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Toolkit to Support the Description of Visual Resources for Accessibility in Arts & Humanities Publications

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Toolkit to Support the Description of Visual Resources for Accessibility in Arts & Humanities Publications

Abstract

With the support of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, the University of Michigan Library and Press have released an online resource designed to advance efforts towards accessible digital publishing in the arts and humanities by supporting the description of visual resources. This article provides an overview of the resource and its particular value for visual resources professionals, arts organizations, editors and authors who wish to make publications more accessible to readers with visual impairments and other print disabilities.

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Stephanie Rosen is Accessibility Specialist and Associate Librarian at the University of Michigan Library. She led the Describing Visual Resources project with the collaboration of Charles Watkinson, Rebecca Welzenbach, Jonathan McGlone, and LeAnn Fields. This article was prepared with input from U-M Library Communications and VRA Bulletin Content Editor Maureen Burns.

Toolkit to Support the Description of Visual Resources for Accessibility in Arts & Humanities Publications

With the support of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, the University of Michigan Library and Press have released an online collection of resources to support the efforts of authors, editors, publishers, and arts organizations seeking to make their publications and collections more accessible to people with visual impairments and other print disabilities. This collection of resources, called Describing Visual Resources Toolkit at <https://describingvisualresources.org/>, offers practical guidance for authors, editors, publishers, and arts organizations. It seeks to advance efforts towards accessible digital publishing in the arts and humanities by supporting the description of visual resources.¹

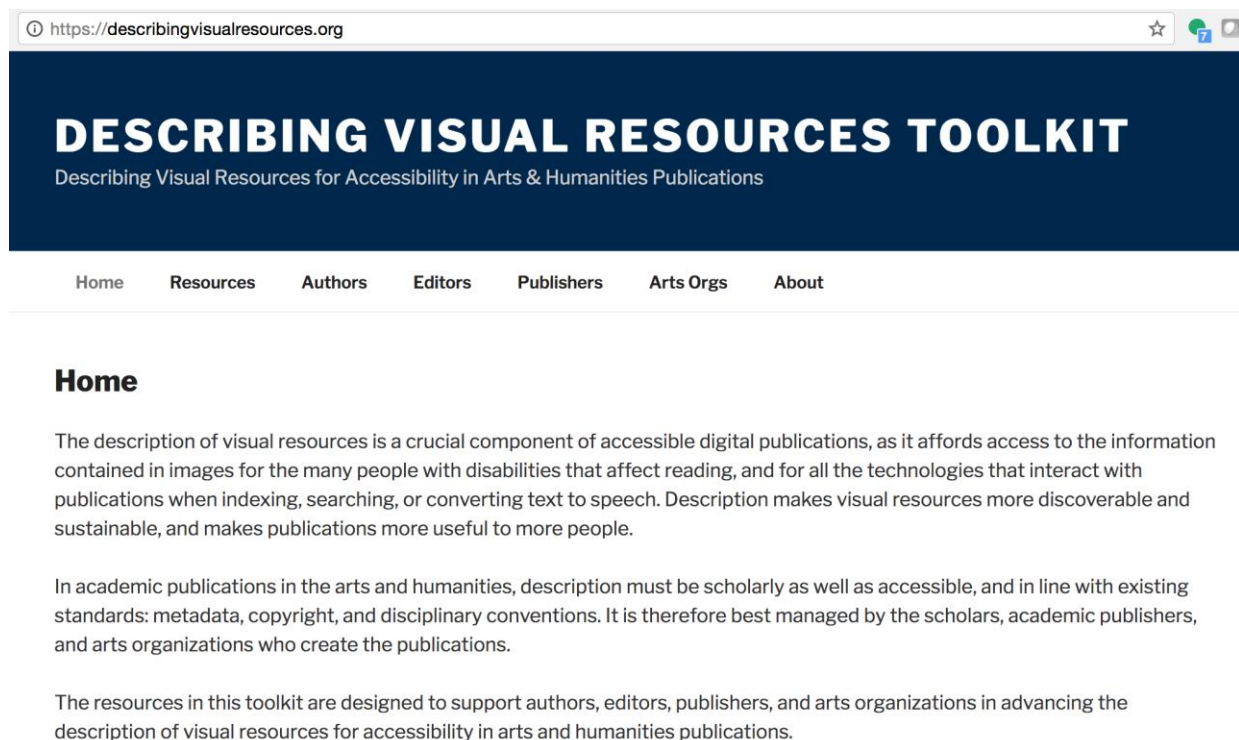


Figure 1. View of the Describing Visual Resources Toolkit Web Site

Description: Screenshot of Describing Visual Resources homepage, with main menu links to Resources, Authors, Editors, Publishers, Arts Orgs, and About; and introductory text for the resource.

