On Writing Images: A Case Study in Writing Alt Text for Orca Book Publishers

by

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Abstract

Print disabilities are not addressed by the Canadian book market despite initiatives such as Born Accessible and eBooks for Everyone. In response to questions around this systemic privilege built into publishing, certain publishers, such as Orca Book Publishers, have taken strides to make their books more accessible. Orca Book Publishers decided to make their backlist accessible by writing Alternative Text, or Alt Text and creating an in-house style guide that would lay down principles and guidelines for writing Alt Text for their books in the future. While Alt Text does not address all accessibility challenges, it offers valuable opportunities for publishers to contribute to the systemic exclusion of some readers.

As such, this report examines the nature of Alt Text from editorial, economic, managerial, and political perspectives, determining the successes and challenges taken on by Orca Publishers. Orca has made significant strides in accessibility through their adoption of Alt Text.

The experience of Alt Text has not yet been standardized, and this causes variations in experience, which can be studied through the different technologies used to create it, and the recommendations of publishers. In-house style guides that exist, which attempt to systemize the writing of Alt Text, do offer one guiding principle — that the Alt Text bring out themes of the book. This principle and the rules mentioned are then tested against three images from Orca's titles and considered in a reflective process. Alt Text as a feature is crucial to publishing, the same as any other feature — and has great potential in the future of accessibility in publishing.

Keywords: Orca Book Publishers; Alt Text; accessibility; backlist; children's literature; diversity; alternative text; accessible books; accessible eBooks; inclusivity

Acknowledgements

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List of Acronyms

EAL	English as an Additional Language
JAWS	Job Access With Speech
NIH	National Institute of Health
NNELS	National Network for Equitable Library Service
NVDA	Nonvisual Digital Access
SEO	Search Engine Optimization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Education Fund
WCAG	Web Content Accessibility Guidelines
WIPO	World Intellectual Property Organization

Chapter 1.   Accessibility and Publishing

Accessibility in publishing has gained importance in the past decade and has grown to be a major point of consideration for publishers and the publishing community. Today, many Canadian publishing houses like Orca Publishers are taking steps to adopt accessibility into their workflow. This sudden swell of importance has originated from a growing need for accessible book formats. For instance, the Accessible Books Consortium estimates that 10-15% of people currently have some form of print disability.[1] So, ignoring accessibility would risk alienating up to 15% of potential readers.

1.1. Context of Accessibility in Publishing

To understand the place accessibility currently holds and where it is in the book publishing industry, we must first consider the unique challenges accessibility offers, the initiatives that were set up to aid accessible publishing, and the factors that contributed to its sudden rise in popularity in recent times.

1.1.1. A Brief History

Accessibility in Publishing with a Focus on Canadian Markets

Even today, despite the surge of interest and the obvious need, there is still a dearth of accessible books in the publishing industry. According to data presented by The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), "Under 5% of books are made available in accessible formats within the first year of publication, while 33% of children […] with visual impairments are not able to have publications in the format they need."[2] This disparity can be seen through the difficulties in implementation.

The biggest constraint to creating accessible versions of books is the high production costs. Bill Kasdorf's findings reveal that due to the publishing industry's highly competitive world, publishers neglect accessibility because accessible formats do not

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[1]abc, "Accessible Books Consortium (ABC)".

[2] WHO, "Unlocking the Power of Books for People with Disabilities," *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 89, no. 9 (September 1, 2011): 626–27, https://doi.org/10.2471/blt.11.020911.

generate sufficient revenue to offset their costs.[3] As a result, the publishing workflow is not engineered for accessibility.[4]

Outside of publishing houses, there have been several attempts to address this challenge. For instance, work done by the Accessible Books Consortium aims to increase the number of books worldwide in accessible formats, such as braille, audio, e-text, and large print. The ABC has launched many initiatives to answer this call.

One initiative, Born Accessible eBooks, was launched by WIPO at its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. This initiative seeks to make books accessible from conception by proposing techniques to convert books parallelly into an accessible format during production.[5],[6] This offers a technique that can be used by publishers to cut costs, time by, for example, applying tags to each element of the eBooks during production instead of as an additional step post-production. [7] Doing so has the additional benefit of increasing the Search Engine Optimization (SEO) of the eBook as soon as it's published, making it more discoverable.[8] This cost-efficient technique has made over 24000 books accessible.

Another such initiative can be found in the Canadian context. Here, accessible books have been traditionally sourced through third-party organizations such as The National Network of Equitable Library Service (NNELS). NNELS provides accessible versions of books to libraries. These are not available commercially. They work with

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[3] Bill Kasdorf, "Why Accessibility Is Hard and How to Make It Easier: Lessons from Publishers," *Learned Publishing* 31, no. 1 (January 2018): 11–18, https://doi.org/10.1002/leap.1146.

[4] Bill Kasdorf, "Why Accessibility Is Hard and How to Make It Easier: Lessons from Publishers," *Learned Publishing* 31, no. 1 (January 2018): 11–18, https://doi.org/10.1002/leap.1146.

[5] Continual Engine. "'Born Accessible' as a Remediation Solution for Publishing House."

[6] Agata Mrva-Montoya, "Towards 'Born-Accessible' Educational Publishing," *Publishing Research Quarterly*, November 7, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12109-022-09922-0.

[7] Continual Engine, "'Born Accessible' as a Remediation Solution for Publishing Houses," Continual Engine, May 19, 2022, https://www.continualengine.com/blog/born-accessible-as-a-remediation-solution-for-publishing-houses/#:~:text=.

[8] Continual Engine. "'Born Accessible' as a Remediation Solution for Publishing House.".

"international partners, libraries, readers, and publishers to make books in accessible formats available to anyone in Canada who suffers from a print disability."[9]

In tandem with NNELS, another important initiative, "eBooks for everyone," was launched in 2022 by The Literary Press Group. This initiative was made possible by funding from the Canada Book Fund.[10] eBooks for everyone made 600 titles accessible to the visually, and hearing impaired.[11] This is not an exhaustive list but meant to give a general idea of which entities are at play in the realm of accessible publishing.

Together, NNELS and *eBooks for Everyone* improved book accessibility in Canada. However, despite these positive steps, many print disabilities remained unaddressed by these initiatives.

1.2.   Print Disabilities and Accessibility

Different types of print disabilities require different modes of accessibility. The following sections will talk about the different kinds of print disability and the formats of accessible books that have been created to address these varied needs.

1.2.1. Common Print Disabilities

The Canadian Copyright Act defines print disability as "a learning, physical or visual disability that prevents a person from reading conventional print."[12] This definition is broken up into three categories: a difficulty in comprehension, as caused by dyslexia;

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[9] NNELS, "About NNELS," nnels.ca, June 21, 2013, https://nnels.ca/about.

[10] Porter Anderson, "Canada's Literary Press Group: Accessible 'Ebooks for Everyone,'" Publishing Perspectives, August 9, 2022, http://publishingperspectives.com/2022/08/canadas-literary-press-group-accessible-ebooks.

[11] "Promoting Inclusive Education: Accessible Digital Textbooks for All Learners | UNICEF Accessible Textbooks for All," www.accessibletextbooksforall.org, accessed January 3, 2024, https://www.accessibletextbooksforall.org/stories/promoting-inclusive-education-accessible-digital-textbooks-all-learners#:~:text=The%20Accessible%20Digital%20Textbooks%20for%20All%20Initiative%20is.

[12] "What Is a Print Disability? | CELA," celalibrary.ca, accessed September 18, 2023, https://celalibrary.ca/about-us/what-is-a-print-disability.

a difficulty in holding a book, as caused by Parkinson's disease; or a difficulty in seeing the page, such as with blindness.[13]

This division into three categories should make accessible publishing easy to produce. However, print disability is hardly specific or homogenous. It is a host of diverse conditions that need equally diverse book formats to address them. One of the major problems faced by publishers when tackling accessibility is addressing this variation.

Creating each form of an accessible book for readers with varied print disabilities requires different demands on the production cycle for publishers. Historically, there have been only a handful of accessible book formats in publishing due to this lack of understanding. A study of early forms of accessibility will ground our exploration into innovations for visually impaired readers.

1.2.2. Types of Existing Accessible Books

Braille Books

Braille is one of the earliest forms of accessible books and has been around since 1824. An early innovation in the accessibility of print books, Braille is a tactile language system that combines patterns of raised dots. Braille addresses only one kind of accessibility — that related to sight.

