

What are they?

Protected characteristics

Why are they
important?



Including protected characteristics in alternative text descriptions for images

- understand how and when to include protected characteristics in alternative text descriptions;
- identify appropriate language and terminology to use when describing certain protected characteristics;
- apply the principles of respect, context and relevance to create inclusive alternative text descriptions;
- have the opportunity to practise writing some alternative text descriptions.

Introduction (5 minutes)

Welcome participants and introduce the topic of the workshop.

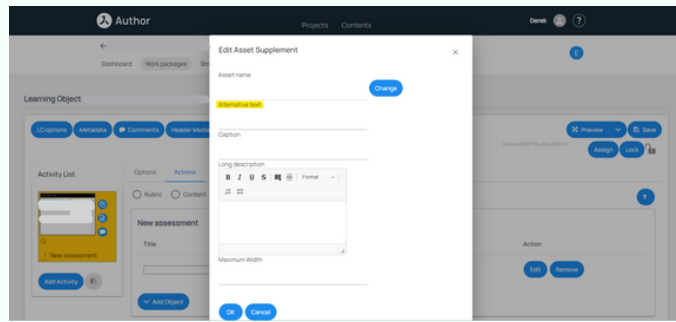
Highlight the importance of accessibility and inclusion in ELT digital materials, especially in light of the upcoming enforcement of the European Accessibility Act in June 2025.

Also mention that accessibility is not a 'nice to have' but should be a consideration from the start of the development process. Publishers and materials developers need to ensure they are 'shifting left', a concept from agile software development that sees workflow elements like accessibility being moved further towards the start of the workflow (to the left) so that their early consideration reduces costs later.

Reference my talk at IATEFL last year where there was discussion of including ethnicity in alternative text descriptions. The question that arose was whether ethnicity details should be included in every image description.

Go over the workshop objectives on the slide.

Alternative text



- text description of an image.
- can be read by screen readers so that visually impaired people can hear the description.
- the text description conveys the meaning of the image.
- Alternative text can be useful for everyone, e.g. if the image doesn't load.

Overview of alternative text and best practice (5 minutes)


What is alternative text?

Who is it for? Why should we do it?

Accessibility in digital ELT content development





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1 in 5 = 87 million




Europeans have a disability

Out of 1000 people...

-  77% have vision issues.
-  18% have hearing issues.
-  10% have dyslexia.
-  8% of men & 1% of women have colour vision issues.





Make your content accessible:
EAA: European Accessibility Act (enforcement from June 2025)
WCAG: Web Content Accessibility Guidelines
 Add Alt text to images 







Statistics from: www.design.education.gov.uk/tools/how-many-users/1000



ALT Text Best Practice


Do you need it?



- X decorative 
- ? assessments   BEWARE of going overboard
- ✓ for meaning 

Don't write 'image of' 

Use proper grammar and punctuation   

Plain language  

No jargon ELT  English Language Teaching

As short as possible  

Either CAPTION OR ALT-text

Visualised by: EmilyBrysonELT.com

What are some best practices to keep in mind when writing alternative text?

Here is a summary of my presentation last year which outlines the best practices around alternative text. For example:

Consider whether the image is decorative vs contextual.

Don't use 'image of' in the description.

Always use proper grammar and punctuation and, as far as possible, plain language.

Keep the description as short as possible. Alternative text fields in authoring tools and elsewhere will often have character limits.

Protected characteristics



Protected characteristics refer to specific attributes of a person that are legally protected from discrimination.

These characteristics are defined by the Equality Act 2010 in the UK.

Defining Protected Characteristics (5 minutes)

