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## **Describing images 4: Photographs, illustrations and works of art**

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**Guidance from UKAAF**



**UK Association for Accessible Formats (UKAAF)**

**Because format quality matters**

## Why format quality matters

"When organisations send me information in formats that I can read myself it allows me to be independent, feel informed and appreciated - just like every other customer."

End-user

"Producing consistently high quality accessible formats helps us to maintain our reputation, to gain new customers and to retain existing ones."

Transcription agency

"We are committed to ensuring that our customers with print disabilities receive the same information, of the same quality, as everyone else."

Service provider

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## Who is this guidance for?

This guidance from the UK Association for Accessible Formats (UKAAF) is primarily aimed at those within education or the workplace who are providing images as part of course materials, their business or presentations. It will be particularly useful in helping to create effective descriptions for blind and partially sighted users. It should be used if materials being provided contain images, or have been adapted with the images removed.

## The 'Describing images' series

This guidance is part of the 'Describing images' series. The series consists of five guidance documents. This fourth document (G016) explains in more detail how to describe different types of photographs, illustrations and works of art. If help is needed with describing a different type of image then the relevant guidance document should be referred to:

- 1 General principles (G013)
- 2 Charts and graphs (G014)
- 3 Maps, maths and tables (G015)
- 4 Photographs, illustrations and works of art (G016)
- 5 Accessible images (G017)

This guidance document includes information on:

- Which images to describe
- How much detail to include
- How to structure a description
- Templates to help you structure your own image descriptions
- How to describe different types of photographs, illustrations and works of art

These guidelines are appropriate for image descriptions in the following formats:

- Print
- Electronic files such as Microsoft Word documents or PDF
- Audio files (such as DAISY)
- Web pages
- E-books
- Presentations
- Accessible images

These guidelines have been updated in collaboration with the Open University (OU) and are an update of the 'Guidelines for describing visual teaching material' (2004). Additional content has been produced by Claire Jones, Assistant Development Officer, (RNIB Centre for Accessible Information) and Emir Forken, Programme Manager, (OU).

### **Disclaimer**

This guidance may include references to external websites, services or products for which UKAAF accepts no responsibility. This information is given without any representation or endorsement of those websites, services or products.

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## 1 Acknowledgements

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Many thanks to the team in RNIB's Centre for Accessible Information, particularly Sarah Home for her support and guidance and Caroline Walker, Alan Waller and Martin Fuller for taking the time to source images for use in this guide. Also Mary Steiner and Andrew Homer for their comments and Sarah Morley Wilkins for overall support.

Thanks also to Alan Waller who has kindly allowed some of his paintings and illustrations to be used in these guidelines.

Thanks also to Paul R. Lynch (Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research (VICTAR), University of Birmingham) for his help and support and Philip Jeffs (RNIB) for helping to source images from the RNIB photographic archives.

## 2 Introduction

By obtaining these guidelines you are demonstrating your commitment to helping people with a print disability to read your materials if they find reading standard print materials difficult or impossible.

This guidance concentrates specifically on materials suitable for blind and partially sighted people - such as large print, audio, braille and electronic file formats. However, others with a print

disability, for example with dyslexia or motor-difficulties, may also find such materials necessary.

The provision of accessible information is a key requirement of the Equality Act which service providers must follow, but good customer service and business practice includes communicating with your customers and staff in ways which meet their reading needs. By providing accessible format materials, you not only demonstrate your commitment to equality and inclusion, but also increase your reach and customer base. It therefore makes good business sense.

This guidance will help you and your organisation to incorporate good practice into your business and provide good quality accessible format materials in a timely and appropriate way.

### **3 About UKAAF**

The UK Association for Accessible Formats (UKAAF) is the industry association whose mission is to set standards for accessible formats that meet end-user needs through:

- development, delivery and promotion of codes, standards, and best practice for the production and provision of accessible formats
- consultation and collaboration with transcribers, service providers and users of accessible formats.

Members of UKAAF include organisations and individuals with an interest in the provision of quality accessible formats, such as service providers, transcribers, educators, researchers, print services, publishers, and end-users.