There are also many challenges inherent in the making of this type of book. Braille books are bigger and heavier than their regular print counterparts, making them less accessible to those with some physical disabilities. Braille books also need thicker paper to accommodate the raised dots, which leads to higher print costs. The characters printed on the page are comparably bigger, at size thirty-six-point, and reading these books require proficiency in Braille. This is difficult as less than one per cent of visually impaired people can read Braille. Thus, this form of accessible book was not sustainable for production in the long run. As a result, other forms of accessible books were developed.

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[13] CELA, "What Is a Print Disability? | CELA."

Audiobooks

Invented in 1932,[14] audiobooks are books read aloud by a professional reader or by a computer. As such, they can reach readers with motor or visual impairments. They are the most common form of accessible books today, offering an alternative to print books for visually impaired or otherwise disabled readers.

There are many constraints to audiobooks. Although accessible to individuals with a wider range of abilities, a single 300-page audiobook can last up to eighteen hours. Additionally, audiobooks have high production costs, lower demand, offer higher royalties to authors, and are classified as luxury products.[15] This makes audiobooks an unlikely possibility for small and midsize publishers. Some of these issues related to audiobooks are resolved within the format of the eBook.

eBooks

Another type of modern-day accessible book, eBooks are electronic versions of traditional books.[16] eBooks, being digital, are easily portable and are also usable by readers with motor, learning, or print disabilities.

Michael S. Hart, the creator of Project Guttenberg, invented the first eBook ('The American Declaration of Independence') with a Xerox mainframe computer in the University of Illinois research lab.[17] Since then, Project Guttenberg has digitized over

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[14] PBS, "A Short History of the Audiobook, 20 Years after the First Portable Digital Audio Device," PBS NewsHour, November 22, 2017, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/a-short-history-of-the-audiobook-20-years-after-the-first-portable-digital-audio-device#.

[15] Carina Pereira, "Why Are Audiobooks so Expensive?," BOOK RIOT, April 27, 2022, https://bookriot.com/why-are-audiobooks-so-expensive/.

[16] Ebook enhancers, "What Is an EBook and How Does It Work? Devices for Reading Ebooks," accessed February 8, 2024, https://www.ebookenhancers.com/learn/what-is-an-ebook/.

[17] Marie Lebert, "Title: A Short History of EBooks Character Set Encoding: ASCII *** START of THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK a SHORT HISTORY of EBOOKS *** Produced by al Haines," 2009, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/29801/29801-pdf.pdf.

70,000 books,[18] drawing mostly from works in the public domain and using volunteer labour.[19]

Following this success, the website Bibliobytes was created in 1993 to sell free eBooks online. By 1999, Simon & Schuster had created what was then called iBooks, and simultaneously published titles in eBook and print format.

By the end of the decade, eBooks stabilized at 20% of book sales, until Amazon monopolized the market with their introduction of the Kindle, effectively bringing eBooks into the mainstream.[20] This was a huge leap forward in the field of eBook production. The Kindle eBook reader allowed for dyslexia-friendly fonts, increasing font sizes as well as changeable screen background colors to aid readers affected by sharp contrasts. Today, an estimated 1 in 5 to 1 in 3 books sold in Canada are eBooks.[21] The use of eBooks has been further aided by the invention of screen readers.

Screen Readers

Screen readers, according to the American Foundation for the Blind, are software programs that allow visually impaired users to read the text that is displayed on the computer screen, using a speech synthesizer or braille display.22

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[18] Project Guttenberg, "Project Gutenberg," Project Gutenberg, accessed March 9, 2024, https://www.gutenberg.org/#:~:text=Project%20Gutenberg%20is%20a%20library%20of%20over%2070%2C000%20free%20eBooks&text=Thousands%20of%20volunteers%20digitized%20and.

[19] Marie Lebert, "Title: A Short History of EBooks Character Set Encoding: ASCII *** START of THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK a SHORT HISTORY of EBOOKS *** Produced by al Haines," 2009, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/29801/29801-pdf.pdf.

[20] Constance Grady, "The 2010s Were Supposed to Bring the Ebook Revolution. It Never Quite Came." Vox, December 23, 2019, https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/12/23/20991659/ebook-amazon-kindle-ereader-department-of-justice-publishing-lawsuit-apple-ipad.

[21] Michael Kozlowski, "1 in 5 Books Sold in Canada Is an EBook," Good e-Reader, June 15, 2016, https://goodereader.com/blog/electronic-readers/1-in-5-books-sold-in-canada-is-an-ebook#:~:text=The%20CEO%20of%20Kobo%2C%20Michael%20Tamblyn%2C%20spoke%20at.
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[22] CDC. "Amazing Books for Amazing Children."

From as early as 2009, Kindle had a text-to-speech feature which helped readers who were completely blind.23 The Kindle supports popular screen readers such as NonVisual Digital Access (NVDA) and Job Access With Speech (JAWS).

JAWS is a customizable, navigable, industry-standard widely-used screen reader. However, with different key commands for tablet and desktop, it is difficult to use. In addition, it is more complex than NVDA. NVDA offers many of the same features that JAWS does and is offered free of charge to everyone across the world. It is also open-source, so anyone is free to review the source code and make changes. This makes it for the blind, by the blind. However, it is not widely used in the public and private sectors.

1.3. Introducing Alt Text

The accessibility feature Alternative text, or Alt Text is a textual substitute written in place of non-text content. Screen readers read out Alt Text in place of images, which aids users who experience visual disabilities. This feature helps them access the content and function of the images.

Originally, Alt Text was used for webpages with images that fail to load. Innovations like screen readers, eBooks and ePubs helped introduce Alt Text as an accessibility feature. Using Alt Text fosters an equitable and inclusive environment, allowing richer reading experiences for visually impaired readers.

1.4. Summary of Introduction

Addressing accessibility through a variety of innovations like screen readers, or book formats like eBooks, offers publishers a chance to foster inclusivity.[24] Despite this, very few publishers have the resources to make a book accessible to every person. The diversity of print disabilities means higher demands on the workflow, such as design,

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[23] Jeremy Francis, "The Kindle Controversy: An Economic Analysis of How the Amazon Kindle's Text-To-Speech Feature Violates Copyright Law Amazon Kindle's Text-To-Speech Feature Violates Copyright Law," *Vanderbilt Journal of Entertainment & Technology Law Vanderbilt Journal of Entertainment & Technology Law* 13 (2011), https://scholarship.law.vanderbilt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1275&context=jetlaw.

[24] Annie Slizak, "Turning the Page: An Analysis of Accessible Publishing in Canada," summit.sfu.ca, December 20, 2018, http://summit.sfu.ca/item/18757.

editing, and acquisition, making accessibility to all highly unlikely to yield profitable returns. What needs to be set in place is a system instead of an application to every book as a separate entity (books catering to dyslexic readers or visually impaired readers who struggle with contrast, for instance)

1.5. Summary of Project Report Chapters

This report has so far introduced and contextualized accessibility in the context of Canadian publishing. It will further examine the growth, constraints and potential of Alt Text, a feature of accessibility that has proven particularly difficult for publishers to incorporate. It will study Alt Text, examining all aspects of the issue and will attempt to arrive at practical solutions for the problems it faces. For more clarity and a better understanding of the realities of Alt Text, I propose to use my learnings during my placement with Orca Publishers as a contextual case study for the benefit of this report.

To begin with, in the following chapter, I will briefly introduce Orca Publishers and look to trace their journey with accessibility against the backdrop of my work placement with them. Following this, in Chapter 3, "Technology and Alt Text", I will discuss the technological process of writing Alt Text and examine innovations that have made it possible. I will also look at some of the technological constraints faced by Alt Text writers and discuss HTML in relation to Alt Text. Finally, I will explain the importance of different file formats such as EPUB and PDF with regard to Alt Text.

In Chapter 4, "Writing Alt Text," I will review the best practices while writing Alt Text and analyse existing Alt Text Style Guides. I will then examine three images for which I wrote Alt Text in the course of my work placement at Orca explaining the rationale for choices related to color and style as well as the relevance of word choice for visually impaired readers. I will then discuss a typical style guide that I created specifically for Orca. Subsequently, I will attempt answers to challenging questions such as who should be authoring Alt Text and where should be its ideal spot in the publishing workflow.

