



## **Alt text author guidelines**

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**Note to authors:** Please note this is a working document. We would welcome your input.  
If you find anything unclear, please do contact us at [uclpresspublishing@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:uclpresspublishing@ucl.ac.uk)

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## Introduction

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### What is alt text?

Alt text (alternative text) is a short description of an image that is used to describe the content of the image in digital content. It is designed for readers who use digital screen readers due to visual impairment or for other reasons.

The alt text is embedded within the underlying html code of the book or article using <alt> tags. By embedding alt text in our ebooks and online publications, we can ensure that all images (includes diagrams and graphs as well as photos and illustrations) can be picked up by screen readers (a type of assistive technology which converts text into audio), ensuring visually impaired people can access our content. The alt text is not visible in the printed book.

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### Why is alt text important?

- Alt text is a key part of accessible publishing. At UCL Press we are committed to making our content as accessible as possible to all readers. In line with our [open access](#) mission, we aim to provide inclusive publishing and reach the widest possible audiences.
- Alt text enables richer image descriptions and better user experience in general.
- We are working towards full compliance with the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG 2.2\)](#). As per the European Accessibility Act (EAA), from June 2025 it will be a legal requirement to include alt text in any ebooks being sold commercially in the EU.

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### How does alt text benefit me as an author?

- By making content inclusive and accessible to all, the reader base for your work will be broadened, you will gain further engagement with your work and ensure equal opportunities for all readers.
- It helps to future-proof your work, as content will be viewed, listened to and accessed in different ways. Alt text is becoming a standard part of publishing workflows.
- Publications with alt text can benefit from enhanced discoverability – alt text will be indexed by search engines.

### **When is it needed?**

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- Alt text is required for any figure in your book or article that illustrates your text. This includes descriptive images (conveying important information or context), functional images (serving a function, like web links), informative images (adding additional information that is not in the text) and complex images (like maps or diagrams). It is not needed for cover images, tables or purely decorative images. Decorative images do not add information to the content of a page. Examples of decorative images include visual styling such as borders or images that illustrate the text without providing any additional information.

### **Why should authors provide alt text?**

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- As the author, you are in the best position to provide clear, descriptive text because you are the subject-matter expert; you have sourced the image and know your content best.
- You maintain creative control of alt text creation and output rather than handing it to an external alt text creator. It becomes another part of the book or article submission, alongside the manuscript and artwork.

### **What are the length requirements?**

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- Try to keep alt text as succinct as possible to make it user-friendly (and avoid placing a burden on the user through overly lengthy descriptions). The alt text should describe the image as concisely as possible. Try to keep alt text to around 50 words. More complex images may require a longer description ([please see below](#)).

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## How do I write alt text?

- Remember alt text should not repeat the caption. Those using screen readers will also have access to the caption, so there is no need to repeat names, dates, locations, or other information about the image that appears alongside the image. Instead, consider which visual details are provided in the caption and which additional details the reader requires to understand why that image has been included. Imagine reading your book or article aloud – what would you say if the reader could not see the image?
- If the body text already provides context, there is no need to repeat this in the alt text since the main text will be picked up by a screen reader.
- Ensure the critical information in the image is included. A good rule of thumb is to include what you might relay over the phone if you were describing the image.
- Ask yourself what the purpose of the image is and what it is trying to convey within a given context. How does it relate to the text around it?
- Assess the image – consider who, what, how, when, where, why?
- Give an overview of image, drilling down into the specifics.
- Try to be as objective as possible and stick to the facts of the image without interpretation.
- Be concise and avoid repetition. Use clear language and plain English.

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## Tips for writing alt text

- Do not include redundant wording such as 'photo of', 'image of'.
- Punctuation: Use commas to break up text where necessary. Use full stops so that the screen reader knows where to insert a pause. Make sure there is a full stop at the end of the alt text.
- Capitals: Screen readers will read groups of capital letters as acronyms (e.g. ABC), so only use grouped capital letters for this purpose.
- Symbols: Use only characters or symbols that can be read by screen readers  
£ € ¥ \$ & @ / %
- Spell out all contractions, numbers, and non-Latin letters and present the information in a logical and consistent order.

