

The Art of the Alt Tag – Transcript

0:04

LYNN: Welcome everybody to The Art of the Alt Tag, or the nuances of creating alternative access to images and graphics in your digital projects. This is one of my personal favorite subjects. And there is a lot that is changing regarding how we use alt text. And it is something that I think can be a little nerve-racking for some people, so we hope we can allay some of your fears today.

0:35

Before we get started, I have to read my standard statement here, bear with me. Welcome to The Art of the Alt Tag by Digital Accessibility by WeCo. The information found in this presentation are tips based upon the experiences and opinions of Digital Accessibility by WeCo Staff and should not be construed as legal advice. Regarding the development and implementation of digital accessibility practices, it is advisable to seek the advice of qualified legal counsel. The information in this presentation is property of The Wehrman Collaborative, LLC. That is also our fancy name.

1:13

Please ask us before distributing this information by contacting us at: accessinfo@theweco.com Thank you. ACCESSIBILITY NOTE: This presentation includes audio description for nonvisual users as part of the narration. For instance, this slide shows the title of the presentation and includes WeCo's logo, and the International Association of Accessibility Professionals Member logo. The WeCo logo is repeated on most of our slides in the presentation.

1:44

And I should just point out that the WeCo logo is the word WeCo, and I apologize I had someone contact me in teams and I need to put a "do not disturb" on. *laughs* Sorry about that. It is the word "WeCo" and we use the letter "O" as if it's a wheelchair. We have a little stick person sitting in that wheelchair. It never occurs to me that we have to make sure we let everyone know what that logo looks like, so there you have it.

2:23

Alright. First a little bit about who we are. WeCo is a company of digital accessibility experts. *notification ding* And I have two laptops up and of course I'm getting messaging on both. Hang on just a minute. And I forget that directors are able to break through my do not disturb so that's part of problem. *laughs* Thank you for bearing with us. We put you in touch with SME's with disabilities. We are members of the International Association of Accessibility Professionals and provide our own rigorous training requirements for our people. So this slide is

showing one of our WeCo Accessibility Specialists using screen magnification software and accessibility audit.

3:21

Next slide. And a little bit about me. My name is Lynn Wehrman. I am president and founder of Digital Accessibility by WeCo. This slide show my photo. I am a petite, blonde person identifying as female with the pronouns she/her. I began this journey as a federal program coordinator for the Minnesota Department of Transportation. A communications background led me down a long and winding road that led me to become one of the first government accessibility professionals. My educational background was communications so I've had kind of an interesting weave of communications and policy in my career.

4:08

Next slide. Now a bit about this webinar. Instead of me simply talking and you listening the whole time, we encourage you to text over questions and thoughts in the chat box during the presentation. I will do my best to include them in the presentation so that you can get answers. Debbie, I realized that the captioning isn't on? So sorry, I'll pause for that. Okay, also Debbie if you could also put your email into the chat box. I apologize, we had a little change in crew here today. Is the captioning active? Okay.

5:02

We can- We also have the option for you to either text in the chat box, or email Debbie if you're more comfortable. Her email is debbie@theweco.com. Just a reminder about the captioning. There's a live transcript that's available at the bottom of your screen, and it has a CC logo or live transcript name. You can see the subtitle, indicate that you want to see that at the bottom of the page. You can also go in and edit the settings to make the type larger, if you need it larger.

5:54

But, what I was trying to get to is that we will have time at the end for discussion. But if you want to shoot questions over, I will try to be cognizant of those in the chat box, and be able to try to integrate your questions into what I'm presenting. Next slide. Today we will not be able to teach you absolutely everything you want to know about alternative text tags. For instance, we're not going to be discussing all of the WCAG requirements in depth, or where to insert them into documents, websites, or social media.

6:31

We're actually launching online courses to cover those this fall in our new accessible online training portal called WeCollege. So you will have the chance to learn more about that later. But what we're going to do for you today is give you some tips for writing effective alt texts. It's our hope that the webinar will also get you to think about how you write your alt text, and how it impacts the people who encounter it. Finally, we will work with you to help find some middle

ground and have more confidence in how you move forward crafting alt text. This slide is a comparison chart of the before-named points that I just discussed.