I will conclude my report by summarizing key ideas such as the rising trend of accessibility in publishing and offer final thoughts on the importance of Alt Text as any other sight-centric facet of publication.

Chapter 2.   Introduction to Orca Book Publishers

2.1. Orca's Ethos and Practices

Orca Publishers, founded in 1990, was created with a mission to "strive to produce books that illuminate the experiences of people…with disabilities,"[25] among others. In an interview with the Children's Book Council, Orca stated that they prefer to publish "books that matter."[26]

Since inception, Orca has been publishing books that prioritize diversity and inclusivity. Being well ahead of the industry in this area, Orca was therefore well-positioned to react faster when there was a call in 2016 for books that catered to a diverse audience base.

In recent years, Orca has incorporated many more accessibility features into their workflow. Their Ultra-Readable format, introduced in 2021 exclusively for dyslexic readers, made it easier for readers to overcome the difficulty of white paper. This Ultra Readable format used a larger trim size, more readable font and cream-colored paper for their books, ensuring that readers with visual impairments will not be affected by the stark contrast between paper and font.[27]

 Another major step taken by Orca was to introduce Alt Text. Alt Text, or alternative text, is a textual substitute for images. As Ruth Linka says - Orca published several picture books in 2015 with downloadable audio files, and some of these had audio Alt Text that was written in-house.[28] They did this also with multiple dual-language books (English-French and English-Cree). The Government making funding available, on the back of publishers' demand for inclusion of Alt Text, further enabled Orca to adopt widely this feature. According to Linka, "The main push for Alt Text came with

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[25] Orca, "About Us."

[26] Orca, "About Us."

[27] Kabriya Coghlan, "Orca Introduces New Ultra-Readable Books to Reach More Readers." Orca Book Publishers - Blog, March 5, 2021, https://blog.orcabook.com/orca-introduces-new-ultra-readable-books-to-reach-more-readers/.

[28] Ruth Linka, Interview.

government funding through eBound a few years ago where books were sent overseas to be remediated by various providers,".[29]

During my internship with Orca, I found them taking many strides in their journey with Alt Text including adopting a language that strove to be compliant with current social norms as well as being sensitive to marginalized communities. This involved the use of descriptive language, employing neutral pronouns and hiring sensitivity readers for books written about marginalized communities. Orca's editors maintained a language compliant with these sensitivity guidelines through their writing of Alt Text. They also ensure that the pictures and illustrations throughout their books—and in particular books like those about the Indigenous experience—display diverse people, whether racially, or in age, gender, ability, or even geographical location.

2.1.1. Work placement

In the summer of 2023, I began a work placement with Orca Book Publishers to write Alt Text for their books. I worked through the Orca non-fiction children's books, particularly those from the *Think, Wild* and *Timeline* series. I wrote Alt Text for around fifty books, experimenting with two drafts and taking feedback from multiple editors. I studied resources on Alt Text and tried many different Alt Text styles before finding one consistent with Orca's house style. I learnt how to incorporate Alt Text that was cohesive with the audience, the themes of the book, and the publisher's mission. As discussed in Orca staff meetings and often with Digital Publishing Specialist, Bruce Keith, Orca focused on writing Alt Text while keeping their audience (typically children) in mind.

When I joined them, Orca Book Publishers were yet to implement Alt Text into their backlist titles. The Alt Text written for the backlist titles was in its nascent stage, to the extent that Orca did not yet have a specific in-house Alt Text style guide. Along with writing Alt Text, I was tasked with creating an in-house style guide.

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[29] Ruth Linka, Interview.

Chapter 3.   Technology and Alt Text

3.1. The Rise of Alt Text in Publishing

Audiobooks, eBooks and digitally read books are good solutions for people with visual impairments but they don't have solutions for images. For instance, to convert images on screen readers into a textual description, a user may need to use Alt Text (alternative text that can be used in the place of an image).[30] This feature evinced substantial interest in Alt Text. In fact, a recent article that explained how to generate appropriate "Alt Text" accumulated thousands of social media views.[31] Similarly, other articles about Alt Text, such as those published by the National Institutes of Health (NIH)[32] and the website Alt Text as Poetry,[33] have all gone "viral" in recent years.

Alt Text was first introduced in 1993, with the HTML 1.2 standard and was intended to give users an idea of the pages that did not load.[34] Originally, Alt Text was not created as an accessibility feature but as a substitute for broken images.[35] While it is generally thought of as a textual substitute for images, according to NNELS, it can be applied to any describable non-text.[36] Screen readers will read Alt Text instead of skipping over images thereby helping visually or cognitively impaired readers.

As conversations around accessibility and diversity began to take place in the 2000s, publishers were forced to re-imagine the book format seeking to make books accessible for all. In Canada, around year 2006, Alt Text started to be used on the back of the rapid rise in usage of eBooks especially through the medium of Amazon's Kindle.

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[30] Edwards, Emory J, et al., "How the Alt Text Gets Made: What Roles and Processes of Alt Text Creation Can Teach Us about Inclusive Imagery."

[31] Bill Kasdorf, "How Publishers Can Get Alt Text Right."

[32] Chiarella D, Yarbrough J, Jackson CA. Using alt text to make science Twitter more accessible for people with visual impairments. Nat Commun. 2020 Nov 16;11(1):5803. doi: 10.1038/s41467-020-19640-w.

[33] Bojana Cokylat, Shannon Finnegan, "Alt Text as Poetry," alt-text-as-poetry.net, accessed November 16, 2023, https://alt-text-as-poetry.net/?colors=off.

[34] "Image ALT Tag Tips for HTML," Accessibility at Penn State, accessed October 9, 2023, https://accessibility.psu.edu/images/imageshtml/#alt.

[35] Ma, Melody, "A Brief History of Alt Text."

[36] NNELS, "About NNELS," nnels.ca, June 21, 2013. https://nnels.ca/about.

Today, publishers in Canada, such as Orca Book Publishers, the University of Toronto Press, and Dundurn Press, have begun to incorporate Alt Text into their workflow. Clearly, Alt Text seems to have finally found its feet in the publishing world.

3.1.1. Technological Innovations Contributing to the Growth of Alt Text

The process of writing Alt Text is a surprisingly simple one as many file formats support this feature. Alt Text is not embedded in an image file itself. Instead, it is paired manually with the image by whoever uploads the image usually through a user interface that prompts for the text.[37] Alt Text is usually written by the person uploading the file and largely stored as a backup form of content. In case where the main type of content cannot be rendered, the Alt Text is rendered in its place.

Screen readers are the main way people come across Alt Text. Instead of skipping images, screen readers read Alt Text aloud to the user. When Screen Readers come across images requiring larger chunks of text, they are led to a hyperlink provided with the image, which takes the reader to the end of the book.

Users also come across Alt Text because of its utility in search engine optimization (SEO). SEO enables web crawlers to index Alt Text and make it searchable.[38] The goal is to have words that describe the content of the pages so that information can be retrieved when it is needed. These make sure they are correctly tagged - by typing in words, a user finds the images in the related words.[39] This though can as well be viewed as a negative innovation with the focus more on marketing rather than on accessibility.

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[37] Ma, Melody, "A Brief History of Alt Text."

[38] Sydney Butler, "What Is Alt Text? Why You Should Use It, and How to Write It," How-To Geek, n.d., https://www.howtogeek.com/821673/what-is-alt-text-why-you-should-use-it-and-how-to-write-it/.

[39] "Search Engine Crawlers | What They Are," Yext, accessed November 27, 2023, https://www.yext.com/knowledge-center/search-engine-crawlers#:~:text=Search%20engine%20crawlers%20are%20programs%20designed%20to%20browse%2C.

It has taken some time and several iterations for the tools to create Alt Text and screen readers to read them to be as effective as they are today.[40] Earlier versions of the HTML standard (HTML4), for example, defined an attribute (now deprecated) called longdesc which provided a hyperlink leading to another page to relay Alt Text.[41] Despite its definition as part of the standard, and despite its usefulness for conveying more complex Alt Text (e.g., for complex diagrams), it is no longer used.[42]

Alt Text continues to evolve. Jaemin Cho and Hee Jae Kim have suggested that Alt Text in the future could be multi-dimensional, enabling users to navigate images in three layers—foreground, middle ground, and background.[43] The proposal attempts to make Alt Text a more immersive and powerful reading experience. Some variations of these are already in use for image maps, with clickable locations, streets, and buildings that offer more detailed information. These innovations are varied and have their utility but also put unique constraints on writers of Alt Text.

