Transcript: Alt Text Tips for Maps

Hi, my name is Brad Neuhauser. I'm with the State of Minnesota Accessible Maps Community here with you today to talk about how to create alternative text for maps.

Each situation is unique, but in all cases readable text is needed somewhere to convey the map's message. If a map is well described in text, your alternative text can be brief. If not, it will need more extensive alternative text.

Maps with good accompanying information need minimum alternative text. This map has it all. Map titles and a paragraph description tell what it is. A table with readable data points provides the map information in an alternative format. A section with contacts and links provides the reader with a way to get more information. In this example, the alt text can be brief: maps with school districts outlined.

The other extreme is if there is no other descriptive text, then a more detailed explanation is needed of the idea it conveys. In this example, the water table elevation map only has a key, but the map data is complex, so a longer alt text is preferable. The suggested alt text would be, "Map of Washington County, Minnesota. Water-table elevations are higher along the river watershed divide on the eastern edge and in the southwest; lower along major rivers down the center north to south. Groundwater flows from the center to the east, south, and southwest."

The following slides will give examples of options for different scenarios. If a title is descriptive, and the caption comprehensive, then the alt text can be brief.

Here's the same water table map, this time with the addition of a title and captions. The suggested alt text in this situation is, "Map of Washington County, Minnesota. Water table elevations are depicted by colored regions."

If the descriptive text is elsewhere, the alt text could direct the reader to it. "See details in...". "Details listed in...". "See accompanying text in...".

If body text lists the regions depicted in the map and they are well organized by heading levels and alphabetization, you can almost artifact the map. But if the text indicates a map should be there, it is expected.

This map shows ecological and water resources by county, along with detailed descriptive body text above. Suggested alt text could be, "Minnesota Map of counties divided into four water resource districts, which are in turn divided into north and south portions. Counties are listed alphabetically in the accompanying text."

Data tables provide readable points on the map. These can be included visibly, invisibly behind the map or through a link. Just make sure the table is not an image.

On the slide, you'll see a document with a map showing water use in Washington County. There's a table next to it that lists the data points. The suggested alt text is, "Map of Washington County, Minnesota depicting water use with symbols by volume and aquifer. Details in the preceding text and table."

If there is more descriptive information elsewhere, provide a link to it in the map. Then provide a link to the map in the descriptive information. Your map may get separated from its source, so it is good to cross reference.

In this example, the trail map contains a link to the state trail web page and the web page provides a link to the map. Note: Links do not go in the alt text. They don't function and are read off letter by letter, which is tedious and annoying. The suggested alt text for this map is, "Color-coded trail map as described on associated web page."

A map could link to a report with detailed descriptions. In long documents, indicate the location of the information by section headings, not page numbers that can change through editing. Section headings can be found within the table of contents or by scanning headings if the document has been set up properly.

In this example, the map has text with a link to a report in the upper corner. The suggested alt text in this situation, "Map of Sherburne County, Minnesota, cross sections describing aquifer characteristics. See details in the accompanying report under the section titled Hydrogeologic Cross Sections."

Excessive repetition can bog down reading. Here we have a group of related maps. They include informative captions so map images can be artifacted. There are two steps.

1. Give good alternative text to the first map and artifact the rest.
2. Explain it in the alternative text.

Suggested alt text for the initial map is, "Fourteen maps of groundwater flow in Washington County. See captions. The following 13 maps have been artifacted for ease of reading."

Finally, check your work by reading your document out loud. Include any title, body text and alt text in order. Ask yourself, does it flow? Does it all make sense together? Does it convey the map's message? Is the alt text brief but informative? Or is it merely repetitive? If the map is described elsewhere, does the text direct you there?

Thank you for joining me today as we discussed how to create alternative text for maps. For more information on map accessibility, visit the Minnesota IT Services Map Accessibility webpages at mn.gov/mnit/about-mnit/accessibility/maps.