Through its leadership and representation, standards-setting, and by fostering a spirit of cooperation between members, UKAAF ensures that the needs and requirements of end-users are

understood by service providers and transcribers to help improve the quality of accessible formats.

Please see the section on "Where to get further help" towards the end of this document for more information about the benefits of being a member of UKAAF.

### **4 Definition of print disability**

A print-disabled person is anyone for whom a visual, cognitive, or physical disability hinders the ability to read print. This includes all visual impairments, dyslexia, and any physical disabilities that prevent the handling of a physical copy of a print publication.

Source: Copyright Licensing Agency Print Disability Licensing Scheme, Guidelines for Licensees 2010.

### **5 Describing photographs, illustrations and works of art**

This section of the guidelines has separate sections covering descriptions for photographs and works of art. The context of the image determines whether they are considered to be illustrations.

Refer to the document 'Describing images 1: General principles' (G013) for general guidelines for describing images.

The distinction between photographs, paintings and illustrations may sometimes be blurred, for example a photograph of a soldier on a bronze horse may be considered as a work of art, an example of technology, or a historical event. It will usually be clear from the context of the image that is the most helpful advice or template to follow.

Before beginning to write a description, establish what the image is showing and what the most important aspects are.



## 6 Describing photographs

Photographs can be very detailed and complicated to describe, though a full description is not always necessary. Consider what is important about the photograph in the context of how the image is going to be used, and how much detail is essential.

Photographs are sometimes used as the focus for questions and activities. It may be difficult to provide the same learning experience with a description, but the aim should be to describe only what is visible, without interpretation or opinion which may answer questions in education. In this way a blind or partially sighted user can consider what is important or significant for themselves.

If the photograph is of a work of art and a person is expected to consider an emotional response, the photograph should be treated as such.

When writing a description of a photograph, describe what the photograph shows unless this is clear from the caption. Describe the scope of the image and, if it is long, how you are going to organise the description, for example: 'The photograph shows the scene at an oasis in the Sahara Desert. The landscape will be described briefly, followed by details of the appearance of the four people referred to in the text.'

The examples given are divided into 'People,' 'Places' and 'Things'. This is an artificial distinction and you will probably need to look at all three sections for help with a particular photograph.

### 6.1 Photographs of people

When describing people think about what is relevant:

- Who are the people?
- Where they are?

- What are they doing?
- How they are interacting with each other?
- Is what they are wearing significant?

### 6.1.1 Photographs of people template

[Start of description]

This {black and white / colour} photograph shows {a number of} {people / children / adults / women / men / girls / boys} {standing / sitting ...}.

They are described in order from {left to right / front to back / clockwise from the top}.

{Include any additional information essential, for example answering educational assessments.}

[End of description]

### 6.1.2 Photographs of people example: Conference group



**Figure 1: Black and white photograph of a conference group, Buile Hill Park, Salford, July 30th 1908**

[Start of description]

Figure 1 is a black and white photograph shows a crowd of approximately 90 people lined up in tiered uneven rows. They are standing against the pillars of a part of a large, grand building; possibly the entrance porch, with a glasshouse to the left, as only part of the building is shown.

The photograph is old; so the details are blurred; they appear to have relaxed facial expressions.

The rows nearest the camera are sitting down; with the rows towards the back standing; possibly on steps as they are raised.

The group are dressed very finely. The ladies wear ground length full dresses or blouses and ground length skirts. They all wear grand hats, decorated with flowers, feathers or lace. One lady standing on the far left carries an umbrella. The gentlemen all wear suits with cravats, though this detail is difficult to see.

[End of description]

## 6.2 Photographs of places

Consider what the reader needs to know:

- What does the image show?
- Is the weather relevant?
- Are there people there?
- Is it rural or urban?
- If it shows geological features, what is the scale?
- If it is a building, only include the main architectural features to keep the description simple
- Mention any aspect of a place or buildings that is related to its purpose, such as handrails or decorative features.

If it is an illustration of a place or building which is a work of art, it may be appropriate to convey a subjective response in the description.

