Image Accessibility on the TMP

A Guide to Writing Image Descriptions, Alt-text, and Image Titles

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Summary of version changes

v1.0. First publication of this report on our website. November 2023.
v1.1. Adjustments for PDF layout. February 24, 2024.
v1.2. Name updates. June 1, 2024.

TRANSGENDER MEDIA PORTAL

Getting started

Why the need for this guide?

TML Handbook states that our team is committed to disability justice. This means making all aspects of TMP, including images, accessible to artists, activists, festival programmers, researchers, instructors, community members, and the general public of all bodyminds.

This includes meeting W3C accessibility standards, although disability justice points out that web accessibility compliance views accessibility as a burden rather than a creative act of care. This guide outlines our approach to image accessibility through this lens of creativity and care.

How did you develop these guidelines?

We developed the following instructions by doing research online and consulting with and listening to disability activists and digital accessibility experts. You can click here to jump to the References and Resources at the end of this document.

We also tested these guidelines on ourselves as a team. This process showed us how describing other people's appearances and identity can be uncomfortable, and encouraged us to recognize this discomfort as an important indicator that something wasn't working, with either our guidelines, or our own relationship to identity. This brought us to pause, reflect, and discuss as a group and with experts about what needed to change.

Our core values at the TMP shape our approach to image accessibility:

Radical Honesty & Listening means asking for and listening to feedback from Blind and low vision people as we build these guidelines. Please see our References and Resources to view some of the publicly available resources we consulted in the process. It also means being open to listening to ourselves when something doesn't feel right when writing them.

Community-Oriented & BIPOC Trans+ Centred means that including aspects of identity is relevant to making images accessible on our site. This means describing the visualities of race, ethnicity, and Indigeneity in alt-text in a way that reflects the people depicted authentically and centres their own language.

Challenging Hierarchies means paying attention to the unequal distributions of power which shape how people can interact with this site and rethinking how we can challenge these inequalities. It also means challenging what visual aspects of identity are assumed when writing image descriptions and alt-text.

Care Ethics means understanding alt-text as a creative practice of care essential to accessibility, not just a part of accessibility standards compliance, and describing images of people with respect for their identity.

The following instructions offer a guide to making images accessible on the TMP, as informed by these knowledges and values. We are always striving to improve and welcome your feedback. Visit our Contact page to learn about the different ways you can get in touch.

How do you make images accessible on the TMP?

We make images accessible on the TMP through a combination of three techniques:

1. Including **image descriptions**, which are informative descriptions of important visual details posted alongside the image.
2. Writing **alt-text**, which for our purposes is identical to the image description, but also included in the site's code to be read by screen readers.
3. Using **image titles** that succinctly identify the subject of the image in one line.

These techniques make visual information available to Blind and low vision people.

A note on visual subjectivity

What might be considered important in an image differs depending on the image's context, intended purpose, and the person encountering it. Recognizing the subjective quality of image titles, descriptions, and alt-text means it is important to pay attention to the implications of language when using these techniques.

It also means that image accessibility can be a fun and creative practice!

Writing image titles

1. **Be brief**, using only 1 short sentence.

2. **Be informative**, emphasising the unique aspects of the image to differentiate it from other titles quickly. Describe the object, including the action and context of the image only if they can be easily summarised.

   - **Object**: The main focus, usually a person or object.
   - **Action**: What is happening; what the person or object is doing.
   - **Context**: The surrounding environment.

3. **Use names if you know them.**

4. **When describing a film still or poster,** if known, include the country, director's full name, and release year, in parentheses. Avoid using actors' names and instead use the characters' names to refer to them.

Writing image descriptions/alt-text

1. **Be brief.** Aim for 1–3 short sentences in length. Feel free to write in a tense and manner that feels comfortable to you and the context.

