

## Best Practices - Alt Attribute

What is the `<alt>` attribute?

Use the `<alt>` attribute after the image name to briefly describe the image. Keep the text concise and simple.

Use the LONGDESC attribute to thoroughly describe the image.

### Creating Effective Alternative `<alt>` Text

Why is `<alt>` text important?

One of the biggest accessibility problems on the Web today is the lack of **alternative** text for graphics and images. Individuals who are blind often use assistive technologies such as screen readers or refreshable Braille devices that read the text on the page to them. **When these assistive technologies come across images without `<alt>` text, they are unable to communicate their meaning.**

**Remember: The most appropriate `<alt>` text communicates the purpose of the graphic, not its appearance.**

### Implications to consider:

When a screen reader comes across an image with no `<alt>` attribute, there are a couple of things that could happen:

- It could simply skip the image as if it were not even on the page.
- It could find some text that is associated with the image such as the file name and read that instead.

### Some Basic Guidelines:

1. Ensure that the text alternatives communicate the purpose of the graphic accurately.
2. Provide empty or null alt text for graphics which do not convey content.
  - **e.g.: Decorative Images**  
These types of images do not provide any content to the user; they are simply used for decorative purposes. Decorative images have no value to someone who cannot see the page. The proper HTML markup for this type of image is what is often referred to as an empty or null alt attribute, written as `alt=""`.
3. Provide `<alt>` text for the hot spots of image maps.
4. Do not repeat the alt text of an image in the adjacent text.
5. Do not put important, descriptive images in the background.

Source:

Resource suggestion from Holly Johnson, Disability Services

[http://www.webaim.org/techniques/images/alt\\_text.php](http://www.webaim.org/techniques/images/alt_text.php)

**Examples:**

[http://medicine.buffalo.edu/phdprogram/research\\_and\\_facilities/Researcher\\_Spotlight.html](http://medicine.buffalo.edu/phdprogram/research_and_facilities/Researcher_Spotlight.html)

## Researcher Spotlight



Current Alt Attribute: Copper and Iron Transport  
Suggested Revision: **Daniel Kosman, PhD**

The most concrete research that I found in regards to how `<alt>` tags function was by reading the above linked Researcher Spotlight page using JAWS screen reader on a UB accessible computer workstation in Capen Hall:

- Using the screen reader. hearing the text read back to me helped me to conclude:
  - Inserting the term graphic, picture, or image in the `<alt>` tag was not necessary. The screen reader will say, 'graphic' and then read back the `<alt>` tag.

While running through the page of Researcher Spotlight's using the screen reader JAWS with Holly Johnson's (Disability Services) assistance, I also was able to determine that some of the images have a `<a href=""></a>` surrounding the image, which causes the screen reader to bypass the image and state it as a link only. In this case, it would be suitable to put the word graphic in the `<alt>` tag.

The **Norma Nowak, PhD** image worked properly, but because the others are links on the page, they did not.

Campus Resources:

<http://ubit.buffalo.edu/sites/assistive.php>

### Nielsen Norman Group recommendations

[http://www.nngroup.com/reports/accessibility/beyond\\_ALT\\_text.pdf](http://www.nngroup.com/reports/accessibility/beyond_ALT_text.pdf)  
beginning on page 44

If you do choose to use graphics, and we acknowledge that some are necessary (like the company logo), there are some things you can do to make them more accessible.

- When writing ALT text, keep the text concise and simple. The goal is to let people using screen readers know what the image is.
- If an image contains relevant information, use the LONGDESC attribute to thoroughly describe the image.

Here is an example used in the:

On the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame website, one screen reader and Braille user found a timeline of rock-and-roll related events. She initially thought she would be unable to read it; she was surprised and glad to find the timeline available in HTML.

- Interactive Timeline (at the bottom of the page):  
<http://rockhall.com/story-of-rock/timelines/memphis/>
- HTML Timeline:  
<http://rockhall.com/story-of-rock/timelines/memphis/basic/>

Secondary Notes I used for my research to support the above summary:

Give all graphics, even advertising banners, names that are understandable and that thoroughly convey what the graphic is and does. Use `<alt>` text to briefly describe images, and the `<longdesc>` attribute to thoroughly describe them.

For screen reader users, there are few things more frustrating than waiting for a screen reader to read something meaningless. It's like waiting in a long line only to get to the front and find out the person behind the counter cannot help you.

