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MAKING BLOG PHOTOS ACCESSIBLE: A NON-GEEK’S EXPERIENCE

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So you want your friends or customers with visual impairments to enjoy your blog—even if it has pictures.

That means you need alternative text. A few words and the right code will allow screen reading technology to convey an image’s information to people who cannot see it. Unfortunately you have to know how to place the description, or it won’t be recognized for what it is. A caption won’t always solve the problem. First, the caption is different from the image alt-attribute. And while a screen reader will relay the caption even if the image has no alternative text, it still won’t make a lot of sense if the caption doesn’t actually describe the photo. The key is to convey the context of the image.

What’s more, if the image is linked, it needs its own alternative text to be accessible.

Alternative text is one of the top issues in blog accessibility, and the single-biggest problem that earned me red flags when I ran my blogs through the WAVE (Web Accessibility Evaluation) tool. (WAVE is an amazing automated free online gizmo. Just plug in a url and see where the accessibility issues are. It was developed by WebAIM, the Web accessibility experts here at the CPD.)

Thanks to WAVE, I knew I had a problem. My next hurdle: I’m not proficient in html. I’m scared enough of it, I don’t even use WordPress. I use Tumblr and Blogger instead.

Fortunately I found all text solutions for both platforms.

In my opinion, Tumblr’s handling of alternative text is a lot simpler. Here’s what you do: after you upload the image, click on it, then click on the photo icon in the editor’s tool bar. An “Insert/edit image” dialog box will appear. Enter a brief description of the photo under “image description.” (Please, don’t make it lengthy. That’s cumbersome for the reader.) Then hit “Insert.” You’re done.

Blogger’s fix is trickier and it involves going into the html editor, but if I can do it, anybody can. I found it on this online forum and tried it on a photo on my blog. It made the red flag go away when I ran the post through the WAVE tool again.

I haven’t solved all my problems. WAVE still red-flags the “search” box in both Tumblr and Blogger—it’s missing a form label. There’s not much I can do about it, since I can’t control that field. Still, one error is a lot better than dozens. What’s more, not all accessibility problems can be detected by WAVE’s automated tool. That said, if a web page goes through the WAVE tool without raising any red flags, that’s a good indication that its developers are paying attention to accessibility.

Want to know more? There are experts for that. WebAIM is my favorite. And self-proclaimed “accessibility conscience” Glenda Watson Hyatt wrote an excellent post on the subject.

Check them out, and happy blogging.