MAKING CURRICULAR MATERIALS INCLUSIVE: ALTERNATIVE TEXT AND LONG DESCRIPTIONS

1. MAKE IMAGES “VISIBLE” TO SCREEN READERS

A picture is worth about 120 characters: Why alt-text is important

Images included in curricular materials should have associated text to describe what they depict and why they are there. Even blank spacers (often used in web documents for layout) or design elements that have no real informational value should be described as “blank” or “decorative element.” This text is called alt-text, providing an alternative way to describe the image for a screen reader. The description should be as concise and complete as possible. You don’t need to start an alt-text description with “an image of . . . .” It will be obvious to anyone using a screen reader that the object is an image of something. “An image that . . .” can be used for images with abstract meanings depicted using literal objects that are less important than the whole.

Why is it important? Alt-text provides invaluable information for those who are visually impaired. Since most document-centric applications allow for alternative text and a description, it can also provide a concise description of complex images, diagrams and charts, to assist all users in understanding the meaning of a visualization.

Microsoft Office alt-text:

Images created in all apps in Microsoft Office have similar tools to add alt-text.

After inserting an image into an Office document, right click on the image to open up a dialog box that will include the choice “Format Picture.” The Format Picture pane, above right, will appear. Once this pane is open, you only have to click on an image to get to the pane. The symbol called “Layout and Properties” will allow you to give the image a title and type in the alternative text. In this image, it is the third icon, a blue square with dimension and “move” symbols.
Charts and tables:

For someone with vision problems, providing an actual data set may be more meaningful than a chart. As with all images, color should never be a primary way of conveying information in a visual.

Charts and tables have a field to describe in words what the image is trying to show. In the case of a chart, you might describe in words what you’d see at a glance, and link to the data set.

In tables, providing headers is mandatory. Typically, a screen reader will read a full column from top to bottom in a left-to-right order.

Much like an image, right-clicking on a chart will offer the option to “Format Chart Area.” A dialog pane appears that has the same symbol as the “Format Picture” pane. You can enter a title and a description of the chart in the text boxes. Although the colors on the chart would be meaningless to a screen reader—and some viewers who are color-blind—, hovering over the donut chart reveals data information—for instance the dark green section is 46%, and represents financial aid. Color should never be the sole means of conveying information in any document.

Reading order of a table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heading 1</th>
<th>Heading 2</th>
<th>Heading 3</th>
<th>Heading 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>one</td>
<td>four</td>
<td>seven</td>
<td>ten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>two</td>
<td>five</td>
<td>eight</td>
<td>eleven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>three</td>
<td>six</td>
<td>nine</td>
<td>twelve</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A simple table, showing a screen reader’s reading order. Right clicking on a table offers the option to edit “Table Properties.” There is an alt-text tab in that tool. Merged and spanned cells are not handled well by screen readers, and should be avoided.
iWorks Pages alt-text:

Version '09 and earlier do not have an alt-text feature. To describe images, you must insert a text box above and below the image and provide a caption. Pages will include alt-text functionality in the next release.

Web content:

Modern web content creation tools all can include alt-text and descriptions:

An image in the media gallery of a WordPress site. There are fields for title, description, caption and alt-text

Further resources:

WebAIM on alt-text
(WebAIM stands for (Web Accessibility in Mind.)

Video: how screen readers work

Word 2016

US DOH recommendations

Accessibility tips for pre-2016 Office, Adobe

Apple Pages and accessibility