

Alt Text Guidelines¹

About alt text

What is alt text?

“Alt text” stands for “alternative text” and refers to textual descriptions of images that people with visual impairment or reading disability might not be able to perceive (well) otherwise. Alt texts are read aloud by screen readers; they are also displayed when images fail to load (for example when the user has a poor internet connection).

Is alt text legally required?

Alt texts are a fundamental tool to ensure the accessibility of online publications. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Title II requires that websites and digital materials must be accessible to individuals with visual and cognitive impairments, as of April 2026. The Department of Justice (DOJ) enforces Title II web compliance using the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2 Level AA, which requires provides an equivalent text description for non-text content.

Why is alt text important, beyond legal compliance?

Alt texts enable more people to read a book and interact with its content in a meaningful way. They allow researchers with different access needs – whether permanently or temporarily – to participate in the academic conversation, consume content without any loss of information, and possibly use and build on that content in their own academic work.

Why is the author required to provide alt texts? Can't the publisher take care of it?

Authors know most precisely why images are included in their publication and what information they are meant to convey. An alt text should not describe a given image in every detail, but rather sum up its key aspects – those that are relevant to the argument and not yet included in the main text or caption. In this sense, alt texts should be understood as another important content element of academic publications – just like abstracts, keywords, headings, or subheadings.

Writing Alt Text

In the main text, describe images and visual material and formulate explicitly any conclusion that sighted readers would be expected to draw from it. The more information in the main text, the less alt-text required. Never rely exclusively on figures to convey key information!

- Briefly describe what the image shows, **focusing on what is directly relevant** to understanding the argument.

¹ These guidelines are adapted from our partner press's DeGruyter's Accessible manuscript preparation guidelines. See <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/publishing/for-authors/book-authors/review-production>.

- Keep it short (**100–150 characters with spaces**). The reason for this is that readers who rely on screen-reading devices must often listen to the entire alt text before they can continue reading: including irrelevant details or repeating information already mentioned in the surrounding text can worsen their reading experience significantly.
- Do not start alt text with “an image of” or “a picture of,” as it is repetitive. Sometimes, it may be important to distinguish between types of images: photograph, painting, woodcut, etc., but use these terms sparingly.
- Do not repeat the caption in the alt text. **Information that is not displayed in the figure itself** (such as author, date, source, bibliographical reference) **doesn’t belong in alt text**.
- Avoid repeating sentences that are already part of the main text. If the figure is so precisely described in the main text and/or caption that any alt text would be repetitive, please use “See caption” or “See main text” in place of it. This is to inform visually impaired readers that the alt text has not been forgotten but deliberately omitted.
- Always use **Unicode characters**. This might be worth double-checking if your alt text includes special characters or symbols.
- Ensure **spelling and punctuation** are correct. Include end punctuation to sentences. Alt text is part of your manuscript and should match its overall quality.