2. **Be informative.** Describe the object, action, and context of the image. (Thank you to Alex Chen for this concept.)
   - **Object:** The main focus, usually a person or object.
   - **Action:** What is happening; what the person or object is doing.
   - **Context:** Describe the surrounding environment.

3. **Describe visible identity.**
   - **Visible identity is made up of both identity and appearance.** These should be woven together when possible (i.e., light-skinned [appearance] Pakistani [identity]), but should **only describe the individual's identity in their own terms.**
     - **Identity:** Someone's name, pronouns, and how they describe their visible identity, such as their race/ethnicity, gender presentation, and disability labels. Look to professional bios or social media to see how people describe themselves (details which may also be found in the Portal). **Unless you specifically know how someone identifies, describe their appearance only.**

- ■ **Appearance:** How someone looks, such as their skin tone, clothing and accessories, or access technologies (hearing aids, canes, knee braces, etc.). **If you do not know how someone identifies, describe their appearance to enrich the description.**
  - ○ **When describing real people**, avoid using pronouns if you do not know them. Also avoid gendered ("feminine," "masculine"), exoticizing, medicalized ("living with" a disability), and value-based terms, unless the person uses these terms to describe their own identity. Remember, Blind and low visit people still infer information and making judgements through image descriptions, just as sighted people do with visual appearance. More details on the individual's identity are available in the Portal anyway—so don't feel the need to cram this information into the image description!
  - ○ **When describing fictional characters in film stills and posters**, the actor's identity might not fully align with that of their character. Remember that when describing a *film* still or poster, your goal is to contextualise the film and its characters for users. In general, avoid using the actor's real name or using their identity as a default in these cases. Instead, focus on describing what you know about the character as it relates to the image and the film. You can turn to existing film descriptions and summaries to guide your descriptions if you are unfamiliar with the film.

4. **Transcribe key text**, including its function and interaction with other elements. Avoid quotation marks by indicating it as written text in the description. For example: "Poster that reads…"

5. **Describe stylization** if an image is illustrated, stylized, black and white, or has any other notable graphic elements.

6. **Avoid redundancy**.
   - ○ You do not need to start the description with "an image of." If the image is a specific type of image, however—a selfie, a film poster, or a logo, for example—feel free to include this detail (see "5. Describe stylization" above).
   - ○ In the TMP, no image is "just" decorative. All images or other graphic elements should have some kind of alt-text that describes what purpose they serve. For example, a paragraph divider should read "Paragraph divider." Images or graphics with no purpose should be avoided.

7. **When in doubt, ask for feedback and trust your gut!** This is a subjective task and there are no "right" answers—don't be afraid to show your own personality and style. If you have questions, opt towards using the person's own words. You can also always reach out to someone else on the team for help.

Examples of titles and image descriptions/alt-text

1. Describing a photo of a person.

Title: Jada Gannon-Day Portrait

Image description/alt-text: Jada, a light-brown-skinned Black person with long black hair, smiles in front of a brown wood background. She is wearing a white button-up top, captured from the shoulders-up.

Explanation: Image description provided by person pictured.

Title: Kit Chokly Portrait

Image description/alt-text: Kit, a white masculine person with short, straight, white hair, laughs while sitting cross-legged on a bench. He is dressed in all black with platform boots, a velvet blazer and silver jewellery. In the background is a pastel green and orange gradient.

**Explanation**: Image description provided by person pictured.

Title: Tourmaline on the Beach

Explanation: Short, unique, and to the point. Remember that alt-text will always be encoded into the image for screen readers, and that image descriptions will almost always accompany it to provide greater detail.

Image description/alt-text: Tourmaline, a brown-skinned person with dark, wet, shoulder-length hair, stands in front of a sunset in a pink ruffled dress, her left foot on the beach and right foot slightly lifted. She holds a bouquet of tulips in her left hand, holding up her dress with her right hand.

Explanation: We couldn't find any sources where Tourmaline described her own visible identity. We opted to describe what we saw, recognizing that these terms are always loaded with particular meanings about identity, and used her name and pronouns since they are known.