3.1.2. Constraints on Alt Text

Alt Text has many limitations imposed by the same technology that makes it useful. First, the way screen readers currently read punctuation is inconsistent and no screen reader can reliably handle all punctuation and typographic symbols. Some of this is functional — there is no reason to read the word "comma." However, the NVDA reader does not read "+" and "=" signs, making simple math expressions unreadable. JAWS reads the "plus" but replaces "minus" signs with a "dash". Without these characters, it might be harder to distinguish parts of speech when using a screen reader.

[40] Google. https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwizt_nv9S CAxX8FzQIHaqBBNcQFnoECA4QAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theopennotebook.com%2Fg uide-to-using-alt-text-to-make-images-moreaccessible%2F&usg=AOvVaw3t9R8UTiF0Wc64b2_KoOYF&opi=89978449..

[41]"HTML Img Longdesc Attribute," www.w3schools.com, accessed November 27, 2023, https://www.w3schools.com/tags/att_img_longdesc.asp#:~:text=Attribute%20Values&text= An%20absolute%20URL%20%2D%20points%20to.

[42] "WebAIM: Alternative Text," webaim.org, accessed November 27, 2023, https://webaim.org/techniques/alttext/#complex.

[43] Jaemin Cho and Hee Jae Kim, "Dimensional Alt Text: Enhancing Spatial Understanding through Dimensional Layering of Image Descriptions for Screen Reader Users," April 19, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1145/3544549.3585706.

Second, to keep readers from getting lost in Alt Text, writers must keep it short.[44] However, short Alt Text may be insufficient to properly describe complex diagrams, maps, or statistical data.[45]

Third, words in all caps are also spelt out by screen readers which makes it hard to convey meaning. When used, such issues can frustrate users or pull them out of the immersive experience.[46]

Fourth, certain screen readers are more customizable or navigable than others, making for a variable reader experience of Alt Text.[47] The Kindle's latest text-to-speech feature, for instance, requires Bluetooth and the learning of gestures such as "touch and drag with three fingers" to scroll a window.[48]

Finally, a question of adoption arises when using Alt Text. Writing Alt Text is simple, just added as a short description for the image through the addition of 'alt = your description of the image,' within the image element.[49] However, despite the simple process, as it is still not employed or found essential by most social media websites / eBooks, Alt Text remains a matter of personal choice.

3.1.3. PDF vs EPUB as Book Formats to Support Alt Text

While Alt Text can be present across various forms of content and platforms, publishers are primarily concerned with the placement of Alt Text in eBooks. This means

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[44] "Structure and Formatting," National Institutes of Health (NIH), August 11, 2022, https://www.nih.gov/nih-style-guide/structure-formatting.

[45] "Everything You Need to Know to Write Effective Alt Text," support.microsoft.com, n.d., https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/everything-you-need-to-know-to-write-effective-alt-text-df98f884-ca3d-456c-807b-1a1fa82f5dc2.

[46] "How to Write Great Alt Text — and Why It Matters," ACES: The Society for Editing, n.d., https://aceseditors.org/news/2020/how-to-write-great-alt-text-and-why-it-matters.

[47] "JAWS vs NVDA: Which Is Better? - Equally.AI Blog," December 14, 2021, https://blog.equally.ai/disability-guide/jaws-vs-nvda/#:~:text=If%20you%20rely%20on%20a.

[48] "Using VoiceView Gestures for EasyReader Amazon," kb.yourdolphin.com, accessed March 9, 2024, https://kb.yourdolphin.com/knowledge/using-voiceview-gestures-for-easyreader-amazon.

[49] Penn State, "Image ALT Tag Tips for HTML."

primarily within PDFs and EPUBs.[50] These two formats, again, offer vastly different experiences.

Though Alt Text can be included in PDFs, the latter are not generally considered a good option for an accessible book. PDF's fixed layout is restrictive, and content interaction is limited to zooming and scrolling, which hampers low-vision or neurodiverse readers.[51] The document structure also lacks semantic identification to help screen reading software understand the structure or the purpose of content or hyperlinks. It is easier to get lost in the content and misunderstand what is important while accessing the screen reading software in a PDF document.[52]

In contrast, EPUB offers dynamic layouts while still offering better accessibility functions than a PDF. EPUBs can easily incorporate long descriptions of Alt Text, and video/audio transcripts when needed, simplifying navigation.[53] There are also fixed layout EPUBs, which are also more accessible and better than a PDF option.

EPUBs are also based on (X)HTML which offers the ability to describe the content through tags and write Alt Text descriptions. Thus, the EPUB tends to be a more effective book format than PDFs for accessibility but they are also more expensive to produce. Books with Alt Text for numerous illustrations or photographs, audio or video enhancements, complex charts or graphs are all better served by EPUBs.[54] Additionally, they can be displayed on electronic paper devices.[55]

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[50] "Routledge & CRC Press Authors - Accessible - EPUB and PDF EBook Formats," www.routledge.com, accessed September 18, 2023, https://www.routledge.com/our-customers/authors/publishing-guidelines/accessible-content/epub-and-pdf-ebook-formats#:~:text=This%20makes%20it%20easier%20to.

[51] Routledge. "Routledge & CRC Press Authors - Accessible - EPUB and PDF EBook Formats."

[52] Ibid

[53] Ibid

[54] eBound. "Fixed Layout vs. Reflowable EPUBs." eBOUND Canada. Accessed January 4, 2024. https://www.eboundcanada.org/resources/fixed-layout-versus-reflowable-epubs/.

[55] eBound. "Fixed Layout vs. Reflowable EPUBs."

3.2. The Future of Alt Text

3.2.1. Art vs. Communication

What would be the best way to write Alt Text is another point of debate. There is clearly a common verdict emerging that it needs to be short. This sentiment of a short Alt Text is explicitly expressed on Microsoft's official page. It reads, "The Alt Text shouldn't be longer than a sentence or two—most of the time a few thoughtfully selected words will do. Consider what is important about an image. For example, important context may be the setting, the emotions on people's faces, the colors, or the relative sizes."[56] This sentiment finds acceptance in many other studies, who opine that shorter Alt Text make for more efficient communication. As Holge and Elliot put it, "Alt Text is short, about 10–15 words or 140 characters or so."[57]

Despite this broad agreement, there is still no standardized system for writing Alt Text. This makes for the reading experience to vary widely dependant on the author of the Alt Text, the publisher, the text surrounding the image and the image being 'read.'[58] In turn, this affects the writers of Alt Text also, as Alt Text style guides vary widely from publisher to publisher. Though, in some way, this variability does make the text very similar to the content of the book embedded.

The need for commonality is for the Alt Text to communicate a guiding principle that ensures Alt Text reaches its audience. Alt Text is meant to reflect the language and reading abilities of the audience of a particular series and is intended to ground all of it in the context of the book for which it was written. This means elaborately written Alt Text would be inappropriate and out of context for the required genre. Like all writing, if Alt Text doesn't reach its audience, it fails.

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[56] Microsoft, "Everything You Need to Know to Write Effective Alt Text."

[57] ACES, "How to Write Great Alt Text — and Why It Matters."

[58] Bevi Chagnon, "Rethinking Alt Text," www.pubcom.com, accessed November 27, 2023, https://www.pubcom.com/blog/alt-text/1_rethink-alt-text/index.shtml.

