

Alt-Text Guidelines

Image descriptions, also known as alt-text, are used by screen readers and other adaptive software to allow blind, low-vision, or people with other disabilities to understand non-text content. Whereas captions serve to provide additional information about an image and how it relates to the text, alt-text should offer a textual description of the image itself. Unlike captions, alt-text does not appear visibly in the text.

NOTE: if you are unable to provide alt-text for each image, you will be charged between \$8 and \$15 per image to cover the cost of hiring an alt-text writer.

General Considerations

Descriptions for the same image may differ vastly depending on context. Survey the text surrounding an image to understand how it fits into the bigger picture. Use context to decide which concepts and terms have already been explained and avoid repetition of explanations and the sharing of irrelevant information. Your book will be published in black-and-white, so you do not need to mention colour.

Know your target reader; use vocabulary and phrases that are appropriate for your audience.

Be concise: more is not necessarily better! A complete piece of alt-text should be less than 250 characters. An additional longer description may be included for more complex images that cannot be described within 250 characters, but try to be brief. In these cases, please provide both a main and long description.

Avoid introducing new concepts or terms.

Describe only what you see – physical appearances and actions rather than emotions and possible intentions. Don't interpret or analyze the material. Instead, allow readers to form their own opinions. Don't omit uncomfortable or controversial content, such as images associated with politics, race, gender, religion, or sex.

The most important information should appear at the beginning of the description.

Use active verbs in the present tense. Write out abbreviations and symbols to ensure proper pronunciation by screen readers. Spell out large numbers. Use descriptive vocabulary that adds meaning (e.g., “map” instead of “image”).

If the image is decorative rather than illustrative, it may not need extensive description. In these cases, provide enough information that the reader is not excluded from knowing what the image is, but be brief.

Alt-text descriptions should begin by noting the type of image (e.g., “map,” “photo,” “bar graph”), followed by a description. Samples of alt-text appear at the end of this document. All images are used with permission from their respective authors.

Specific Image Types

Photographs

Photographs may require only short alt-text. This will be dependent upon surrounding text and whether or not a caption is included and provides sufficient information. Describe the location/setting and the subject. Describe foreground, background, and directional orientation of object.

Cartoons

Describe the drawing first to set the backdrop for the cartoon, then write out the text. The text of the caption or label can be edited if the commentary being conveyed by the cartoon would not make sense without further context.

Drawings and Paintings

If the caption is brief, or missing some key details, describe setting, subject, and action first, then include texture, orientation, and colour, if relevant.

Diagrams

Traditional descriptions of purely visual images benefit from descriptions that are brief and specific. Organize the description in a linear fashion, moving left to right. Bullet points or line breaks can be used in long descriptions to aid in navigation. Focus on the intent of the image and the surrounding text.

While a diagram may initially look complicated because it shows colours, arrows, and levels, focusing on the actions taking place, in order, makes it easier to describe.

If each part of a multi-part image is similar and contains the same types of information with only slight variation, use the same order, sentence structure, and words for the description of each part.

It is not necessary to describe the visual attributes of the charts, e.g., yellow boxes, curved arrows, etc., unless there is an explicit need. Various phrases may be appropriate, such as “leads to,” “points to,” “yields,” “feeds on,” “changes into,” depending on the context.

For **complex diagrams**, a table included in the long description may be required to discern the relationships within the illustration. A short description of the general trends of the diagram should be included.

For **Venn diagrams**, focus on the data, not on its appearance. Provide the data in brief statements. Give a summary if one is immediately apparent.

For **radial or web diagrams**, identify that the image is a web diagram with a centre circle and the number of circles connected/linked to it. Identify labels in the circles.

For **hierarchy or tree diagrams**, set up the diagram by providing the title if there is one and a general overview, including its levels and parts. Approach the diagram from top to bottom and from left to right. Depending on the intended audience, the diagram can be described using a narrative, a simple bulleted list, or a complex nested list.

For **flow charts or cycles**, convert the text into nested lists. Present the “boxes” as numbers and the possible transitions as sub-bullets. For complex flow charts, begin with a brief overview, explaining the distinct elements of the image, including if it has multiple starting points, additional lists, etc.

For **timelines**, provide the title, then the dates and the events, from left to right, in a specific order. If there are more than three events, a bulleted list would be useful. If there is a general trend, such as multiple events clustered around a certain timeframe or date, or a large gap in events, then a summary sentence could be useful before the list of the dates.

