Image Descriptions

# Introduction

Image descriptions can be difficult for those who are unfamiliar with image descriptions. Image descriptions are described to convey information to the user that would often be obtained through the eyes. The question becomes, “how much information do I need to provide?”. If you provide too much information, it may overwhelm users with reading disabilities. Providing too little of information may hinder users with visual disabilities from obtaining the necessary information. The below article, pasted below from HubPages in case the link expires, explains the difference in sparse and lush descriptions.

Direct link to article: <https://hubpages.com/art/Image-Descriptions-And-How-To-Write-Them>

## Article pasted below

# Image Descriptions And How To Write Them. By Zera

Updated on August 25, 2012

## Introduction: What Are Image Descriptions?

Image descriptions are text captions for images on the internet. They can be put in plain text near the image (usually directly following it) or placed as alternate text in the HTML to be picked up by screen readers (although there are problems with this second method that we'll get into later). It's simple to add them and it makes the internet more accessible for several groups. While any descriptive writing requires skill to achieve its own beauty, image descriptions are largely tasked with being practical. The idea is to convey the facts of the image, so there's no need to feel pressured to turn the image description itself into a work of art. This means that image descriptions are easy to create even for non-writers.

As a final note, image descriptions are always separated from the rest of the text with symbols ({}, [], \*\*, (), etc) in order to announce their presence to screen readers.

## Reasons For Image Descriptions

I've encountered four main purposes of image describing.

### Accessibility For Blind And Other Vision-Impaired Internet Users

This is probably the first and most obvious reason to use image descriptions. Without some kind of caption, images are useless to those using screen readers. Colorblind users may also miss nuances to an image. For an idea of how many people that's excluding, check out the World Health Organization's [page on Vision Impairment and Blindness](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs282/en/).

*Accessibility For Internet Users With Slow Connections Or Limited Memory*

Tumblr user trafalgarslaw has an [excellent post](http://trafalgarslaw.tumblr.com/post/23340507654/image-descriptions) on how it's not just ableist (discriminatory against disabled people) to skip image descriptions, but also classist (discriminatory against poorer individuals). In short, not everybody has high speed internet and unlimited computer memory. This means that it's easier to use the internet with mods that block ads and images. So without an image description, pictures are just as hidden to them as to those with screen readers.

I mentioned earlier that including the image description in the HTML wasn't always the best option. This is true for two reasons. First, not all browsers and sites support the same (or any) versions of alternative text, so it's not a consistent method and it may be inaccessible for some users. Secondly, this group of users (those who turn off image viewing but are not using screen readers) would have to hunt through the HTML to find the description of an image that they may not have any way of knowing is there. It's not really a workable solution.

### Calling Attention To Important Aspects Of The Picture

This is more relevant for images with some kind of point, like a political cartoon or gag comic. Particularly if the image itself is somewhat busy, a well-worded image description can help users focus on the main point. The first point of this ~~Writer's Resource Blog post~~ is a good summary. Basically, an image description lets you choose, to some degree, what you want your viewers to focus on.

### Writers Can Practice Descriptive Skills

I wrote in the introduction that there's no requirement to be a writer to write image descriptions. While that's true, it can be a vehicle for writers to practice their descriptive abilities. There are limits to this- as the ~~Dayton Art Institue's Image Descriptions article~~ states, an image description is supposed to be factual rather than evocative like prose. However, image descriptions do require accuracy, a certain level of detail (more on that later), economy of words, and emphasis on relevant points. These are good skills for any writer to learn, practice, and become proficient at.

## The Two Types Of Image Description

There are two main categories of image description. For the purposes of this article, I've decided to classify them as sparse and lush.

### Sparse

Sparse image descriptions are best suited for images presented with a particular focus in mind. They contain basic information on what's in the picture and call attention to the important aspects of it without detailing everything. This means that the same image might be described very differently depending on what its message is. For example, an image of a fashion photo shoot used in an article about clothing will likely be accompanied by a description of what the model is wearing. However, if that same image is used in an article on beauty standards in the fashion industry, the image description will likely emphasize the features of the model, and whether or not there's been obvious photoshopping.

