Transcript for Accessibility Bites: Image Descriptions (October 26, 2023)
BCcampus event hosted October 26, 2023
Host and facilitator: Josie Gray

JOSIE GRAY:
Hello, everyone. Thank you so much for joining us for the second topic in the Accessibility Bites series. Before I get started, I want to highlight that you can download the slides for this session from bit.ly/accessbites, and my colleague is going to put that into the chat, so you can click that link if you want to be able to open up the slides on your own computer or come back to them later. The slides are accessible, and they also, the PowerPoint version of the slides includes my speaking notes. Sometimes that can be helpful for people to follow along with the speaking notes as we go through. You'll also see in that folder, slides from the previous Accessibility Bites session there as well.

I am grateful to be joining you all today from Moh'kins'tsi, now known as the city of Calgary. The land I live on is part of Treaty 7, which includes the Blackfoot Confederacy, (the Siksika, the Piikani, and Kainai Nations) as well as the Tsuut'ina Nation and the Stoney Nakoda, which includes the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley Nations. It is very wintery here, we got a bunch of snow over the last few days. It feels like we're fully into winter, and I know parts of B.C. had some snow over the last few days as well. I hope you are all staying warm and cozy and really grateful for you all to be joining us today. My name is Josie Gray and I use she/her pronouns. For anyone who can't see me, I'm a white woman in my late 20s with blond hair glasses and a septum piercing. I work for BCcampus, and I have been working in digital accessibility in education for seven years. I have a masters of design in inclusive design.

The things I'll be sharing throughout this whole series come from my experience in making educational materials more accessible to disabled students. However, it's important to recognize that I am not a disabled person. And also that disability is a huge category and there's a huge amount of diversity, even among people with similar disabilities. I'm starting off saying this because I want to be clear that I don't know everything about what it is to make something accessible to all people. What may work for one person, may not work for another. I really want to encourage everyone to dig into all of the topics we're going to cover through the series and then seek out further learning, especially from people with lift experience. Welcome to the second session of the Accessibility Bites series. This series is looking at different topics related to accessibility in teaching and learning in post-secondary. Today's topic, we are talking about image descriptions.

Here is what you can expect from the session today. I am going to take 15 minutes to explain some key concepts. Then there will be a 10-minute activity, which will allow you to practise. Then we will use any time we have left for additional discussion and questions.

Before we can talk about image descriptions, we need to understand accessibility for this series. When we're talking about accessibility, we are specifically talking about what is needed to

ensure people with disabilities can have equitable access to education. To make education accessible, we must design and create resources, experiences, tools, and spaces that allow for and support the diversity of our bodies and minds. Rather than focusing on what we think is normal or average, we're going to start from a place where we celebrate the presence of diversity and work to build in flexibility and choice so people can access their education in ways that work for them. Although accessibility can benefit everyone, the needs of disabled people are the priority and focus for accessibility work.

Today's topic is all about image descriptions. An image description is a verbal or written description of an image for someone who can't see it.

Who are image descriptions for? Image descriptions are most commonly used by people who have a disability that affects their vision. For example, someone who is blind. They may also be used by someone with a brain injury that makes it hard for them to look at a computer screen. Or someone with a cognitive disability who appreciates a written explanation of what's going on in the image. Image descriptions can also be helpful for someone with a poor internet connection that causes images not to load.

Image descriptions are important because images have a huge explanatory power. Images can provide context, represent spatial concepts, show relationships, and provide examples in very small spaces. In education, images are often crucial parts of course materials. Image descriptions ensure that important information that is being conveyed visually is accessible for all students from the very beginning. This is made possible when course materials are provided in digital accessible formats Students can use assistive technologies called screen readers to access these digital materials. And a screen reader will allow them to navigate digital interfaces like computers and phones. And a screen reader will read out the content on the page and allow them to navigate it. If an image has a description, if an image has an image description, the screen reader will read out that description. Or if the images on the page aren't loading, the image description will display instead.

Where would you use an image description? Image descriptions can be used anywhere digital images are used, so that includes websites, social media, course materials, and ebooks. They can be added to content created in all sorts of digital platforms, including Pressbooks, Microsoft Word, Google Docs, PowerPoint, WordPress, etc. Generally, any content creation tool that you're using on your computer, you should be able to add image descriptions to those images.

Where do image descriptions go? The most common place is in the alternative text of an image, and I will explain more about what that means on the next slide. Image descriptions can also go in the text surrounding the image, like in a caption field. If an image is really complex and needs a long description, which is generally a description that is multiple sentences. A description can also be added to a long description section where people who need it can navigate to. You can set up links where they can go back and forth between the image and the description.