7:14

But before we get started, allow me to share some personal insight with you. I was born with two cognitive disabilities. Actually in a family where I and my four sisters all lived with cognitive disabilities. Having lived as a targeted user, while trying to meet- I'm sorry- while trying to meet the communication needs of other people with disabilities, I learned a major lesson. We will never fully understand someone else's experience regarding a disability, even if we live with a disability ourselves, or live with the same disability, our experience can be very, very different. We can only listen and make an educated guess and realize that we are going to miss the mark sometimes.

8:07

So the key that I hope you take away is try to please the widest audience possible. That is about the most important thing we can do, is try to reach people and try to modify how we write to them in a way that speaks to them, and accept that you simply will not please everyone. That was something that I learned very quickly doing communications for state government and hope that that is helpful for you to take away. This slide shows the text that I have just read.

8:43

So let's begin by defining what alternative text is. This slide shows the following quote from WebAIM. "Alternative text provides a textual alternative to non-text content in web pages. Most common application is alternative text for images only, though the principles can be applied to media, applets, and other non-text web content." That's a long-winded way of saying that alt text makes things that are visible available to non-visual users and also sometimes helps those of us who live with cognitive disabilities. I'm just gonna check the chat box here and see what we had coming in.

9:32

I will answer the questions on the platform at the end for you Sam, thank you. And it looks like Debbie had that covered anyway, thank you Debbie. *laughs* That said, one way to look at alt text is that it's like painting a picture in someone's mind. It is also a way that we can see to it that everyone receives the same information regardless of their ability level. As we approach alt text, it's crucial to keep in mind that all human beings learn in different ways. And regardless of if we're able to use our eyes, fully or in part, or if we have difficulty taking in information visually as many of us with cognitive disabilities do, visual information is impactful and important to all of us. This slide shows some open paint tins, brushes, color swatches, representing brilliant colors. And in case you didn't realize it, I'm writing alt text right in front of you by reading it out loud at this moment. We'll see how well I do doing this live. *laughs* Okay. Artificial intelligence is moving us closer to accessibility in some ways, and farther away in

other ways. Alternative text is a good example of this. AI can be helpful in identifying images that are familiar to its algorithm.

11:02

But it can totally miss the mark regarding content. I personally appreciate it when AI tries to lighten my workload by writing AT for me. But I never assume that it's going to be dialed in right. I always take a look and check it, and sometimes I can enhance it and make it a little bit better. And sometimes it's totally off-base. Look at it this way, artificial intelligence can identify, but we can investigate. When I did some intense alt text writing for the Department of Transportation, often regarding things I knew very little about, I began to see my value as a writer. I could take the time and speak with an engineer about a map they had included or some statistics I didn't understand, and make certain that the alt text would be correct and meaningful for the user. This slide shows two icons, one of a robot and one of a magnifying glass.

12:03

The basic principle of alternative text application within the WCAG is that images that provide meaning are going to usually require alt text. Images that don't contribute meaning may be marked as null or decorative. This slide shows a yellow conversation bubble on a blue background. But first it's important to note that there are types of images that don't require alt text.

12:34

First, if the image is part of the page design, as shown on this page we have a kind of curly page divider. Something that you might put in to separate different sections of text. This is entirely intended as a visual break. It offers no information. So it can be marked simply as decorative. Or if the image is part of a text link. The example we're showing is a tube of lipstick, partly because lipstick is my favorite cosmetic. I have more tubes of lipstick than any person could believe. But next to the link marked "lipstick," which might appear in a cosmetics or department store website, is the work "lipstick," and so there's no need to double up on that image because the information about what that image is already there.

13:36

So how that might be used is that maybe there is a link to the page where all the lipsticks are offered and there's also a hyperlink in the image. A few more examples include images that have adjacent text describing it. This was really common for the accessible document and website work I did for the government as we used many complex charts or graphs. One our says at the top bar graphs help us demonstrate changes in data. They may use multiple columns and categories. A context note: These were often the images that I needed to consult the documents author about when I was working at the DOT. So I needed to make certain that I was conveying what the graphic wanted to say, what it was trying to tell the public. And finally,

images used for ambience alone or eye candy. The example we're showing here is an image of colorful kayaks used to enhance a description on a resort web page.

