy-dress party. flakes of fresh snow lay on the street and sidewalk. Chacko was dressed like Nehru. He wore a white churidar and a black shervani. His

shoulders were dusted with snow. There was a rose in his buttonhole, and the tip of his handkerchief, folded into a triangle, peeped out of his breast pocket. On his feet he wore polished black oxfords. He looked as though he was laughing at himself and the way he was dressed. Like someone at a fancy dress party.

Margaret Kochamma wore a long, foaming gown and a cheap tiara on her cropped, curly hair. Her veil was lifted off her face. She was as tall as he was. They looked happy. Thin and young, scowling, with the sun in their eyes. Her thick, dark eyebrows were knitted together and somehow made a lovely contrast to the frothy, bridal white. A scowling cloud with eyebrows."

Section 3: Practice

Writing Exercise 2: Subjectivity and Audience

Many people have advocated for describers to be as objective as possible, allowing the person engaging with the description to make their own subjective interpretation.

However, there has been a lot of push back on the idea that objectivity should be a central goal of description. Objectivity is an incredibly elusive concept — where is the line between fact and interpretation? As Georgina Kleege writes, do we say "smile" or do we say "lips turned up at the corners"?

The pretense of objectivity plays into existing power structures. "Objectivity" often validates the perspective of white, cis, middle and upper-class men while marking other perspectives as "subjective." Furthermore, it is unclear if an "objective" approach produces quality descriptions. Trying to be an objective writer often leads to language that is precise and technical. The resulting writing can be difficult to understand, or starkly contrast the tone of the image.

For this exercise, you'll need a photo that you've taken. If you have a smartphone, pull up a photo there — it can be the last photo on your camera roll or the last photo you posted to

social media.

→ 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 again, this time from your own perspective, as though you were describing it to your best friend.

Describing an image is an inherently subjective process — as you write, you are drawing on your own ways of seeing and making sense. However, a description should aim to provide a clear understanding of the image to an intended audience. People who use alt-text are not a monolith. They want different things from an image description and they interpret language in different ways. When describing, think through who you are speaking to. It's probably similar to how you would speak to your audience when writing for a website or social media account as a whole. What tone makes the most sense for this audience? What do they already know or have context for? What jargon, slang, shorthand, and vocabulary is relevant?

An issue with how alt-text currently exists is that its author is often unattributed. Because we know that the description's author impacts the description, transparency around authorship and process is something to explore. Depending on the scale of your operation, there are different ways to approach this. One option is to include information somewhere on your website about who writes the alt-text and what guidelines and processes they use to write it.

Clear authorship also opens up options around using the first-person voice when writing alt-text and other phrases that

signal the subjective nature of the process:

→ “X reminds me of...”
→ “X stands out to me”
→ “If I guessed, it would say it’s...”
→ “I think it looks like X, but after reading about the work, I learned it’s Y.”

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