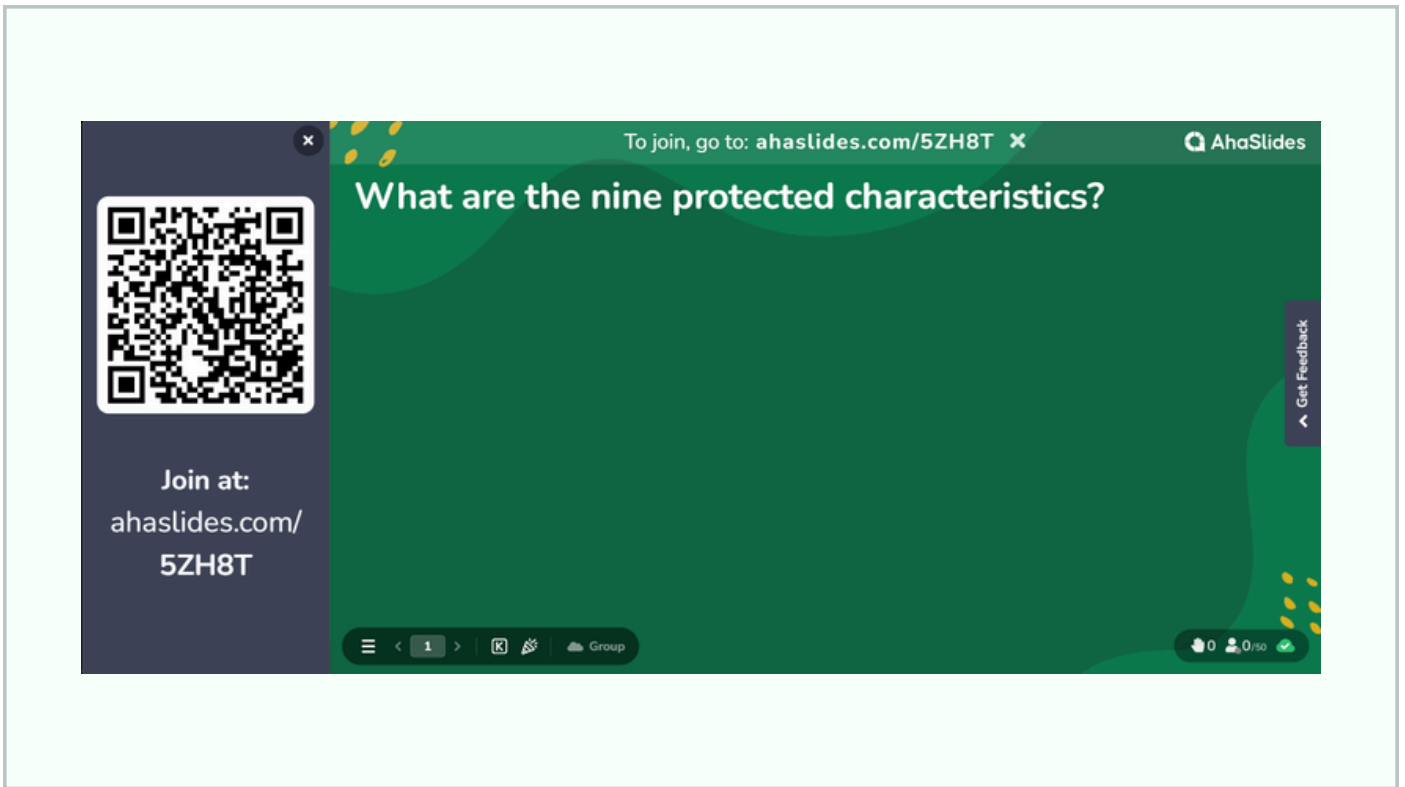
Go through the definition of the term 'protected characteristics'.

In the context of accessibility, protected characteristics refer to specific attributes of a person that are legally protected from discrimination. These characteristics are defined by the Equality Act 2010 in the UK.

The aim of considering protected characteristics in accessibility is to ensure that content and services are inclusive and do not exclude or disadvantage individuals based on these attributes.

Definition: Protected characteristics are specific attributes that are legally safeguarded against discrimination. The Equality Act 2010 lists these characteristics.

Relevance to Accessibility: When creating digital content, it's crucial to consider how protected characteristics may impact a person's ability to access and use that content. For example, a person with a visual impairment may need alternative text for images, and someone with a cognitive disability may benefit from clear and consistent navigation.



So, what are the nine protected characteristics outlined by the legislation?

Scan the QR code and write down the ones you know.



Protected Characteristics:

Age: Accessibility should account for the needs of both older and younger users.

Disability: This includes a wide range of visible and invisible impairments such as physical, sensory, and cognitive disabilities. It includes conditions from the point of diagnosis such as cancer, MS and HIV/AIDS as well as mental health conditions, progressive conditions like dementia, and neurodiversity such as dyslexia.

Gender Reassignment: This refers to people who are proposing to undergo, are undergoing, or have undergone a process to reassign their sex.

Marriage and Civil Partnership Status: While this is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act, it may not be as relevant to digital accessibility as other characteristics.

Pregnancy and Maternity: It's important to be aware of how content represents pregnant women and new mothers.

Race: This includes colour, nationality, and ethnic or national origins.

Religion or Belief: This includes any religion or philosophical belief, as well as the lack of any such religion or belief.

Sex: This refers to whether a person is male or female.

Sexual Orientation: This refers to how people feel as well as their actions toward persons of the same sex, opposite sex, or either sex.

RESPECT



Relevance

Key Considerations: Respect, Context, and Relevance (5 minutes)

Discuss the three key considerations for writing inclusive alt text: respect, context, and relevance.

