

Writing alt text **that works**

Alt text is what a screen reader says in place of an image. Good alt text gives the same information the image gives. Here's how to write it in under a minute.

One question decides everything

If you had to replace this image with words, what would you say? That sentence is your alt text. If you would say nothing, the image is decorative.

Name the image type, then write

Informative

Conveys a fact or idea. Describe the information, not every pixel.

Functional

An image inside a link or button. Describe the action or destination, such as “Search” or “Design Lady home.”

Complex

Charts, maps and diagrams. Give a short alt that names it and its main takeaway, then put the full data in text or a table nearby.

Decorative

Adds look, not meaning. Use an empty alt, `alt=""`, so screen readers skip it. Never leave the attribute out.

Images of text

Repeat the words in the image exactly. Better still, use real text instead.

Already described

If the caption or nearby text says it all, use `alt=""` so people don't hear it twice.

Write it well

- **Lead with what matters.** Put the key information first; many listeners move on after a few words.
- **Keep it short.** A phrase or one sentence is usually enough. Long detail belongs in the page text.
- **Skip “image of.”** Screen readers already announce that it's an image. Do say “Photo” or “Illustration” when the type itself matters.
- **Write for the context.** The same photo needs different alt text on a careers page than on a product page.

- **Use punctuation.** A period gives a natural pause. Avoid all caps, which some screen readers spell out.
- **Don't stuff keywords.** Alt text is for people. Search engines reward accurate descriptions, not lists.

Before and after

Common alt text, rewritten

IMAGE	WEAK	BETTER
Bar chart of sign-ups	"chart"	"Bar chart: monthly sign-ups doubled from January to June." Full figures in a table below it.
Logo that links home	"logo.png"	"Design Lady home"
Magnifying-glass button	"magnifying glass icon"	"Search"
Patient photo on a support page	"image of woman smiling stock photo"	"A woman checks her prescription refill on her phone."
Divider flourish	"decorative swirl"	<code>alt=""</code>
Banner that reads "Free shipping"	"banner"	"Free shipping"

Check your work

- **Turn images off** in your browser and read the page. Does it still make sense?
- **Listen once** with a screen reader (VoiceOver on Mac or iPhone, NVDA on Windows, both free).
- **Use automated tools** to find missing alt attributes. They can't judge whether the words are right; a person has to.
- **Don't forget documents.** PDFs, Word files and slides need alt text too, set in each app's accessibility options.

Run the free self-audit: designlady.com/tools

Need a full audit? jerlyn@designlady.com

Based on WCAG 2.2 Success Criterion 1.1.1 (Non-text Content) and the W3C WAI [alt decision tree](#). © Design Lady LLC. Share freely with credit.