3.2.2. Alt Text as Poetry

A variation from the positioning that Alt Text needs to serve the text is the idea of Alt Text as poetry. In a sharp departure from the preoccupation with brevity, some argue Alt Text should be a creative and engaging experience, not a burden that offers dry descriptions.[59] This idea was propounded to encourage people to write Alt Text, doing away with the conventional rules formulated around it, and instead, using it as a space to create, amplify, and share accessibility media, and encouraging people to think about technology's effects on society. The idea is to offer a sense of belonging in digital spaces to those with disabilities.[60]

The website "Alt Text as Poetry" espouses an extreme of extension of the view relating to artistic expression. Created by two disabled artists, Bojana Coklyat and Shannon Finnegan, it pushes the envelope on what publishing professionals believe to be considered Alt Text. This website re-envisions Alt Text as a tool for sparking powerful emotion.[61] According to the two founders, Alt Text is often bland and uninteresting but need not be so. This website capitalizes on the human aspect of writing Alt Text, making the writing of it an enjoyable and immersive experience and an act of poetry.[62]

> "Candystore, a white non-binary body, stands on a urinal wearing black boots, black jeans, a black leather jacket, a black faux leather hat from a gas station stuck with a black raven's feather, a shadow cast over half shimher face, sibylline. @agaywhitemale"[63]

This view of Alt Text as an art form, as an extension of an aesthetic, also allows experimentation and creativity that is not limited to the rules set forth by publishing but is very firmly rooted in art and literature.

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[59] Bojana Cokylat, Shannon Finnegan, "Alt Text as Poetry."

[60] "Alt-Text as Poetry: A Promising Practice in Reimagining Alt-Text | DO-IT," www.washington.edu, accessed November 27, 2023, https://www.washington.edu/doit/alt-text-poetry-promising-practice-reimagining-alt-text.

[61] Cokylat, Bojana, "Alt Text as Poetry."

[62] Ibid

[63] Ibid

The impact of Alt Text poetry is a redefinition of the boundaries expected from Alt Text. It can be consumed as part of the image, but more often, it is better off being on its own. If the author wrote the Alt Text as poetry, it might be usable if thematically relevant to, say, a fictional book or a book about poems and art. However, if not, then such artistry for this type of writing will disrupt the flow and take the reader out of the work.

Perhaps, as the eBook accessibility expert Laura Brady insists, the right approach for Alt Text should be somewhere in between the boring list of objects it was and the type of immersive, powerful descriptions it has become. She says, "Include Alt Text. Make it robust, meaningful, and thoughtful."[64]

3.2.3. AI and Alt Text

Far from the utterly human experience of Alt Text as poetry is the ethical debate surrounding the use of AI. This difference between AI-written Alt Text and human-written Alt Text becomes more pronounced in the hotly contended area of employing AI to write Alt Text.

Originally, AI bots struggled with understanding the context of images and were best suited to the processing of dry data. AI tools could produce an accurate and robust selection of object tags or offer a logical structure of information that might not be as efficient if performed by a human.[65] Computer-generated Alt Text is often written with the prefix 'this image contains,' followed by a list of objects that the AI has identified.[66]

This limited approach of AI has changed with more recent AI developments — generative AI can pull out relevant context combined with descriptions of the images, allowing for more accurate Alt Text. However, this poses the ethical question of whether bots should be employed to perform tasks instead of humans. The issue of labor being

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[64] "Let's Talk about Fixed-Layout + Accessibility," Laura Brady, accessed September 18, 2023, https://laurabrady.ca/blog/lets-talk-about-fixed-layout-accessibility.

[65] Edwards, Emory J. et al., "How the Alt Text Gets Made: What Roles and Processes of Alt Text Creation Can Teach Us about Inclusive Imagery."

[66] Edwards, Emory J. et al., "How the Alt Text Gets Made: What Roles and Processes of Alt Text Creation Can Teach Us about Inclusive Imagery."

passed from human workers to AI is one which is being raised in all areas of publishing, from writing books themselves to using book covers.

Alt text has grown and the tech has evolved, but there is still a lot of inconsistency in how it is treated by the devices that can interpret it. This variability, coupled with the variability in styles and approaches, has led to a very heterogeneous experience for anyone using Alt Text, and it leaves those wishing to support them through the creation of Alt Text without clear standards.

Chapter 4.   Writing Alt Text

4.1. Best Practices

4.1.1. Analyses of Existing Style Guidelines

I began by referring to some of the existing Alt Text style guides: one from Microsoft and one from UBC Press.[67] These proved useful as reference points during the construction of an in-house style guide and aided my work done with Orca.

A few key points of consideration emerged that were used in creating Orca's Alt Text style guide.

Both the Microsoft and the UBC Press' Alt Text Style Guides restrict Alt Text writing to 250 characters,[68] valuing conciseness over description. This is largely a good rule to follow, except in certain circumstances. Word count becomes an issue when attempting Alt Text for covers, diagrams, maps or complex illustrations with many layers. They require an additional, longer description of more than 300 characters. To this end, Onyx allows for additional descriptions provided as a hyperlink at the end of the book.

A short word count ensures that Alt Text remains as functional as possible, always supporting the main text as it is meant to, instead of replacing it. Also, users don't run the risk of getting lost in lengthy descriptions.

Just as in some instances there is a call for writing longer descriptions in the Alt Text, the UBC Guide also points out that, in some cases, Alt Text might not be needed at all. Such as in cases where an image has a caption that serves the same purpose. If a caption is written to describe the photo, a short line in the Alt Text must be added to avoid the default Alt Text of 'decorative image,' which some software will insert when Alt Tag is being used but left empty.[69]

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[67] "Alt-Text Guidelines," accessed November 16, 2023, https://www.ubcpress.ca/asset/2526/alt-text-guidelines.pdf.

[68] UBC Press, "Alt-Text Guidelines."

[69] Ibid

Decisions based on what should be included or left out must depend on the context of the image and the text surrounding it.[70] These decisions include, but are not limited to, what makes an image a decorative feature as well as what parts of an image should be acknowledged and will contribute to a deeper understanding of the themes.[71] These choices are made with relation to the style of the image (illustration or photograph, sketch or diagram, etc.), composition (color, labels, etc.), and general impressions about the image that might make the Alt Text relevant or concise (for example, if it is about a famous historical figure, or if the photograph is merely someone standing at a podium).[72]

The UBC guide recommends that the Alt Text writer stay away from any interpretation or analysis when describing what the image is about.[73] Depending on the genre (children's or medical textbooks), it seems common sense to maintain a factual, objective and logical view towards the image.

UBC's style guide also offers suggestions relating to grammar such as writing in simple present tense and keeping sentences short. However, they sometimes allow for deviation from good grammar such as using dangling modifiers. I assume this would be a point of contention, but this rule often results in a shorter word count.

That all said, the guides, while making their separate, concrete recommendations on how to write Alt Text, point to a driving principle, one that supersedes these rules. According to them, an understanding of subjectivity and thematic relevance should be at the forefront of writing Alt Text. This ensures that Alt Text is a cohesive part of the text and does not stand out or cause confusion about the main text.

It is important to keep in mind that every image is unique and have specific aspects that make it relevant. Bringing attention to these aspects might involve breaking at least one of the previous takeaways. This subjectivity is further accentuated when concerns relating to genre are brought in, which will be discussed later.

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[70] UBC Press, "Alt-Text Guidelines."

[71] Bruce Keith, interview.

[72] Bruce Keith, interview.

[73] UBC, "Alt-Text Guidelines."

Now that I have explained the key takeaways from other style guides, I will proceed to reflect on my processes for writing Alt Text during my work placement with Orca Book Publishers.

4.1 Writing Alt Text for Orca Book Publishers

4.1.2. Examination of Three Images with Their Alt Text

In this section, I will be looking at three different examples of images that represent many of the decisions made and lessons learned during my time with Orca: the illustrative cover of *The Antiracist Kitchen*,[74] a photographed spread from *Less is More*,[75] and a medical diagram from *Listen Up!*[76] The process will be an analysis of features such as color, style, and word choices, as well as any design choices and how they translate into a concise written medium.

Colorful Illustration Example
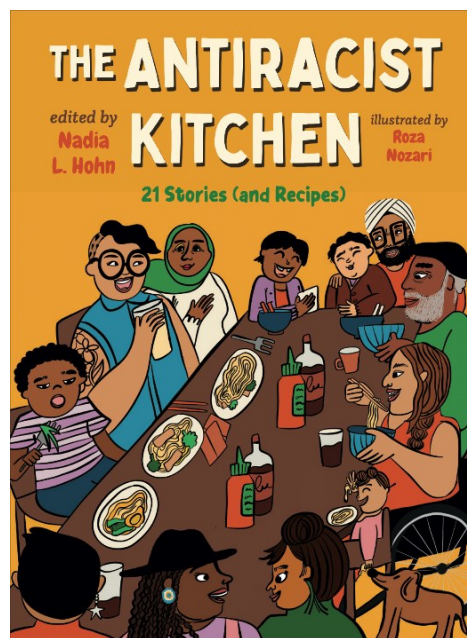
Figure 1.   Colorful Illustration from *Antiracist Kitchen*

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[74] Nadia L Hohn, *The Antiracist Kitchen*.

