

Alternative Texts in Scientific Publications – A Short Guide for Authors

As authors of scholarly content, we strive for precision of communication. Digital accessibility means ensuring that this communication reaches every recipient—including those who cannot see a chart but access its content through assistive technologies.

1. Why is it mandatory? (Legal context)

Ensuring digital accessibility, including alternative descriptions for graphics, is a legal requirement for public entities (universities, research institutes) under the Act of 4 April 2019 on Digital Accessibility. Publications must comply with the international WCAG 2.1 standard at level AA. The absence of alternative text violates the fundamental principle of 'perceivability' (WCAG 2.1, criterion 1.1.1), thereby excluding blind users relying on screen readers from accessing scholarly content.

2. What is—and what is NOT—alternative text?

Alternative text (alt text) is a concise textual equivalent of an image, conveying the same information or function as the illustration in the article. It is not merely a description of what is visible, but rather the information or conclusion conveyed by the image.

It is NOT equivalent to a caption. A caption is visible to all readers and serves as a title, often including a figure number or source.

3. How to create effective alternative texts?

When writing an alt text, ask yourself: What would I say about this graphic to someone who cannot see it?

Conciseness: Typically 5–15 words (usually no more than approx. 250 characters). If the figure requires more extensive analysis, include it in the main body of the article.

Specificity: Do not begin with phrases such as 'The image shows...'. Screen readers already identify graphics. Go straight to the key message.

Charts and data: Do not describe appearance (e.g., 'blue bars'), but rather the meaning of the data—trend or key conclusion.

Context: Do not repeat information already included in the caption or surrounding text.

Decorative elements: If the graphic is purely decorative, mark it as such and do not provide alt text.

4. Examples of alternative texts

Below are selected examples illustrating ineffective and effective alternative descriptions:

Line chart: Poor: 'Line chart of the word freedom.' Good: 'Frequency of the word "freedom" increases after 1989, peaking in 2010–2020.'

Historical map: Poor: 'Map of interwar Poland.' Good: 'Borders of the Second Polish Republic with regions of diverse ethnic composition highlighted.'

Bar chart: Poor: 'Bar chart with survey results.' Good: 'Respondents aged 18–25 most frequently declare daily reading.'

Pie chart: Poor: 'Pie chart with results.' Good: '70% support the reform, 20% oppose, 10% undecided.'

Note: For graphics with high interpretative value, the alternative text may be longer, provided it remains concise and focused on meaning.

How to add alternative text in Microsoft Word?

1. Right-click the graphic.
2. Select 'View Alt Text' or 'Edit Alt Text'.
3. Enter the description in the description field (not the title field).

Do not use the 'Generate alt text' function, as automatically generated descriptions are often of low quality.

Note

Alternative texts should ideally be created by the author, taking into account the specific context of the illustration or chart. AI tools may assist in generating descriptions; however, such tools are not infallible and require careful verification.

How to create alternative texts using AI?

An alt-text assistant is available at:

<https://chatgpt.com/g/g-68c0871af8708191bd3535b45efa45f3-asystemt-alt-tekstow>

Best results are achieved when:

1. You provide a fragment of the document (contextual paragraphs before and after the image).
2. You specify the purpose (e.g., informational, illustrative, comparative).
3. You attach the image.
4. The tool generates a proposed alternative text.
5. You verify its substantive and linguistic accuracy.