BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
Alt Text Compliance Guidelines

For all content creators, web publishers, and social media managers | Effective date: April 24, 2026

Section 1: What Alt Text Is and How Assistive Technology Uses It

Alternative text (alt text) is a written description attached to an image that conveys the same information the image conveys visually. It is not visible on screen under normal circumstances. It exists in the code behind the image—on a web page, in a social media post's metadata, or in a PDF's tag structure—and is read aloud by assistive technology.

How Screen Readers Use Alt Text

A screen reader is software that converts on-screen content into synthesized speech or braille output. When a screen reader encounters an image, it looks for alt text. Here is what happens in each scenario:

Scenario	What the Screen Reader Does
Image has good alt text	The screen reader announces "Image:" followed by the alt text. The user hears a description of what the image shows and can understand its purpose in context. Example: "Image: Three students in Ball State gear tossing bean bags at the Homecoming tailgate on the Student Green."
Image has no alt text	The screen reader either skips the image entirely (the user doesn't know it exists) or announces the image's filename, which is typically meaningless. Example: "Image: IMG_4823_final_v2.jpg." The user has no idea what they are missing.
Image has bad alt text	The screen reader announces whatever was written, no matter how unhelpful. Example: "Image: photo." or "Image: image of students." The user knows an image exists but still cannot understand what it depicts or why it matters.
Image is marked as decorative	The screen reader skips the image completely and moves to the next element. This is the correct behavior for images that serve no informational purpose—ornamental borders, spacer graphics, purely aesthetic backgrounds.

Understanding this is critical: alt text is not a caption for sighted users. It is the **only** way a person using a screen reader can access the content of an image. When alt text is missing or poor, the image might as well not exist for that user.

Where Alt Text Lives

Alt text is applied differently depending on where the image appears:

- **On a web page (bsu.edu):** Alt text is entered in the "Alternative Text" field when inserting an image in the CMS, or coded as the alt attribute on the <img> tag in HTML.

- **In a PDF:** Alt text is stored in the document's tag structure, attached to <Figure> tags. See the PDF Accessibility Remediation Guide for instructions.

- **On social media:** Alt text is entered in a dedicated field during upload on each platform. See the Social Media Accessibility Compliance Guide for platform-specific instructions on where to find and fill out these fields on Instagram, Facebook, X, LinkedIn, TikTok, and YouTube.

- **In Word and PowerPoint:** Alt text is entered by right-clicking the image and selecting "Edit Alt Text" (or via the Alt Text pane). When the document is exported to PDF, well-formed alt text carries over into the PDF's tag structure.

Section 2: How to Write Good Alt Text

The goal of alt text is to provide the same information the image provides to a sighted user. Not less. Not more. Not different. The same information.

The Core Rules

1. Describe the content and function of the image

Ask yourself: what does this image communicate to someone who can see it? That is what your alt text should communicate. If the image shows students registering for organizations at a fair, say that. If the image shows a bar chart of enrollment trends, describe the data. If the image is a button that says "Apply Now," the alt text is "Apply Now."

2. Be specific, not generic

Generic alt text ("students," "building," "event") is almost as useless as no alt text at all. It tells the user that something exists but not what it is. Compare:

Vague (Fails the Purpose)	Specific (Serves the User)
"Students on campus"	"Four students studying at a table in Bracken Library with laptops and coffee cups."
"Building exterior"	"The front entrance of the Letterman Building, with glass doors and the Ball State logo above the entryway."
"Chart"	"Bar chart showing undergraduate enrollment increasing from 15,200 in 2020 to 17,800 in 2025."
"Group photo"	"President Mearns and six scholarship recipients holding award certificates at the 2025 Beneficence Gala."

3. Keep it concise but complete

Alt text should be no more than 125 characters while still conveying the full meaning of the image. One to two sentences is typical. If an image requires a paragraph of explanation to convey its meaning, it may be better to provide a longer description in the surrounding text and keep the alt text as a summary.

4. Do not start with "image of" or "photo of"

Screen readers already announce that the element is an image before reading the alt text. Writing "Image of students at a table" causes the user to hear "Image: Image of students at a table"—redundant and annoying over the course of a page with multiple images.

5. Context determines content

The same image can require different alt text depending on where and why it is used. A photo of Beneficence on a general campus webpage might be described as "The Beneficence statue on the

campus quad on a sunny afternoon." The same photo on a webpage about the statue's history might need: "Close-up of the Beneficence statue, a bronze female figure with outstretched arms holding a small bird, created by Daniel Chester French in 1937." The context of the page determines what information matters.