What is alternative text also known as alt text? This is a type of written image description that is added to the HTML of a digital image. That means that the alt text will not appear visually in the resource, but it can be accessed by assistive technology like a screen reader. The example on the screen shows a screenshot from a platform called Pressbooks. What we're looking at here is the Image Details page for an image. It has an alternative text field, and the text inside that field reads, "An empty highway surrounded by trees and snow-capped mountains disappears into the distance." Then underneath, there's a Caption field that reads, "Highway 16 - Terrace to Prince Rupert." The text added to the alternative text box will not display visually in the resource, but it can be accessed by a screen reader. This example also shows us the difference between alternative text and a caption. The alternative text is telling us what is visually shown in the picture. Then the caption is giving us additional information and context.

To illustrate this example, I have an image on the screen here that is covered. You can't see it right now. All that we can see is the figure caption which reads, "Figure 1,.The numbered treaties." I'm curious how many of you think you could guess what this image is based on the caption alone. If you want to, you can put your answer in the chat. I won't actually call on you, but I am curious to see if people think they could guess the image based on this caption or not. Someone has a guess. There's also an image attribution underneath that gives a bit more information. People are guessing a map, photo of treaties written in script, map of numbered treaties. Very good guesses. Map of Canada showing numbered treaties. Yes, I'm going to advance one.

Here is a sample image description that I've created for the image that is still covered up. It reads, "A map of Canada showing the land covered by each of the 11 numbered treaties and the dates they were signed." That's giving us a bit more information about what this picture actually is.

Here is the actual image. Without that image description, a student who relies on image descriptions would be left to guess the content of the image. Some of you thought you could guess and you came pretty close, but a lot of information is missing without that additional context. I'm sure for other people they might not have any idea what this image was actually, so just illustrating how image descriptions work and their purpose.

Let's move on to how to go about describing an image. The first thing to figure out is if the image needs a description in the first place. To do that, we need to make a distinction between decorative images and functional images. Decorative images are images that are primarily used for design and do not convey content. Or they convey content that is already described in the surrounding text. For these types of images, they don't need text descriptions. Functional images are images that convey important non-text content. For functional images, you have to consider what information would be lost if those images weren't available. That information needs to be provided in a text format.

Here is an example of a decorative image that appears beside a question in a math textbook. The text reads, "A bag of potato chips weighs 48 grams, How many milligrams is that?" Then beside that, there is an image of an open bag of chips. The image of the bag of chips helps break up the text and make it more engaging, but it is more decorative than functional. No information would be lost if that image was deleted. In this case, it wouldn't need a text description.

In contrast, here is a line graph that shows a close correlation between the divorce rate in Maine and the per capita consumption of margarine between 2000 and 2009. It was taken from a sociology textbook, where it was included to demonstrate that correlation does not equal causation. If this image were not included, the example would be lost and the point would be less effective. As such, this is an example where the image does need a text description.

So we determined that an image does need a description, so what about it do you describe? How do you go about actually describing it? A helpful framework is Object-Action-Context, which was developed by Alex Chen. In Object-Action-Context, the object is the main focus of the image. The action describes what is happening, usually what the object is doing. And then context describes the surrounding environment. This framework can help you structure an image description to ensure the most important information comes first, followed by the details. If we go back to the line graph example, the object is a line graph. The action shows a close correlation between the divorce rate in Maine and the per capita consumption of margarine between 2000 and 2009. Then the context could be, "The lines fall at the same rate from 2000 to 2005 and then there is a slight rise before it levels off again." So that shows you how that framework could be applied.

I see a question about logos. Do logos tend to be decorative? My answer to that is, it depends on the context. For the most part, for example, if you were to have a one-pager document with the organization's logo in the corner. In that context, I would probably have an alt text for that logo. That's just the name of the organization logo, something like that. There might be cases where it would be appropriate to provide a more visual description of what the logo actually is. Maybe on your company website, that might be an appropriate place for that, more of a visual description. The other context where logos are used in websites is when they're in the top left and they act like a home button. In those cases, a proper image description would be home because clicking that image takes you back to the home page. It does vary depending on context, but generally it would need some type of description.

