

## The Alt= Attribute - Putting it to Good Use

by Peter Stevens

Let's begin by clearing up a very common misconception. When webmasters properly discuss HTML, those elements placed between chevron brackets are called "tags" and elements placed within those tags are called "attributes". Therefore, because it's an attribute of the <img> tag which in itself is a text container referred to as "alt text", there is no such thing as an "alt tag"!

The <img> tag carries several elements; some like "class=" are optional. Others like "height=" and "width=" are necessary to help the browser quickly work out where to place an image on the page. There is one element of this tag which is absolutely vital for quite a number of reasons - the "alt=" attribute.

Some people shy away from using it, in the mistaken belief that it's only used for "accessibility" purposes, and anyway writing accessible HTML is really hard, isn't it? Well, actually, No! All it does require is a bit of care and lots of practice. Let's now explore this attribute a bit further.

Whether or not any text is placed between the quotes, the alt attribute must always be present for every image! The reason for this emphasis will become clearer.

There are occasions when you should not place any text between the quotes. The code...

`alt=""` (Note: No space between quotes!)

is perfectly valid and should always be used in circumstances where images are placed on the page purely for decorative purposes. Examples of this are backgrounds, bullets and spacer images - whether transparent and/or containing things like curves for border corners, rules or box outlines.

Say you have a fairly long list of bulleted items. How long could you put up with a voice telling you repeatedly: "Image - red arrow pointing right"? Also, the empty string will suppress screen readers from announcing that it has encountered "an image" when it doesn't need to.

So, who benefits from correct use of the alt attribute? The simple answer is anyone and anything associated with your site. Here's a list...

### ◆ Web Robots:

To these critters relevant(!) text content within the attribute is yummy spider food. They eat up information that they can easily compare with all the surrounding text and very quickly come to the conclusion that several points of discussion within the page are properly illustrated. Up goes your page rank for far more search words - just for starters!

### ◆ Your Visitors:

When your visitors hover their mouse over an image, a tooltip will appear showing the alt attribute text. Just as important, the tooltip won't appear on empty alt text. On a fairly large image that is only partially displayed you may tempt your visitor to stay a bit longer by

reading further down the page, rather than them either looking for something else on your site, or worse clicking the close button.

If you use images as thumbnails for hyperlinks, alt really comes into its own. Within the alt text you can probably provide a longer / more meaningful description than within the link text. If your hyperlink opens a pop-up or another window, it allows you to place "View image in new window" into the "title=" attribute of the <a> tag. As you will see, this is its proper place, not in the alt text.

#### **Example A - An Image Pop-up:**

```
<a href="images/manonmoon.jpg" title="View image in new window"
onclick="newpop(this.href,'rel','550','550','0'); return false;">
<br />
The Eagle Has Landed</a>
```

So far, only Internet Explorer will correctly show the alt attribute when the mouse is hovered over the image, and separately show the "a" tag's title content when hovered over the caption. Most others will only show the title attribute content, which is important for all visitors.

#### **◆ Visitors With Assistive Technologies:**

It's fast becoming a misnomer that it's only disabled people who use Assistive Technologies. If you have a well designed web site that visitors regularly enjoy reading, then you open up new possibilities for them. Imagine for a moment someone who uses a screen reader simply so they can have your recipe page read to them, while they prepare your special curry, or sit back doing their knitting while the reader describes the pattern. Again the alt attribute comes into its own. Will the visitor need a picture to see how light or dark the paste should be? Say you have a poetry site and you add a new image, or a graphic hyperlink to a new page. Regular visitors will soon pick up on that. Oh, and be sure that if these experiences are enjoyed, visitors will tell their friends all about it!

I'll come back to the accessibility issues when how to populate your alt text is discussed below.

#### **◆ Visitors With Images Turned Off:**

I've got to be kidding, right? Yes, there were the bad old days when because people were charged the earth for bandwidth download, they'd turn images off in their browser. Okay, so those days maybe long-gone, but it comes back to an old saying - what goes around, comes around. However, this time it's not for any bandwidth reason, and it's not limited by accessibility issues either!

As more and more devices are designed in ever smaller packages to access the internet, so we are back to where images cannot be shown, other than possibly as thumbnails. It's here also where adding alt text to bullets and things can really confuse the issue.

#### **◆ You - The Webmaster:**

The alt attribute helps you in all sorts of ways. As you will have read above, it helps to bring visitors to your site and to keep them. It also helps speed your code writing, especially if

you have similar images on one page, like groups people or several in a series, and you want to make amendments to that page, maybe months later.

There are also occasions where you want to place an image on the page without an accompanying caption, simply because visually it isn't necessary. Unless you're discussing various varieties of apple, you won't need a caption, but the alt attribute is going to help either way.

### **How to Populate the Alt Text**

The number one consideration here is relevancy! By all means add keywords, but if you use any kind of keyword-stuffing, you will only harm your site. As with the <title> tag, practice a technique of assembling a keyword rich and meaningful sentence, only much shorter.

There are some don'ts! Avoid prefixing alt text with the words "image" or "picture"! A screen reader will first tell the listener "an image" then read out the alt text.

If you add a colon suffix to the word "Image", it'll probably make things worse by either saying "an image image colon" or "an image" adding a pause then "image" then another pause before it gets to what the listener really wants to hear. How annoying is that?

### **In Summary**

Never ever leave out the alt attribute from the <img> tag. Only ever populate it with relevant text in places where it matters. One final point, don't cheat, the ultimate outcome is that you cheat yourself.

Even in this long page, I've only touched on the main benefits of correctly using "alt=". Now you have an idea why it is that most evaluators set such store by it. Use it wisely and everyone benefits!