



Victorian Government Website Management Framework

Accessibility: Understanding the WCAG — text alternatives

Guideline

All Victorian Government websites must conform to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) by 2012/14. This Victorian Government guideline explains the intent and practical implementation of Guideline 1.1: text alternatives for non-text content.

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Overview

The Victorian Government has a responsibility to provide information and services to all. Websites afford a useful tool for this purpose, but must be made accessible if they are to reach all members of the public. One way websites can ensure adequate accessibility is to conform to the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#) (WCAG) – a series of guidelines produced by the open standards organisation, the [World Wide Web Consortium](#) (W3C).

The implementation of the WCAG is prescribed by the whole of Government [web accessibility standard \(WEB/STD/05\)](#). The standard requires phased conformance to [version 2.0 of the guidelines](#) (WCAG 2.0), where Level A conformance is required by end of 2012 and Level AA by the end of 2014.

Audience

This guideline is for voluntary use by any agency within the Victorian Government, in particular all departments, the four inner budget agencies (Environment Protection Authority, State Revenue Office, VicRoads and Victoria Police) and CenITex. It may be relevant to website managers, content creators and managers, and/or anyone responsible for the management of a website.

Context

The WCAG comprises 12 unique guidelines, each of which must be addressed for complete conformance. This Victorian Government guideline examines Guideline 1.1, which relates to text alternatives for non-text content.

This guideline is of particular importance because the subject matter remains relevant throughout the life cycle of a website. It is particularly important throughout the content creation and maintenance phases.

References

- Standard: Whole of Victorian Government accessibility standard (WEB/STD/05), www.enterprisesolutions.vic.gov.au/business-systems/online-and-mobile/
- External reference: [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, Guideline 1.1](#), W3C
- External reference: [How to Meet Success Criterion 1.1.1](#), W3C
- External reference: [Understanding Success Criterion 1.1.1](#), W3C
- External reference: [Appropriate Use of Alternative Text](#), WebAim
- External reference: [Creating accessible images](#), WebAim
- External reference: [Writing effective ALT text for images](#), Webcredible
- External reference: [4 Syllables](#), 4 Syllables



Implementing text alternatives for non-text content

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines — Guideline 1.1

Guideline 1.1 of the WCAG states:

Provide text alternatives for any non-text content so that it can be changed into other forms people need, such as large print, braille, speech, symbols or simpler language.

Success Criterion 1.1.1 stipulates:

1.1.1 Non-text Content: All non-text content that is presented to the user has a text alternative that serves the equivalent purpose, except for the situations listed below. (Level A)

- **Controls, Input:** If non-text content is a control or accepts user input, then it has a name that describes its purpose. (Refer to Guideline 4.1 for additional requirements for controls and content that accepts user input.)
- **Time-Based Media:** If non-text content is time-based media, then text alternatives at least provide descriptive identification of the non-text content. (Refer to Guideline 1.2 for additional requirements for media.)
- **Test:** If non-text content is a test or exercise that would be invalid if presented in text, then text alternatives at least provide descriptive identification of the non-text content.
- **Sensory:** If non-text content is primarily intended to create a specific sensory experience, then text alternatives at least provide descriptive identification of the non-text content.
- **CAPTCHA:** If the purpose of non-text content is to confirm that content is being accessed by a person rather than a computer, then text alternatives that identify and describe the purpose of the non-text content are provided, and alternative forms of CAPTCHA using output modes for different types of sensory perception are provided to accommodate different disabilities.
- **Decoration, Formatting, Invisible:** If non-text content is pure decoration, is used only for visual formatting, or is not presented to users, then it is implemented in a way that it can be ignored by assistive technology.

Relationship to the Victorian Government web accessibility standard

The implementation of text alternatives for all non-text content is a minimum requirement of the WCAG (i.e. Level A and above) and therefore mandatory under the [Whole of Victorian Government web accessibility standard](#) (WEB/STD/05).



What is non-text content?

Non-text content is any web content that is not pure text, for example images, video and audio. It is particularly worth noting that an image of text is considered non-text content.

What is a text alternative?

A text alternative (commonly referred to as alt text) is simply a textual description of non-text content. For example, in the case of an image, 'A grey dog lying on grass with a ball in its mouth'.

How do I implement text alternatives?

Text alternatives are implemented through the HTML or XHTML code of a web page. Specifically, the appropriate text alternative is entered into the alt attribute of the tag relating to the non-text content. For example a simple XHTML implementation for an image might appear in the code as:

```

```

Why text alternatives?