Graphs

It is not necessary to describe the visual attributes of graphs, e.g. solid lines, coloured columns, etc., unless there is an explicit need. Provide the title and axis labels and what they represent. If you plan to include a table of data in addition to your alt-text, please copy and paste it from Microsoft Excel, but please be sure to include a short description

Alt-text for **bar graphs** should briefly describe the graph and give a summary if it is easy enough to do so. For double bar graphs, explain the data on the x-axis and the y-axis and summarize the overall trend. Data tables can be included in a long description.

Alt-text for **line graphs** should briefly describe the chart and give a summary if one is immediately apparent. Include a data table in the long description if necessary.

For **pie graphs**, guide the reader toward the most relevant points, and include a table in the long description. It is helpful to list the numbers from smallest to largest, regardless of how they are presented in the image.

For **scatter plots**, identify the image as a scatter plot and focus on the concentration of data. If it is necessary to be more specific, convert the data into tables for the long description.

Maps

Simple maps may require only a short description. If the map is used to illustrate a concept and help define new terms, describe it in more detail.

Focus on the map's central purpose to determine if borders, region shapes, and bodies of water are important.

If the map is an essential part of the text, provide a general overview along with details and place names. Include labelled landmarks and labelled bodies of water in the description. If there are too many labels (if all 50 states are labelled on a map of the US, for example), focus on the labels that are most relevant to the figure and the concept it is depicting. Whenever possible, organize the description using bulleted lists.

If the map is supporting surrounding text, or if it has a detailed caption, describe general trends in the map and refer to large areas at once.

The elements in the key can be folded into the description of the map itself and do not need to be described separately.

You may consider putting all map labels into the long description, and keeping only the most relevant ones in the main alt-text. This may depend on how commonly known these labels are to your specific audience. For example, a Canadian reader may not need each province and territory labeled in the alt-text, but an American reader of the same book may benefit from it.

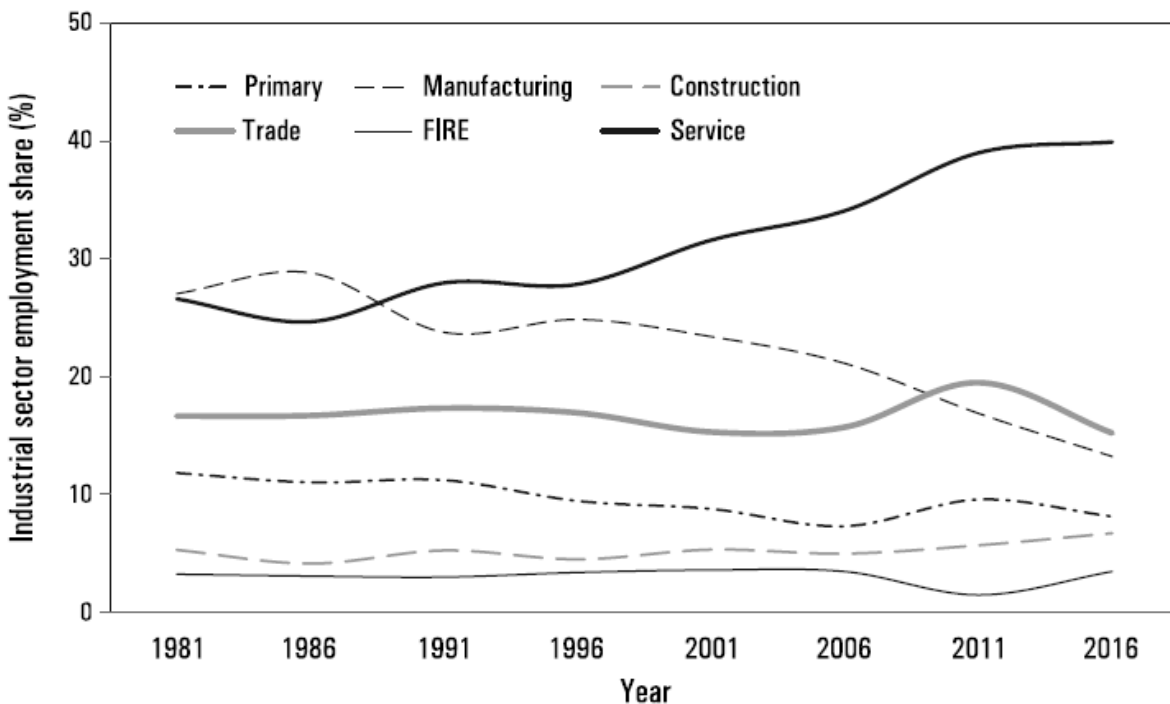
Text-Only Images

For images and artwork that contain text only (e.g., an ad), in most cases, the text needs to be fully transcribed. If the text is remarkably long (if, for example, you are including an entire news article), summarize. Include punctuation to create small pauses so the information doesn't run together.

