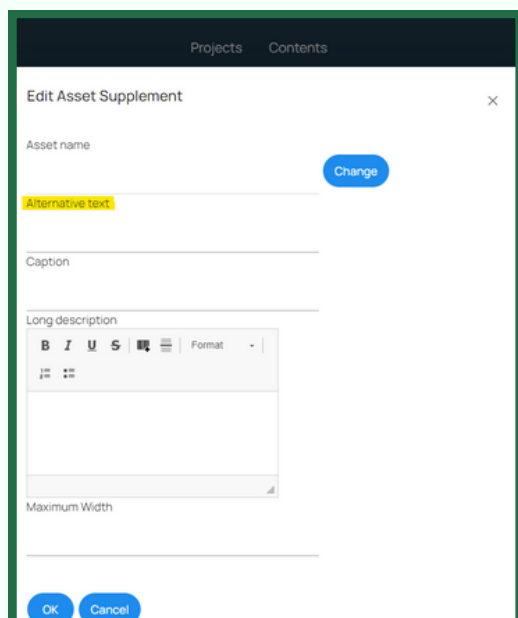


REFRESHING PUBLISHING GUIDES

Issue 2: Alternative text descriptions for images



One asset that is frequently used in both print and digital ELT materials is photographs. This is one of the first standards that comes up in the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and one which certainly impacts ELT publishing and, in particular, digital content development. The WCAG standard in question is alternative text descriptions for images and is one that can have a very positive impact on many users. It comes under the category of content that is perceivable and is a level A (basic) standard. As ELT online courses use lots of images, this standard would be a good one to include in your accessibility road map.



So, what exactly is alternative text? Put simply, it is the description of an image. According to the Royal National Institute of Blind People, Alt Text is used to describe images that appear on websites and social media so that visually impaired users can hear a summary of what is in those images.

The text description should be equivalent to the image itself, or as close as possible. Content authoring tools like Avallain will typically have a field in the asset's edit window where alt text can be added.

Why use alternative text?

The addition of alt text to images is important for accessibility reasons. Screen readers can detect and read out loud the description of an image so that the meaning of the image is conveyed to the user. Basically, the alt text acts as a replacement for the image.

The description is important when trying to convey meaning. Consider the following two images.



In this image, it may well be enough to describe it as 'The Colosseum in Rome.'



However, in this image, describing it as 'horse heads' may conjure up a very different image in someone's mind than if the description is something like, 'The Kelpies sculpture of two mythical horse heads in Falkirk, Scotland.'

And, if an image doesn't load for some reason, the alt text will be displayed in its place, benefitting all users.

Alt text can also be used by search engines to improve search results, this being useful for marketing departments.

How do you use alternative text to describe a photo?

As already mentioned, the description needs to convey important and meaningful information to the person listening to the description via a screen reader.

Let's have a look at an example. Here's a photo I took recently and is one that would not look out of place in ELT digital materials. Have a look at the four possible alternative text descriptions of the image below and choose which one you think is best.



1. A gorge.
2. An image of a deep gorge.
3. A deep gorge with a river running through it.
4. An image of a deep gorge in Iceland with a river running through it.

#1 doesn't really give very much information to the user so is not particularly useful.

#2 adds a bit more information but both it and #4 include the text 'an image'. You don't need to include words like 'an image' or 'a photo' in alt text because the screen reader software automatically detects the asset and announces what it is.

#3 is the best of the four although could be improved upon.

The alt text description can be influenced by the reading text that the image is attached to. For example, if this image was attached to a text about Justin Bieber and his music videos, then that could be reflected in the alt text as this was one of the locations in Iceland he filmed at.

It's best to try and keep your alt text descriptions short. A couple of sentences maximum is fine although a few words may be sufficient. Be sure to use proper grammar and punctuation. And keep it simple. Avoid any jargon if possible.

When do you use alternative text?

Do you need to provide alt text descriptions for every image you use in your digital content? Not necessarily.



Images with caption text do not also need to have alt text. It would be repeated by the screen reader and not a particularly good user experience.

Fjaðrárgljúfur gorge in Iceland

Images that are purely decorative also don't need to have alt text. These are often referred to as 'ambience' or 'eye candy' images. This doesn't tend to happen so much in digital ELT content but it could in eBooks.



Images that are used in assessment as, for example, answer options don't need alt text if that would give away the answer. In such situations, it may be best to reword the question or use a different interaction type.



It is useful to keep this in mind if reusing images because alt text may be appropriate in the image's first use but not in its subsequent use as it's purpose may have changed.

Alternative text best practice

- Think about the purpose of the image. Is it informational (ie provides context) or decorative (eye candy)? That purpose might change if you reuse the image elsewhere in your content.
- Don't use words like 'image of' or 'photo of' in your descriptions.
- Use proper grammar and punctuation.
- Keep it as short as possible.
- Use plain language and no jargon.
- Either caption the image or use Alt text, but not both.


Sketch note

Here's a brilliant sketch note of my IATEFL presentation about accessibility in ELT content development that was done by Emily Bryson. You can find out more about Emily and the work she does at www.emilybrysonelt.com

Accessibility in digital ELT content development





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1 in 5 = 87 million



Europeans have a disability


Out of 1000 people...

-  77% have vision issues.
-  18% have hearing issues.
-  10% have dyslexia.
-  8% of men & 1% of women have colour vision issues.

Make your content accessible:





EAA: European Accessibility Act
(enforcement from June 2025)


WCAG: Web Content Accessibility Guidelines


Add Alt text to images 



ALT Text Best Practice


Do you need it?


- X decorative 
- ? assessments   BEWARE of giving answers!
- ✓ for meaning 

Don't write 'image of' 


Use proper grammar and punctuation  ? ! #

Plain language  

No jargon ELT  English Language Teaching

As short as possible  →

Either CAPTION OR ALT-text



Statistics from:
www.design.education.gov.uk/tools/how-many-users/1000

Visualised by: EmilyBrysonELT.com 