UVic RCSD Provision of Alternative Text Image Descriptions: Position Paper

Issue Intro

In the spring term of 2013, Alternative Text Support at the University of Victoria became increasingly concerned about their ability to provide discipline-specific alternative text image descriptions that adequately represented intended course-specific educational outcomes for students with visual impairments. In the preceding 12 months, this cohort of students was attending classes across eight different disciplines (Writing, Social Work, Law, Women’s Studies, Psychology, Computer Science, Public Administration and Indigenous Governance) at both the undergraduate- and graduate-level. In response to student concerns over the level of discipline-specific context applied in the process of developing appropriate alternative text image descriptions, a review of the available literature was undertaken to help develop procedure. The following is a summary of that review, and recommendations for updates to current practice.

Expert Knowledge

Much of the contemporary literature considering alternative text comes from a web design standpoint, which assumes that the image describer is also the author/creator of the document, as only the content provider can know exactly why an image was included. This presents a challenge to providers of alternative text in an academic environment, as they lack access to the author’s intentions (or the discipline-specific expertise required to reasonably assume their intentions), and may not always know why an image was included or selected. While the literature agrees that “important” information about an image must always be included, there is no consensus on how to accurately determine importance without authorial or expert knowledge. As such, evaluations of importance by non-experts are understandably (and inevitably) subjective and inconsistent.

Subjectivity

In the literature examining alternative text, subjective elements are considered an integral and necessary aspect of descriptions. These subjective components include descriptions of emotions, motivations, symbolism, and thematic aspects; essentially, elements which necessitate authorial, expert or discipline-specific knowledge. Even in cases where authorial/expert knowledge seems less necessary to adequately describe an image, it is unavoidable that different image describers will focus on different aspects of images and provide different information. For example, when describing an image of a dog, one person may relate

2 Tang, 4.
3 Ibid., 18.
4 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 257.
the dog’s pose, another may state its colour, while a third describes the dog’s apparent breed. Without authorial/expert knowledge, each describer will have different ideas of what subjectively constitutes the important components of an image.

**Time**

In a comprehensive examination of the production of alternate text image descriptions at the University of Saskatchewan, time was identified as the main issue for participants in the study. More time spent on image descriptions (unsurprisingly) led to more detailed and comprehensive alternate text, but also required unfeasibly long periods to complete without authorial/expert knowledge of the subject. The researcher noted that the time investment required for detailed descriptions meant that text alternatives could not be provided to users quickly. While the researcher recognized that a large amount of time could be spent writing image descriptions, it was concluded that the alternate text descriptions should be completed efficiently and provided in a short period of time.

**Limiting Descriptions**

In light of these difficulties relating to time constraints and images’ subjective elements, existing guidelines for alternative text in an academic setting encourage describers to significantly limit their image descriptions. Describers are advised to relate only what they see, without interpreting subject matter content, so as to avoid influencing or confusing the student’s academic inputs or outcomes. This is considered especially important in the context of the multiple paradigms through which post-secondary students are asked to interpret material. For this reason, literature specific to providing alternative text in an academic rather than a web design-based context directs describers to look to the image captions already provided in the text. If the caption is deemed “adequately explanatory”, the describer is instructed to label the image as “image described in text/caption” and to avoid inserting his or her own (non-authorial) interpretations. However, while determining what is “adequately explanatory” might be correctly determined in some cases by a non-expert, this determination would be best conducted by an individual with authorial, expert or discipline-specific knowledge or a familiarity with intended educational outcomes.

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7 Tang, 133.
8 Tang, 175.
9 Ibid., 94, 169, 175.
10 Ibid., 175.
12 For example, physical appearances and actions can be seen, while motivations or intentions can only be interpreted. See Bookshare, as well as Landry.
**Risks of Inadequate Image Descriptions for the Student**

Students with a print-based disability rely on the provision of timely and accurate alternative format materials to have the same access to required textual course materials as other students. Discipline- and course-specific image descriptions work to provide equal opportunity to develop one’s own interpretations of the image.\(^4\) Assuming that the practice of interpreting an image, or simply gleaning information from a textual source, is an intended educational outcome of a required reading, it seems appropriate, whenever possible, to provide equal opportunity to all students in attaining that outcome. This seems particularly important when it serves the interests of both the student and the relevant academic standards of the academic unit requiring the course reading.

Failure to have access to accurate alternative text image descriptions for required course materials may present a situation where the student needs to request a delay in writing an exam or submitting an assignment. Ultimately, an incomplete or inaccurate description could limit access to intended educational outcomes for the student or, worse, confuse or mislead the student, actively working against the intended educational outcomes.