The pros of sparse image descriptions are that they're shorter to write, get straight to the point, and don't clutter that point with unimportant details. The cons are that they can remove reader autonomy (letting the reader decide what they think is important about the image) and are inappropriate for images that are just meant as visual art.

### Lush

By contrast, lush image descriptions are for when you want to describe everything. They're the best when presenting visual art without trying to point out anything in particular to your reader, or when you want the reader to decide what's important. Bottom line, describe everything you notice and can stand to write (and think your audience can stand to read).

The pros of lush image descriptions are that they're detailed and give everyone the exact picture. If you're a writer trying to practice description, they can additionally help convey the visual aesthetic by being pleasingly worded as well. The cons are obvious, though- they take longer to write and if you overdo it they can be confusing and overwhelming. The other downside worth noting is author bias. If you want to describe everything, you have to describe everything equally. Your audience will notice if you describe an able-bodied woman as a 'woman' and a disabled woman as a 'disabled woman.' Plus, on the axis of race, it's easy to get it wrong, as described in [this post](http://sherlocksflataffect.tumblr.com/post/22179788942/how-to-write-image-descriptions) by tumblr user sherlocksflataffect. Unless it's relevant to the point of the picture or you know for certain, it's generally a good idea to not describe race at all.

## Examples

I'll round off this article with examples of both types of image description and a bonus overdone image description by SotD. Here's the image:



{Sparse image description: a zoomed-in and reversed image of one part of a United States dollar bill. The head of the eagle is visible. Above it are several stars. Part of the E Pluribus Unum banner held in the eagle's beak is visible.}

{Lush image description: a zoomed-in and reversed image of one part of a United States dollar bill. It is a very light faded green-gray with black ink. The head of the eagle is visible but the image cuts off just under the beak. The eagle's eye is intently focused. Above the eagle is a cloud. Inside the cloud are three rows of stars, with the topmost containing three stars, the next containing four stars, and the last only having one star. The light of the stars is denoted by several lines radiating out from them. Part of the E Pluribus Unum banner held in the eagle's beak is visible.}

{Overdone image description by SotD: A rectangular picture most blurry which has the appearance of that which might be seen on the US's national currency, except that it appears to have been reversed. The top of the image is decorated with a cloudlike structure, though so circular is it that it might be mistaken for flower petals. Within this circle are lines and dots which stretch outward, as if to symbolize light. Within this are horizontal lines meant to symbolize darkness. In this darkness, is a row of three, then four, then one five pointed stars. Outside this circle of clouds, a pattern most like a shingled roof dominates the image. Peeking its head out from the bottom of the image is an eagle which holds a sort of ribbon in its beak. It may be assumed that this ribbon connects to the one throughout the image, upon which is printed, though not all of it is shown, "E. Pluribus Unum."}

Regarding the third, I think it's clear why image description writers should be careful... although I doubt it's possible to match SotD's abilities of purple prose by accident.

## Conclusion

Image descriptions are easy to write and invaluable to add. They'll increase your accessibility, audience, and clarity. All you have to do is figure out which style works for the project at hand, and you're set- everybody wins.

If anyone thinks of something I missed, please send me feedback and I'll try to accommodate you.

# Additional Notes From Samra:

With alternate text, you often are the one responsible for deciding what is important in an image and what is not. Minor details of a photo or flyer may contribute to the overall meaning of a photo, even if they are not something that would stand out to you typically. For example, if you are creating alternate text for a flyer about an event related to race or gender, it may be relevant to describe the speakers’ identities in the photo, as it will help attendees understand more about the identities from which speakers gain their experience. Understanding people’s identities but not assuming them is key. For example, if you do not know someone’s gender identity, you may describe someone with long hair and makeup instead of assuming they identify as a woman. An example of when physical descriptors may be important can be found below.

[image description: left side of image picture of book with yellow, green, and blue cover and text reading “Disability in Higher Education: A Social Justice Approach”. On right picture of authors, four white females with varying shades of brown hair all wearing glasses.]

This screenshot is intended to show how people's identities play a role in the content about which they speak.

left side of image picture of book with yellow, green, and blue cover and text reading “Disability in Higher Education: A Social Justice Approach”.  On right picture of authors, four white females with varying shades of brown hair all wearing glasses.