

## Tech Snacks: “Alt Text” Basics + Copilot AI shortcut



### Alt Text: What and why is it?

Alternative text (“alt text”) is a text description of visual content, e.g., images and graphics.

Many vision-impaired learners and members of the public interact with MSU-Northern’s digital resources using screen-readers. For these users, alternative text is essential to understand non-text content such as images, diagrams, and other graphics.

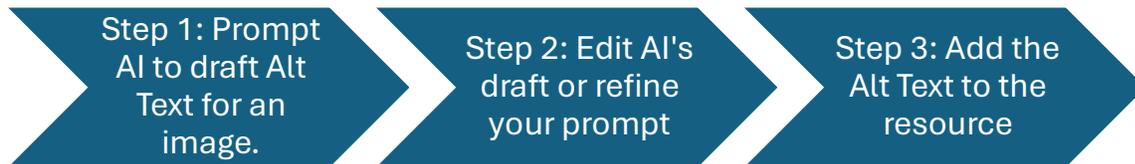
However, alternative text can also benefit other users:

- Users with slow internet connections or content blockers.
- For faculty & staff who create/maintain digital content, alternative text provides clues for moved or missing source images.
- Students: For some learners, viewing an image + consuming the same info via text helps them understand and retain the information better.

Important note about “**Decorative images**”: Visual elements that serve aesthetic purposes and don’t contribute meaningful information do not need Alt Text.

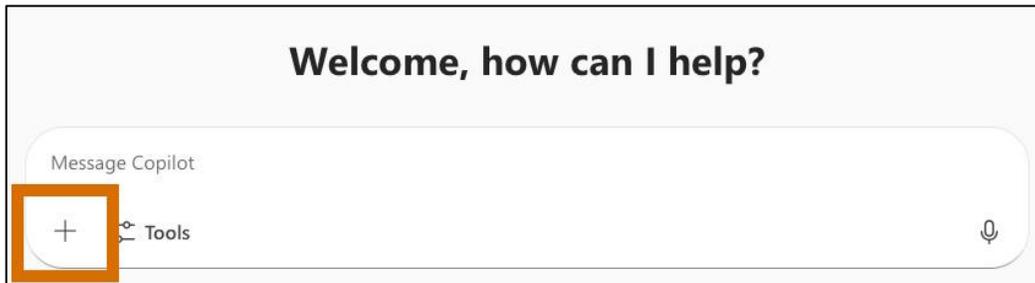
## OTLE Recipe: Using Copilot AI to help write Alt Text

An AI like Copilot can help you draft Alt Text, but it can't be trusted to do all the work. This workflow is meant to help faculty and staff write alt text more quickly and reduce the cognitive fatigue of the work. We are using Microsoft Copilot because it is included with our Microsoft 365 accounts. That said, this workflow can be used with most LLM chatbots



### Step 1: Prompt Copilot AI to create draft Alt Text for a given image.

1. Navigate to the [Microsoft Copilot AI webpage](#).
2. In Copilot Chat, select *Add content* (plus icon) next to the message box, then choose *Upload images and files* (see screenshot below).



3. Copy & paste one of the sample prompts (in this Tech Snacks handout, below). For simple images, you can use the simple prompt as it is written—no need to tweak it. For complex images, e.g., technical drawings, you may need to add contextual information to the prompt to get a quality draft from the AI.

Below are sample prompts that you can use and adapt for your own needs.

#### **Prompt for Simple Images:**

Copy the prompt (below), and paste it into an AI chatbot (e.g., Copilot).

**Persona:** Act as an expert in accessibility for college-level instructional materials.

**Objective:** Draft alternative text for the uploaded image.

**Context:** This image appears in a university course, website, or official document.

When drafting alt text, follow these **parameters**:

- Do not begin with “image of...”
- Include image type (e.g., historical photograph, painting, chart, map, schematic diagram, etc.) when doing so is likely important for the reader’s understanding.
- Transcribe all text included in the image, exactly as written.
- Be succinct, but the same time, favor completeness of relevant information over rigid length limits.
- Your draft should be free of bias and stereotypes. Avoid assumptions about a person's gender, race, ethnicity, age, or ability.
- Aim to make your draft comply with the WCAG 2.1 accessibility standard.
- If the image is functional (e.g., an icon that links or triggers an action), describe the action or destination. (WCAG 1.1.1)
- Avoid instructions that rely only on shape, color, or location (e.g., “green button on the right”). (WCAG 1.3.3)
- If no context/purpose is provided, describe visible content only and do not speculate.

### ***Prompt for Complex Images:***

Copy the simple image prompt (above) and paste it into an AI chatbot. Next, revise the prompt using the suggestions below. Revising the prompt is optional, but more context helps the AI identify relevant info in your complex image. Experiment—start with minimal context then add more if needed.

**Add to Persona:** In addition to accessibility expertise, tell the AI to act as an expert in the subject/discipline being taught. For example, “Act as an expert in anatomy for undergraduate nursing students.”

**Add to Context:** Describe where the image is found. For example: “The image is found in a college course titled <course title>, which is <a one sentence description of the course>.” If more context is needed, consider adding a brief module description and/or associated learning objectives.

**Add to Context:** Consider a brief description of the image’s purpose. For instance, “The graph is meant to help engineering students understand stress vs. strain.”

### **A few more options and ideas:**

- Instruct the AI to ask for clarifying information if it is needed. Pro: this strategy can result in better quality responses. Cons: it’s slower, and the AI will almost always find a reason to ask you for clarifying information.

- On the Copilot user interface, in the top-right corner of the screen, you have the option of telling the AI to give a “Quick response” or to “Think deeper.” Thinking deeper leads to better responses but takes more time.
- Alt text features generally don’t allow you to structure your text or include hyperlinks. For that reason, you might consider collecting complex image descriptions in an appendix and using the alt text to refer to the appendix. In that case, the following alt text format may be used:  
“**[Image type]** illustrating **[data type]** showing **[reason for including image]**. This is a complex image and may require specific support for blind and low vision students – please contact **[Name of designated person]** if required.”

### Step 2: Review and/or revise the AI’s draft.

Reviewing and revising the AI’s alternative text draft is a crucial step. Not only will AI’s overlook important details, but they also often “hallucinate” false/imaginary information. They can also give very offensive and/or unprofessional responses—check their work!

### Step 3: Add the Alt Text to the resource

Steps to add alternative text depends on the platform/tool being used. This might be the subject for a future Tech Snacks, but in the meantime, please contact one of the friendly folks in OTLE if you have questions.

Much of the information in this Tech Snacks handout was adapted from the [Accessibility Handbook for Teaching and Learning](#), by Luke McKnight and Briana Fraser.