**Risks of Inadequate Image Descriptions for the Educational Institution**

The provision of user-appropriate and timely alternative format materials for students with a print-based disability is a legally mandated academic accommodation in Canada. Failure to provide user-appropriate and timely alternative format materials may provide a student with a legitimate reason to request a delay in writing an exam or submitting an assignment. While not specific to the alternative text image description, the failure to provide user-appropriate and timely alternative format materials has resulted in human rights complaints filed against Canadian post-secondary institutions.

**Conclusions**

A consideration of the literature surveyed, in the context of the University of Victoria understanding the implementation of academic accommodations to be a shared responsibility of all involved parties, has led us to conclude that Alternative Text Support does not have the authorial, expert or discipline-specific knowledge, or an appropriate familiarity with intended course-specific educational outcomes, to provide adequate alternative text image descriptions when producing alternate format materials for visually-impaired students. The creation of accurate, discipline-specific alternative text image descriptions dramatically (and in many cases, unfeasibly) increases the time required to provide alternative format texts, when utilizing the current practice of Alternative Text Support-centralized services, preventing the efficient delivery of materials to all students with a print-based disability. Furthermore, attempts to provide detailed descriptions without authorial/expert knowledge of the subject matter or the intended educational objectives could prove detrimental to students’ comprehension of class materials, while putting undue responsibility on Alternative Text Support for students’ academic inputs and potentially placing the institutional at risk.

\(^4\) Bookshare.
As it remains a responsibility of the institution to provide accurate and timely image description to students with visual impairments, a potential alternative to the current practice of Alternative Text Support—centralized image description is to require those selecting the required readings to provide image description for use in alternative format course materials. The individual or department selecting the readings would presumably have direct access to expert, discipline-specific and, in some cases, authorial knowledge of the reasoning for including an image, as well as familiarity with intended course-specific educational outcomes and departmental academic standards. Alternative Text Support would work to support the development of timely image descriptions and include descriptive text completed by the appropriate academic authority in the final alternative format materials provided to the student.

In an effort to show how we might begin the process of transitioning responsibility for the provision of alternative text image descriptions, please see the following Appendix: Quick Reference Guide to Alternative Text Image Description.

See the attached bibliography for more thorough guides to producing basic alternative text image descriptions.

**Appendix: Quick Reference Guide to Alternative Text Image Description**

1. **Identify the purpose**

   Identifying the purpose of the image is the first step in providing quality alternative text. At this stage, the describer considers why an image was included, as well as what the reader would miss if the image was not described, paying careful attention to the desired educational outcome of the image. Broadly, the describer is answering the question “Why is this image in the text?” A direct answer to this question is not typically included in the provided alternative text image description itself. Instead, the question and answer serves to provide context for the describer in their approach to the description.

2. **Classify the image**

   At the outset of the description, the describer should classify the type of image. For example, the image may be a photograph, an abstract or realistic painting, a poster, a newspaper cartoon, etc.

3. **Describe the basics**

   The describer can then move on to a broad description of the basics of the image. Alternative text literature typically looks to the example of library cataloguing in determining what information to initially include, focusing on the “W5 System” (Who, What, When, Where, and Why). At this stage, the describer is focused on factual information, limited to the objects, persons, locations, actions, and colours depicted.

4. **Give details**

   From these foundations, the describer can move on from the initially-basic image description to an elaborated scene. For example, an image broadly described as two men standing on a riverbank could then be fleshed out with descriptions of
their appearance/clothing, any gestures/posture/movement in the image, the weather and apparent time of day, and so forth.

5. Outline thematic, contextual, and subjective elements

The final level of description, and most important in the post-secondary setting, requires expert knowledge of the specific context in which the image is being presented. At this point in the description, subjective information is conveyed to the student, such as symbolism, thematic elements, atmosphere, and emotions (both expressed in the image and evoked in the viewer). While certain elements may seem intrinsic or vital to someone with expert or authorial knowledge, these are the aspects of the image most likely to be missed entirely or considered trivial by a non-expert describer, as they lack the necessary interpretive paradigm to recognize these subjective elements.

Note that it is not necessary to describe any interpretation that can be gleaned from the alternative text image description arrived at by following steps 1 through 4, as above. However, in the case that this more basic description is inadequate to arrive at the academic interpretation or educational outcome intended by the original image, a more involved explanation of the thematic, contextual, and subjective elements is required.

6. Consider the flow of the text

The placement of the description within the body of the text is an important consideration. Simply inserting an image description in the same place on the page as the image itself can cause confusion, as a screen-reader will seem to suddenly change topic (typically mid-sentence), and then pick up where it left off without warning. It is best to move image descriptions to the end of the pertinent paragraph, so as to preserve document clarity and flow.

Bibliography/Further Reading:

American Council of the Blind’s Audio Description Project, “Audio Description Standards” (July 2009).