### **6.2.1 Photographs of places template**

[Start of description]

This {black and white / colour} photograph shows a {landscape / scene / town / rural landscape / urban landscape} with {something} in the foreground and {something} in the background. It is {taken from a high point / low point / an aerial view}.

The description begins with the background, followed by the foreground details.

The sky is {cloudy / clear}.

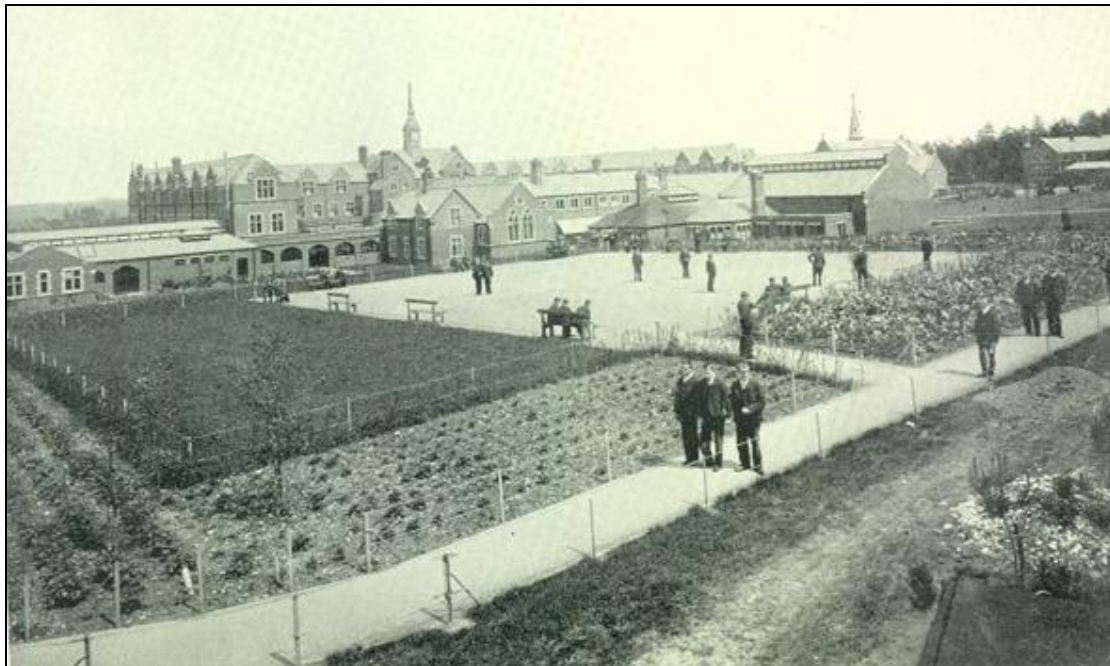
There are {no people / some people}.

The land is {cultivated / uncultivated / wooded / desert / snow-covered / flat / hilly / mountainous}.

{Include any additional information essential, for example answering educational assessments.}

[End of description]

### 6.2.2 Photographs of places: RSIB Leatherhead, 1908



**Figure 2: Black and white photograph of RSIB Leatherhead grounds, 1908**

[Start of description]

This black and white photograph shows a scene of school grounds with a courtyard and gardens in the foreground and school buildings in the background. It is taken from a high point.

The description begins with the background, followed by the foreground details. The school is made up of many separate buildings of various sizes; with some buildings being one storey high; others two and some three. All have steeped roofs. The details are feint, but one building has a clock tower and the chapel has a spire.

The courtyard has benches around its edges and is surrounded by cultivated gardens. These are neatly planted with plants growing in straight rows. A path leads from the courtyard, going around the edge of the gardens.

There are small groups of boys standing in the courtyard or on the path. Their details and features are too faint to be seen; though they all appear to be neatly dressed.

[End of description]

## 6.3 Photographs of objects

Consider:

- What the object is used for?
- Where it is?
- Whether it is being used?
- What is important about it?
- What colour is it?
- How big is it, if known?

