

Image descriptions for digital publications

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Introduction

Clear, accurate descriptions of images are essential for creating accessible digital publications. “Accessible,” in this context, refers to the practice of making digital material usable to all, regardless of ability or disability.

Scholarly Communication staff members are responsible for working with book authors and volume editors to review images in a publication and write descriptions (also known as “alt text”) per the “Categories and guidelines” section below. These descriptions should be provided with the original manuscript when it is transmitted to production for copyediting. Editorial will copyedit the descriptions while working on the manuscript. Production will ensure that the descriptions are properly encoded for digital format(s).

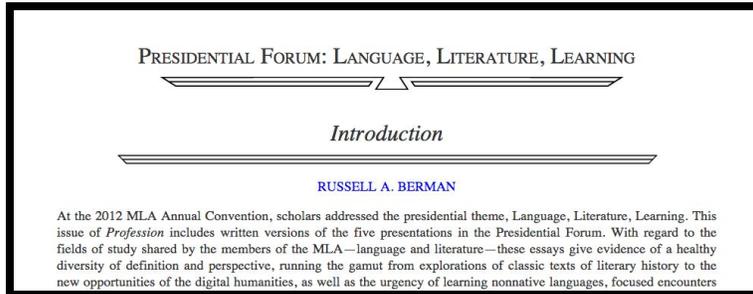
Categories and guidelines

Images fall into one of four categories, each of which requires a different approach to writing an appropriate description. These are based on best practices published by the DIAGRAM Center at Benetech, an accessible technology company. For more information see: <http://diagramcenter.org/59-image-guidelines-for-epub-3.html>.

Purely decorative

If the image is purely decorative, there’s no need for a description.

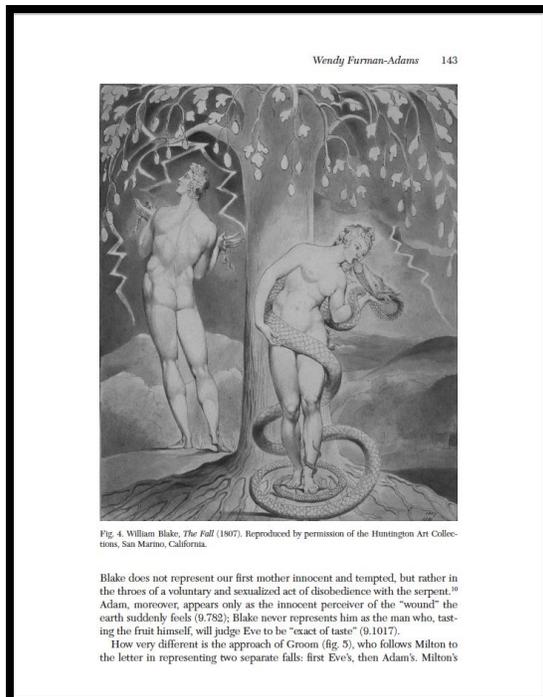
For example, these line art illustrations from *Profession 2012* do not require descriptions.



Caption or surrounding text sufficient

If either the surrounding text or the caption describes its presentation, content, and context sufficiently, there's no need for additional description but do provide a simple label that identifies the image.

For example, a painting from *Approaches to Teaching Milton's Paradise Lost*: the author describes the image and its importance to the essay in the surrounding text, so a label such as "William Blake's *The Fall*" would suffice.

