



AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Advancing Knowledge, Solving Human Problems

Guidelines for Creating Image Descriptions

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Introduction

Image descriptions provide a textual description of images presented in digital documents. These descriptions support the inclusion of blind, low vision, and low-tech users of all AAA products. This ensures that information presented in a purely visual format, especially a digital graphic, is accessible to anyone who may not be able to physically see the visual for any reason. Image descriptions may also be used in printed products, especially when printed in Braille, to provide information about the visuals supplementing text. Printing the text of an image description may also provide sighted readers another option for processing visual information.

Importantly, image descriptions are a type of visual description. Visual descriptions provide information about the visual appearance of spaces, objects, people, and more. The term “visual description” can explain when someone describes the visual context of a location, person, or space in real time, and it may also be used in reference to image and audio descriptions. These guidelines provide examples for creating image descriptions, but please be aware that aspects of these guidelines may also be applied to visual descriptions more broadly.

Image descriptions are necessary for most visuals except for those solely included for aesthetic and decorative appeal. Examples of visuals include:

- Logos
- Pictures
- Art
- Graphs
- Maps
- Charts
- Videos

When describing visual material, be attentive about describing content as well as aesthetics and style.

Perkins School for the Blind has published a fantastic resource created by Veroniiiica (Veronica with Four Eyes) entitled, “[How to Write Alt Text and Image Descriptions for the visually impaired](#)”.

Note: It is important to be aware that many, though not all, members of the blind and low vision community consider “visually impaired” to be outdated and inappropriate language. When discussing issues related to the blind and low vision community, use the phrase “blind and low vision”, unless an individual has personally indicated otherwise.

Examples

This section includes examples of the following types of visuals:

1. Logo
2. Human portrait
3. Animal picture
4. Blurry picture
5. Drawn image
6. Map
7. Graphics with text

Example 1: Logo



- **Image description:** The American Anthropological Association logo, a red swirling symbol, next to text that reads, "American Anthropological Association - Advancing Knowledge, Solving Human Problems".

Example 2: Human portrait



- **Image description 1 – more descriptive:** Nell, a white woman with short black hair, is outside on a bright day. She wears thick, black-rimmed glasses and smiles at the camera. She also wears a white and dark-colored quatrefoil collared shirt and a black and gold diagonal stripe bow tie.
- **Image description 2 – less descriptive:** A picture of Nell outside smiling at the camera.

Note: Regarding identity features, there are a number of factors to consider when determining to include details about people's individual traits. Ideally, people identify their features individually, as displayed in the above description of Nell. Without knowing who this person is, the below description provides information without assumptions about the person's identity:

- **Alternative image description 1 – more descriptive:** Nell, a light-skinned person with short black hair, is outside on a bright day. They wear thick, black-rimmed glasses and smiles at the camera. They also wear a white and dark-colored quatrefoil collared shirt and a black and gold diagonal stripe bow tie.

Example 3: Animal picture



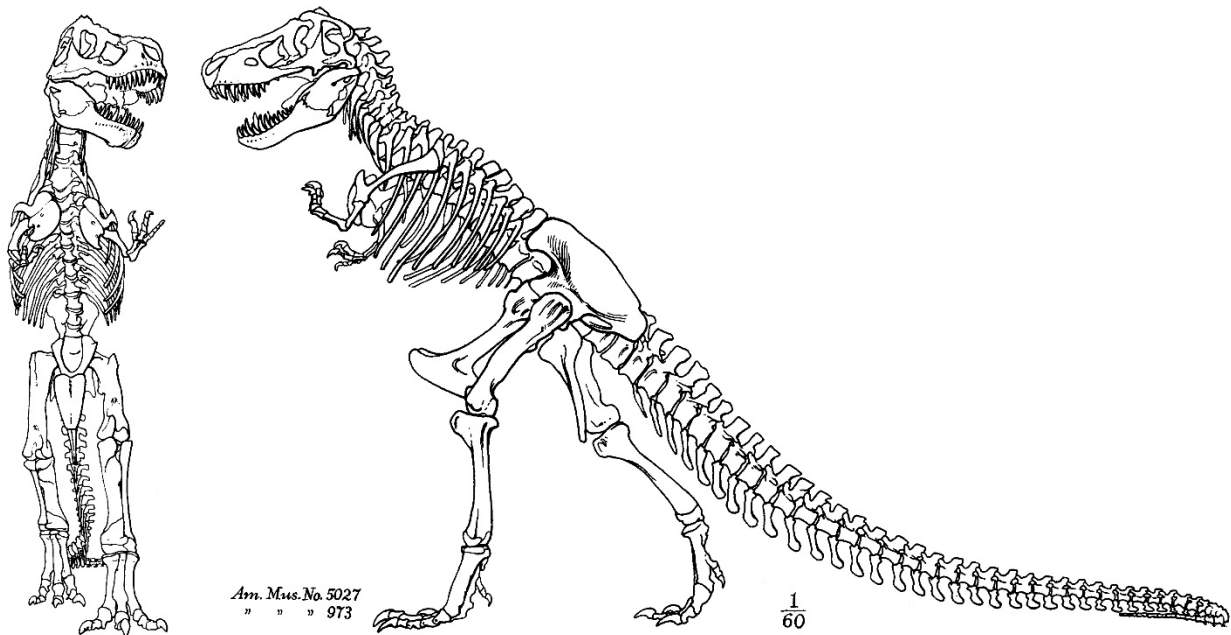
- **Image description:** A baby gorilla sits on a large flat rock surface, holds a bamboo branch in one hand, and hugs a larger gorilla's leg with the other hand while resting their face against the other gorilla's leg. Only part of the larger gorilla is visible in the picture.

