

WRITING GOOD ALTERNATIVE TEXT

For WordPress content editors at York University

Alternative text or “**alt text**” is recited by screen readers in place of images, video and other objects, allowing the content and function of the object to be understood by people with visual or cognitive disabilities. It’s also displayed in a web browser if the object is not loaded.

As a content editor, it’s your job to ensure that the alt text on your WordPress pages is meaningful to users with disabilities as required under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).

- Include **default alt text** every time you upload an image to WordPress. If there is no alt text on an image WordPress uses the filename as the alt text instead—usually not helpful!
- Ensure all existing images have default alt text: Go to the Media Library admin panel, click on the first item to start browsing, and use the < arrow buttons > to review each item. If you find one without default alt text, add it here.

Keep Alt Text Short and Sweet

Alt text is **short**, usually from a few words to a sentence or two at most.

Imagine that you’re reading a document over the phone to someone, and that you’re in a rush. What can you say to convey the **essential meaning** of the image in as few words as possible?

Don’t include “image of” or similar in your alt text. A screen reader will inform the user that an image is present. Only include what type of image it is—“photograph of three penguins”— if that matters to comprehending the content of the document. Otherwise “three penguins” will do.



Make Alt Text Context Appropriate

Good alt text is **context appropriate**—meaning the same image may have different alt text depending on the particular situation in which it is used. “Three penguins” may suffice on some pages, but on a science page you may need to write “Three penguins, a bonded pair and their chick”, where that is important for readers to know.

- Check the alt text in every time you insert an image into a WordPress page.
- If the default is not appropriate for the context, insert the image first, click on it in the content editor, and then click the Edit (pencil) icon. Edit the default alt text to be appropriate for the new context.

Ensure Alt Text Describes Function



If an image has a **function**, describe its function in preference to its appearance. “Go to next page” or even just “next page” would be good alt text for a navigation button that links to the next page. A screen reader will say something like “image, link” followed by your alt text, so you don’t have to include “this is a link to”. And you only need to describe the appearance of that image if it really matters.

Include Text from the Image in the Alt Text

Avoid using images that have text on them—real text is more accessible not only to screen readers but to people who have to magnify the screen image to read. However, sometimes you have no choice but to use an image with text such as a corporate logo.

If an image includes any text on it, your alt text must include **all of the text** that is included in the image, as well as whatever else you need to make the image understood.



For a corporate logo, write something like “York University logo”—don’t describe the appearance unless it’s critical in the context of the page.

Use Null Alt Text for Decorative Images

When an image is purely decorative, don’t waste someone’s time with alt text that doesn’t add any meaning to the document—especially if the decorative image repeats several times on the page. In a case like this, web authors use what is called “null alt text”. This convention communicates that you assessed the image, determined it conveys no meaning, and don’t want to waste the user’s time on it.



- To create null alt text in WordPress, type a single blank space in the alt text field. A screen reader will either skip the image entirely, or read it as “image: null”.

Include Alt Text for Tables and Other Objects

Alternative text has to be added to other objects that are not plain headings or paragraphs of text, including tables. If you are unsure how to add alt text to other objects, please contact UIT for support.

Provide Long Descriptions of Complex Images

The full meaning of complex images like charts can’t be conveyed with alternative text alone, so in this case you should also include a longer description of that content, either within the main text of the page or through a link to a supplemental page.