[75] Stephen Aitken, *Listen Up!*

[76] Leah Payne, *Less Is More*.

The first image is of a cover, from the book *The Antiracist Kitchen*, which is a cookbook filled with stories of cooking from around the world. The cover sports a brightly colored illustration and several hierarchies of texts. Here, I will be looking into the choices made regarding the Alt Text in terms of how to describe text interacting with image, the format of the image (illustration versus photograph), choices regarding descriptions of gender, race, age, and familiar relations. I will also go into stylistic aspects such as what elements of the image can be left out.

Final Alt Text

The final Alt Text was: "A group of adults and children laugh, talk and eat dinner. The words "The Antiracist Kitchen," are splayed across the top, with a subtitle "21 stories (and recipes)". The lines "Edited by Nadia L Nohn," and "Illustrated by "Roza Nozari," are in smaller letters around the title."

Color and Style

I initially struggled with writing Alt Text for this cover because I was unsure of how to explain the texture of this cover, the kinds of art used, and the bright, multicolored illustration. Eventually, upon discussion with my manager, Orca Book Publishers decided to describe the type of image (photograph, illustration), only if it was in the minority. For example, if a book largely had illustrations, the odd photograph would have the words 'A photograph of' mentioned in the Alt Text.

This is a useful rule because it highlights the visual dimension of the image, which is crucial to the emotional experience of Alt Text readers but is largely invisible when only narrating what the image shows. This meta-layer of description proved valuable, even if it, at times, disrupts the immersive experience of readers. It proved particularly important to my work and learning process when the image in question was a black-and-white photo, a vintage ad, or a complex diagram with both text and images. It managed to handle a huge chunk of the visual information without adding to the word count too much.

Furthermore, for covers, the image description is written while moving from a larger to a more granular perspective. First, the metadata of style is emphasized to offer context and then the image itself in terms of the actions and people/objects. Subsequently, the names of the title and author and/or illustrator follow. Information on

the names are written how they appear—for instance, 'splayed across the cover are the words…' or 'Down the center of the page in a column…' —to give readers a clear view of what a cover looks like.

Word Choices

I also struggled with how to write about character relations, especially as nothing in the image provides real indication of the relationships between characters. My original description of the illustration was as follows: "A frolicking family dinner. This ethnically diverse family laugh, talk, play, and eat as they sit around a dinner table, feasting on noodles." On conferring with the staff at Orca, they deemed the use of both 'ethnically diverse' and 'family' as assumptions that the Alt Text and Orca should not make. This is because assumptions like these enforce heteronormative views of what comprises a family. For instance, a picture with a man, woman, and child should not be assumed as a family, as these connections were, most importantly, wrong, and secondly, possibly harmful messaging to young readers. This attitude towards word choices also extended to describing food on the table when it was not entirely clear what kind of food was being served. Here, again, Orca deemed it appropriate not to make assumptions. This was an important choice considering the focus of the book as an antiracist cookbook.

In this way, Alt Text began to enter the discussions around feminism, antiracism, queerness, and anti-colonialism. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Orca already had accessible formats and showcased diversity in a sensitive way through numerous books such as *The Witness Blanket,*[77] and *Shelter,*[78] taking care to make sure images in every book kept up to this expectation. Taking a stance to ensure sensitivity towards marginalized communities within the Alt Text felt like a natural step for the staff at Orca and remains an important decision at every turn. This central idea, of not making assumptions when describing images, was continued in relation to race and gender, as it will be discussed below.

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[77] Carey Newman and Kirstie Hudson, *The Witness Blanket*.

[78] Lois Peterson, *Shelter*.

Issues of Describing Race and Gender

The description of race and gender within the images of Orca's books is an important and relevant talking point. It comes from the understandable striving to be sensitive to Orca's community of writers, readers, children, and parents.

Instead of constantly writing 'ethnically diverse' for each illustration that featured a non-white figure, the staff at Orca met as a group and discussed at length how to proceed in a way that was respectful and sensitive to all communities who were a part of their audience base. They finally agreed to omit it entirely, and no mention of race, age, gender, or geographical location can be found anywhere in the Alt Text. Now, Orca has subsequently decided to mention gender if explicitly stated in the text. This seems like a step in the right direction, aligning the experience of readers without print disabilities with those who only rely on Alt Text, a little more.

Alt Text: An Ethical Discussion Between Orca and its Audience

The creation of Alt Text for Orca additionally cemented their values and mission statement in rewarding and powerful ways. Even the act of not making assumptions regarding identity was an active political choice, and one that reflected the values and beliefs of the publishing house.[79] Here, in a way, Alt Text becomes a direct conversation between publisher and reader, illuminating specific aspects as decided by the publisher. This discussion, being political, is also innately ethical, and an important one to be had.

By considering the impact that describing images could have on those who are visually impaired, a sense of respect and thoughtfulness seems to have been displayed. Orca chose to handle the varied topic of identity by hosting a disclaimer on their title page, reassuring visually impaired readers that the images within the text would espouse the diversity in all forms that Orca endorses and supports, but that the Alt Text would also make no assumptions about said diversity.

The difference between showing diversity in images and writing it in Alt Text becomes a matter of certainty, instead of being merely a matter of allowing what is diverse to remain so without making white-centric, heteronormative judgements

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[79] Martez E Mott, John Tang, and Edward Cutrell, "Accessibility of Profile Pictures: Alt Text and beyond to Express Identity Online," *Proceedings of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, April 19, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1145/3544548.3580710.

regarding the same. It is an important conversation to reinforce even in this small way, especially towards vulnerable, young readers who are growing up in the current political climate. The following photograph will consider other choices made with regards to describing images in a more pointed way, as it deals with actual people or places as a subject.

Color Photograph Example in Double Page Spread

This spread was taken from the book *Less is More: Join the Low-Waste Movement*.[80] The book centers on the themes of waste production and actionable steps to mitigate the process.

Figure 2. **Photograph Spread from Less is More**

I chose this spread because photographs present their own challenges, and here I focus on problems relating to understanding their thematic relevance to the text, which operates differently to writing Alt Text for covers.

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[80] Leah Payne, *Less Is More* (2023).

Final Alt Text

The final Alt Text went something like, "In a brightly lit kitchen, a child tips cereal from a brown paper bag into a glass jar, which stands on a wooden dining table. An adult stands behind."

Color and Style

The important takeaway from writing Alt Text for these photos was understanding the thematic relevance between Alt Text and photos as well as the relationship between Alt Text and the surrounding text. While writing Alt Text, it was important to understand that every photo was chosen for a reason, and the Alt Text had to unearth that reason through the reading experience. The Alt Text could not exist in a vacuum; it had to be a cohesive part of the book.

An original draft of Alt Text for the lower right-hand side image was as follows: "In a brightly lit kitchen, a boy stands over a table, hefting a bag and pouring grains into a jar." This describes the boy and the bag but fails to mention that it is a brown paper bag. This essential detail shows that a sustainable household practice relating to food, and mentioning the mesh bag relating to the fruit and vegetables also connects it to the larger theme of food waste. As with all kinds of writing, specificity is of paramount importance in understanding the images.

Consequently, the final Alt Text was shaped by the conversation regarding thematic relevance which also remained imminent during the rest of my placement. In this case, the book was about waste, and that needed to be reflected in every step. It became clear to me that to write Alt Text that accurately reflected the themes of the book, I had to read the entire book at least once, and I had to understand how the images fit alongside the text immediately adjacent to them. Word choices became especially geared to fit this need, as discussed below.

Word Choices

In addition, staff at Orca had some questions regarding word choices relating to age. The use of words like 'teen,' 'boy,' 'girl,' or 'senior,' were all removed, as they did not wish to make assumptions about age or gender, and instead replaced it with general words like 'adult' and 'child.' These were used to avoid any assumptions, the obstacle already mentioned with regards to race and gender.

Finally, it became important to use language that was culturally relevant to Canada, which was a frequent research topic during my time writing Alt Text for Orca. This was a subjective learning experience as someone from the East and is not a universal struggle faced by all Alt Text writers. I quickly learnt many practices native to Canada and what they implied here, such as the use of mesh bags and brown paper bags.

