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# Complex Images and Long Descriptions

Complex images and Long descriptions can seem overwhelming at first, but if you follow the advice in this section they will become easier.

We create longer, complex descriptions for any image that contains complex information or data. Common examples are Maps, Graphs, Charts and Diagrams. We can also create longer, complex descriptions when we need to transcribe an [Image with Text](#), such as an image of a letter. If you are not sure if your image requires a complex description, ask in the [Q&A section](#).

A **complex image** is any image that contains complex information or data. Common examples are Maps, Graphs, and Charts. All complex images require extended descriptions beyond the Alt-text, also known as Long Descriptions.

A **Long Description** is a detailed text description of an image that can be several paragraphs long and/or may contain other elements such as tables and lists.

When creating a complex description work from the general to the specific: provide an overview of the image before you describe specific details. The way you introduce a complex image can vary depending on the type of image. We included documentation for all the most common images we come across at the end of this page.



If you have any questions, post your question on the [Alt-Text Q&A](#)

## How to Write Long Descriptions

The complex descriptions must also follow the standard Alt-text guidelines (though it will be longer than 2-3 sentences).

- Breakdown the image into smaller parts and organize it in a logical order (you may have to experiment with which technique works best: Quadrant, Compass, or Clock. See below for more details about breaking down an image.)
- Start with a brief description, followed by more specific information. This allows the reader to get the initial concept and read further if desired.
- Be consistent and balanced in your descriptions. Most long descriptions are not narrative and are more repetitive than general Alt-Text. This helps the reader keep track of the data and information without getting lost.



Writing balanced sentences can help avoid cognitive overload. Learn more at [Balanced Sentences](#).

- Know your audience. If it is a fantasy novel map, a more narrative style would work for the description. But if it is a map in a textbook, then a be less narrative focusing on the data and facts.

- Focus on the data and not on extraneous visual elements. Don't describe every detail. If the visual elements are important to understanding the image, then describe what they stand for instead of their shape. For example, a dotted line could represent a railway, so state it is railway instead of describing the line.
- If a graph, chart, or other type of visualization has an intentional visual impact, you should include that in your description, just don't get bogged down or lost in the details.
- Use multiple modalities when necessary. Some content is better converted to tables or lists than being provided in a narrative description.
- The reader should be able to understand the description in one reading, and if you organized it properly, they will be able to navigate back and forth through the data with confidence.

## Breaking Down Image into Smaller Parts

A strategy we use is to break the image up into its component parts, and then organize them so that the description makes logical sense.

There are a couple of techniques you can use to breakdown a complex description:

- **Quadrants:** divide the image into 4 quadrants. Top and bottom, left and right.
- **Compass:** divide the image by North-South-East-West. This is most commonly used for Maps.
- **Clock:** divide the image by the times of a clock. This is most commonly used for images that have the main focus in the center of the image.

The type of breakdown will depend on the context, audience, and type of image. Sometimes you will have to experiment with which one works the best for your complex description. By breaking down a complex image into sections you can take the reader on a journey. Remember, you need to be able to walk your reader through the image in a logical order, and you need to be able to recreate the image without looking at it. Using this approach helps to create an immersive experience for the reader. Editing will be important with complex images, go to [Editing Alt-text](#) for more information.

Sometimes doing a table or nested list can be too complicated, and it might be better to use a narrative description. It can potentially remove relationships between data, spatial data, etc..



A good rule to follow is that all tables need a header row and are used for tabular data. If that fits the image you are describing then use a table. Go to [Tables](#) for more info.

If you are using lists, you can also use a more narrative style with the list by adding relational information to the data in the lists.



We recommend you check out the DAISY webinars on Complex Descriptions. You can find the links in the [Resources section](#). You can also find multiple examples in [Alt-Text Samples](#).



If you have any questions, post your question on the [Alt-Text Q&A](#)

## Getting Started

For images that require more complex or extended descriptions we create two descriptions:

1. Standard Alt-text in the Alt-text description Box (2-3 sentences average) including See the link below the image for an extended description. at the end of the description
2. Long description in the [Complex Image Descriptions Section](#) that links back to the image being described.



You must include a shorter image description in the Alt-text box that compliments the longer description. Remember, all images must have Alt-text. Empty Alt-tags in non-decorative images can be confusing to the reader, and leave out part of the experience of reading.

