Writing Alt Text for UI Extension Publishing

Alt Text is a brief, written description of a graphic image (table, textual images, photograph, logo, illustration, hyperlinked icon—like a button) used primarily to aid readers who have a visual impairment, and/or have a sensory processing and/or learning disability. Screen readers and braille displays access the alt text. However, alt text has other uses:

- It displays in place of an image when the figure file hasn't loaded or when a user chooses not to view images.
- Search engines use it to return search results.

The higher the quality of alt text, the more accessible information is to all readers and the more searchable it becomes. Writing high-quality alt text is not intuitive, so we offer the following tips:

Writing Alt Text—Step by Step

1. Context and intent are key. How and why are you using the image? What information is important to provide for readers? Consider the user experience and how to make your material more accessible to them.
2. Be specific, concise, and conversational (one to two sentences, usually no more than 140 words in total). Use proper sentences, not keywords or phrases.
3. Never start with "Image of" or "Picture of." That's too general and obvious and wastes your word limit. Context is important, however, so beginning with the type of image is often useful, like headshot, illustration, chart, screengrab, closeup, etc.
4. Use keywords sparingly. One or two are good. Do NOT create alt text that is only a list of keywords (called "stuffing").
5. More complex images, like line graphs or tables, might require a longer description. Write a brief summary as alt text and include the fuller description underneath the image.
6. Decorative images (those that do not teach anything) need no alt text. These include brand graphics or images that prettify the document or visually break up content. Only images that have contextual significance or meaning (help readers understand your information better) require alt text.

Of course, there always are exceptions, but these are good rules of thumb.

Alt Text 101

Watch this 7-minute YouTube video Alt Text 101: The What, Why and How by Easy Accessibility for a crash course in writing alt text.

Additional Resources

For more in-depth guidance, consult the following resources:

- Poet Training Tool (provides interactive training), https://poet.diagramcenter.org/

- Diagram Center, "Accessible Image Sample Book" (a very detailed resource for complex images that involve data, charts, graphs, diagrams), http://diagramcenter.org/accessible-image-sample-book.html

- *Image Description Guidelines* (downloadable book version, likely of the previous resource), http://diagramcenter.org/table-of-contents-2.html

- Harvard University, "Digital Accessibility" (a simplified resource page for writing alt text; provides examples, including those about data-based graphics), https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/describe-content-images

- University of South Carolina, "Digital Accessibility" (very thoughtful instructions for alt text writing, including case examples/step-by-steps of charts, etc.),
- https://sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/digital-accessibility/toolbox/best_practices/alternative_text/step-by-step-instructions-alt-text/index.php

- PennState, "Accessibility and Usability at Penn State," (another university-based resource; see especially "Complex Images" links, but also provides links to How-Tos using different design software and other alt text resources), https://accessibility.psu.edu/images/alttext/