Assistive technologies (AT) are able to interpret text alternatives and provide a preferred, comprehensible response back to the user, for example a screen reader could play synthesised speech of the text alternative for a visually impaired individual.

General rules for text alternatives

1. Text alternatives should explain or describe the meaning of the non-text content. In writing text alternatives, consider the role of the non-text content and its context.¹
2. Text alternatives should not include words identifying the content type or format (e.g. 'A photograph of a grey dog lying on the grass with a ball in its mouth').
3. Text alternatives should be succinct and no longer than 200 characters.
4. If images require a longer description (e.g. a chart) further information can be provided in the textual content surrounding the non-text content, or through links to further information.² In these instances, the text alternative should indicate that a long description is available.

Null text alternatives

In some instances, text alternatives are not required for non-text content. This is particularly true with redundant images, transparent and spacer images, image maps and decorative images. In these instances the alt attribute should be set to null, for example:

```

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In addition, the title attribute should be either absent or empty,³ for example:

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Redundant images

Images that provide emphasis or clarification for nearby textual content do not generally require text alternatives. The image below contains two examples of redundant images.

¹ See [Text alternatives for your images: some examples](#), 4 Syllables.

² See [Creating accessible images](#), WebAim.

³ See [Using null alt text and no title attribute on img elements for images that AT should ignore](#), W3C.



Dairy Mega Evaluation

Evaluation report on the impacts of innovation on the dairy industry over the last 30 years.



Fire, flood and other emergencies

Find out how DPI helps in emergency situations.

Below are the same examples with the images turned off (i.e. as AT would read the page).

Photograph of dairy cattle grazing in a field [Dairy Mega Evaluation](#)
Evaluation report on the impacts of innovation on the dairy industry over the last 30 years.

[Fire, flood and other emergencies](#)
Find out how DPI helps in emergency situations.

Note that the first example has a text alternative for the image but it does little to enhance the corresponding textual content⁴. The second example shows the correct approach, using a null text alternative for the image and leaving the corresponding textual content to inform the user.

When implementing redundant images alongside textual links (as with the examples above), ensure the image is also hyperlinked (to the same destination as the textual link).

Transparent images and spacer images

Transparent images and spacer images are structural elements used to implement particular designs within web pages.⁵ They are intended to be invisible to users and, consequently, null text alternatives should be implemented wherever they are deployed.

Image maps

Image maps comprise an image and a number of hyperlinks that overlay that image. Typically the image will provide visual context as to where each of the hyperlinks will take the user.

Text alternatives must be used for each of the hyperlinks on the image map. A text alternative should also be implemented for the underlying image where it conveys a meaning to the user.

In the following image map, because the image (of Victoria) conveys meaning it should have an appropriate text alternative (e.g. *Map of Victoria sectioned into regions*). The coloured regions of Victoria also represent unique hyperlinks, each of which should have an appropriate text alternative (e.g. *South-west region*).

⁴ The example also contains a literal interpretation of the image ('Photograph of dairy cattle...') which contravenes one of the general rules for text alternatives (see above *General rules for text alternatives*).

⁵ The introduction of CSS has largely eliminated the need for these types of images. See www.w3.org/Style/CSS/.



In the next image map, below, the underlying image does not convey meaning and therefore does not require a text alternative. However, each of the other hyperlinks (associated with the individual menu items) should have text alternatives (e.g. *Projects & initiatives*).⁶



Decorative images

Text alternatives are not required for images that are used as part of the visual template of the particular page or the website generally. However, text-based images should be used with caution. As a general rule, text is decorative only if the word(s) can be rearranged or substituted without effect (e.g. the background image of a page design contains a series of generic words in an unobtrusive colour).

Generic images

A subclass of decorative images is those images which are used within content areas to simply fill space or provide additional visual impact within a given page. As a general rule, these images should be used sparingly and only with a clear purpose in mind. Moreover, if they have any relationship to the surrounding textual content they should have text alternatives, otherwise they should be implemented with null text alternatives.

Further information

For further information regarding this standard, please enterprisesolutions@dpc.vic.gov.au.

⁶ This guideline acknowledges that image-based navigation is poor practice and should be avoided where possible.



Glossary

Term	Meaning
CAPTCHA	Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart (CAPTCHA). As the name suggests, a CAPTCHA is used to ensure that only human users are interacting with a given web resource, typically a form. A CAPTCHA will generally display an image of numbers, character and/or symbols which the user must successfully enter into an adjacent field to be able to submit the form.
Time-based media	Time-based media is content that is displayed over a duration, e.g. video, audio, slide shows.

Version history

Version	Date	Doc ref	Details
1.0	01 June 2012	D12/12271	First published version