Remember to include a basic Alt-text description for the image itself along with a note that the reader can find a longer description in another location of the book. Simply enter the sentence See the link below the image for an extended description. at the end of the Alt-text. This way readers are aware there is a longer description.



For information on how to format the Complex Image Book section go to [Complex Image Descriptions](#) wiki page under Book Sections on the main eText page

We also do this because all non-decorative images require Alt-text, even if a long description is also provided. Empty Alt-tags in non-decorative images can be confusing to the reader, and leave out part of the experience of reading.

Below is a video that shows how a screenreader interacts with a long description:

[long-description-demo.mp4](#)

When creating a complex description work from the general to the specific: provide an overview of the image before you describe specific details. A good strategy is to break the image up into its component parts, and then organize them so that the description makes logical sense.



If you have any questions, post your question on the [Alt-Text Q&A](#)

## Maps

This is the most common complex image you will come across in your work. Again, context will also help you out a lot in your description. Below are the general guidelines for how to describe a map.

- Include the Name/Title of the Map and a Description of the Legend
- It is not necessary to describe types of lines/colour-coding and images when this information can be described using the information the legend conveys.
- Aim for clarity, even if detail is sacrificed. Focus on the information that is relevant in the greater context of the book.
- Ask yourself: What is this Map telling the reader? Only describe what is necessary to convey the intended meaning of the map. This will vary.

Spatial relationships are very important in maps. The reader needs to know where they are and where they are going within the description. The most common way to break down a map is with the compass technique, but this also is dependent on context. If you have a map that has a central focus, then the clock technique might be better. You also might find it easier to use the quadrant method. Again, you may have to experiment as you are writing. Remember it has to walk the reader through the image, and be recreated based on the description alone.



Do not simply list places on a map. This removes all spatial information, and can be meaningless to the reader.

See examples on [Samples of Alt Text: Maps](#)

More tips on [writing text descriptions for maps](#).

We also recommend checking out the DAISY webinars on the [Resources page](#).



If you have any questions, post your question on the [Alt-Text Q&A](#)

## Graphs and Charts

Not all graphs require a long description. More simple graphs and charts can be easily described in 3-4 sentences and can go directly into the Alt-text. When they do need a long description it is important to focus on the facts and data more than any visual elements.

As with maps, ask what is this chart saying? To help answer this question, review the context surrounding the graph.

Are there any striking visual trends in this chart? Remember that charts and graphs are used to give visual impact to data, so summarizing that at the beginning of your description is a good idea.

Begin by providing the title of the graph, and its main purpose (if it is not clear from the title). Then,

describe the its structure and design before going into detail, including the type of graph, and the information on the X and Y axes. You want the reader to understand the layout and larger pieces before describing finer details!

If possible, include the data in a table in a long description.



For units, use the full word instead of shortened/abbreviated forms (i.e., Use “seconds” instead of “s”), and ensure units are described consistently throughout the description

See examples on [Samples of Alt-Text:Graphs and Charts: Short Descriptions](#) or [Samples of Alt-text: Graphs and Charts Long Descriptions](#)

Remember:

- Describe only the visual features that convey meaning. Including implied visual impact.
- Focus on the meaning of symbols and not their appearance.
- If the chart is about relationships, describe the relationships and not the symbols.
- This is something that happens more with flowcharts and family trees, you don't have to describe all the arrows and lines, instead describe the relationships and take advantage of multiple modalities! Lists, nested lists, and even subheadings can help with these types of charts.

Below are the more common Graphs and Charts you will come across.

## Bar Charts

Below are the guidelines for describing a Bar Chart.

- Describe only the visual features that convey meaning.
- Focus on the meaning of symbols and not their appearance.
- Describe the layout of the graph before describing specific data (i.e. "A Bar Chart of ...")
- State what the graph is telling you before you describe its details (i.e. The chart shows murder rates in Chicago from 1990 to 2020.)
- Include implied visual impact.
- Provide the most relevant information first, like what is being measured on the X and Y axes.
- Make sure what you are describing is relevant to the image. Do not simply repeat the titles and labels without providing information about what the graph portrays.
- For units, use the full word instead of short forms (ex. Use “seconds” instead of “s”) and ensure the unit is described consistently throughout the description.

See examples on [Samples of Alt-Text:Graphs and Charts: Short Descriptions](#) or [Samples of Alt-text: Graphs and Charts Long Descriptions](#)



For graphs, you can write a summary of the chart and what it is saying then put the data into a table or list for clarity.

