Accessible Content Core Skill 5: Alternative Text

Alternative text (or alt text) is used to describe the essential information in images, tables, charts, diagrams and other graphics. Alt text allows people who use screen readers to understand images and other graphics. It is important to get in a habit of adding alt text to all images and other graphics.

What you include as alt text depends on how you are using an image or graphic. There are four main types of images that require different types of alt text:

- Informative Images
- Functional Images
- Decorative Images
- Complex Images

Informative Images

Images or pictures that visually represent information should include alt text that describes the image as a whole. Below is example of the YRDSB logo as an informative image.
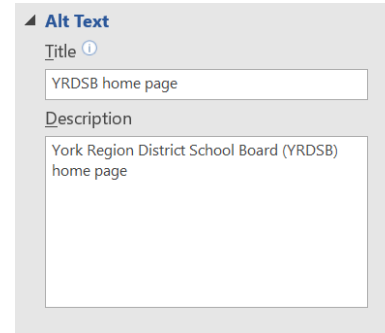

The standard alt text when using the YRDSB logo is: **"Logo for York Region District School Board (YRDSB) in black and red"**.

This alt text describes the image as a whole. You do not need to write out what the actual logo looks like or how the words are positioned within the logo. **Please Note:** it is not necessary to include a "Title" for alt text.

Functional Images

Images that are used as links or buttons are known as functional images. They should include alt text that describes the function or action of the image.

This same image of the YRDSB logo (above) has different alt text when used as a functional image that links to the YRDSB home page. The new alt text is: **"York Region District School Board (YRDSB) home page"**.

Decorative Images

Certain images or graphics only provide visual decoration to a page, such as line breaks or background images in a slide deck. Decorative images still need some form of alt text (e.g., "decorative line" or "decorative background") or what is called a "null text alternative" (`alt=""`) when creating content in HTML. This informs a screen reader that there is an image.

Decorative images can be used effectively in moderation, just like the use of colour. But always consider whether any image or other non-text element adds value to your content in a meaningful way.
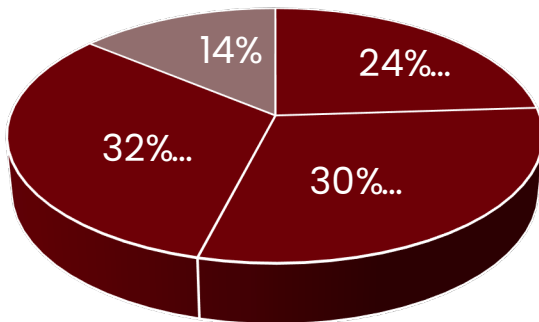
Complex Images

Charts, tables, diagrams and other informational graphics are known as complex images. Accessible charts or graphs need two elements:

1) a brief description of the chart or graph as alt text; and

2) a detailed description in the text before and/or after the chart or graph.

Descriptive text before charts: The wider impact of disability was examined in a 2019 study by the Angus Reid Institute in partnership with the Rick Hansen Foundation. The study found that 86% of Canadians are impacted by disability in some way - either directly affected (24%), affiliated through a family member or close friend with a disability (30%), or concerned (32%) about how disability will affect them in the next 5 to 10 years.
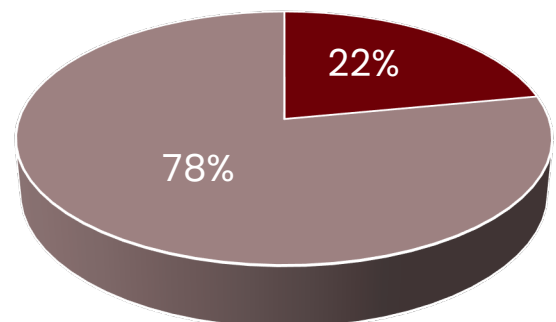
Relationship to Disability in Canada (2019)

Disability in Canada (2017)

- ■ Affected by disability in some way
- ■ Unaffected by disability

Alt text: Pie chart showing percentage of Canadians with some relationship to disability (86%) (source: Angus Reid Institute)

- ■ Canadians with disabilities
- ■ Canadians without disabilities

Alt text: Pie chart showing percentage of Canadians with (22%) and without (78%) disabilities (source: 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability)

Descriptive text after charts: The 2019 data also highlights the importance of accessibility by showing how disability does not only impact people with disabilities, but affects almost everyone. Based on findings from the 2019 Angus Reid Institute study, only 14% of Canadians believed that they have no relationship or concerns when it comes to disabilities. While recognizing that 22% of Canadians have a disability, it can be more impactful to also state that disability affects 86% of Canadians in some way.

Visit the W3C Web Accessibility Tutorial on Images Concepts to learn more about the alt text required for different types of images.

Do...

- Add alternative text (alt text) to all images and other graphics as a regular practice.
- Put key information first and keep the alt text concise.
- Choose appropriate alt text based on the type of image or graphic.
- **Informational images:** Add alt text that describes the information, not the image.
- **Functional images:** Add alt text that describes the link or "action" of the image.
- **Complex images:** Add brief alt text for charts or tables in addition to descriptive text before or after the graphic.
- **Decorative images:** Add alt text indicating the image is decorative.

Do Not...

- **Don't** forget to add alt text to all images and other graphics.
- **Don't** include long or detailed descriptions as alt text.
- **Don't** describe what the actual image or graphic looks like as alt text.