Section 3: What Not to Do

The Biggest Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

Mistake	Why It's a Problem	What to Do Instead
Leaving alt text blank	The screen reader skips the image or reads the filename. The user misses information entirely.	Write meaningful alt text for every informational image. Mark decorative images as decorative.
Relying on auto-generated alt text	AI-generated descriptions are generic ("people sitting in a room"), miss context, and frequently misidentify content. They do not meet the standard.	Always write your own alt text. Use auto-generated text only as a starting point to overwrite.
Stuffing keywords for SEO	Alt text is for people, not search engines. Keyword-stuffed alt text is useless to a screen reader user and can be flagged as spam by platforms.	Describe the image. If a relevant keyword naturally fits the description, fine. Don't force it.
Copying the caption into the alt text field	Captions and alt text serve different purposes. A caption provides editorial context visible to everyone. Alt text describes the image itself for people who cannot see it. If the caption says "Our students are the best!" that is not a description of the image.	Write alt text that describes the visual content. The caption and alt text should complement each other, not duplicate.
Writing "image of" or "photo of"	Causes the screen reader to say "Image: Image of…"—redundant every time.	Start directly with the description: "Students registering at the Involvement Fair."
Writing alt text that is too long	Screen reader users cannot scan alt text the way sighted users scan an image. A 200-word description is exhausting to listen to.	Keep it to one or two sentences. If the image is complex (a detailed infographic), provide a brief summary as alt text and a full description in the body text nearby.
Marking an informational image as decorative	The screen reader skips it entirely. If the image conveys information, the user loses that information.	Only mark images as decorative if they truly serve no informational purpose—ornamental borders, background textures, spacer graphics.

Ignoring text inside images	Screen readers cannot read text rendered as part of an image file. Event flyers, quote cards, and infographics with text baked in are invisible to assistive technology.	Include all text from the image in the alt text field, verbatim. See Section 4 of this guide.

Section 4: Images That Contain Text

This category deserves special attention because it is one of the most common content types at Ball State and one of the most problematic for accessibility.

Why This Matters

When you create a graphic in Canva, Photoshop, or any design tool that includes text—event names, dates, locations, quotes, statistics, URLs—and export it as an image file (PNG, JPG), all of that text becomes pixels. It is no longer text. A screen reader cannot read pixels. Every word in that image is invisible to assistive technology unless you provide it as alt text or in surrounding page/post content.

This is governed by two WCAG criteria: 1.1.1 (Non-text Content), which requires a text alternative for all informational images, and 1.4.5 (Images of Text), which says that if the same visual presentation can be achieved with actual text, use actual text instead of an image of text.

What to Do

- **Option 1: Include all text from the image in the alt text.** If your flyer says "Spring Career Fair | March 12 | Worthen Arena | 10am–3pm | Register at bsu.edu/careerfair," your alt text must contain all of that text. Do not summarize. Reproduce it.

- **Option 2: Include the text in the surrounding content.** On a web page, provide the information as text on the page near the image. In a social media post, include it in the caption. This approach benefits all users, not just screen reader users.

- **Option 3: Don't use an image of text.** If the purpose of the content is to communicate information, write that information as text and use a photo or simple branded visual as the accompanying image. This is the most accessible approach and often the most effective for engagement.

> **The Flyer Problem**
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> Event flyers are the single most common accessibility failure in university social media and web content. A beautifully designed flyer posted as an image with no alt text is completely invisible to a screen reader user. Before posting any flyer, ask: is every piece of information on this flyer available as text somewhere the user can access it?

Section 5: How to Handle Specific Image Types

Image Type	How to Write the Alt Text	Example
Photo of people	Identify who is pictured (if known and relevant), what they are doing, and where. If names are not relevant, describe the group and activity.	"President Mearns shaking hands with a donor at the Beneficence Gala."
Photo of a place	Name the location and describe what is visible. Include distinguishing features that matter in context.	"Exterior of Beyerl Residence Hall at dusk, with warm light visible through ground-floor windows."

Chart or graph	State the type of chart, what data it presents, and the key takeaway. Do not just write "chart"—convey the data. If the chart is complex, provide a brief alt text summary and a full data table or description nearby.	"Line graph showing 4-year graduation rates rising from 48% in 2018 to 59% in 2024."
Logo	Name the organization. Do not describe the visual design of the logo unless the design itself is the subject of discussion.	"Ball State University logo."
Icon or button	Describe the function, not the appearance. A magnifying glass icon that triggers a search is not "magnifying glass"—it is "Search."	"Search." or "Download application (PDF)."
Map	Describe the area shown and any key features marked. If the map serves a navigational purpose, provide text directions as well.	"Campus map showing the location of Beyerl Hall in the north residential neighborhood, adjacent to North Dining and the Rec Center."
Screenshot	Describe what the screenshot shows and why it is relevant. If it demonstrates a process step, describe the step. If it shows a specific field or button, name it.	"The Proxy Management screen in Self-Service Banner, with the Add New button highlighted."
Decorative image	Mark it as decorative (empty alt attribute on web: alt=""; mark as artifact in PDF; check "decorative" in Word/PowerPoint). Do not write alt text for it.	(no alt text—screen reader skips it)

Section 6: How to Decide If an Image Is Decorative

One of the most common questions about alt text is: "Is this image decorative?" Getting this wrong in either direction creates problems—marking an informational image as decorative hides information, while writing alt text for a truly decorative image creates noise that clutters the screen reader experience.