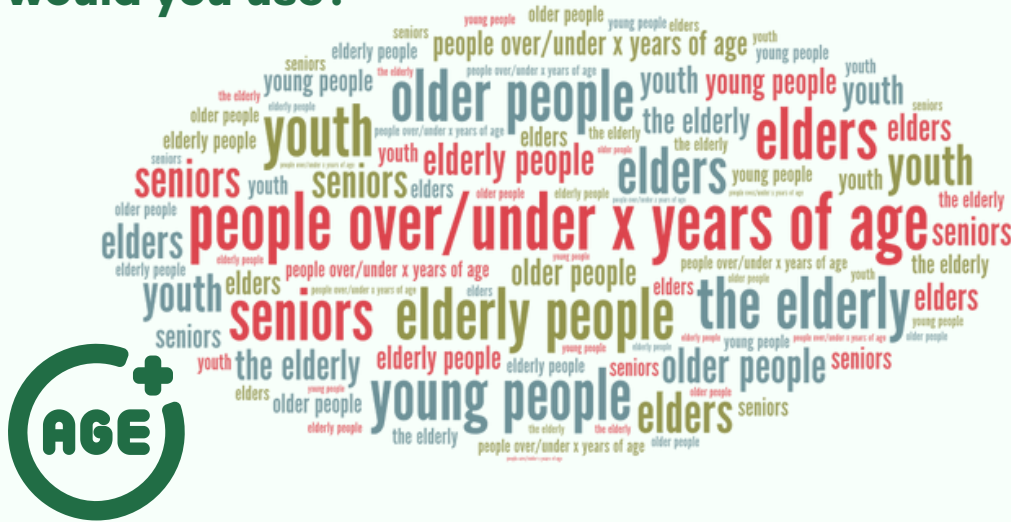
Respect: How do you think someone would like to be described or portrayed? Is it potentially offensive? Is it accurate? You do not necessarily know the people in the images being selected for online courses or books.

Context: Why is the image being used? Is the description of the protected characteristic relevant? Decorative vs contextualised images. Decorative images don't require an alternative text description and can be marked as such so that screen readers ignore them. Is the image attached to a particular text or audio? The reading or listening will influence the description of the image.

Relevance: Is it acceptable to describe the image neutrally? Would it be overkill to include information about a protected characteristic?

Explain the importance of using respectful and appropriate language.

Which words or phrases would you use?



Join at:
ahaslides.com/1Y2VR

The first protected characteristic we are looking at is age.

Is it relevant to mention age? If so, what terminology is appropriate?

Provide examples of both good and bad terminology in a word cloud and have the participants categorise them.

Participants scan the QR code and select the words or phrases they think are appropriate to use in an alternative text description.

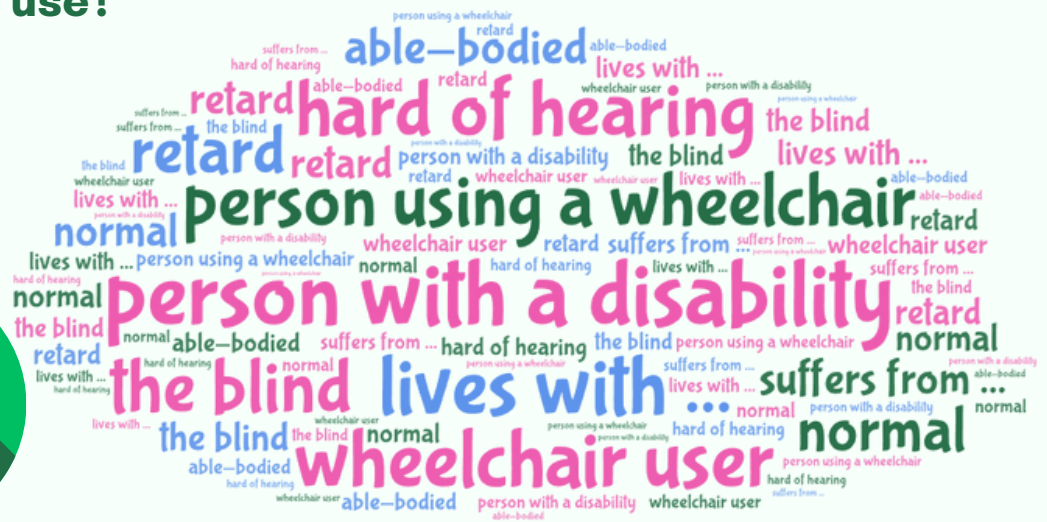
✓	✗
people over/under x years of age	youth
elders	the elderly
elderly people	seniors
young people	
older people	

Good: 'people over/under x years of age', 'elderly people', 'older people', 'elders', or 'young people'. These words and phrases are more factual or statements of fact.

Point out terms to avoid: 'the elderly', 'seniors', or 'youth'. These words/phrases tend to be used more pejoratively and create an us and them situation. Avoid homogenising and patronising language.

Descriptions should reflect the fact that people lead full, interesting, fun and active lives. Avoid stereotypes such as teenagers only playing video games or sports and having limited interests.

Which words or phrases would you use?



Disability:

How would you describe a person with a disability in a way that is respectful and accurate?