14:47

So the text says, "Anderson's Resort has array of kayaks for rent in an array of fun colors." So that is already describing what is being shown with that photograph. So we're going to move next onto how you write your alt tags and alt text. Depends upon a lot of things. The most important of all is your lens. And it's really important to understand that how you view things and your experiences are going to color how you write alt text. I think we just have someone that I'm gonna- can we mute everyone, Debbie? Thank you, great, just had a little bit of conversation coming through.

15:41

This is so important to understand because it will color the choices on how you approach your subject. So, will your tags be long or short? Should they include a description of color? Should they explain the scene pictured by focusing only on the objects, or also talk about the action being shown? Or even more importantly, as we become more socially aware, how do we describe our fellow human beings? Do we include their sex, race, ethnicity? Shown in this image is a blurred photo of a city at night with someone holding up a magnifying lens and showing part of the city up close.

16:23

So let's find out. Let's take a look at short and long alt tags. The first workshop that I taught for WeCo was at the Minnesota government IT symposium, and we preceded to have two people who were blind fight about whether they preferred short or long alt tags. *laughs* So that is a tricky thing, it is not an exact science, and different users will want different things. But we do have some clues that you can use that will help you decide when to apply these.

17:02

Short tags are not complicated and provide basic information about the image. Long tags are more complex and convey more than just the simple aspects of the image. This image on our slide is a long tree branch with the word "long" and little short worm sitting on it with the word "short" over it. A few rules for thumb in short description alt tags. They are what we use most, they cover most web pages and basic documents, and are used to convey simple information. The visual example we are showing on this slide is a bunch of yellow stadium seats in a row, and the tag that we've chosen is "Yellow stadium seats." Pretty straightforward, just the objects, not a lot of action happening.

17:54

Rules of thumb for long description alt text. These are usually graphics that I like to say "do more," or provide layers of visual information that users need to know. This may include charts

and graphs and tables, such as what is shown on this slide. I often used to use these in work in state government for legislative studies, which contained a lot of charts and embedded tables.

18:22

But they also may be needed for a photograph that may be conveying a lot of action, like something like a natural disaster, a flood scene, something that has a lot going on. We used them at MNDOT all time to explain plat maps demonstrating to the public where new roads were going to be built in their neighborhood. So that's an example of something that's pretty complicated that the public needed to know about that we had to figure out how to decipher for them.

18:54

As I alluded to in the earlier slide, many times just looking at an image itself isn't enough. Because in many cases, the images are present to support a point found in the text. It's vital you take the time to read the web page or document at least in the immediate vicinity of the image if you're working on someone else's project. This will help you understand that you're providing the correct information. So this slide shows red and white umbrellas on a beach.

19:31

If we had put this into a document and not read what was around it, there might be a point we might be missing about why the document decided to include this. Maybe it's an article about overcrowding on beaches, maybe it's an article about a range of people all behind matching red and white umbrellas. So that's why it's important. Now we're going to put some of the principles to work and get you involved. Hint: This exercise is only going to work if you respond. You can respond in the chat, you can respond by emailing Debbie.

20:06

I'm not going to give you the answer, so prepare to use your text box and email to join into this next part. There's also a prize involved, which is always awesome. Alright, so I would like you to create an alt text for this photo. We'll give you a minute or so to think, but once you're done, share your results in the chat box or email. The first three responses are going to get a Starbucks gift card. If you'd rather have Caribou, we live in the land of Caribou Coffee, we'll give you choice. Starbucks or Caribou. *laughs* Go ahead and write your alt text.

20:47

[silence]

21:10

And pop it into the box. Okay! Jennifer Burgess is first. Okay, Ruslan, Yamileth, Megan, Thank you. These are really really great examples, and thank you for jumping in. Our team will be

keeping track of the first three responders. So if you're able to view or detect the chat box, it's a great time to look at it right now because we got a lot of different examples.

21:44

So we, I'm going to just pick out a few. So Mary Kate said "Person raises their hands in excitement at a concert on a brightly lit stage." And then contrast, Megan said, "A man holding up both arms at a crowded concert. And Michael shared, "A music concert stage with lights and smoke is blurred in the background. In the foreground, a viewer has hands raised in excitement." So, and then Mary A says "Concert pic with person enjoying event with hands in the air." So those are really some good examples of how we can be applying a short tag to this or a long one.