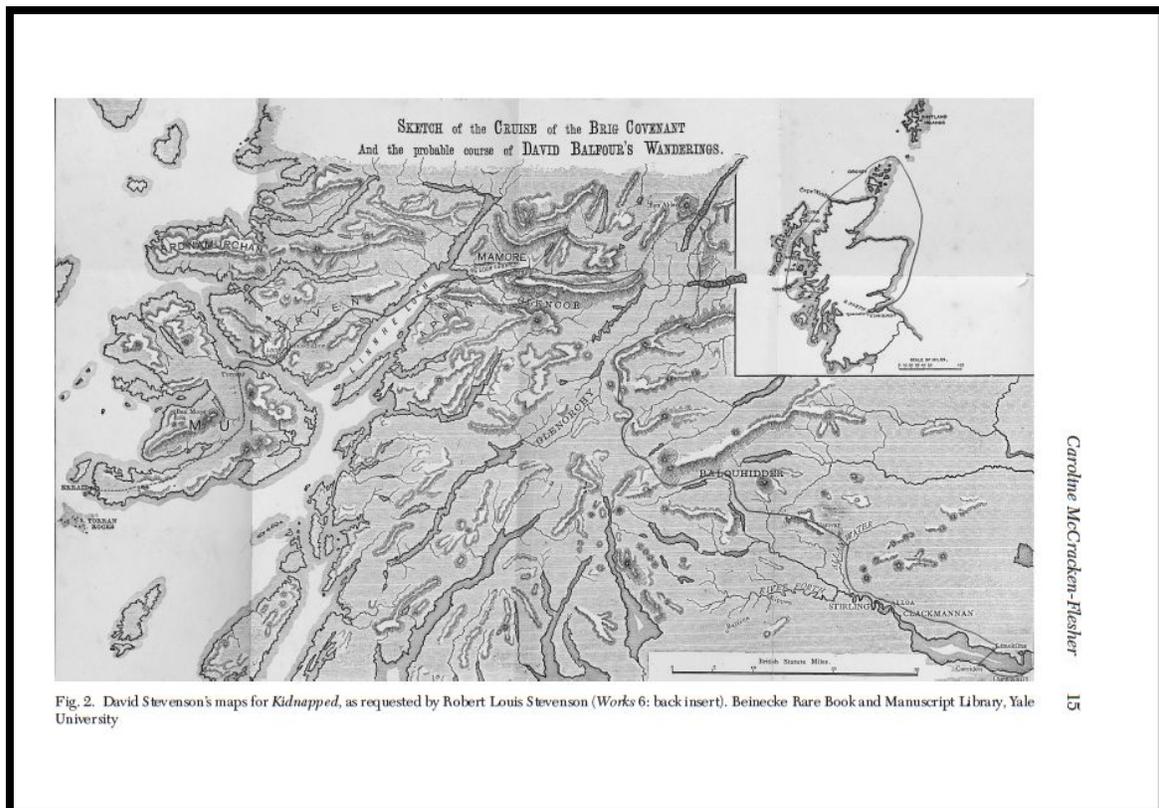


Examples of images that need descriptions

If neither the surrounding text nor the associated caption describes the image's presentation, content, and context sufficiently, write a description that:

- Exhibits a high degree of subject matter expertise
- Follows a general-to-specific structure, i.e. begin with a contextual overview before noting the visual details presented
- Does not exceed 200 characters

For example, a map from *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*: though the author introduces the map, and though it has a caption, there's no discussion of its visual content. An acceptable description might read: "19th-century map for *Kidnapped*, showing Balfour's wanderings and Brig Covenant's course. Central and western Scotland are in focus; in the top right corner, there's an inset of Scotland as a whole."



Short versus long descriptions

If neither the surrounding text nor the associated caption describes the image's presentation, content, and context sufficiently, and its complexity warrants a lengthy

