



Alt Text and Visual Descriptions: Enhancing Accessibility in Digital Content

Introduction

Accessibility is a fundamental aspect of creating inclusive digital environments. Alt text and visual descriptions are crucial tools that ensure visual content is accessible to everyone, including individuals who are Blind or live with low vision. This white paper outlines considerations and practices for using alt text and visual descriptions to enhance digital accessibility.

Understanding Alt Text and Visual Descriptions

Alt Text

Alt text, or alternative text, is a brief description added to the metadata of an image. It is typically limited to 100-250 characters, with best practices

recommending around 125 characters. Alt text is primarily used by screen readers to convey the content of an image to Blind users. It can also be displayed if an image fails to load.

Example:

- *Alt Text:* "A cartoon-like White-breasted Nuthatch perched face down on the letter 'B' in 'Birdability'."

Visual Descriptions

Visual descriptions are more detailed and can be included in the image caption or a text post. These descriptions are not limited by character count and can provide a comprehensive explanation of the visual details in an image. Visual descriptions are exposed in the document or post and can be read by anyone. Visual descriptions can help many different users access content, improve comprehension, and help non-visual learners, too

Example:

- *Visual Description:* "Graphic with blue text that reads 'Birdability' with a cartoon-like picture of a White-breasted Nuthatch perched face down on the B of the text. The Nuthatch is facing left and appears inquisitive"

Importance of Alt Text and Visual Descriptions

Alt text and visual descriptions ensure that all users, regardless of their visual abilities, can access the information conveyed by images. This promotes inclusivity and enhances the user experience for people with disabilities.

Goals of Using Alt Text and Visual Descriptions

- Awareness: Raise awareness about accessibility as a fundamental aspect of digital content.
- Skill Development: Develop increasing skills for creating effective visual descriptions in online interactions.
- Best Practices: Identify and implement best practices for using alt text and visual descriptions on social media and other digital platforms.

Best Practices for Alt Text and Visual Descriptions

1. Convey Important Messages Only: Only use images to begin with if they convey important messages that text alone cannot.
2. Avoid Emojis and Excessive Punctuation: Do not include emojis or excessive punctuation in alt text.
3. Transcribe All Text: Ensure that all text within an image is transcribed in the alt text or visual description.
4. Avoid All Caps: Avoid using all caps as screen readers may interpret them one letter at a time.
5. Caption All Videos: Provide captions for all videos to ensure accessibility.

Tools and Resources

Written Tools

- Alt Text: Added to image metadata or the "alt text" box on social media platforms. Limited to around 125 characters.

- Image Descriptions: Included in captions or text posts. Not limited by character count and can provide detailed visual descriptions.

Conclusion

Incorporating alt text and visual descriptions in digital content is an essential practice for promoting accessibility and inclusivity. By following best practices and utilizing the tools available, we can ensure that all users, regardless of their visual abilities, have equitable access to information.

For more information and resources on creating accessible digital content, visit [Access Guide](#) and [How to Write Alt Text and Image Descriptions](#).

This white paper is based on guidelines and examples provided in the Alt Text and Visual Descriptions presentation created by Birdability staff.