If anything about the above guidelines is unclear, please check the [DIAGRAM Center guidelines](#) for more information. If your questions are still unanswered, please consult with UBC Press's assistant editor, Editorial and Production, Carmen Tiampo (tiampo@ubcpres.ca).

Sample Artwork (graph)

Figure 5.4 Historical share of Chatham-Kent's employment by industrial sector



Source: Statistics Canada (2017b).

Caption:

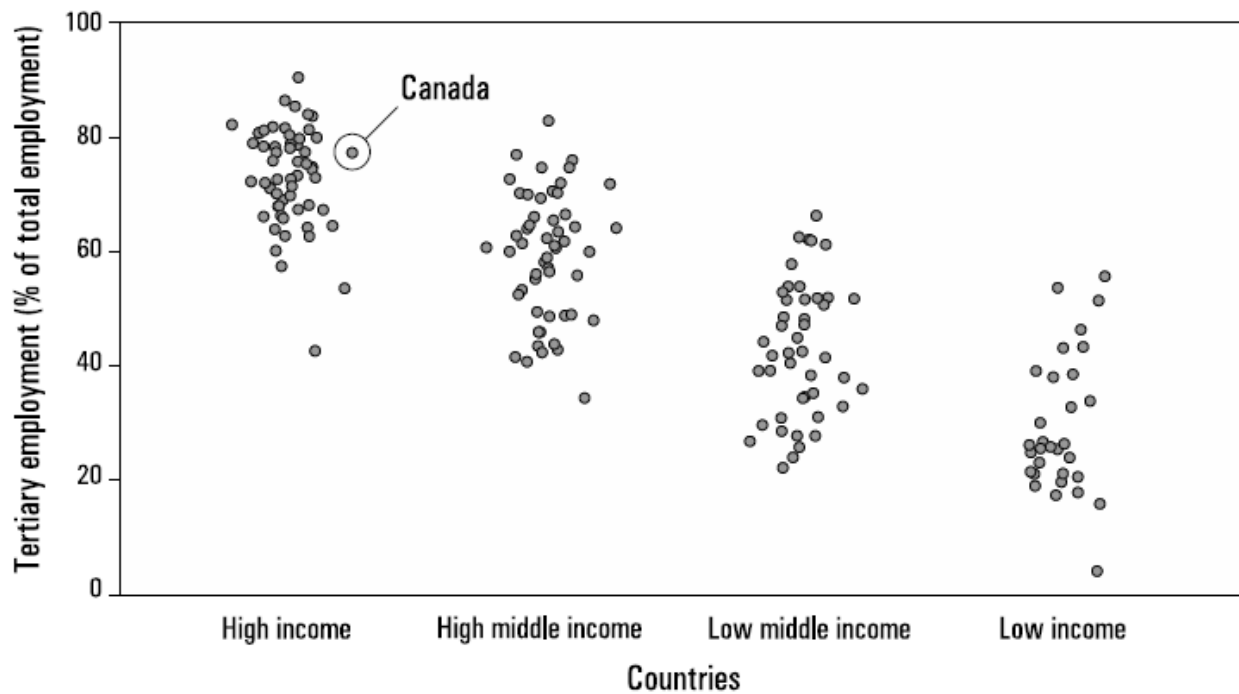
Figure 5.4: Historical share of Chatham-Kent's employment by industrial sector.

Alt-text:

Line graph: the graph shows that the share of employment taken up by the service industry rose by more than 10% between 1981 and 2016. Other industries – primary, manufacturing, construction, trade, and FIRE – show flat or slightly decreasing shares.

The above illustration and its caption appear in Hartt, Quietly Shrinking Cities: Canadian Urban Population Loss in an Age of Growth (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021). The alt-text shown here does not match the alt-text in the book due to changing standards.

FIGURE 3.1 Proportion of 2018 tertiary sector employment for 187 countries by level of income



Source: World Bank (2019).

