WRITING EFFECTIVE ALT TEXT

Adding effective alternative (alt) text to images ensures students understand the intention and purpose of the image in course materials.

Instructions

What Is Alt Text?

Alt text is text associated with an image, graphic, or table so that students who use screen readers will be able to access an equivalent description of the image. Alt text offers sufficient information so that non-sighted or visually-impaired students can understand what the images convey. Providing alt text allows these students to engage with the content in an equivalent manner as students who do not use screen readers. Every image, graphic, figure, model, or table requires alt text. Determine what to write based on the image's purpose and function in that context.

How Do I Write Effective Alt Text?

Too little description and the meaning is not conveyed; too much and the meaning is buried. Effective alt text strikes the balance between succinct and informative. The amount of description you need to include depends on the image's purpose and function in that context.

The Blueberry Pancake Example

The same image could serve two different purposes, making its alt text requirements very different. For example, if this image of pancakes appears in a course overview, a sufficient description could be: pancakes.
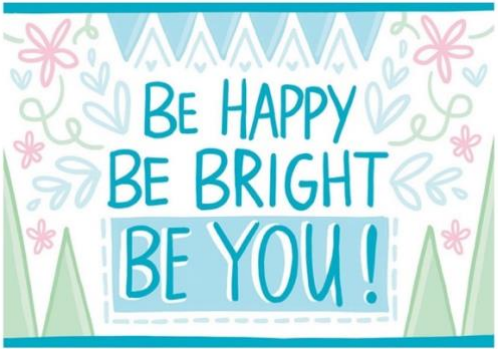
However, if this image appears in a course reading as an example of amazing pancake decoration, more description is needed because now the image is providing meaningful

information. A more suitable description could be: stack of blueberry pancakes with powdered sugar.

What are different types of images?

Images generally fall into one of five categories based on their purpose.

Text Images	What should the alt text say?	Example
Text images are any images that display words.	Ask yourself: What kind of information does this image display? For text images, repeat the words on the image.	 Alt Text: Be Happy, Be Bright, Be You!
Decorative Images Any image that is there purely for decorative purpose; without the image, the page still makes sense.	**What should the alt text say?** Ask yourself: Does the page make sense without the image? Before classifying an image as decorative, make sure the content on the page can be understood without it. Any image of the same shape and size could replace a decorative image with no impact on the content. A screen reading device will skip any image marked as decorative.	**Example** Alt Text: Tropical Beach As an alternative, you can mark it as a decorative image.

WRITING EFFECTIVE ALT TEXT

Descriptive Images	What should the alt text say?	Example
Any image that provides meaningful and valuable information to aid in mastering a course concept or assessment of that mastery.	Ask yourself: What meaning does this image add in this context? Short and succinct is better, but add more description as needed, especially if the image illustrates a key concept or needs to be distinguished from other adjacent images.	Alt Text: Great Sphinx of Giza, a mythical creature with the head of a human and the body of a lion.
Complex Images	What should the alt text say?	Example
Any chart, graph, map, theoretical model, or image requiring complex analysis.	Ask yourself: What other information relates to this image? The alternative text should be the title of the graph or chart and a direction to another resource that helps to interpret the information. This can include an adjacent data table containing the data used to create the figure. The alternative text could also provide a URL to a web page that provides a longer description of the complex image.	Alt Text: The Prison Industrial Complex. See pages 270-272 in your textbook for a full description.

	Complex information, such as graphs or charts, must also include a description written above or below the image. The description should summarize what the graphic or chart illustrates.	
Functional Images Any images with navigational purpose.	**What should the alt text say?** Ask yourself: What happens if I click on this image? For this type of image, it is best to focus on the function, task, or sequence that the image is conveying. For example, with an image of an app icon, you would not describe what the icon itself looks like, but instead what it does. Alternative text of a functional image should describe the function as well as the content. For example, the JWU library logo linking to the JWU library website.	**Example** Alt Text: JWU Library logo linking to library website

Hot Tips

- Ask yourself, how would I describe this image out loud?

- Be accurate and equivalent when choosing what information you describe. Succinct and informative descriptions are best.
- Avoid using "image of…" or "graphic of…" because this adds clutter and pushes the important information further away from the student.