Submitting Alt Text

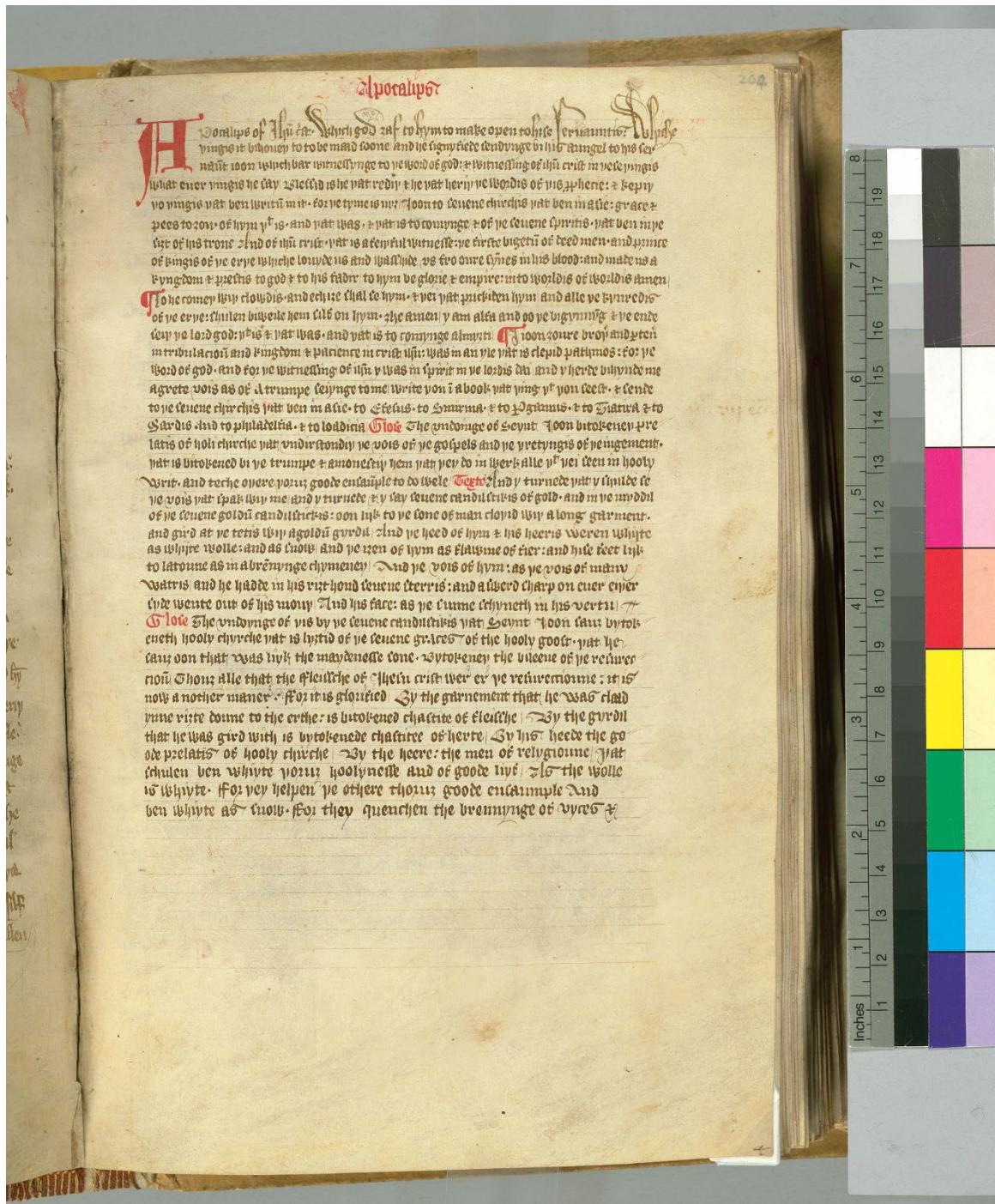
Include alt text for all figures as a section in your cover note. List each figure number, caption, and alt text, clearly labelled.

Fig. 1: Title page of Ludwig Tieck’s *Minnelieder aus dem schwäbischen Zeitalter*, published in 1805 at the Realschulbuchhandlung – the royal bookstore that was to become De Gruyter about a century later. © De Gruyter Book Archive 2017.

Alt text: Title page adorned with two cherubs kissing.

Alt Text examples

Photograph of manuscript page:



Caption: **Figure 1:** MS Plimpton Add. 03, fol. 204r, early fifteenth century, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

Alt text: A manuscript leaf of the first page of the English *Apocalypse*, with some script in red ink.

A woodcut:



Caption: **Figure 2:** fol. 116; A treatise excellent and compendious, shewing and declaring, in maner of tragedye, the falles of sondry most notable princes and princesses with other nobles (London: Richard Tottell, 1554; STC 3177). “The king liggig eaten of wormes.” The Latin lines from Ovid’s *Tristia* (4.8.47–48) translate as “nothing is so high and above danger, that it is not below and subject to God.” (Photo: Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas)

Alt text: A woodcut of three noblemen looking at a crowned man lying prone on raised tomb, his body covered with worms.