The only indication people using screen readers have of what the image is is what the developer explicitly tells them. We saw many examples of poorly named images, poorly used ALT text attributes, or images with no ALT text at all. HTML affords elegant means for naming images. Use the ALT attribute after the image name to briefly describe the image. Use the LONGDESC attribute to thoroughly describe the image.

When writing ALT text, keep the text concise and simple. The goal is to let people using screen readers know what the image is. For example, there is probably no need to go into great detail about what the Major League Baseball logo looks like, but telling users a particular graphic is the MLB logo would help. Conversely, the Charles Schwab site used an image to convey the risk level of a particular mutual fund. The images were named Risk 1 through Risk 5, and they had no ALT text associated with them. The image itself did not use a numeric risk level, but rather indicated a high, medium, or low risk level. It would have helped screen reader users to have the images named High Risk, Low Risk, etc., or to have the ALT text provide this information.

If an image contains relevant information, use the LONGDESC attribute to thoroughly describe the image. This is obviously a good recommendation for any items that you are selling. Also, you should thoroughly describe any information in graphical timelines or hierarchical images.

On the Japanese e-commerce site, Ways Shop, several buttons were not properly labeled. The screen reader read only the words Push button. Sighted users would see these words in Japanese on the buttons:

- Change amount (white button)
- See my shopping bag (light blue button)
- Check out (red button)
- Continue shopping (navy blue button)

> WHEN GRAPHICS CONTAIN USEFUL INFORMATION, ALSO PROVIDE THE INFORMATION IN TEXT.

Some graphics are just stock art or logos, and even if described, a person who is blind or who has with low vision might not get much information from them. There are times, however, when graphics comprise useful information. When this is the case, users should be able to access it in HTML.

On the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame website, one screen reader and Braille user found a timeline of rock-and-roll related events. She initially thought she would be unable to read it; she was surprised and glad to find the timeline available in HTML.

Interactive Timeline (at the bottom of the page):

<http://rockhall.com/story-of-rock/timelines/memphis/>

HTML Timeline:

<http://rockhall.com/story-of-rock/timelines/memphis/basic/>

[http://soap.stanford.edu/downloads/beyond\\_ALT\\_text.pdf](http://soap.stanford.edu/downloads/beyond_ALT_text.pdf)

## Stanford School of Business: Style Guide

Use the ALT attribute after the image name to briefly describe the image.

Use the LONGDESC attribute to thoroughly describe the image.

ALT text is a user interface element, not a statement of political correctness. ALT text should help blind users (and others who can't see images) navigate and operate the site. The text should describe the image's meaning for the interaction and what users need to know about the image to use the site most effectively. **\*\*There is no need to describe irrelevant visual details.**

Accessibility: For more information about accessibility please visit the Stanford Online Accessibility Program website. There you will find a number of resource materials outlining best practices, policies, development guidelines, and more. The site also provides tips, tricks, and tutorials geared towards the web designer/developer.

[Stanford Online Accessibility Program \(SOAP\)](#)

"Today's multitudes of web-enabled devices rely on online content that has been optimized, not for a specific browser, but rather for Universal Accessibility."

Image Alt Tags

- Images should be given meaningful <alt> tags.
- Identify the type of image by using photo, logo, or icon, etc., in the <alt> tag. **\*\*** Caryn disagrees, as this information is already announced when using a screen reader. (6-29-10)

Source:

[http://www.gsb.stanford.edu/styleguide/web\\_styleguide/bestpractice/accessibility.html](http://www.gsb.stanford.edu/styleguide/web_styleguide/bestpractice/accessibility.html)

**www.w3.org**

While alternate text may be very helpful, it must be handled with care.

- Authors should observe the following guidelines:
- Do not specify irrelevant alternate text when including images intended to *format* a page, for instance, alt="red ball" would be inappropriate for an image that adds a red ball for decorating a heading or paragraph. In such cases, the alternate text should be the empty string (""). Authors are in any case advised to avoid using images to format pages; style sheets should be used instead.
- Do not specify meaningless alternate text (e.g., "dummy text"). Not only will this frustrate users, it will slow down user agents that must convert text to speech or braille output.

Source:

<http://www.w3.org/TR/1999/REC-html401-19991224/struct/objects.html#edef-alt>