

A Note About Text Equivalents for Visual Elements

Text equivalents for visual elements present some unique challenges. So let's start with the big picture question and work our way down from there.

When you use a visual element (chart, graph, picture or other), you typically include it to convey meaning to the reader. That meaning is contextual, so the same visual element may not convey the same meaning all the time. If I use a picture of a bird in an article about state birds, then I might just provide a text equivalent that says "The Scissortail Flycatcher, state bird of Oklahoma." But if I include that same picture in an article about how the bird uses its tail feathers to move more quickly when it hunts, then my text equivalent will be much different.

How do you determine what meaning the visual element conveys? Pretend that you are reading the report to someone over the phone. What would you describe to them about the visual element in the context of your report? That is your text equivalent.

Now that you have the text equivalent, it is a matter of putting it in the best place. We have three options:

- The Alternative Text attribute for the element
- The caption for the element
- The body of the document, adjacent to the element

If the text equivalent is short, say 2-4 brief sentences, then it is reasonable to put it into the element Alternative Text attribute or into the element's caption. If you put it into the caption, then do not repeat it in the Alternative Text attribute. If you repeat the text equivalent in the visual element's Alternative Text attribute and its caption, then you force someone using a Braille reader or screen reading software to read that text equivalent twice.

But leaving the Alternative Text attribute blank can confuse readers.

Instead, put something brief in the Alternative Text attribute that ties it to the caption. Even the Figure number from the caption will suffice to do this. Then a brief statement such as "described in caption".

If the text equivalent is longer than a few short sentences, then it is more appropriate to put it into the caption or into the body of the document, adjacent to the visual element. Captions are not typically more than a few sentences either, but you can create captions that are longer than what Alternative Text attributes should be.

Long descriptions are often necessary if the visual element is a chart or graph with many data points. A longer description may also be necessary if the visual element is an image that has details that are important. If the description is longer, then put it into the body of the document itself. And put it immediately before or after the visual element that you describe. Then, use the Alternative Text attribute to tell the reader where the text equivalent is. If a paragraph that describes the visual element

is immediately after the element, then the Alternative Text attribute could say “Longer description follows in the next paragraph”.

Much more [information about text equivalents is available from The DIAGRAM Center](http://diagramcenter.org/) (<http://diagramcenter.org/>).

Summary

- Text equivalents convey the meaning of an image. Write a text equivalent as if you were going to read it to someone over the telephone.
- Put the text equivalent into the Alternative Text attribute if it is 2-4 short sentences or less.
- Put the text equivalent into the figure caption if it is longer than 2-4 short sentences, but not long enough to be a paragraph.
 - The Alternative Text attribute should reference the caption as the source for the text equivalent: “Description follows in caption”, for example.
- Put text equivalents that are too long for captions into the body of the report, immediately adjacent to the figure.
 - The Alternative Text attribute should reference the description in the body of the document: “Description in report immediately before/after figure”, for example
- Captions often provide information about the figure but do not convey its intended meaning. For example, if the image shows a device, then the caption might say “A custom-made device that performs soil measurements”. This information probably does not serve as a text equivalent for the image.
 - The text equivalent in the Alternative Text attribute might describe the important features of the device’s appearance, if that is the intended meaning of the figure.