22:30

Just a couple of points that I'm going to walk you through here. Do you see a rock concert? Or perhaps you see exuberant fans in the audience of a rock concert, which are descriptors thereout. Maybe you see complicated technical lighting hanging over a full house at a rock concert with cheering fans. So you get the idea. And I thank you everyone for jumping in because you really demonstrated the range of different alt texts that we could write for a picture like this.

23:02

If you couldn't see this picture, what do you think you would prefer to hear? Would you prefer to hear more detail, or less detail? It really depends upon your lens. And it's like the first workshop that I taught at that symposium, we had two different nonvisual users who had very different ideas. One said, "I want short and concise, I want to get on to what I'm reading and get off the picture." And someone else said "I want to know everything in that picture."

23:33

Okay, so just some things to think about with context. With the context of the information you're looking for change what you wanted to hear. For example, how would what you want to hear change if this was a photo from your favorite band's last concert, or if it was an advertisement on a ticket website when you're looking for a symphony orchestra event.

24:06

So if it's your favorite band, you're probably going to want to hear more. If it's just an image and you're looking for something else on the website, you're probably going want to hear less, correct? So it's just important to understand that it's really difficult to have one universal way to approach an image, and that understanding what your reader may want from it, what the website may indicate, what the document may indicate, is important to consider.

24:35

So in what ways does your individual lens impact what you would like to share about this photo? Ready for the next one? Okay, here we go.

24:51

Now we want you to write an alternative text description for this photo. And when you're ready share in the text box or email, and remember we're doing three more gift cards. We're going to try to give the gift cards to new people, so that we can give out to six total people today. Choice between Starbucks and Caribou. If you haven't tried Caribou coffee, you might want that gift card. It's pretty awesome. *laughs" We have an advisory board member that lives in Philadelphia and she begs me to send her Caribou beans for Christmas every year, so we do. *laughs*

25:30

Okay, we've got Kilole, Mary Kate. Two colleagues collaborating on a project in an office. Two women collaborate over plans laid out on a desk. Older and younger women working on a project desk. Any others? Pop em in there, even if you responded before. There are no right or wrong answers. We're just sharing to learn from each other. Okay, Sarah said, "Two women at work standing over a table full of pens, paper, business plans. They are discussing a project.

26:20

So this is a very different image than the first, and it brings- oh, one more from Mikayla, "Two people are talking side by side about a project at work. The person on the left has light skin and has white hair. The person on the right has brown skin and black hair. Okay, that was helpful. That added some more dimension, thank you for that one. So it is a very very different image from the first one. It brings up some interesting questions about how we are writing this alt text. So allow me to guide you through some questions about what you wrote and what you might think regarding your choices.

27:04

First of all, can you determine what these people are doing? Go ahead and prompt that question, Debbie. Thank you. I think it's fairly safe to say that our descriptions determine that they are working on a project. I look at the desk and I think that it might be architectural plans, you know they've got some sort of clear schematic, documents, and rolled up things. But you know, that would depend. You could, again, look at the text around it to determine that.

27:44

What is their work role? Is one the boss? Is one a contractor? What's their favorite color? Is this important? What about their race? What about their gender? What about their pronoun preference? How vital are the details of your description to the readers understanding? It's really important to think about what you're accomplishing. That's why I threw some crazy questions in there. Because sometimes we can get really focused on identifying absolutely

everything. And not consider whether our user need all that information, or whether it might be creating some problems. Is there something that perhaps when you look at your alt text that you should have left out or included? And what happens if your readers don't agree with what you wrote? *laughs* Okay, alright. Some good food for thought. Just let me adjust my notes.

29:08

So this slide shows stick figures standing in a row as it's visual. What we want to prompt you to think about is this: Is how we're crafting alt tags providing needed detail and being sensitive or offensive? Does it bring meaning to a wider audience or a narrower one? Is it possible to craft alt tags in a way that informs respectfully, and can we determine what "respectful" means all on our own. Chances, no. WeCo is really a wonderful learning lab for understanding people who- all of us who work at WeCo except for Debbie, who is the only person who does not live with a disability on our team.

29:58

We- it's a lab where we are really able to experiment with how we feel as a class of people that have been on the outside of work places, and a lot of different aspects of society. And we talk a lot about how we like to be referred to. We also work with a lot of other groups of people from a variety of different clients who have opinions about how they would like to be referred to.