Use this decision process:

Question 1: If I removed this image from the page, would the user lose any information?

If yes, the image is informational and needs alt text. If no, it may be decorative.

Question 2: Does the image contain text?

If yes, it is informational. Text in an image always needs to be available as alt text or in surrounding content. There is no such thing as a "decorative" image that contains text.

Question 3: Is the image purely aesthetic—a background pattern, a colored divider line, a decorative border, a spacer?

If yes, and it communicates no information, mark it as decorative.

Question 4: Does the image duplicate information already provided in adjacent text?

This is the hardest case. If a heading says "Our Beautiful Campus" and the image below it is a generic campus photo that adds ambiance but no new information, it could arguably be decorative. But if the image shows a specific location, building, or event that the text does not mention, it is informational.

When in Doubt, Write Alt Text

If you are unsure whether an image is decorative, write alt text for it. A brief, accurate description never hurts. An informational image incorrectly marked as decorative is a compliance failure. An unnecessary alt text description is, at worst, a minor inconvenience.

Section 7: Where to Apply Alt Text (Platform Reference)

Alt text is entered differently depending on where the image is published. The table below provides a quick reference. For step-by-step instructions on social media platforms, see the **Social Media Accessibility Compliance Guide**. For PDFs, see the **PDF Accessibility Remediation Guide**.

Platform	Where Alt Text Is Entered	Key Notes
bsu.edu (CMS)	In the image upload dialog, the "Alternative Text" field. In HTML, the alt attribute on the <img> tag.	For decorative images, set alt="" (empty) so screen readers skip it. Never omit the alt attribute entirely.
Word / PowerPoint	Right-click the image → Edit Alt Text. Or use the Alt Text pane (Review tab).	Check "Mark as decorative" for ornamental images. Alt text carries over when exporting to PDF if the export is done correctly.
PDF (Acrobat)	All Tools → Prepare for Accessibility → Add Alternate Text. Or via the Tags panel on <Figure> tags.	See the PDF Accessibility Remediation Guide for detailed instructions.
Instagram	Advanced Settings → Write Alt Text (mobile). Accessibility tab (desktop).	Do not rely on auto-generated alt text. See the Social Media Guide.
Facebook	Three-dot menu on image → Edit Alt Text. Replace auto-generated text.	Auto-generated text is a starting point only. Always overwrite it.
X (Twitter)	+ALT button on uploaded image (mobile). Add description (desktop).	Cannot edit alt text after publishing. Up to 1,000 characters.
LinkedIn	"Alt. text" link below uploaded image.	PDF carousel slides do not support alt text—describe key visuals in the post caption instead.
TikTok	"Add alternative text" on photo post composer (mobile app only).	Desktop does not support alt text. Edits possible within 7 days of posting.

Section 8: Alt Text Checklist

Use this checklist every time you add an image to a web page, document, or social media post.

✓	Check
☐	The image has alt text written by a human (not auto-generated and not blank).
☐	The alt text describes the content and function of the image, not just its appearance.
☐	The alt text is specific enough that a person who cannot see the image understands what it conveys and why it is there.
☐	The alt text does not start with "image of," "photo of," or "picture of."
☐	If the image contains text, every word of that text appears in the alt text or in the surrounding page/post content.
☐	If the image is a chart or graph, the alt text conveys the data and key takeaway, not just "chart" or "graph."
☐	If the image is purely decorative, it is marked as decorative (not given meaningless alt text like "image" or "photo").
☐	The alt text is concise—one to two sentences for most images. Complex images have a brief alt text summary with a longer description in adjacent text.
☐	The alt text is not stuffed with keywords, hashtags, or marketing copy.
☐	The alt text is not a duplicate of the visible caption—it describes the image itself.

Section 9: Compliance Authority

Accessibility compliance is the responsibility of any individual creating content for use on behalf of Ball State University.

Alternative text for images is required under WCAG 2.1 Level AA, specifically Success Criterion 1.1.1 (Non-text Content, Level A). The ADA Title II final rule (28 CFR Part 35, Subpart H) adopts WCAG 2.1 Level AA as the technical standard for all web content and mobile apps provided by public universities. Ball State University's compliance deadline is April 24, 2026.

Every image posted on bsu.edu, in university documents, and on university social media accounts after that date must have appropriate alt text or be correctly marked as decorative. There are no exceptions for "simple" images, "obvious" images, or images that "everyone can see." The standard applies universally.

For platform-specific instructions on how to enter alt text, refer to the **Social Media Accessibility Compliance Guide** and the **PDF Accessibility Remediation Guide**, which are companion documents to this guide.

Questions about this guide or its requirements should be directed to Greg Fallon, Associate Vice President of University Communications and Digital Strategy, in Marketing and Communications, gmfallon@bsu.edu, 765-285-0048.