

## Q&A Guide

### Recommendations for Improving the Provision and Use of Braille for State-Mandated Assessment

## **Recommendation 1e:**

Provide image descriptions in both accessible digital text and hard copy braille for all tactile graphics

### **Acknowledgments**

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### **Introduction**

This Q&A Guide is a supplement to the AEM Center's practice brief, [Recommendations for Improving the Provision and Use of Braille for State-Mandated Assessment](#). The AEM Center, in collaboration with national experts in the provision of braille and other services for blind students, developed this guide to help users understand and implement Recommendation 1e from the practice brief: Provide image descriptions in both accessible digital text and hard copy braille for all tactile graphics.

## **Rationale for Recommendation 1e**

Images contain a vast amount of information that may be needed to answer test questions, but this information may not be easily accessed by all users. Two common methods for providing access to visual content for blind students are tactile graphics and image descriptions. While tactile graphics are vital for providing access to visual information, there are some limitations. One is the content of the visual itself, which may be too complex to convey tactilely. Another example of the limitations of tactile graphic is the skill level required to interpret them. Some students may be early in braille instruction and not yet prepared for tactile graphics. And some braille users may have motor impairments that render tactile graphics unusable. For these reasons, it is essential that all visuals used in assessment be accompanied by an image description, regardless of the availability of tactile graphics.

## **Note to the User**

For the purpose of Recommendation 1e, the term “image description” means any text description of a visual (e.g., graphic, image, table, or chart). The term is sometimes used interchangeably with alt text and long description. In this guide, we use “image description” as a general term, and “alt text” and “long description” to describe specific methods of describing images.

## **Questions & Answers**

### **Question 1:**

#### **Why are image descriptions important?**

Blind students and others with low vision may use screen reader software to access information on websites and other digital documents. Screen readers do more than read the text that appears on the screen. All onscreen elements are made accessible to the screen reader user via keyboard shortcuts (laptops) and hand gestures (smartphones and tablets), including the navigation structure, menus, buttons, hyperlinks, and more. When a digital image is presented to a screen reader user, the screen reader speaks aloud any image description, known as alt text, provided by the author of the content. Image descriptions that are well written provide essential information to screen reader users. For more information about image description and alt text, visit [Perkins School for the Blind](#) and [a video from the Office for Civil Rights](#).

## **Question 2:**

### **Who should be provided with image descriptions?**

Image descriptions are essential for providing access to digital content for blind and visually impaired students. Image descriptions are also beneficial to students who are colorblind, students with cognitive or intellectual disabilities, and those who need more context to understand the meaning of an image. The [Access Guide](#) has a helpful tutorial about image descriptions.

## **Question 3:**

### **What is the difference between alt text and long description?**

Both alt text and long description are textual explanations of a digital image. Alt text is brief, omitting any specific details that may or may not be important to context. Long description is lengthier, allowing for more detail that includes context and the relevance of the image to the surrounding content.

## **Question 4:**

### **What is best practice for knowing when to provide alt text versus long description?**

Alt text has a 120-character limit. If an appropriate description of an image can't be written within that limit, then an image description should be provided. Keep in mind that what is being described may change depending on the context of a test item. For example, if details of an image are needed for the test taker to respond to an item, then those details must be provided. If providing those details exceeds the alt text character limit, then a long description is needed.

## **Question 5:**

### **What is important to include in an image description?**

The most important elements to include in an image description depend on both purpose and context. For example, the same image might receive a different description depending on how it's being used to support or enhance the surrounding content. And, in some cases, an image may be used for a purely decorative purpose and doesn't add

any information to the surrounding content at all. [Visit WebAIM for a specific example of how context informs image description.](#)

### **Question 6:**

#### **Who is responsible for providing image descriptions in testing materials?**

Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the State Education Agency (SEA) and Local Education Agency (LEA) to ensure that appropriate image descriptions are provided. SEAs and LEAs are responsible for providing a free appropriate public education to all children with disabilities and for ensuring that children who need instructional materials in accessible formats are provided with these materials in a timely manner ([see Section 300.172 of IDEA](#)). When contracting with test vendors, SEAs and LEAs should require that image descriptions be written by content authors who understand the purpose and context of images used in the test materials. Alternatively, image descriptions are authored by agency staff.

### **Question 7:**

#### **Where can additional best practice guidelines for image descriptions be found?**

In addition to WebAIM, which was referenced under Question 5, the following resources provide reliable guidelines:

- [National Center for Accessible Media \(NCAM\): Describing Science Images for Learners with Disabilities](#) is cited by the Braille Authority of North America (BANA). NCAM includes guidance on how to use accessible tables to describe large data sets and highly-detailed graphs (see Example A).
- [DIAGRAM Center: Image Description Guidelines](#) was co-authored by NCAM
- [American Anthropological Association: Guidelines for Creating Image Descriptions](#) provides useful distinctions among alt text, long description, and captions
- [Urban Institute: Centering Accessibility in Data Visualization](#) is currently the most contemporary resource for improving access to visualizations produced from data sets.

## **Question 8:**

### **How are image descriptions provided in hard copy braille?**

In hardcopy braille documents, image descriptions are provided through transcriber's notes. BANA offers guidelines on best practices. The following excerpts provide examples:

- [Principles of Print-to-Braille Transcription \(2016\) guidance on transcriber's notes](#): "The notes should be as brief as possible (one to two sentences for most content, more for complex material), be grammatically correct, and use appropriate grade-level vocabulary. Sentence structure and word choice are dictated by the grade level of the material."
- [Guidelines and Standards for Tactile Graphics \(2012\) as related to design principles](#): "When writing transcriber's notes, use vocabulary appropriate to the grade level and subject matter of the text. Use terminology from surrounding text. If needed to clarify the content in the graphic, further description may be added in the transcriber's notes."

## **Question 9:**

### **How are image descriptions provided in hard copy braille?**

Simply put:

- If a tactile graphic is recommended, it should always be accompanied by an image description.
- If a tactile graphic is not recommended, an image description is required.

For typical transcription work, BANA recommends either producing a tactile graphic or an image description to provide access to graphic content. [See BANA's Decision Tree that illustrates the process for determining if a tactile graphic should be produced.](#)

For the purposes of assessment, a tactile graphic alone may not be sufficient for all braille readers. The interpretation of tactile graphics is a skill that students develop with time and practice, and not all braille readers will be able to access tactile content in an equally effective manner. For this reason, it is recommended that all tactile graphics be paired with an image description. The addition of an image description will provide access to graphic content for test takers who are not able to effectively use tactile graphics, and it can also support the interpretation of the tactile content.

Some graphic content is too complex to be effectively conveyed in a tactile format. In this situation, a detailed image description should be provided, and an accompanying tactile graphic is not required.