30:29

So the audio description as a part of our slide presentation brings up a lot of controversy when we're doing these webinars because our alt text is read out loud for everyone to hear. So for us, alt text can impact many people, even people who don't normally depend upon it. It also helps us learn a lot. This has created opportunities for us to better understand how our alt text impacts people and find new ways to be inclusive and respectful to those surrounding them.

31:01

Examples. So at some events last year when I described, as one of you did in your description, that someone in a photograph was a person of color, a person in the audience who was of color came to me afterwards and said they were offended at being singled-out and identified as different from someone else who was not of color.

31:26

It was a difficult thing because there was only a person of color in the photograph. Another person of color thanked me for making the delineation. Still another person came to me following the presentation telling me that I should never delineate gender identification because we can never know if someone considers the person in the picture to be male, female, or nonbinary. This one really hit me because one of my best friends is transgender, and an associate of mine is nonbinary. I understand how difficult it has been for them to be put into a category by how they appear to others without any consideration for how they see themselves.

So we made some very different decisions about how we do alt tags so let's talk about that next.

32:25

Given those experiences, our company has made decisions about how we will write alt text and other descriptions. Keep in mind these are not best practices. They're decisions- the types of decisions, that you need to make for yourself and your group. Because you have different goals. You do different work than we do. Our group decided that pointing out types of disabilities that we live with, or that are represented in photographs, is necessary for us. To say that someone is blind, to say that someone is in a wheelchair. Because it gives context to our work.

33:08

We manage a team of user experience testers who live with disabilities, and a lot of times when results are deciphered to our clients or explained to our clients, we explain that this is a photograph of our tester and they are blind. They are using a braille laptop. Things like that.

33:30

But we then concluded that using "they" is more inclusive than he she his hers, and less likely to offend in alt text. So determining that somebody is a male or female is not something that we concentrate on anymore. Because we have plenty of people that we work with That other people my tag as male or female, and they don't see themselves that way. Pointing out race and gender also does not serve any purpose information in the work we do. So it gives you some idea how disability is something we have to point out.

34:16

Now if you were working for a nonprofit that was involved with social justice, pointing out race might be really important to your work. So it really depends upon the context. But the one thing that we did decide was that "people first" language, instead of saying "the disabled" we say "people with disabilities," that "people first" language can be applied to anyone. Not just people with disabilities, and we like that.

34:45

Okay, so this where we're going to pause for questions. We tend to think in pretzels at WeCo. Our mind gets twisted around a lot. Because we are weaving ourselves in and out of cultures everyday where people who are different are not the majority, and then we go back into your company that we call our "WeCo bubble" where we all live with disabilities and so what?

35:20

So it's kind of an interesting perspective. Okay. Sarah, thank you for your question. How do you address the viewer of the picture. Example: if someone in the image is smiling directly at the

viewer, do you say "smiling at the camera," "smiling at you," or "smiling at the viewer"? I tend to use "smiling at the camera," although I don't know that it matters that much unless there is a context that you're trying to convey.

35:52

If, you know, in the text around it. Like, I would think, "smiling at you" if it is more of a personal document. Yeah, I tend to use camera. Does anybody else have any thoughts on that? What they do? Feel free to slip it into the text box. I was wondering if "smiling at the camera" would be misleading such as a person smiling at a camera that is shown in the picture. Good point! *laughs* Or maybe just say the person is smiling. That makes it easier. Okay, Mary Kate: I agree with using the context. If it was a therapist website I might say "they are smiling at you." Do we have any other questions that I missed, Debbie?

36:54

DEBBIE: There are no questions directly to me. Everybody's been putting them in the "everyone" chat.

37:03

LYNN: I'll leave the floor open for a few minutes. While people are mulling about questions, this is a brand new class, and you are my guinea pigs. How did you feel about the approach? You can just text it in when you have a moment or you can email Debbie. Whatever you'd like to do.

37:36

But we're trying to- we get a lot of people coming to us saying that they're really tied up in knots about gender identification, race identification. And so we really put some thought into this and realized that we've been down the same path, and this is where we're going. And so it's really helpful, if you or your organization approaches it in a different way, and you want to get in touch with us, we'd love to learn from you too. Because this can go a lot of different ways.