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### How does alt text differ from captions?

An image caption is text that displays on the screen or in a printed publication. Alt text is read aloud to someone using a screen reader but is hidden from a sighted user. Alt text is not the same as a caption, which typically provides information supplementing or not already in the visual element itself.

Alt text will often be more descriptive than a typical caption. It will not include the credit line or information on copyright that would be relevant to a sighted person. Consider the below images and captions.

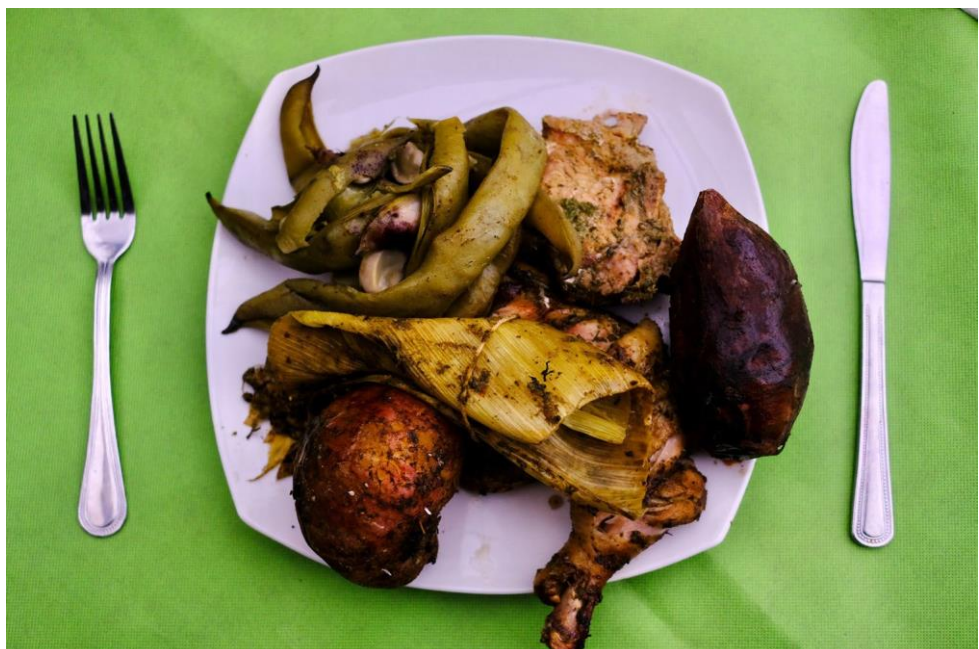
**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Peruvians at an event at the Latin American Church. Screenshot of video captured by the Visual Anthropology Lab, Pontifical Catholic University of Chile.

The alt text would be more specific and would provide context for the reader e.g. 'Four people eating at a table in a crowded room. Other people appear in the background'.

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** Chicken prepared in a *pachamanca* ('pot in the earth') at the Peruvian Club. Photo by Alfonso Otaegui.

The alt text for this image might be 'A plate of food including cooked meat and vegetables with a fork and knife laid either side of the plate on a green table'.