2. Describing a film poster.
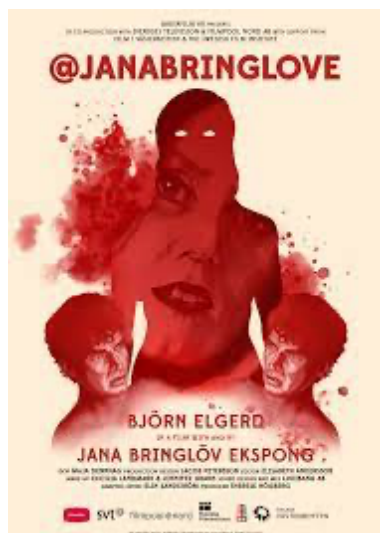
Title: @Janabringlove (Sweden, Jana Bringlöv Ekspong, 2016) Poster

Image description/alt-text: A film poster with a crimson silhouette in the centre, overlayed with a closeup of @janabringlove's face. The silhouette's eyes are the same colour as the cream background, making them stand out menacingly. Blood spatter behind the silhouette connects it to two mirrored portraits of a man with a fearful expression on his face. The title @JANABRINGLOVE is largest and anchored at the top of the poster while actor names Björn Elgerd and Jana Bringlöv Ekspong are smaller and at the bottom.

Explanation: The alt-text strives to convey the graphic horror aesthetic of the poster. It mentions relevant names and/or genders of the characters knowable to the film's

viewers without giving away the plot. It also copies the primary text of the poster, which would otherwise not be legible to a screen reader. If this poster was being viewed at a larger size, it might be appropriate to include the smaller text at the bottom as well, although details on production and distribution would also be available in the Portal itself.

3. Describing a film still.

Title: Still from Ponyboi (US, River Gallo, 2019), Ponyboi and Bruce lie on the beach

Explanation: Briefly describing the image type (film still) with relevant details about the film and a very short description of the image to set it apart from other titles.

Image description/alt-text: A film still from Ponyboi. Ponyboi, a brown-skinned, intersex transfeminine person, is lying on a sandy beach on his stomach, chin resting in one hand and feet kicking in the air. He is smiling dreamily at Bruce, a cowboy in white seated in front of Ponyboi playing guitar. Waves are crashing against the shore in the background.

Explanation: Ponyboi's intersex identity is critical to this film and his pronouns are included in the film's synopsis. The image description also tries to capture the overall dreamy feeling of the scene.

4. Describing a logo.

Title: Transgender Media Portal Logo

Image description/alt-text: The logo for the Transgender Media Portal, which features a transgender symbol next to the stacked words "transgender" and "media portal" in a vertical orange-to-pink gradient.

Explanation: Like logos themselves, a short, clear description is best for logo image descriptions.

Title: quiplash logo

Image description/alt-text: quiplash queer crip access arts, a bright yellow rectangle with black writing.

Explanation: A short, clear description provided by quiplash themselves.

5. Describing graphic elements.

Title: Paragraph divider.

Image description: Ornate paragraph divider.

Explanation: This separator provides no useful visual information other than its use to divide paragraphs. Decorative images like these should generally be avoided on the TMP.

References and resources

Special thank you to [Amelia and Al Lander-Cavallo of Quiplash](#), [Dr. Cynthia Bennet](#), and [Morgan Klaus Scheuerman](#) for meeting with us and sharing your invaluable knowledge on bringing accessibility to digital spaces.

Writing image descriptions and alt-text

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Writing about race

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Writing With Colour (blog). Accessed March 17, 2023. https://writingwithcolor.tumblr.com/

Other resources about Blind and low vision accessibility

Quiplash. Accessed March 17, 2023. https://www.quiplash.co.uk/

Reid, Thomas. Reid My Mind (podcast). Accessed March 17, 2023.
    http://reidmymind.com