This also led me to realize that Alt Text's limitations also rest on that of the writer, who might not have the expertise necessary to accurately describe an image in a way that is useful to the readers. This is another extension of the issues relating to a lack of standardized advice or rules regarding Alt Text, which makes it initially harder for a writer. This lack of standardized rules are a bigger issue when dealing with standard fact-based images, such as diagrams, maps or graphs, as explained below.

Diagram Example
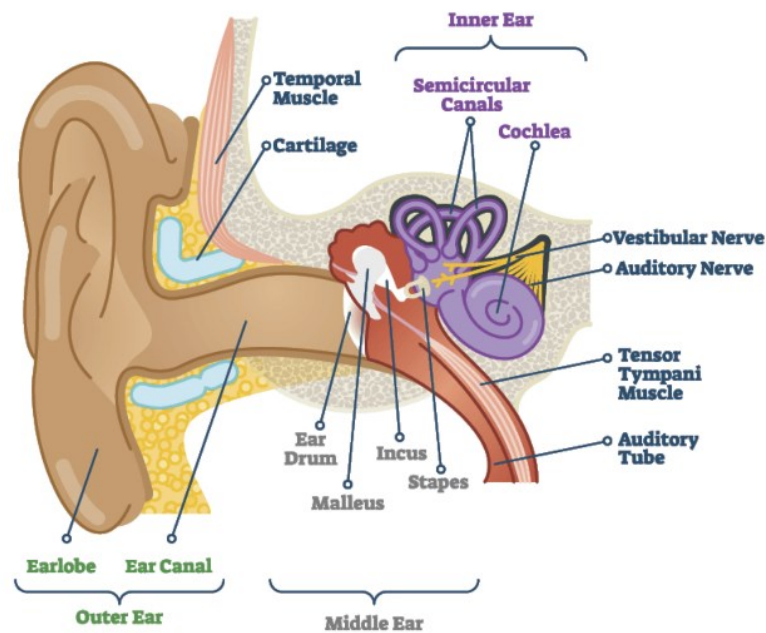
Figure 3.   **Diagram of Ear from Listen Up!**

This third image is a diagram of an ear from *Listen Up!*,[81] an Orca book about natural sound. I chose this image as scientific diagrams present their own challenges regarding the complexity of images, the hierarchy of text, and how much of it can be feasibly included in Alt Text.

Final Alt Text

"A diagram of an ear, with three sections. The outer ear is composed of the fleshy earlobe below the ear, the temporal muscle and cartilage sitting above the ear, and a tubelike ear canal which leads into the middle ear. The middle ear is composed of a oval ear drum, two small white organs labeled malleus and incus and a connecting piece labeled stapes. Right at the end is the inner ear, with two loops labeled as semicircular canals, and a sea-shell shaped cochlea. Between these two are two nerves, labeled the Vestibular nerve and Auditory nerve. Right at the base of the inner ear are the Tensor Tympani muscle and a tube leading into the skull called the Auditory tube."

- Alt Text for the ear diagram.

Color and Style

A huge challenge while writing Alt Text was in tackling diagrams such as Figure 3. As a scientific diagram of an ear, showing the various parts with labels, it was important to remember that in addition to the specialized knowledge required to describe this image, it would be hard to describe the shapes and colors of various parts of the organ. Thus, Orca decided to use the style note of 'colorful diagram,' but the hierarchy of labels proved to be a difficult issue to solve. The diagram was first divided into three sections, the inner ear, outer ear and middle ear, with some elements not in sections. These were then subdivided into many tiny parts, in addition to there being colorful organs. One possible solution was to simply have a sentence saying, 'A diagram of an ear,' but this would not be a rich reading experience, which is what Orca was aiming for.

Diagrams such as these are difficult to accurately describe. This is because doing so would require a huge word count, which is not feasible for many young listeners accessing this book. The problem of word length was the biggest barrier here, as well as making sure there was a logical, cohesive transfer of information. Structure here was

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[81] Stephen Aitken, *Listen Up!*

key, to avoid making the Alt Text a confusing mess of labels and descriptions, with nothing to anchor it in place or give it a sense of natural flow. The process of curation, or what to leave out, was the biggest issue with this diagram, as every piece of information seemed vital.

Word Choices

The text had to naturally start from the left and then move right. The information had to be structured in a hierarchy that made sense. This hierarchy was not based on direction, but the shape and use of each part of the ear, which would be relevant to the reader. Another consideration relating to word choice is that it is written, of course, by sighted readers. So, when the Alt Text is being read aloud along with the rest of the text, descriptions that are 'sight-centric,' for example, words like 'left,' 'right,' or 'above,' are meaningless to the visually impaired reader and even prove confusing.

Initially, Orca agreed to use hyperlinks for diagrams such as these, which would take the reader to the back of the book where they could find a larger description. They have now added a few hyperlink descriptions, usually involving tabular data. Later on, in the process, the staff at Orca decided against any such attempts, deciding to merely describe the shape and organ in one or two sentences, for brevity and clarity's sake. This decision might have been to avoid confusion, but in addition, it feels like a smart choice with regards to the genre of the book. An academic book would necessarily need to have diagrams described in great detail, but a non-fiction book about noise, might not require the same vigor. In this way genre, too, influenced the writing of Alt Text, as certain images become more important as opposed to others—which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

4.1.3. Writing Orca's Alt Text Style Guide

At the culmination of my placement, I wrote the in-house Alt Text Style Guide for Orca Publishers, which was both a challenging and rewarding experience. Creating this style guide clarified what I assumed throughout the process—writing Alt Text is an innately subjective process that deserves careful thought and consideration. Every writer approaches the images differently, as every reader sees something different, and these choices—relating to word count, what is most relevant, style of sentences etc.—imply a high level of control over the reading experience.

The guide for Orca had rules specific to the publishing house's series. For instance, *hi-Lo* covers had to be described in simple sentences to cater to the audience of the series. The non-fiction books for middle graders had to have genre-appropriate language and vocabulary, matching the tone of the book.
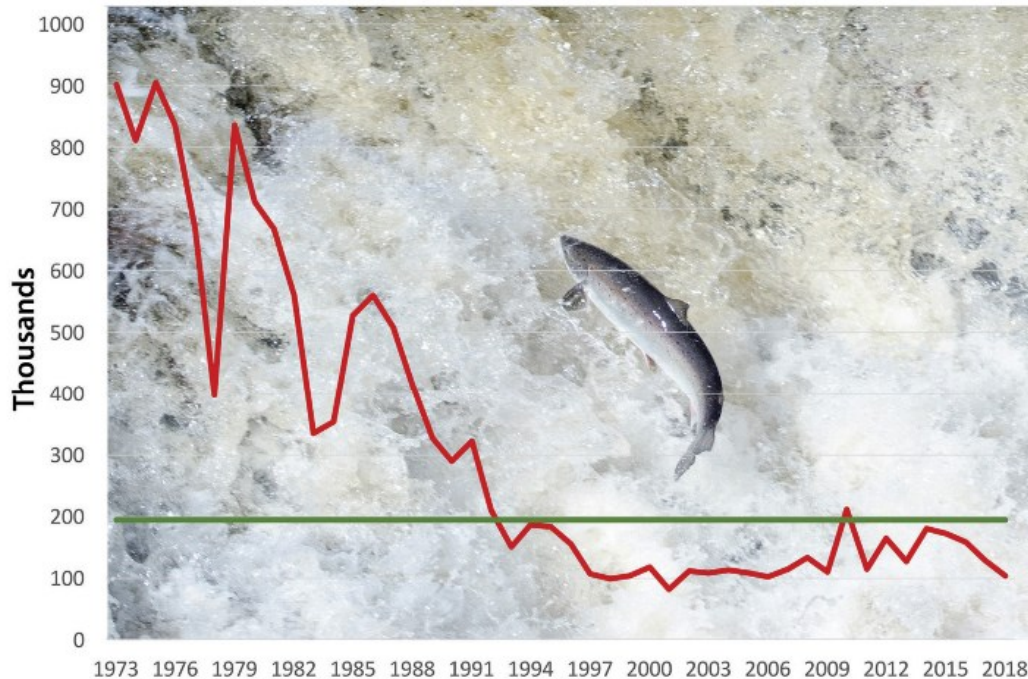
Figure 4.   Graph

Orca's view on graphs and diagrams was to not have too much text but to lay out the information in a logical, linear fashion. This meant not describing them as 'A group of scattered dots,' or 'a row of bars,' but merely stating information such as in the example of Figure 4 of *Salmon* dates: "In 1973, the number of salmon in Canada was at 900,000, but in between then to 1976, it dropped to 400,000, following which at 1979, they rose to 800,000. This was followed by a sharp decline over the next few years, as in 1982, the number of salmon were below 400,000."[82] This made describing such diagrams as Maslow's pyramid, this one, or the water cycle much easier than expected. Another important feature of the style guide, which was reiterated to me throughout the placement, was to avoid describing background items—baubles, trees, and so on—while describing the text. Describing these usually confused the minds of readers rather than

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[82] Rowena Rae, *Salmon* (Orca Book Publishers, 2022).

adding to the experience, thus distracting from what was important to the understanding of the image.

