

Guidelines for Image Descriptions

Overview

When writing image descriptions, there are many and varied ideas on what “best practices” exist. Most folks try to strike a balance between brief, functional descriptions and longer, more detailed ones. In order to decide what is necessary for an image description, ask why the image itself is necessary to your post/paper/presentation. What elements are important? What affects does it convey? Are there ‘incidental’ elements (those that may not be the focus of the image but are also somehow important)? Answering these questions will provide a framework of how to craft your image description.

Most brief image descriptions are about 15-25 words. It is not necessary to begin with or even include “In image...” or “this picture shows...” as images are usually apparent and screen readers cue users that an image is being described. For photographs of a person (for an interview, bio, etc.) it is best practice to have the person photographed provide their own description; when this is not possible, use qualifiers for perceived gender, age, skin tone, and disability.

Examples



A wide shot of Chicago’s Millenium Park shows skyscrapers in the background and focuses on the iconic “Cloud Gate:” a giant reflective statue with concave and convex curves.



A person who appears to be a woman looks serenely at the viewer with hands touched together just below her face. She has red hair, light-brown seeming skin, and is wearing an orange jumpsuit.

Resources

[Axess Labs Guide to Alt Text](#)

[s.e. smith's Alt text and image descriptions made simple](#)

[Universal Design 2016 Photo Competition Guidelines for descriptions](#)

[California State University Northridge's Best Practices for Accessible Images](#)

[Thought Snax's "Image Description and Identity"](#)

[University of Leicester's "Writing Effective ALT text"](#)

[We Need Your Help: Specifying Race and Gender in Image Descriptions](#)

[Image Descriptions and Facebook](#)

[The Revolution Must be Accessible, Part 1: Image Descriptions](#)