### 6.3.1 Photographs of objects template

[Start of description]

This {black and white / colour} photograph shows {something} {on a desk / on a table / in a hand/ ...}.

It is {large / small} compared with the {something} [if known].

A scale in the photo shows that the object is {a size} [if relevant].

It appears to be made from {wood / ceramic / cloth / glass}.

It is described from {left to right / front to back / clockwise from the top}.

{Include any additional information essential, for example answering educational assessments.}

[End of description]

### 6.3.2 Photograph of objects example: Eastern Mediterranean pot

#### Exert from accompanying text

Figure 3: This pot from the eastern Mediterranean was found in fragments in a layer of soil in London deposited after the fifth century CE. Taken in conjunction with its provenance (where it was found), this source suggests that trade between London and the eastern Mediterranean continued after the fifth century into the so-called 'Dark Ages'. Museum of London. (Photograph: Open University; course A103 Block 3)



**Figure 3: Black and white photograph of a fragment of an eastern Mediterranean pot**

[Start of description]

The black and white photograph shows a hand holding a part of a broken pot that is not much bigger than the hand holding it. It appears to be made from clay.

A thick handle is attached to a small part of the pot's body. Here the pot's body has decorative grooved lines and is roughly finished. The section of the body beneath the handle is smooth, with a few minor indentations in the surface. There are cracks in the pot.

[End of description]

### **6.3.3 Photograph of objects example: Memorial plaque**

#### **Exert from accompanying text**

'First, write a paragraph describing what you see in Illustration H. In your second paragraph, consider the location of this memorial at Newton Blossomville, and whether the memorial's size is appropriate, and its form fitting to its function. Comment on any symbolism you see in the form of the memorial, and what the symbolism conveys. Your two paragraphs should total about 300 words.'

'You may find it helpful to know that the plaque at Newton Blossomville (a village in Buckinghamshire) is on the outside of a house, on the other side of the road from the church, facing a little green called the Green Hill.'





**Figure 4: Colour photograph of memorial plaque in Newton Blossomville, Buckinghamshire**

[Start of description]

Figure 4 is a colour photograph of a carved memorial stone plaque on a rough stonewall. A wreath of poppies has been placed over the regimental insignia.

The top of the plaque is triangular, like a roof, and there is a decorative horizontal carved pattern above the inscription. It is difficult to estimate the size; comparing it with the wreath it is estimated to be 3 feet wide and 2 feet high.

The inscription reads:

'To the immortal Glory of the men of this village who fell in

The Great War 1914 – 1918.

Pte Geo Hobbs – 8th Beds Rect

Pte Fredk C. Andrews – 2nd Middx Rect

Pte Ernest C. Bransome – 2nd Ox & Bucks LI

Cnr David Taylor – R.F.A.

And to

Pte Wm T Herbert 11th Royal Warwicks Rect

Who, invalided out of the army on account of wounds etc., came home and died.

Who dies if England live!

[End of description]

## **7 Describing works of art**

The purpose of a description of art for a blind or partially sighted person depends on its context. Do you simply describe what is visible or do you include your emotional response?

It is important to remember that people have a wide range of sight differences; they may or may not be able to perceive colour or details or they may be able to see just the edges or just the centre of an image. If they have no sight, they may have many years of experience and memories of seeing and will understand the feeling that an image can evoke.

An Open University workshop concluded that it is important to convey an emotional response to a work of art, as it is often the reason for including a particular example as part of educational course material. If a course is teaching a key skill which is based on visual discrimination, the meaning of this for a blind person needs to be considered.

There are some general features that should be described if they are not covered by the caption or close by in the surrounding text:

- The medium used, for example, watercolour, oil or pencil sketch?
- What the painting is of.
- Whether it is portrait or landscape in orientation.
- The size of the original and the approximate size of the particular reproduction, for example full page, half page and so on.
- The atmosphere the painting conveys.

## **7.1 Strategy for tackling details**

Begin a description with a single sentence introducing the work, the overall technique used and any unusual viewpoint.

