

Writing Alternate (Alt) Text

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 states the federal government’s electronic information must be accessible to people with disabilities. In this context, “accessible” means that the document does not rely on a single sense or ability of the user, such as vision or hearing. In the case of images, Section 508 requires that all images have textual equivalents. Alternate (Alt) text is read aloud by screen readers to convey the meaning of an image or other non-text element to someone who cannot see it. Alt text is not a description of the image; it is an alternate representation of the meaning of the image. Therefore, when you write Alt text, ask yourself what information the image is conveying.

Tips on How to Write Alt Text

- Be brief—rarely more than a sentence is needed
- Convey the intended meaning of the image rather than describing it
- Avoid redundancy—do not use the same information in the Alt text that is used in the adjacent or body text
- If the content of an image is presented in the surrounding text, use minimal Alt text
- Avoid using phrases such as “image of” or “graphic of”; a screen reader provides that identification automatically

Types of Images that Require Alt Text



Decorative/Background Images

For decorative or background images that do not convey information, insert a single space as Alt text (i.e., “ ”). If the software you are using permits it, you may tag these images as artifacts.



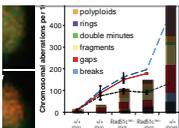
An Image as a Link

If an image is hyperlinked (clicking on the image takes you to a different web page), Alt text must describe the function or destination of the link unless this information is provided in the text surrounding the image. Avoid using “link to” or “click this image” in Alt text because links are identified by screen readers.



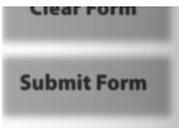
Text in an Image

If an image contains text, the text should be replicated completely as Alt text. This also applies to functional images, such as navigation buttons on web pages.



Charts and Graphs

Charts and graphs are often used to display research results or demonstrate trends. Try to summarize the results or trends in the Alt text for these kinds of graphics.



Form Image Buttons

Form image buttons need Alt text that describes their functions. Alt text should describe what the buttons do, such as “Search,” “Submit,” “Register,” or “Place Your Order.”



Logos

Logos are frequently displayed on web sites and documents. Using the company name as Alt text is usually sufficient. “Logo” does not need to be included in Alt text.