

Is a Picture Always Worth a Thousand Words?

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We've all heard the term, "A picture is worth a thousand words", right? We use images daily to add emphasis and help clientele better understand the content. Now, think about someone trying to navigate a website or learn about a particular topic through a digital publication containing pictures with a visual impairment. **Inaccessible web content means that people with disabilities are denied equal access to information and can exclude people just as much as having steps at an entrance to a physical location would for someone using a wheelchair.**



People with visual impairments navigate the web in various ways, such as using screen readers to speak the text that appears on a screen. While screen readers work great for written content, they need our help with visual content. We must tell the reader what is displayed, like we use captioning for someone with a hearing impairment.

Alternative text, or alt text, is like a caption but different because it lives inside the code of a document or website. Whenever a screen reader encounters a visual image, it relies on the code to describe it.

Alt text should be added to images, such as photos, infographics, clip art, charts and tables, and can be done easily when creating documents using the tab found under the Picture Format tab in Microsoft Word. Alt text can also be added when editing photos on social media platforms under advanced settings.



Man and woman viewing bluebonnets and maroon bluebonnets on a walk through the Texas A&M University Campus Gardens

When adding alt text, use language appropriate for your audience's age, background knowledge, and purpose in viewing the image. Be specific. Avoid starting the description with "a photo of" because the user already knows it's an image. The description should describe the subject in detail, the setting, and the action and should typically be 1-2 sentences and less than 100 characters. **The**

description should always end with a period, even if it's not a complete sentence. This tells the screen reader to pause after reading the alt text.

For example, when describing the photo below, one might say, "People looking at flowers." However, a better description might be, "Man and woman viewing bluebonnets and maroon bluebonnets on a walk through the Texas A&M University Campus Gardens."

Remember, adding alt text not only helps to bring stories to life and make subjects easier to understand, it also improves accessibility and makes digital content inclusive to everyone while also ensuring we are providing the best user experience to all of the people we serve.