Remember that blind or partially sighted people cannot skim read, so let them know how long the description is likely to be. Do this by giving an overview of the information first and return to this to relate each part to the whole image, especially for pictures with a lot of essential fine detail. Let the reader know how you plan to work, from left to right, foreground to background, from the top in a clockwise direction and so on.

If the description is lengthy, summarize at the end but make it clear that you are doing so, for example 'To summarise...'

List what is included in general terms before describing fine detail, for example say that there are 10 men in the picture before describing what each is wearing.

Some points to include if they are relevant:

- Use vocabulary that is consistent with any accompanying material. Keep it simple, but use technical terms that have been previously explained in the accompanying text.
- Light
  - predominately light or dark, even, patchy, strongly lit
  - are there big contrasts of light and shade?
  - is it sunny?
- Colours
  - bright, vivid, intense, dark, pale, faint, blended
- Textures
  - smooth, glossy, coarse, grainy, worn, cracked, grooved
- Mood
  - surreal, tranquil, stormy, sombre
- If the illustration has shapes that resemble everyday objects, use this in your description, for example, 'It looks like a wedge of cheese.' Use terms such as cubed, spherical, curved, sloped, rounded and so on.
- Mention size if applicable, but apply caution. For example, the height of a structure can be estimated with a person standing next to it, but without that person it is impossible to guess. Use terms such as miniature, monumental, life-size, tall, wide, thick, thin, narrow and so on.

## 7.2 Painting example: Representational painting



**Figure5: Watercolour painting, titled Swans by Alan Waller**

[Start of description]

This is a watercolour painting of a countryside scene showing a lake, with a grassy bank in the foreground and fields on hillside in the distance. There are two swans floating gently in the lake in the foreground. The painting is landscape in orientation, though its actual size is unknown.

The colours of the painting are pale and the foreground is painted with fine detail showing each blade of grass. The scene is tranquil and two mute swans float gently on the lake. One swan sits just in front of the other. They are both looking towards the same spot on the lakeside bank. Their long necks are straight and their wings are folded against their backs.

The sky is clear, the water of the lake is calm and the hills in the distance are paler in colour than the foreground detail. There are hedges and trees marking out the distant fields.

[End of description]

### 7.3 Painting example: Abstract painting



**Figure 6: Oil painting title 'Geometric Abstract by Alan Waller**

[Start of description]

This is an oil painting in a landscape orientation. It is an abstract painting with dark, intense dark colours of purple, blue and green and two small strips of bright red. The image is composed of blocks of geometric shapes; each shape is a solid block of colour. As an abstract painting it can be read in a number of ways as there are no representational features within the image; therefore it is difficult to describe this image objectively.

The title 'Geometric abstract' reflects that it is composed of a series of many geometric shapes. The lower section of the painting shows a row of shapes that have varying shades of green; the top section of the painting shows shapes that are dark blue and purple in colour. There are three rows of blue shapes. The row across the

centre of the image is lighter in colour, with each row getting darker, with the darkest row across the top.

Most dominant in the image is a triangle built of shapes with lighter tones: its narrowest point starts in the top left corner of the painting, with one side reaching across to the bottom right corner. Another side reaches from the top left corner and reaches a third of the way across from the left of the painting. Within this triangle, there are geometric shapes which are lighter in tone than the rest of the painting including a thin line of red running between the green and blue shapes.

[End of description]

## 7.4 Sculpture example: Bust of T.R. Armitage



**Figure 7: Black and white photograph of a sculpture of T.R. Armitage**

[Start of description]

The sculpture shown in figure 7 is assumed to be bronze and shows the head, shoulders and chest of T.R. Armitage, the founder

of RNIB. It is difficult to state his age; though looks to be late middle age.

It is shown front on, looking slightly up at the figure. He has a balding head with curly hair at the sides and a moustache and mid-length curly beard. He has a serious facial expression, though does not look stern. His dress is grand; he could be wearing a cloak with broad collar and a cravat; though these are not detailed. It looks like he is wearing a sash across his shoulders.