Figure 5.   Decorative Image

Decorative images like the set of footprints or the zigzagging line connecting the stars behind the boat in Figure 5 are not necessary to describe. Here, my original Alt Text was as follows: 'A line of red footprints leads us from one page to the next.' Whereas, my final Alt Text was simply a 'decorative image' for both image files. This is expressed as <img src="xxx.png" role="presentation" alt=""> and is ignored by screen readers.

Additionally, I eventually came up with a formula, that, while not all-encompassing, managed to systematize the writing of Alt Text in the clearest possible manner. This was in the order as listed below:

1. setting +
2. main element with subject and verb +
3. any extraneous detail from the background (that is important based on context) +

4. a second sentence with anything else that might enrich the experience without causing confusion.[83]

Moreover, a few important rules relating to writing Alt Text were to never use all-caps, as the screen reader would read each individual letter separately out loud, and never include terms not already mentioned in the book. The latter was for clarity and precision.

As my journey with writing Alt Text for Orca continued, I discovered that incorrect grammar could be used as long as it didn't affect clarity or meaning. To keep Alt Text as concise as possible, incorrectly used parts of speech such as dangling/misplaced modifiers or dangling participles were all acceptable. This caused a great deal of discussion at Orca, and they have accepted grammatical irregularities that are deemed acceptable in spoken English. Overall, the style guide was a combination of a reflective process of my experiences with Alt Text as well as specific rules from researching best practices relating to Alt Text as a function and Orca's positioning and values as a publisher. A final issue that Orca grappled with, was not related to the mechanics of Alt Text but the managerial frame, which will be discussed below.

4.1.4. The Author of Alt Text

Another reason, as I discovered, that publishers have difficulty in successfully incorporating Alt Text into their books is that, from a management angle, they simply are unable to identify where in the workflow it should be addressed. This is something Orca has considered at length, and as I began writing Alt Text, one of my chief responsibilities was to try and identify where it should be introduced within the publishing workflow, as I gained understanding on what kind of work this was and what it entailed from its writer. Such a management question would be addressed differently at various publishing houses, but having a systematic and streamlined process for publishers would make the process of including Alt Text more accessible to Canadian publishers.

The question of who writes Alt Text matters in part because it is a time-consuming process, but also because the author of Alt Text will have more editorial control over how the text flows in screen readers as well as how accessible formats

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[83] Vishaka Sriram, *Orca Alt Text style guide*, (2023).

transform the reading experience. It is as important a question as any other editorial choice, and this was reflected in the lengthy, robust team meetings with Orca.

On the one hand, Orca considered having the illustrator/author write the Alt Text, as they understand why images are relevant, and this adds depth to the text. They understand the subject best and will ensure consistency.[84] On the other hand, I also considered whether the editor should write Alt Text, as this is an editorial issue.

At this point Orca now has the authors writing the Alt Text, illustrators submitting their illustration notes and the editors creating the final Alt Text. The first few books with this method should be arriving in Orca's workflow very soon.

From my experience, I believe publishers would benefit from thinking of all aspects of accessibility, including Alt Text, at every stage in the workflow. This means that even in the initial stages of acquisition, publishers must consider how to approach Alt Text for a specific book and perhaps compile a document that outlines word choices, audience, voice of the novel-specific language, sensitive language, and anything else that might be relevant to writing Alt Text. Then, as the book evolves and changes, so will all the features of accessibility including Alt Text. In short, Alt Text must be treated with equal importance as any other editorial choice along with every other feature of accessibility.

I found writing Alt Text was at its most thoughtful and informed when it was discussed with peers, editors, and managers. Speaking with editors of various books that required specific or sensitive language enhanced the writing process and ensured internal consistency. Furthermore, being able to converse with designers to discuss describing images from a design perspective also aided my research. Thus, in my experience, Alt Text needed to be written not by an external Alt Text writer but by people who have already worked on a book and were familiar with it.

I also believe that writing of Alt Text has to be a collaborative process between editor and writer as much as any other editorial process. Depending on the type of book, this would also include the Art Director and designer. This collaboration will ensure that

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[84] Bruce Keith, Interview.

the Alt Text adheres to the publisher's standards and mission statement while maintaining the vision and integrity of the author.

This would look something like —

1. Acquisition of book — Author is made aware of their responsibilities re: writing Alt Text

2. Editor, Author and Art Director — they look at images or illustrations chosen and discuss guidelines on how the author will write Alt Text.

3. Author submits sample Alt Text for consideration.

4. Editorial meeting including all parties — discusses the Alt Text with general suggestions relating to style, word choice, etc.

5. Editor and Author work together to find an agreeable middle ground, as they work with the rest of the book.

6. Art Director meeting — Designers and Editors fine tune Alt Text.

Chapter 5.   Conclusion

Alt Text is a complex discussion between image and text, one that enhances the reading experience for those with print disabilities and acts as a continuation of the dialogue between publisher and reader. It is an act of translation and curation, of creating meaning and offering relevant information, with the goal of equitable transfer of knowledge from Alt Text writer to reader.

Accessibility is increasingly becoming a talking point among publishers and readers. These conversations are vital as accessibility technologies can correct injustices, unfair advantages, and power imbalances.

I experienced this empowering potential of Alt Text as I worked through 50 books during my internship with Orca. For instance, while writing Alt Text for *The Antiracist Kitchen*, I employed a contextual approach which aided me in navigating the ambiguous guidelines of existing style guides. I used the text as a focal point around which to conceive and understand the Alt Text. Every decision I made, from voice to language to text length, was made keeping the text at the center.

Yet, I also felt the constraints of Alt Text technologies while working through the medical diagrams and complex graphs from Orca's backlist title, *Listen Up!* In the process of describing the diagrams in a single sentence, I could envision how such images might find a new life through innovations such as multi-dimensional Alt Text. The medical diagram of the ear, for instance, could be studied one section at a time, and in greater detail, offering a robust experience.

However, issues remain to be addressed, both technical and user-based. On the technical side, I encountered struggles with word count and the use of hyperlinks, which might in the future get addressed with the evolution of both attributes and accessible formats. Any debates on PDFs versus EPUBs could be resolved with improved accessible solutions and file formats. Such solutions will help integrating Alt Text into the workflow.

Despite the challenges publishers face while incorporating Alt Text, it is an important step in the publishing process and should be treated as an intrinsic part of the workflow rather than as an afterthought or add-on. It needs to be incorporated right from

the stage of acquisition alongside every other feature of accessibility. Treating Alt Text like any other facet of publishing will reflect our growing understanding and sensitivity to disabilities and the people who live with them. Further, this will foster an atmosphere of inclusivity and fairness, counteracting the long-standing tradition of ableism and restriction of information from those who likely need it the most.

Orca, in particular, has always strived to remain at the forefront of innovations that are related to accessibility.[85] As a response to calls for diversity, they began to transform all their books into accessible formats. Orca's adjustments to their backlist continues to offer their audience a fuller reading experience—one that brings them into the conversation and gives them a seat at the table.

As useful and valuable as it surely is, Alt Text however only serves to make books more accessible to those with visual or motor impairments. It fails to address disabilities related to perception and cognition. Currently, the publishing industry has little experience with technologies that cater to perceptive or cognitive disabilities. Attention and innovation are still sorely needed in these areas.

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[85] Orca, "About Us."

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