The University of Michigan Press recognized a need for such a resource while working with authors to create born-accessible electronic books for its disability studies book series, *Corporealities: Discourses of Disability*. While accessible publishing standards require image descriptions, few resources provide authors, editors, and publishers with the necessary guidance to create and implement meaningful, scholarly descriptions in their publications. The Describing

¹ Images in this article include textual description in the alt text; this same textual description is reproduced within the caption for the benefit of all readers. For more information about alt text and how reading technologies handle different elements of description, see the Toolkit Glossary at: <https://describingvisualresources.org/guidelines/glossary/>.

Visual Resources Toolkit links to existing guidance on description, for fields ranging from fine arts to journalism to visual access, and specifically provides guidance for arts and humanities publishing.

Extensive background information can be found on the Toolkit ‘Home’ and ‘Background’ Web pages, explaining the need for digital publications that are accessible to people with print disabilities and how this project developed. The ‘Resources’ page links directly to the actual Guidelines, which reflect “a humanistic concern for the interpretation of meaning, creative expression, cultural contingency, and the specific and the non-reproducible” and outline “parameters for effective description without prescribing standards of practice.” The Guidelines include a glossary, basic principles, examples, and exceptions. In addition to guidance on effective description, there is support for all aspects of accessible publishing, including links to existing publishing resources, guidance on incorporating image accessibility into editorial processes, and sample language to promote the reuse of existing descriptions with sample permission requests.

The Toolkit was developed with contributions from experts in academic and museum publishing, art history and visual studies, disability studies and accessibility, and the cultural heritage fields, who came together for a two-day workshop in Ann Arbor during December 2016. Three members of the Visual Resources Association were in attendance: Jasmine Burns, Maureen Burns, and Susan Jane Williams. The interactive workshop was a unique opportunity for interdisciplinary dialogue around the issue and to clarify next steps for advancing the field. The University of Michigan Library and Press staff were crucial to the success of the project, taking the lead on dialog, drafts, feedback, finalization, and publicity. The resulting toolkit, which represents workshop participants’ collective knowledge and work, is intended to fill gaps in available guidance, direct practitioners to relevant resources, and catalyze the movement for accessible publishing by putting tools directly in the hands of authors, editors, publishers, and arts organizations.



Figure 2. Photograph of the Participants in the December 2016 Workshop

Description: Photograph of 25 workshop participants, standing and smiling for group photo.

One such practitioner is Mara Mills, associate professor of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University, who says, “I can think of no other accessible publishing kit addressed equally to authors, editors, and publishers. I already find myself referring to it in my own writing and editorial work, and I plan to share it with the undergraduates in my next disability studies seminar.” The toolkit translates expertise from a variety of fields into practical information for its specific user groups. For example, the Glossary section defines terms like ‘HTML,’ ‘alt text,’ and ‘assistive technology,’ and also notes that the “history of technology shows that what is ‘assistive’ often becomes ‘mainstream.’” Background on the need for accessible publications and the particulars of reading digital content with modern assistive technology is also provided.

