

Glenville State University – Drupal Tutorials

How and When to use Alt Text with Images

Last Updated: July 1, 2026 (By: Josh Chambers)



Using alt text on images is an often-misunderstood topic. Contrary to some beliefs, the alt text field does not always need to be filled in. Indeed, leaving it blank is sometimes the better choice for accessibility. What matters is understanding *when* to fill it in, *when* to leave it blank, and *how* to write it well when it is needed.

When to Use Alt Text

Alt Text should be used when the image portrays content and/or context information that is not already provided by surrounding text on the page. A good rule of thumb is to ask yourself, “If this image didn’t load, would a user be missing important content or context?” If the answer is yes, alt text should be included.

Pay particular attention to:

- Images containing text, such as event posters, flyers, infographics, or logos with wordmarks. The text in the image should be included in the alt text field, unless it is already written on the page. Logos must always have alt text labeling them as logos and what the logo is for.
- Photos where a specific person, place, or event is important to the page's content and is not identified in a caption or surrounding text. Portrait images almost always have an alt tag labeling who the picture is of.
- Charts or graphs where the data being shown is not described elsewhere on the page.

Additionally, as the alt tag can be toggled off when inserting an image onto a page, the default action should be to add a description of some kind into the alt tag field when creating or editing an Image media item. A decision can then be made later whether to change the alt text or mark the image as decorative.

When to Leave Alt Tag Blank

Leave the alt text field empty when removing the image would not cause a visitor to miss **any** meaningful information. Common examples include:

- Header, banner, or other image that is simply there to set a mood or visual tone
- Image dividers or other purely decorative images

- Any image whose meaningful content is already **fully** conveyed by adjacent text or a caption

Leaving the field blank in these cases actually improves accessibility by preventing screen readers from repeating information already conveyed by the surrounding text.

However, the decision to leave alt text blank should be carefully considered. For example, an article about the University presenting a check to a group may include a photo of the event. Even though the article discusses it, the image may still warrant alt text. Describing who specifically is pictured, for instance, adds visual context the article text may not provide. The key question is whether the image itself conveys anything meaningful beyond what the surrounding text already says.

If you have any doubt, an alt text should be provided for the image.

How to Write Alt Text

When alt text is needed, keep these guidelines in mind:

- Keep it short and to the point: one to two sentences at most
- Alt text written in the form of a sentence should end in a period
- Describe what the image *communicates*, not just what it literally shows. A photo of a university official handing a check to a student at an awards ceremony is better described as "President Manchin presenting the Johnson Scholarship to student Jane Doe at the 2026 Alumni Dinner" than as "two people shaking hands"
- Do not begin with "image of" or "photo of." Screen readers already announce that the element is an image. The exception is when the type of image is itself relevant, such as identifying something as an icon, logo, or illustration
- Do not repeat text that already appears adjacent to the image on the page. If the surrounding text already covers it, leave the alt text blank instead. This includes image captions
- A good rule of thumb is that alt text should not be used to supplement the image; it should be intended to **replace** the image for those who cannot view it
- If an image is also a link, the alt text should describe the link destination the same as if it were a text link.

Additional information can be found on the [Section 508 page about alt text](#).