The What, When, How, and Why of Image Descriptions

What is alternative or alt text?
Alt text is written copy that appears in the place of an image if it fails to load on a user’s screen and describes images to visually impaired users. Alternative text should be relatively short (one-to-two sentences or 125 characters or less for best functionality with popular screen readers). Check out the separate guide for formatting alternative text for more information!

Why include image descriptions?
Including alternative text in posted images ensures that presentations and related materials remain accessible to all participants. These descriptions allow users to have text descriptions of images to let them understand the significance of the image and what it contributes to a presentation.

What kind of images require descriptions?
- Any image that conveys important information or context should include alternative text.
- A few types of images do not need alternative text:
  - Images that improve page design (borders, etc.)
  - Images with already present text caption

- Ultimately, the presenter is the only one who can decide whether an image is decorative or not.
- However, taking the time to ensure that all participants have an equitable experience through adding descriptions is worth taking the extra few minutes!

How to write an image description:
1. Describe the image and be specific.
   a. Use the subject and context to guide you
   b. What is the purpose of the image?
   c. What work do I want it to do for an audience?
2. Keep it shorter than 125 characters for screen readers (many will not read descriptions after this number has been exceeded).
3. Do not start with “an image of” or “picture of”
   a. Screen readers and Google will identify images from HTML code
Let’s Try It Out!

Examples A:

A: Baseball player hitting a baseball at a baseball field.

- Remember to consider the context and subject of your image.

B: Business school professor pointing to a student’s computer screen

- Overly general descriptions rarely aid in comprehension of the image’s role.

Better description:  

- Bad description: Baseball player hitting a baseball at a baseball field.

- Better description: David Ortiz of the Boston Red Sox batting from home plate at Fenway park.

Example B:

Bad description: A woman points at a person’s computer screen

- Better description: Business school professor pointing to a student’s computer screen