Word cloud examples again via the same QR code.

✓	✗
person with a disability	normal able-bodied
wheelchair user person using a wheelchair	wheelchair-bound confined to a wheelchair
lives with ... is affected by ...	suffers from ... is afflicted with ... is a victim of ...
hard of hearing hearing impaired visually impaired	the deaf/Deaf the blind the disabled the handicapped
	retard special needs

Word cloud examples again.

Good: 'person with a disability', 'person using a wheelchair', 'lives with [medical condition]', 'hard of hearing', 'wheelchair user'.

Avoid: 'the blind', 'suffers from [medical condition]', 'She's Deaf', 'able-bodied', 'normal', 'retard'.

The blind/deaf/disabled or handicapped are homogenising and are often pejorative.

'Deaf' typically refers to someone who has had severe or total hearing loss since birth and who uses sign language as their first language. Saying 'She's Deaf' or 'the Deaf' does not acknowledge that there is a spectrum of hearing loss.

'Retard' has been deliberately included here due to its recent resurgence in usage, mainly due to Elon Musk's continued use of it on X, undoing years of work that had successfully reduced its use.

'Special needs' has social stigma attached to it.

Emphasise foregrounding the person rather than the disability, e.g., 'an athlete using a wheelchair'. However, there are preferences both ways. 'Wheelchair athlete' is also acceptable.

Caution against misrepresenting models in stock images as having disabilities. You do not know the person/people in the image.

Alternative text descriptions can highlight examples of less visible disabilities: hearing or vision impairments.

Which words or phrases would you use?



Ethnicity:

When is it relevant to mention ethnicity?

What terminology is appropriate and respectful?

Refer to the distinction between race (physical characteristics) and ethnicity (social and cultural characteristics).

✓	✗
Black white	White
People of Colour (UK)	
multiracial biracial	mixed race
Indigenous	
American Indian Indigenous American Native American (less popular)	
First Nations First Nations People Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Australia)	Aborigine/Aboriginals Eskimo ATSI

Good: 'Black', 'People of Colour', 'Indigenous', 'Biracial', or 'multiracial', 'American Indian', 'Native American'.

Avoid: 'mixed race', 'aborigine', 'Eskimo', 'White'.

'Mixed race' promotes a narrative of there being one superior/pure race.

'Aborigine' and 'Eskimo' are now outdated names with terms such as 'First Nations', indigenous peoples, or the actual tribal name being preferred.

While 'American Indian' and 'Native American' are acceptable terms, if possible, use the tribal name. 'Native American' has become less popular with some tribal people. 'Indigenous American' is also acceptable.

The debate about 'Black' vs 'white' (upper and lowercase) may come up in the discussion. 'Black' is seen as the righting of a wrong and conferring dignity and racial equity to a specific community. Many people feel that to capitalise 'white' would, therefore, be inappropriate.

Indicate that a reading text or listening can determine whether mentioning ethnicity is necessary.

Choose one of the photos? Create the alternative text.



<https://ahaslides.com/AE7QL>



<https://ahaslides.com/ZIITI>



<https://ahaslides.com/BOHII>

Alternative text task (10 minutes)

Show the participants the three images, each representing one of the protected characteristics. They choose one of them via the QR code and write the alternative text description for it, keeping the principles of respect, context and relevance in mind (assume it's a contextual image and that it is relevant to include details of the protected characteristic).

Have each group share their alternative text descriptions with the larger group.

Ask the group to consider: Is the description respectful? Is it relevant to the context of the image and learning materials?

Facilitate a discussion about the challenges and successes of creating inclusive alternative text descriptions.

Erdogan Dulda
89 years old
10K race



<https://ahoslides.com/AE7QL>

Image by sporlab on Unsplash

Tyler Masterson
2017 Chicago Marathon



<https://ahaslides.com/Z11T1>

Image by Seth Kane on Unsplash

Hennepin County
Government building,
Minneapolis, US
2020

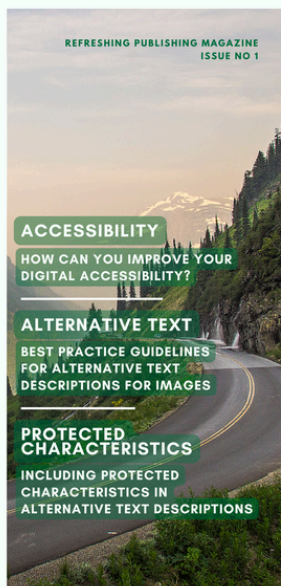


<https://ahoslides.com/B0H11>

Image by Josh Hild on Unsplash



ACCESSIBILITY
NO.1



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Key takeaways from the workshop (5 minutes)

1. Remember to consider the principles of respect, context and relevance.
2. Do you need to include information about the protected characteristics?
3. Consider carefully the language you want to use in your description.