

Describing Graphic Files for Students with Visual Impairments

- ☐ Graphic files are very commonly used in online distance education, whether as clip art in a Microsoft Word document, a chart in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, or as an illustration in an HTML document. Providing a text alternative for these graphic files provides students with visual impairments with an opportunity to have the same level of information as other students accessing these files.
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- ☐ However, in preparing files with graphical information, instructors should strive to provide the appropriate amount of alternative information to accommodate students with disabilities. Providing too much information can cause a student to bog down in unnecessary details. Providing too little information can cause a student to miss important details. The goal should be to provide descriptions that are short, to the point, but that convey the same information that a student without a disability would have.
- ☐ Instructors can also choose to provide both short and long descriptions of graphic images. Long description links can be used in HTML files to provide information about complex images.

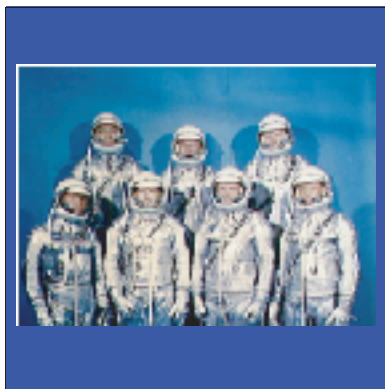
Provide Brief Descriptions of Decorative Images

- ☐ Often, images are used not because they convey information but because they serve a decorative purpose. The image in this section is a simple abstract design, with a yellow line, a red square, and a blue circle on a black background.
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- ☐ However, because this image conveys no information, an instructor could simply label this image as an "abstract design." There would generally be no need to provide more information than a short description. An overly long or detailed description would merely clutter the file with excess data. However, if the design were being discussed in some depth, in an art appreciation class or a geometry lecture, a longer description would be warranted.



Make Descriptions Concise, But Useful

- ☐ Generally, the shorter the description, the more helpful it will be for a student with a visual impairment. Students with visual impairments may have to spend more time than other students going over data; providing short – but useful – descriptions of images helps manage the level of information they have to assess.
- ☐ For example, these are some possible descriptions for one image, a group portrait of the original seven Mercury astronauts:



- Σ Astronauts
- Σ Mercury Astronauts
- Σ "Original Seven" Mercury Astronauts in silver spacesuits
- Σ Mercury Astronaut program group portrait
- Σ Front row, left to right, are Walter M. Schirra, Jr., Donald K. Slayton, John H. Glenn, Jr., and M. Scott Carpenter. Back row, left to right, are Alan B. Shepard, Jr., Virgil I. Grissom and L. Gordon Cooper.

Option 1 is the most concise and describes the picture adequately. Option 2 is almost as concise, and should be used if there are multiple pictures of astronauts presented (for example, Gemini astronauts, or Apollo astronauts). Option 3 provides some extraneous information that may or may not be needed, such as the color of the astronaut's spacesuits. Option 4 is a little too long. Option 5 contains more information than many students would need, however, it could be helpful as a long description. (Both Options 4 and 5 were derived from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) website where the image appears.)

■ Describing Graphic Files for Students with Visual Impairments - *continued*

■ Inserting Long Descriptions in HTML

□ In HTML files, generally an instructor should keep alternative text associated with images (“alt-tags”) short and concise. Alt-tags should be no longer than 250 characters. However, HTML allows instructors to insert longer descriptions than are available by use of the alt-tag. This is especially useful in dealing with charts, graphs, and other images with complex information.

□ One possible strategy is the use of the “D” link. The “D” link is generally placed right after the image and has a link to a small HTML file that provides a long description.

□ If the image in the example above was placed in an HTML file, the “D” link would be placed right after the image tag, as in this example:

□ □ □ `
<a href="longdescription.html" title="long
description">D`

□ The presence of the capital letter “D” next to the image alerts a user with a disability that selecting the link will lead to a longer description of the image than is present in the alt-tag. The instructor then would have to set up a small HTML file named “longdescription.html” that had a text-only version of the long description.