The inscription is difficult to read, part of it says 'T.R. ARMITAGE. ESQ. MD. Founded this institution in 1868 and was its Honorary Secretary and general supporter until his death in 1890. Originally known as the British and & Foreign Blind Association the name was changed to the National Institute for the Blind on the occasion of the opening of the building by Their Majesties the King and Queen {illegible text}.'

[End of description]

## 8 Cartoons

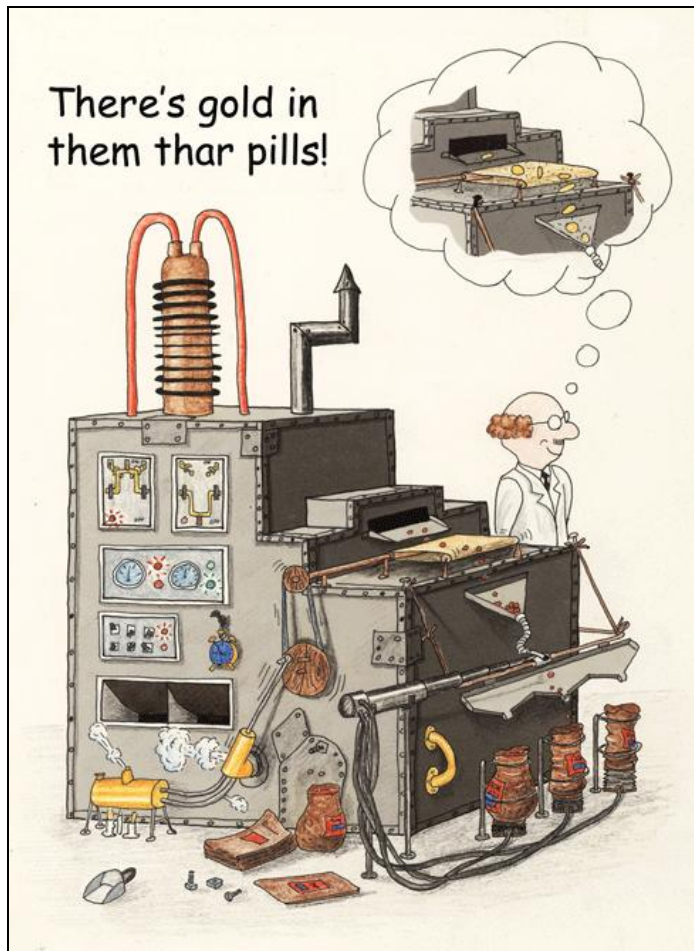
Cartoons and comic strips need to be described if necessary.

- Set the scene of the cartoon without giving away the joke
- Provide a brief overview of the image
- Give the script in full – in some cases the text in speech or thought bubbles may be all that is needed.

It is not the job of the person writing the description to include any additional information that explains who the characters are, unless the context of how the image is used dictates this.



## 8.1 Cartoons example



**Figure 8: Cartoon 'There's gold in them thar pills!' by Alan Waller**

[Start of description]

Figure 8 shows a cartoon of a pill making machine. It has dials, flashing lights, cogs and wheels. It has an output tray where pills are distributed into three containers. Steam comes out of parts of the machine. There is a white-coated scientist. A thought bubble shows him picturing the output tray which is pouring out gold shaped as pills instead. The caption reads 'There's gold in them thar pills!'

[End of description]

## 9 Architecture

Images of architecture can be very complicated, but it may not be necessary to describe all of it with the same level of detail. Only include the main architectural features to keep the description simple.

The sample principles apply whether describing architecture for practical purposes, or for artistic appreciation.

### 9.1 Architecture template

[Start of description]

This is a {colour / black and white photograph / drawing / ...} of {name of building} in {location} {Include if not obvious from the caption}.

It is a {front / side / back / three-quarter / corner} view of the building. It is a {style of building if known, for example modern / Tudor / art deco etc} style of architecture. {Give overview of main features.}

{Give any further in-depth detail of any key features. If other buildings are shown in the image describe how the architecture described compares or contrasts with its surroundings.}

{Include any additional information essential, for example answering educational assessments.}

[End of description]

## 9.2 Architecture example: Bull Ring Birmingham



**Figure 9: Colour photograph of the side of Selfridges; Bull Ring, Birmingham. Photograph by Claire Jones**

[Start of description]

Figure 9 shows the Selfridges building within the Bull Ring, Birmingham. It is a side view of the building. It has a dramatic appearance and is clad in silver round aluminium disks, so it looks like the surface of an insect's eye or a golf ball.