## Can captions be used as alt text?

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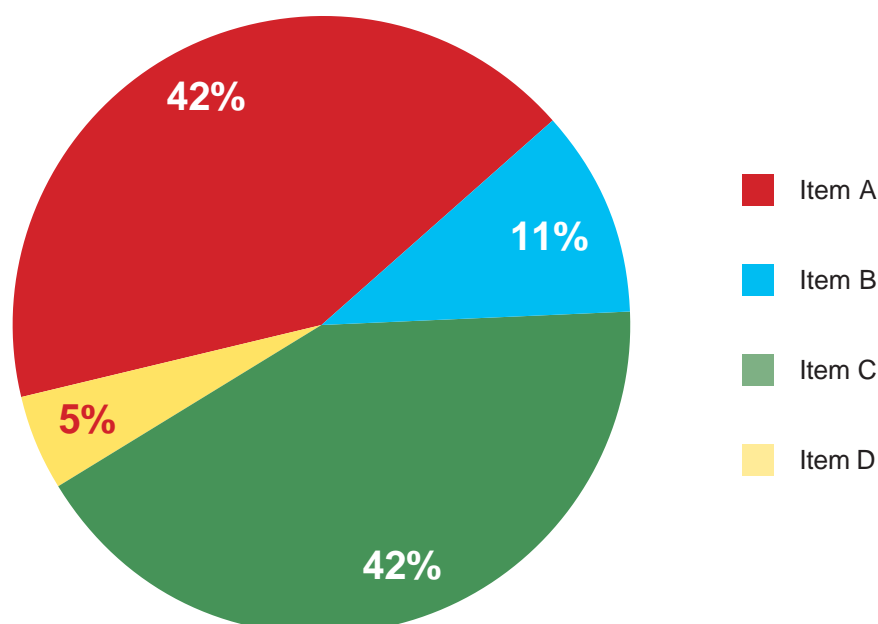
- Provided the caption contains **all the relevant visual information for the image** we may be able to use it. Please refer to our [author guidelines](#) for tips on captions. The alt text, however, might require more description than is in the caption.

## What is a long description?

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A long description is a more complex description that is required if the image provides information that is not present in the text. More detailed images, in particular graphs, diagrams and charts are likely to require long descriptions. Long descriptions may contain lists and data tables. They are provided in addition to the alt text.

Consider the below image. Describing a chart as 'A pie chart showing sales over time', for example, would not be useful to a visually impaired person.



For these types of images, we request that you provide more descriptive text, which will make the image more accessible to screen reader users. Please provide a brief overview of the chart or graph (short description), followed by a more in-depth description (long description), being as specific as possible. The text should provide the information conveyed in the chart or graph. Try to convey the insight; for example, 'A pie chart showing sales over time. In July, sales for brand A surpassed sales for brand B and kept increasing throughout the year.' For more information on writing alt-text for these types of images please see these links:

[Long descriptions](#)

[Charts and diagrams](#)



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## How do I submit alt text?

When submitting your manuscript, please include alt text in a separate list corresponding to your captions, e.g.

Figure 1 alt text:

Figure 1 long description:

## Examples

### Photos



**Source:** Public domain

**Caption:** Johannes Vermeer, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, 1665. Oil on canvas, 44.5 x 39 cm. Collection of the Mauritshaus, The Hague.

**Alt text:** A young woman tilts her head over her shoulder, gazing towards the viewer with her lips slightly parted. A turban covers her hair, leaving only the bottom half of her ear on show, adorned with a large pearl exposed. Her turban is blue and gold. She is wearing a white shirt under a brown jacket.