## Pie chart

The description for a pie chart needs to reference the following data elements:

- The title of the pie chart.
- The structure and design of the chart.
- The number of variables.
- The data point(s) for each variable. This may be a value, a percentage or both.
- When describing the data, organize the data into size order to help the user with visualizing and understanding the chart.
- Unless colour is integral to understanding the chart, it does not need to be referenced.

See examples on [Samples of Alt-Text:Graphs and Charts: Short Descriptions](#) or [Samples of Alt-text: Graphs and Charts Long Descriptions](#)

## Flowcharts and Trees

Flowcharts and Trees are all about relationships. Don't get weighted down on the visuals. Focus on the meaning of symbols and not their appearance. You want to describe the relationships and not the symbols themselves! For example, A line could be Yes or No, or it could be a mother or daughter. Describe what it means and not what it looks like.

The description of a flowchart needs to reference the following elements:

- The title of the flowchart.
- The structure of the chart and a summary of what it is saying (i.e. The Smiths Family Tree).
- Number of Tiers or Layers. Describe all the levels first, then start at the beginning and work your way through the flowchart
- When describing a family tree, first describe all the levels, then start at the top and go to the bottom, repeat for each branch. Do not describe any extra visuals.
- Describe pathways through the flowchart to guide the user



Numbering the squares can help organize a flowchart. With Family Trees you only have to state the name, date (if present), and relationships.



If there is jumping back and forth between different points in the flowchart, then you should mix headings with your list as opposed to nested lists. Headings are easier to navigate back and forth with than nested lists. See the Alt-text Samples for an example.

For examples, go to [Samples of Alt-text: Graphs and Charts Long Descriptions](#) and the [Poet Centre](#) has some great examples you can work through as well!



## Venn Diagrams

A Venn Diagram consists of a list of elements interacting with each other to form sets. Your description should trace the diagram in a clockwise direction and list each interaction and the sets created by those interactions.

The description of a Venn Diagram needs to reference the following elements

- State the number of variables and the labels.
- Identify the focus or gateway point.
- Identify the pathway (left to right or clockwise depending on the style of Venn diagram).
- Reference the labels as you move through the pathway identifying the interactions

For examples, go to [Samples of Alt-text: Graphs and Charts Long Descriptions](#).



If you have any questions, post your question on the [Alt-Text Q&A](#)

## Paintings

Depending on the context, a painting may need a complex description. These can be especially complicated and overwhelming since art is so subjective, and if it requires a long description then the painting may be very detailed. Like all long descriptions, break it down into logical parts and start describing.

The description of a Painting needs to reference the following elements:

- An overview of the artwork piece including style
- the title
- a brief description of the main components



Often this is enough, and can go into the Alt-text with no long description required. If the context calls for more then proceed with a long description.

The [Poet Centre](#) has a few tutorials on writing Alt-text for paintings that are very helpful.

For a complex description it is important to consider the context for which you need the description. This may include:

- The painting style
- The color and composition
- The style and location of the figures/elements in the image
- Allegorical Meaning
- Historical Context

For examples, go to [Alt-text Samples: Paintings](#).



If you have any questions, post your question on the [Alt-Text Q&A](#)

## Anatomy and Diagrams with Labels

Unlike other long descriptions described above, shapes are important to Anatomy and Diagrams with Labels. Spatial relationships are also essential. You do not want to simply list all the labels without context or relations. Remember, you want to walk the reader through the diagram, and you should be able to recreate the image from your description.

The description of an Anatomy Image or Diagram with Labels needs to reference the following elements:

- Include the shapes of the parts and where they are located in relation to each other.
- Spatial relationships, how they are related to each other, their shape



You can still have this in a list format, just add this additional info beyond the labels.

For examples, go to [Alt-text Samples: Anatomy and Diagrams with Labels](#)



If you have any questions, post your question on the [Alt-Text Q&A](#)



The average writing time for a Complex image is 35 minutes per image. The average editing time is 25 minutes per image



Sometimes images will require so research on your end and will take longer than average. For example, when describing art, you want to use the right terminology for the style of art you are describing and a quick search on the art piece or artist can help. This is also try for culturally specific items. For more information, go to [Glossary of Alt-text Terms](#) and [General Guidelines](#).

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