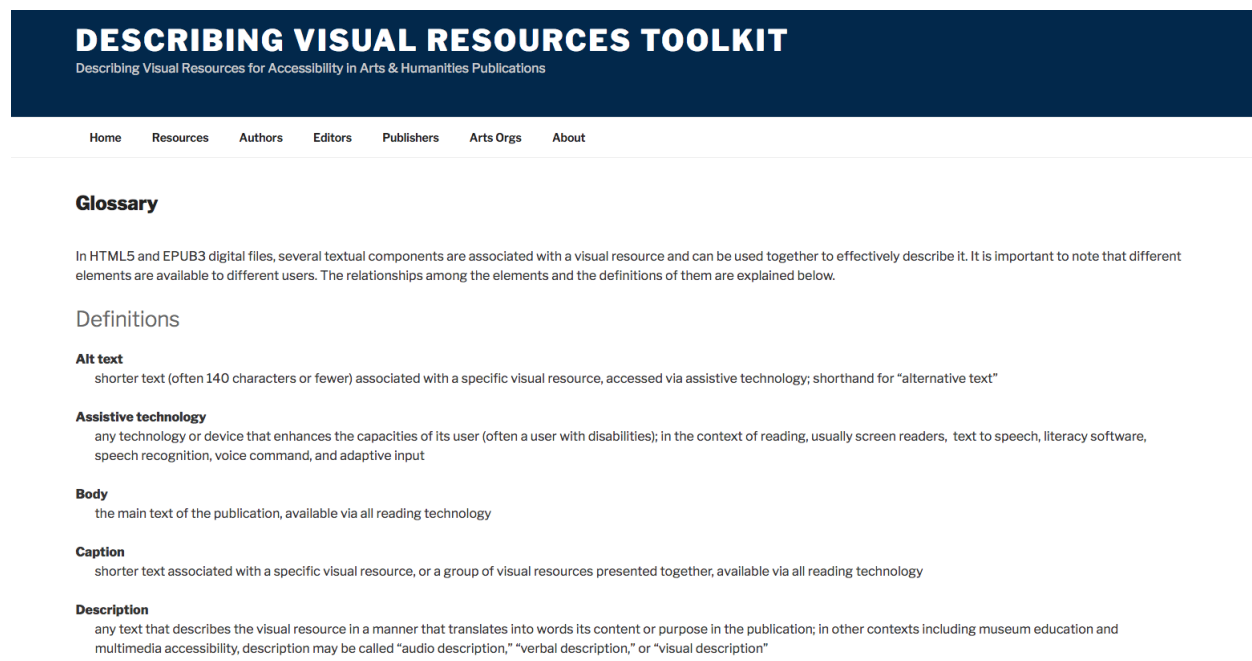


Figure 2. View of the Glossary

Description: Screenshot of Describing Visual Resources Glossary page, with definitions for alt text, assistive technology, body, caption, description, and more terms.

Karen Levine, Editor in Chief of the Getty Publications program, describes the toolkit as “an invaluable resource for authors, publishers, and arts organizations who are committed to making digital publications accessible to all interested readers. At last those of us publishing in the arts and humanities can consult information and guidelines that make sense for our fields.” Resources specific to those fields include information on how arts organizations can support accessibility by promoting the reuse of image descriptions they already develop and maintain, for example by granting authors the rights to reproduce those descriptions when they grant permission to reproduce the images within publications.

DESCRIBING VISUAL RESOURCES TOOLKIT

Describing Visual Resources for Accessibility in Arts & Humanities Publications

[Home](#) [Resources](#) [Authors](#) [Editors](#) [Publishers](#) [Arts Orgs](#) [About](#)

Arts Organization Resources

[Promoting Reuse of Existing Description](#)

Use the description you already develop to support accessible publishing. If you develop and maintain language describing the visual resources to which you hold or manage the rights, you can promote the accessibility of those visual resources by supplying descriptive language when responding to requests to reproduce visual resources.

[Incorporating Image Accessibility into Editorial Processes](#)

Promote effective and accessible use of visual resources. Editorial processes and policies can be used to promote the effective and accessible use of visual resources at every stage — from manuscript submission, to editing, to peer review.

[Resources for Accessible Publishing](#)

Learn how and why to adopt accessible publishing practices in your organization. Several initiatives have created resources to advance more accessible publishing practices, and excellent resources are freely available online.

[Background](#)

Learn why we need accessible digital publications for people with print disabilities and how this project developed.

[Glossary](#)

Understand the technical components of visual resources in digital publications and how users with print disabilities access them. Where print works have only the text and the visual resource, digital publications have additional, hidden text associated with images and accessed via specialized technology.

Figure 3. View of the Arts Organizations Resources Web Page

Description: Screenshot of Arts Organization Resources page, with links to sections on Promoting Reuse of Existing Description, Incorporating Image Accessibility into Editorial Processes, and more.

The description of visual resources is a crucial component of accessible digital publications, as it affords access to the information contained in images for the many people with disabilities that affect reading, and for all the technologies that interact with publications when indexing, searching, or converting text to speech. For an example that might resonate for visual resources professionals, if Leonardo da Vinci's 'Mona Lisa' were used in a publication, a corresponding textual description would provide relevant information for a reader listening to software read the publication aloud. That description would be comprised of a combination of elements: the text itself, the caption, the alt text, and the long description (the latter two of which are available specifically to assistive technology commonly used by readers with visual impairments). Furthermore, the description would be very different if the publication were an introduction to art history, an analysis of da Vinci's anatomical studies as an influence on his art, or a treatise on conservation techniques — even while all might share common descriptive elements like portraiture and landscape. The alt text for figures in this article is reproduced within the captions for easy reference. Extended examples and discussion can be found on the Web site at: <https://describingvisualresources.org/guidelines/examples/>.

Stephen Kuusisto, Professor at Syracuse University and author of *Planet of the Blind*, calls this work “a remarkable achievement. It offers a new and vital resource for academic publishers who are looking for innovative ways to support the blind and visually impaired in contemporary publishing.” Maureen Burns, former president of the Visual Resources Association, notes that, “Visual resources and other information professionals in archives, libraries, and museums, should familiarize themselves with these new guidelines and make a concerted effort to understand the issues and to promote the use of these comprehensive

guidelines. It is right up our alley as we strive to improve the sustainability and discoverability of visual content. Since information professionals tend to be well-versed in image description, perhaps these skills can be of use to university presses and other publishers as we develop new roles in the ever-expanding digital universe.” Indeed, it is the hope of the Toolkit creators that this resource will facilitate new collaborations and more activity in accessible publishing across the arts and humanities.