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).