When describing images, here are six things to keep in mind. And these principles were developed by the Diagram Center. The first is context. Why is the image there? What's its significance in the context it is appearing in? Second is audience. Who is accessing this image? What information are they expected to take away from this image? For example, a description for first-year students might be less detailed than a description for graduate students. That's something to consider. The third is concise. Keep it short. Only include information that is relevant depending on the context and information that would be lost if that image wasn't

provided. Also with concise, recognizing that people have short attention spans, and they want to get to the most important information first, that's something to keep in mind. The fourth is objectivity. Objectivity can be tricky, and there are contexts where less objective descriptions are appropriate. But overall, avoid putting your own judgments into the image description and only describe what is visually showing in the image. If you find that you're adding additional context to the description, that's probably information that should be added to the caption or the surrounding text, so everyone can access that information. Then fifth, when structuring your image description, especially for a complex image, start with a general overview, then get more specific with the details that will make your description easier to understand because it helps build a mental model of what's going on in the image. Then finally, consider your tone and language. Your tone when describing a personal image for social media will likely be different than when describing an image in a textbook. In addition, use language that will be accessible to your audience. That covers the content I have to share at this moment.

I'd like to move into an activity. I have a picture up on the screen. I'd like you all to take about a minute and write down things that you see in this picture, aim to make note of five to 10 things. You can either write this down on a piece of paper or your own notebook. If you're comfortable, you're more than welcome to share those things in the chat because then we can see the different languages that people are using, the different words that people are using, and the different things that different people are noticing. Because it's often useful to see the different things people notice. Take about a minute to write five to 10 things down that you see in this image.

Hey, thank you everyone for sharing. I see mathematics lecture auditorium, classroom, engaged students, students seated in a semicircle around the speaker. Speaker writing mathematical equations. Someone else has noted a lecture classroom from an elevated student perspective. We're being told the perspective that the image is showing us. Multiple levels of desks, overhead screen with slides. Some people are giving approximate numbers of students, about 15, about 20 students. You can see in the chat here lots of different details that people are noticing. Generally people are talking about some lecture hall with students, an instructor at the front. Doing this activity is interesting because it's recognizing that when writing image descriptions, all image descriptions are going to be a little bit different. And that's okay. And that's a normal part of writing image descriptions. There's never one correct answer for an image description because people will notice different things. They're bringing their own perspectives. Their own perspectives, and their own details of what they're noticing. Thank you for that. Okay, now, and I know some of you have already started to do this based on your responses. But if you haven't already, take the words that you've noticed and try to write an image description for this image. When you're writing your image description, remember those six principles that I talked about. Context, audience, concise, objective, general to specific, tone and language. I will say that in this example, I haven't given you any context, so you're not going to be able to make a decision based on that. But for the other five things, try to consider that while you write your description. And feel free to share those in the chat as well if you're comfortable.

Someone has asked a question, "Is it important to state the type of image, for example a photo?" That's a great question. Generally, if it's a photograph, that's not information you would provide. The way that screen readers work when they come across the presence of an image, they will tell the person using the screen reader that there's an image here, screen reader will say image and then read out the description. Often saying "a photo of" or "an image of" is redundant. However, depending on the type of image, it might be appropriate. Maybe there's an infographic that you're describing. It might be appropriate to say, "An infographic blah, blah blah." Or maybe if it's like a portrait of a person, it might be "A portrait of name of person, blah, blah, blah." It does depend on the type of image. Generally, if it's a photograph, that's not information you need to include. I'm seeing some descriptions come in. Yeah, exactly. A watercolor painting, a gray scale sketch. Those are important details that would be important to include in your image description. Yes, but in this case, we're just looking at a photograph. I wouldn't include that. Great questions.

I'm seeing some image descriptions come in. These are excellent. "An instructor at front of room of students at tiered arrangement of desks. A screen at the front of the room displays mathematical formulas." Excellent. "A classroom with students sitting at semicircular tiered tables and instructor stands in front of a wall screen with mathematical formula." Absolutely. "People sitting at desks in a tiered lecture hall facing person in front of room, in front of projected screen displaying mathematic equations." We can see a lot of commonalities across these descriptions and none of them are more right or more wrong. It's just showing different approaches that you can take with these descriptions.

Okay, here is a description that I've written for this image. It reads, "A college math classroom. Students sit in 4 rows of tiered desks. An instructor stands in front of a projector." Again, mine is a little bit different than other peoples, but it doesn't mean it's more right or more wrong. As one of the principles that we talked about was conciseness, often it's a good practice to take a first draft at an image description and then see how you could make it shorter. See where you could cut words. See where you could be more succinct and try to reduce the word count where possible. Okay. I see a hand up, please go ahead.