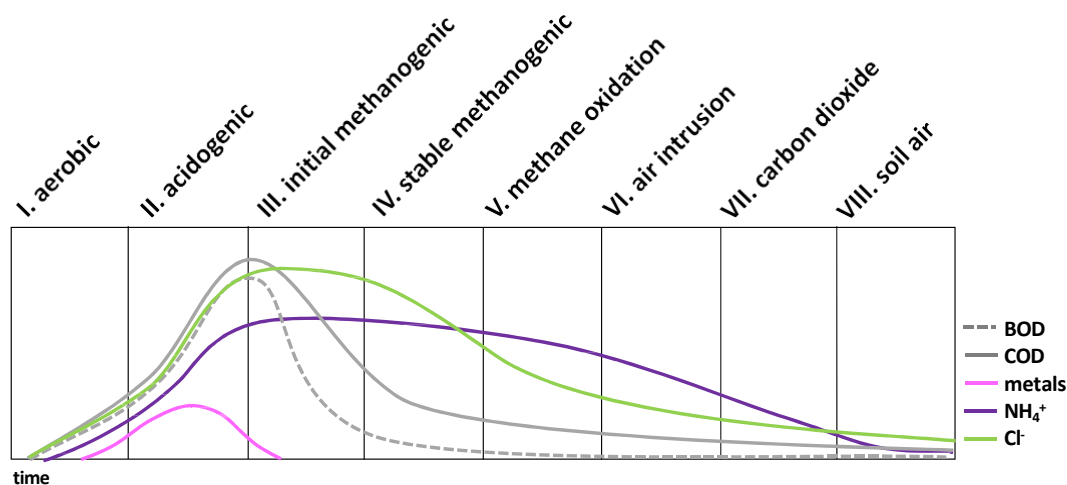


**Source:** Public domain

**Caption:** 'Woman in a Tub' by Edgar Degas, c. 1883. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.

**Alt text:** Edgar Degas's artwork, Woman in a tub, circa 1883, presented in pastel on paper. The portrait features a nude woman kneeling in a shallow, circular bathtub. She holds a white towel in her right hand. A second towel lies draped across a dark red armchair to her left. A pale green door stands open in the background, framed by yellow wallpaper.

## Graphs/diagrams



**Source:** Adapted from Kjeldsen et al. (2002).

**Caption:** Landfill leachate composition predictions as a function of time.

**Alt text short description:** The line chart compares the lifetime of a landfill showing general trends in gas and leachate quality development over time.

**Long description:** Time is plotted along the X-axis, but no measurements are provided. Time is divided into eight sections as follows.

1. Aerobic.
2. Acidogenic.
3. Initial methanogenic.
4. Stable methanogenic.
5. Methane oxidation.
6. Air intrusion.
7. Carbon dioxide.
8. Soil air.

Five data lines represent the trends in gas and leachate quality. These include Biological oxygen demand, Chemical oxygen demand, Heavy metals, Ammonium ion and Chloride.

The percentages are plotted against the Y-axis, but no measurements are provided. The full dataset is presented in the following table. Please note that the data are estimated for each stage of decomposition.

| Stage                | Biological oxygen demand | Chemical oxygen demand | Heavy Metals                       | Ammonium ion        | Chloride                    |
|----------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| Aerobic              | Rises from 0 to 20       | Rises from 0 to 25     | Rises from 0 to 10                 | Rises from 0 to 10  | Rises from 0 to 20          |
| Acidogenic           | Rises from 20 to 80      | Rises from 25 to 85    | Rises from 10 to 20 and falls to 8 | Rises from 10 to 60 | Rises from 20 to 80         |
| Initial methanogenic | Falls from 80 to 10      | Falls from 85 to 40    | Falls from 8 to 0                  | Stays at 60         | Rises to 83 and falls to 80 |
| Stable methanogenic  | Falls from 10 to 3       | Falls from 40 to 15    | 0                                  | Falls from 60 to 55 | Falls from 80 to 50         |
| Methane oxidation    | Falls from 3 to 1        | Falls from 15 to 8     | 0                                  | Falls from 55 to 45 | Falls from 50 to 25         |
| Air intrusion        | Falls from 1 to 0        | Falls from 8 to 5      | 0                                  | Falls from 45 to 25 | Falls from 25 to 15         |
| Carbon Dioxide       | 0                        | Falls from 5 to 3      | 0                                  | Falls from 25 to 8  | Falls from 15 to 8          |
| Soil air             | 0                        | Falls from 3 to 2      | 0                                  | Falls from 8 to 2   | Falls from 8 to 5           |

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## Resources

[What is alt text?](#)

[Introduction to alternative text](#)

[Describing figures](#)

[Image descriptions](#)

[Image description guidelines](#)

[The alt decision tree](#)

[Image alt text best practices](#)

[textBOX image description examples](#)

[Images tutorial](#)

[Webinars on accessible publishing and reading](#)