The building does not have conventional straight sides. From the base of the building the walls sink in then bulge out again at the top of the building; forming a bulbous shape at the front; at the top of the building the roof curves round.

The pavement in front of the building slopes down, with a walkway rising around the edge of the building to a glass entrance on the right edge. Above the raised walkway is a small balcony.

The building adjoins a more conventional looking building; which is just visible to the left of the photograph. It has pale beige walls, with a few small windows, balcony and green roof in view.

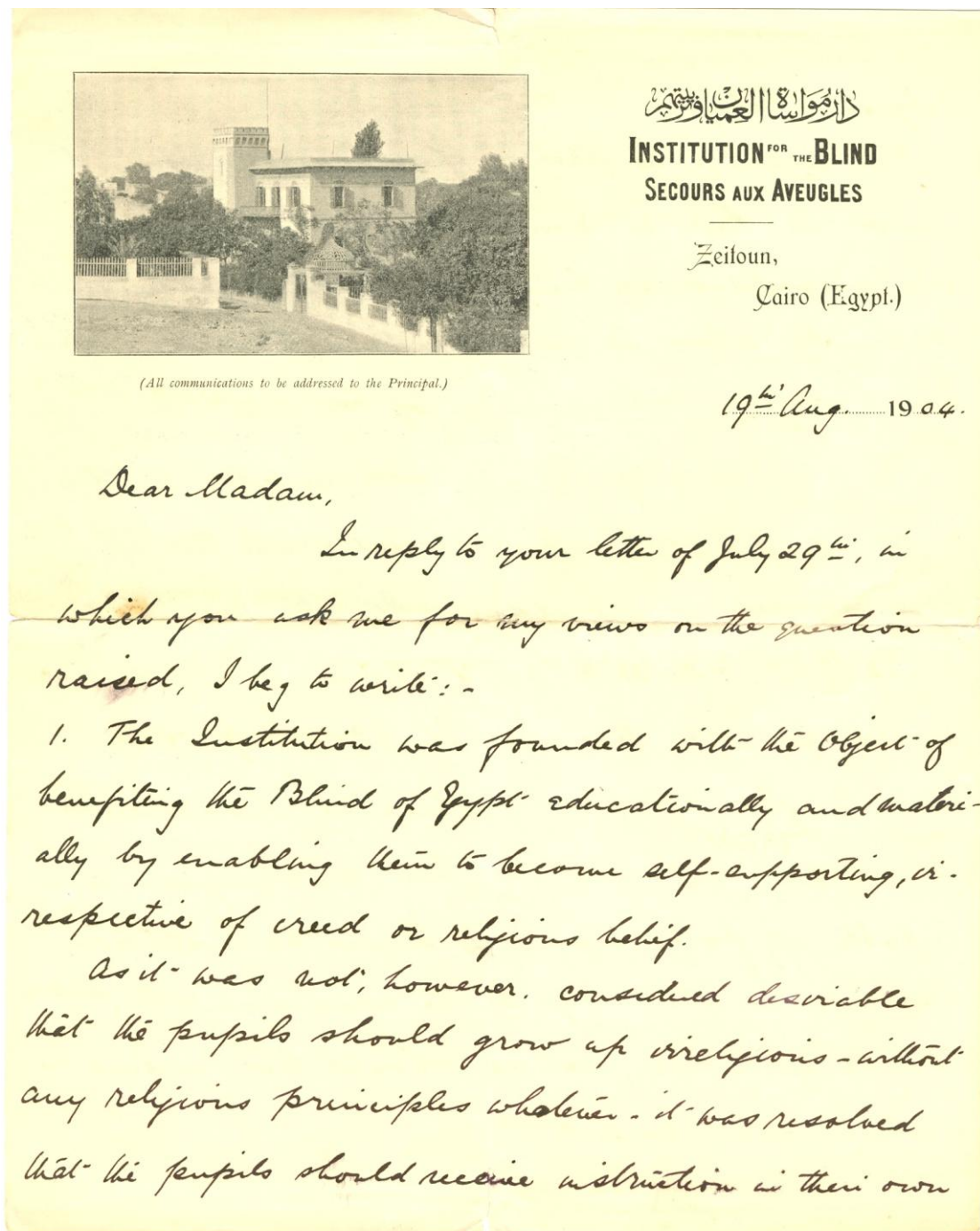
[End of description]