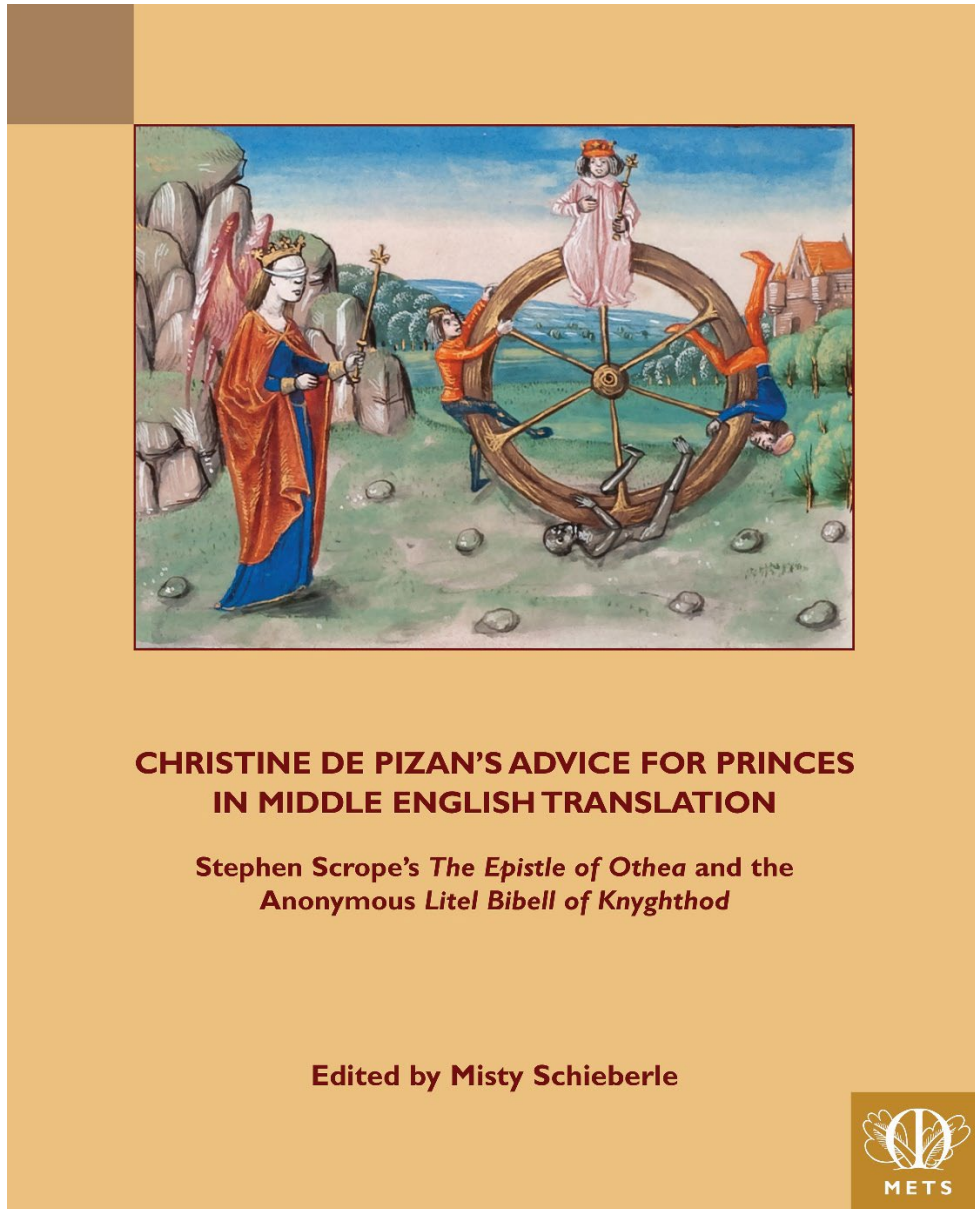
A miniature:



Caption: **Figure 33:** A71 (fol. 136r); King Darius looks on as the lions eat Daniel's accusers.

Alt text: A pride of lions devour several men, while three bearded men, including a crowned one, watch.

A book cover:



Alt text: Centered in the cover is a manuscript image [depicting The Wheel of Fortune. A winged Lady Fortune wears a blindfold, crown, and holds a scepter. To the right is a wooden wheel with a nobleman at the top, a corpse at the bottom, and two men clinging on opposite sides.] Along the cover's bottom is its title and editor. The METS logo in the bottom right corner is a rounded capital M surrounded by two leaves.

Additional Resources

Web Accessibility Initiative Images Tutorial

<https://www.w3.org/WAI/tutorials/images/tips/>

Harvard University Digital Accessibility Services

<https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/describe-content-images>

Section 508, Authoring Meaningful Alternative Text

<https://www.section508.gov/create/alternative-text/>