38:10

MAUREEN: I have a comment. I'm a nonvisual user who, I work for WeCo, and if you are doing something that you know is going to specifically nonvisual users, sometimes it's good to know- I mean I realize that's a really small audience, but sometimes it's good to know a little about the people, if they have always been blind or became blind later. It's going to make a big difference.

38:41

People that have always been blind don't really care a whole lot about what color everything is because they've never seen color. As opposed to people who've been sighted before might want more description because they can picture it in their minds.

38:59

And really look at what is the purpose of whatever. I give this example a lot when talking to clients at WeCo, that I do user testing, and there was a text said "Our college is a really good place to go to school." And the alt tag description was "Two people sitting on a bench." And I thought, "Why would that make me want to go to your college?" And then found out from a sighted person that what the picture showed is the people were seeing people skating and shopping and you know doing all kinds of activities around where they were sitting on a bench.

39:42

LYNN: That's a really, really good point. Thanks, Maureen. And the first point about the argument that the two people were having in our early training at that symposium, one person had been born blind- I knew them both- One person had been born blind, the other person had gone blind when they were in their forties.

40:03

And when people have had sight, they remember what color is. They know what a sunset looks like. They want that color. When- yeah. Michael- the interactive part was great and fun! Really appreciate the info about the context (long and short) and the context about race and gender. Thank you.

40:26

But the other thing that Maureen was talking about was- I think that we're getting away from the days where alt text is simply "two people sitting on a park bench." And I think that the fact that all of you are in here today is a real testament to the fact that people want to do better with alt tags. And that's why—it could be that it's my professional writing degree that enters into this—but it really is about thinking about what that user needs to know. And I think in the old days, it was, when we were first doing tags, it was just "what is that object," and not how it ties into anything.

41:15

Well we're nearing the end, so I think we'll just finish up with a few more things. We will be putting this recording on YouTube and with a caption and a transcript, and we will also be linking it back to our free webinar page, so you will be able to catch it either on Digital Accessibility by WeCo's YouTube channel or on our website theweco.com, theweco.com.

41:48

We're also going to send you a follow-up email in the next 24 hours and we're going to include some of WeCo's free resources to help you with alternative text tags, and some wonderful resources from W3C. If you aren't aware of it yet, they have an alt tag decision tree, and they have some wonderful resources. So you're going to be able to share out this recording, and also

have some more information to follow up on your work. So we're also pleased to announce that the expanded versions of our great webinar classes, like this one, will soon be available in our WeCollege accessible e-learning portal.

42:33

Having trouble advancing that slide, Debbie? *laughs* We have a slide for that. There we go! Okay, this is going to be coming in late October, and you are the first members of the public to hear that we are pre-selling discounted passes for WeCollege right now. And if you would like more information you can actually reach out to Debbie, or accessinfo@theweco.com, and one of our great client relation specialists will get in touch with you. So it is a greatly discounted pass that is on sale now through September 30th.

43:11

And this slide shows a person seated on a couch in kind of fun-colored clothing wearing a headset and typing on a laptop, and it looks like they're in an IKEA living room so it's very chic. Okay, learn more from us. WeCo has all sorts of free resources to help you on our library theweco.com and look under Resource tab or /resources.

43:36

We have a free accessibility library. That houses most basic things about WCAG and section 508, plus other things like online free open source accessibility tools you can use. We have workshops, webinars, conferences, and we offer our training on site and online. So use our free stuff, that is what it is there for. And then finally, we provide you with free and easy ways to stay on top of accessibility through the email, through our accessibility blog that comes out one or two times a month and our monthly email QuickTips that gives you a quick learning moment while you have your morning coffee to keep accessibility top of mind. So you'll be notified a few times a month when we have these out, and they're just a wonderful way to stay on top of accessibility without having to make a huge time commitment.

44:40

You can sign up on our website, or if you want to, send your email to Patti or she will get you signed up as well. We have sign up sheets all over our website so it's pretty easy to find. Thank you for joining us today. So please feel free to reach out to Client Relations team with any questions. Again they're at accessinfo@theweco.com Their phone number is 855-849-5050 extension 1.

45:09

We really enjoyed this time with you, thank you for being our guinea pig, and thank you for doing wonderful, wonderful audience participation. We will be in touch with those of you that received coffee gift cards. So thank you so much, have a wonderful day.