Example 4: Blurry picture



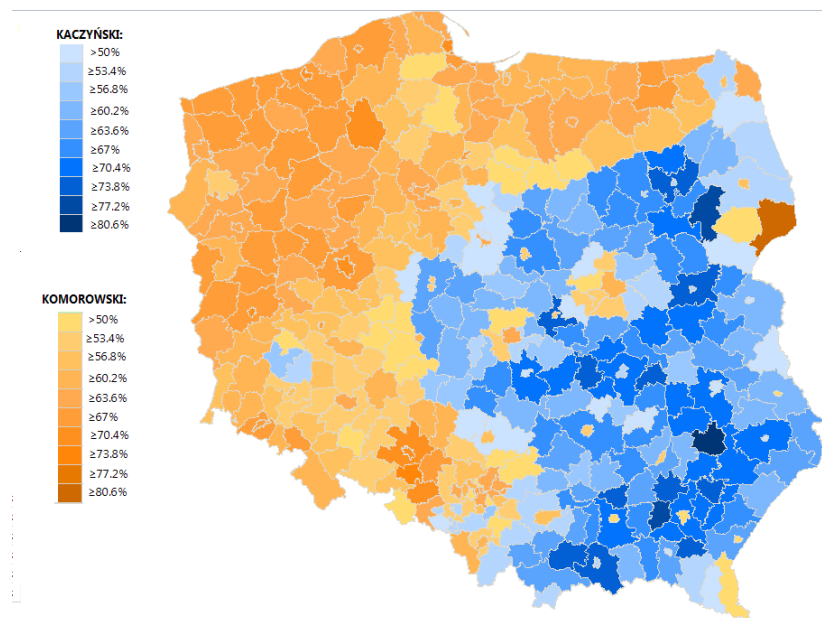
- **Image description:** A blurry photo of the legs of two people going upstairs with silver railing on the left.

Example 5: Drawn image



- **Image description:** An inaccurate scientific diagram of a t-rex skeleton. The left displays a frontal view of the fossil, and the right displays a left profile shot of the body. Text on the figure reads: “Am. Mus. No. 5027, “ “ 973” and “1/60”.

Example 6: Map



- **Image description:** A map of Poland with voting districts outlined. The map outlines the results of the 2010 Presidential elections. The majority of the left side of the map is various shades of orange and the majority of the right side is various shades of blue. A key to the left outlines the shades of blue that represent the percentage of votes won by Komorowski and the shades of orange that represent the percentage of votes won by Kaczyński.

Example 7: Graphic with text



- **Image description:** A red circle with the word “Vote” inside. Right of the circle reads “Your vote matters! Cast your ballot in AAA and section elections before May 31st!”

Practice

Creating image descriptions, like all skills, takes time to learn. It takes time to learn what is important and what is superfluous information in a visual context and from there to learn what to share or not share. One way to learn this is through practice. The AAA has created an “[Image Description Practice Form](#)” to provide an opportunity to practice creating image descriptions. This form does not provide feedback, but it does give a way to compare your image descriptions with examples.

The form provides three different types of visual graphics that you describe in one section. You copy each image description you create to paste in the next section. In the following section, the form shares an example of an image description of each image that you can compare to your pasted image description.

Please be aware that image descriptions **do not have to be identical**. Therefore, if your image description is not an exact match, that is ok! This is an exercise for your own experience.

If you have any questions about image descriptions or hope for feedback and more practice, please feel free to reach out to the AAA Accessibility & Meetings Coordinator, Nell Koneczny, at accessibility@americananthro.org.

Additional Resources

Simplifying the alt text and image description process.

smith, s.e. Oct. 6, 2016. "Alt text and image descriptions made simple." Blog post. Link: http://meloukhia.net/2016/10/alt_text_and_image_descriptions_made_simple/

More examples of image descriptions.

Livingwithdisability. 2016. "All About Image Descriptions." Blog post. Link: <https://livingwithdisability.tumblr.com/post/124066767358/all-about-image-descriptions>

More reasons to do image descriptions.

belenen. Aug. 31, 2016. "22 months writing image descriptions: 4 awesome side-effects/resources & explanation of the need." *Medium*. Blog post. Link: <https://medium.com/@belenen/22-months-writing-image-descriptions-4-awesome-side-effects-resources-explanation-of-the-need-c686fae8e3e5>