## 10 Historical documents

Documents which are reproduced in course material may need to be both described and transcribed.

- Describe the appearance of the document and if appropriate any unusual shape to the writing.
- State whether the writing is handwritten; brailled or typescript.
- Provide a transcript of any legible text
- State if any text is illegible, marking this in curly brackets.
- If unsure of what a word says, put this in curly brackets.
- If you want to put a full word where an abbreviation exists in the original, put those parts of the word not in the original in square brackets.
- Always copy out a document as it appears in the original; including any spelling mistakes or grammatical errors. Use capital letters and punctuation following the original.
- If known or relevant; include the dimensions of the document: measure the document if you have access to the original.

## 10.1 Historical documents example: Handwritten letter



**Figure 10: Copy of handwritten letter from W.R.W Gardner to Miss Alice Armitage**

[Start of transcription]

Figure 10 is a handwritten letter in ink. On the top right of the page there is the stamp of the institution. Beneath a line of Arabic text it reads:

'Institution for the Blind

Secours Aux Aveugles

Zeitoun

Cairo (Egypt)'

On the top left of the page is a black and white photograph of a building surrounded by a wall and trees. It is assumed to be the building of the institution. The text underneath the image reads: '(All communications to be addressed to the Principal.)'

The letter is dated 19th Aug. 1904

[Transcript]

Dear Madam,

In reply to your letter of July 29th, in which you ask me for my views on the question raised, I beg to write:-

1. The Institution was founded with the object of benefiting The Blind of Egypt educationally and materially by enabling them to become self-supporting, irrespective of creed or religious belief.

As it was not; however, considered desirable that the pupils should grow up irreligious - without any religious principles whatever, it was resolved that the pupils should receive instruction in their own'

[End of transcription]

## 11 Where to get further help

UKAAF assists businesses and organisations by advising how to meet the needs of customers and clients with print disabilities; providing guidance on how to source and provide quality accessible formats like large print, audio, braille, electronic file formats and Easy Read; and helping you to understand your responsibilities as a service provider.

Through our website and magazine, members will also gain access to:

- findings from public consultations and end-user research
- research and innovation in accessible formats
- information on suppliers of transcription services
- guidance and advice on standards for accessible formats
- opportunities to review and help to develop standards and guidance.

In addition to supporting service providers and transcribers, UKAAF also represents people with print disabilities. We believe that because format quality matters, end-users should have genuine input into the development of standards for accessible information. By collecting and sharing users' views with service providers and transcribers we can help them to deliver a quality service which meets users' needs.

UKAAF has a User Advisory Group (UAG) so we can include blind and partially sighted people and others with print disabilities in ongoing research and consultation on key accessible format issues.

There are many benefits of being a member of UKAAF, not least to demonstrate your commitment to quality accessible formats. For more information visit us at [www.ukaaf.org](http://www.ukaaf.org).

## 12 Your feedback is welcome

We would welcome your views on this guidance, any suggestions for additions, or case studies of how this guidance has helped you. You might like to share your experience in an article in our magazine 'Format Matters'.

You can phone, email or write to us - our details are at the back, or use the feedback form on our website [www.ukaaf.org](http://www.ukaaf.org).

If you find UKAAF's guidance valuable, please encourage others to join by visiting our website.



## Document reference information

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## Notes

## Notes

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## **UK Association for Accessible Formats (UKAAF)**

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