NICOLE: Hi.
My name is Nicole. I'm an editor at Northwest College in Edmonton. I'm also a technical writer. A general description for a photograph like this works really well, it's fine. But going back to the map of the treaty territories, the alt text was very general, but didn't actually give any information about the image. That puts people who can't actually see the image at a disadvantage. They don't know where the treaty territories are, what the numbers are, or what the dates are. Where do you draw the line between a general description and actually conveying concrete, concrete information about what's on the image?

JOSIE:

That's a really, really good question. It's not always an easy question to answer, but generally when you're trying to decide how much information to include, you really have to pay attention to the context that the image is appearing in. Based on that context, what is the important information? Why is this image being included? Depending on where this image is appearing would dictate how much information you include. Maybe this image is included to show you where those treaties are, in which case your description would be expanded to include a description to list each treaty and describing the geographic area it covers. Maybe the image is being included to show the order that the treaties were signed, in which case you might describe it where you list them by the date and do it that way. Yeah. The description I included was a very general description that didn't get into a lot of the detail. There's a lot of information missing. Describing images, there's always that judgment call. That's why often it's really important when describing images to have the author involved in that process as much as possible. So that they can weigh in on like, okay, I included this image for this reason. I want students to take away this information from this image, or maybe this information isn't totally relevant in this context. Really good question, not an easy one to answer. I would really just go back to that context of looking at the context and trying to figure out what's the important information here based on that context. Does that answer your question?

NICOLE: Yeah, yes.

JOSIE:
Great. Yeah, it's a challenge and it's something that needs practise to develop those skills to identify what's the important information.

I have another question. "For the classroom image, from an equity lens, is there value in mentioning the perceived gender of a person when... the assumed gender due to implicit bias that it might be a man? That is a great question. Just let me navigate back to that picture. Again, it's going to depend on context. Describing people is always tricky and can be quite sensitive. Generally, when describing people, I would encourage... I would make a distinction between a named person and a not named person. What I mean by that is if you have a picture in a textbook where the student is going to know that person's name. Or a picture of a person in a blog article where that person is named, then I would include a description about them. Generally, I would look to how they describe themselves and how they self-identify, so you're not making assumptions based on how they look. Also when describing people, be consistent. Something that sometimes happens is that people of colour will describe their skin colour or their ethnicity. And then white people won't even mention it. When you're describing people, ensuring you're describing characteristics consistently. In the example of where you're trying to highlight gender diversity, if that was part of your purpose in including an image, then absolutely include that type of detail. Also another judgment that you have to make when describing people. It's complicated. Just making sure I'm catching up with the chat. Someone suggested using a table for treaty information. Absolutely. When describing images, you don't have to just use big paragraphs of text. If you're describing the image outside of that alternative

text field, you can use lists, you can use tables to structure that information to make it easier to digest.

"Would it be fair to say that the accuracy of descriptions help people using screen readers discern the accuracy given in image recognition features, which are sometimes inaccurate due to the facts continuing to be developed?" I'm not sure if I understand that question. I'll have to come back to it when I can think about it a bit more.

"For something like a map of numbered treaties, I think some of the information would be better located alongside the map. There's too much data for a short alt text description." Absolutely. When I mentioned earlier that there's a few different places you can describe an image with alt text. Alt text especially is meant to be short. Generally, I tell people 125 characters, so that's a sentence at most. When an image is needing more description than that, the description has to go elsewhere, either surrounding the image or in a long description section. Someone is sharing that,

"Often the tricky part of it is that different people will want different levels of detail from an image." Which is a reality that people have different preferences. It's hard to say more detail is better or less detail is better. Something that is a good practice is to make sure you're starting with that really important information first before you provide more of those details, so people leave the description when they want to, but at least they're getting that most important information first. Absolutely.

Okay, I see we're getting we're at the half hour. Thank you so much everyone for your engagement and these wonderful questions. I have links to more resources in the slides, like for more complex images, practise tools that you can use. If you can download the slides, you can access and click all of the links that I have there. We also have additional Accessibility Bites sessions coming up. They're hosted on the last Thursday of each month, and you can register for more of those at bccampus.ca/events. We also have a short survey that my colleague has put into the chat. Really appreciate any feedback that you have for how we can improve these and your experience in them. If you have time and interest to fill out the survey, that would be greatly appreciated. And yes, recommendations for all text is 125 characters. Much less than 125 words, but characters. Yeah. Thank you so much, everyone. I really appreciate your time and your engagement today.