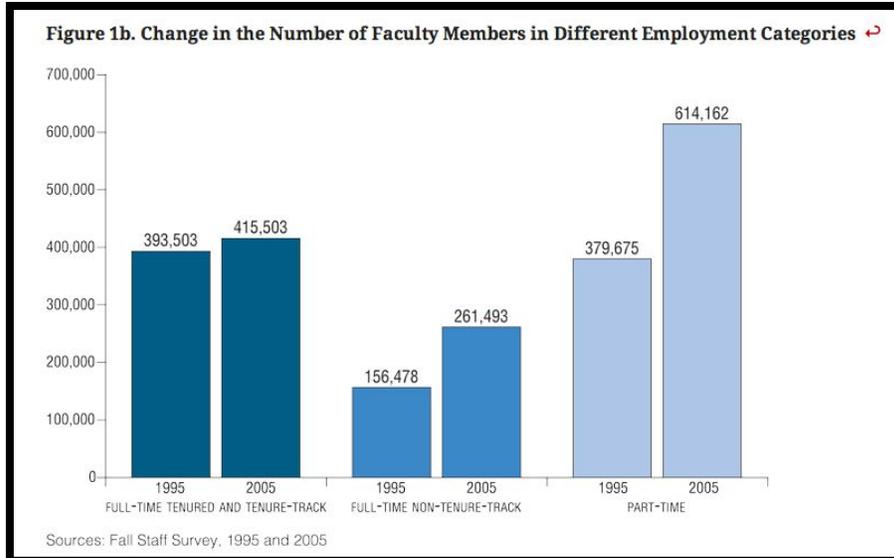
description (> 200 characters), provide separate short and long descriptions per the following guidelines:

- For the short version, write a simple label that identifies the image
- For the long version, write a description that
 - o Exhibits a high degree of subject matter expertise
 - o Follows a general-to-specific structure, i.e. begin with a contextual overview before noting the visual details presented

NOTE: We recommend that authors and/or editors avoid lengthy descriptions as much as possible. Brevity tends to provide an easier and more accessible user experience.

E.g., A bar chart from Beth Landers’s article, “Contingent Labor: National Perspectives, Local Solutions,” in *Profession*: the amount and density of data presented here requires significant explanation. Here, the basic label might read, “bar chart,” while the long description might read,

A bar chart with a y-axis that goes from 0 to 700,000; there are marks for all 100,000 intervals between these values. On the x-axis there are three groups of labels. The first, Full-Time Tenured and Tenure-Track, has two bars, in dark blue, labeled 1995 and 2005. At the top of the 1995 bar is the number 393,503; at the top of the 2005 bar, 415,503. The second label, Full-Time Non-Tenure-Track, also has two bars labeled 1995 and 2005, though in a lighter shade of blue. At the top of the 1995 bar is the number 156,478; at the top of the 2005 bar, 261,493. The third label, Part-Time, again has two bars labeled 1995 and 2005, in this instance in very light blue. At the top of the 1995 bar is the number 379,675; at the top of the 2005 bar, 614,162.



Additional examples

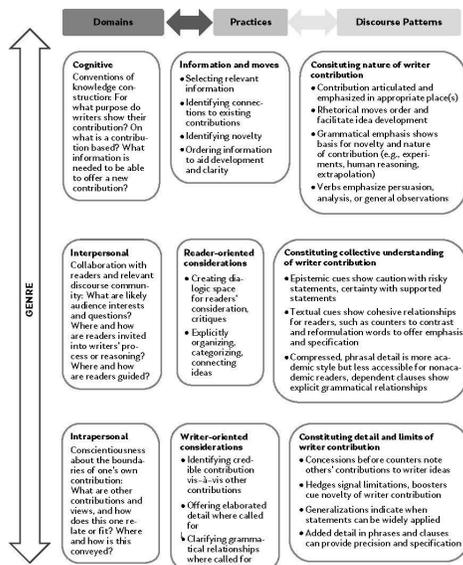


Figure 5. Taxonomy: Making a Written Contribution through Macro- and Microlevel Choices

(from *How Students Write*, 2020)

Advice: Distilling all of this information into short alt text seems impossible for non-subject-matter experts. One possibility is to write a long description in another location (e.g. an appendix at the end of an ebook) and then linking to it. See the resource section for more detail.

Outside resources

When and how to write long descriptions

[How to Write Great Alt Text and Why It Matters](#) (ACES)

[Describing Visual Resources Toolkit](#) (University of Michigan Library)

[A Picture Demands a Thousand Words: Rethinking Long Descriptions](#) (EPUB Secrets)

[Providing a long description](#) (compliant with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines)