

How to write an image description



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A diagram illustrating the Object-Action-Context framework. The text "Object · · Action · · Context" is centered on a light purple background. "Object" is enclosed in a solid dark purple box, "Action" is in italics, and "Context" is enclosed in a dark purple outlined box. The words are separated by two dots (· ·).

Dark purple text that says, “Object — action — context” on a light purple background.

What is an image description?

An image description is a written caption that describes the essential information in an image.

Image descriptions can define photos, graphics, gifs, and video — basically anything containing visual information. Providing descriptions for imagery and video are required as part of WCAG 2.1 (for digital ADA compliance)

How to write a good image description

Object-action-context

There is a storytelling aspect to writing Image Descriptions. It doesn't make sense to go from left to right and describe everything in an image because that might lose the central message or create a disorienting feeling. For that reason, I came up with a framework that I recommend called **object-action-context**.

The **object** is the main focus. The **action** describes what's happening, usually what the object is doing. The **context** describes the surrounding environment.

I recommend this format because it keeps the description objective, concise, and descriptive. It should be **objective** so that people using the description can form their own opinions about what the image means. It should be **concise** so that it doesn't take too long for people to absorb all the content, especially if there are multiple images. And it should be **descriptive** enough that it describes all the essential aspects of the image.

Examples:



Image Description: Black Lives Matter sign being held in a crowd

Object: Black Lives Matter sign

Action: being held

Context: in a crowd

We can add more detail to this image description to paint a more vivid picture. **I recommend adding the detail with the object-action-context format.** This makes the description more concise.

A concise way to add detail: A painted Black Lives Matter cardboard sign being held anonymously in a blurred out crowd in front of a stone building.

A [not concise] redundant way to add detail: Black Lives Matter sign being held in a crowd. Behind them, there is a building made of stone. The crowd is blurred out. The sign is painted on cardboard. The person holding the sign is anonymous.

You can see that the redundant example repeats a lot of words and skips from one thing to another, making it longer and more disorienting. In contrast, the object-action-context format helps fixate on the primary focus, and then slowly expands to get the full picture.



Image Description: Light brown Pit Bull dog sitting in a field of autumn leaves

Object: Light brown Pit Bull dog

Action: sitting

Context: in a field of autumn leaves

When you post your Image Description, you only need to post the statement (e.g., Black Lives Matter sign being held in a crowd); you don't need to also post the listing of the Object, Action, and Context.

However, jotting down the Object, Action, and Context should be helpful to you to write objective, concise, and descriptive Image Descriptions.