Caption:

Figure 3.1: Proportion of 2018 tertiary sector employment for 187 countries by level of income

Alt-text:

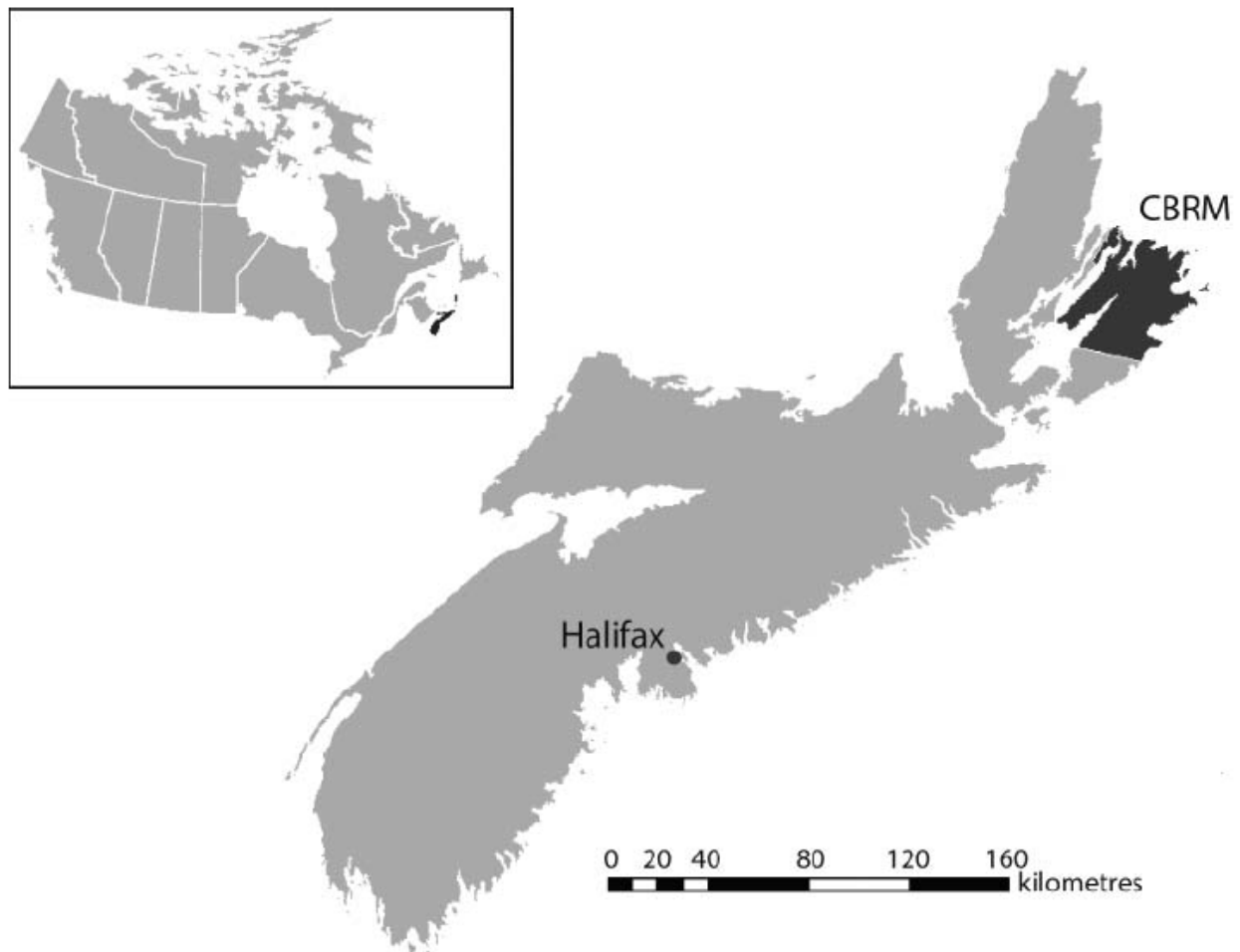
Cluster graph: the graph shows that high-income countries have the highest proportion of tertiary employment. Canada’s datapoint is located in the top third of these high-income countries. A longer description follows.

<Long description: Cluster graph: the graph shows that high-income countries have the highest proportion of tertiary employment, followed in hierarchical order by high middle–income countries, low middle–income countries, and low-income countries. Canada’s datapoint is located in the top third of the high-income countries.>

The above illustration and its caption appear in Hartt, Quietly Shrinking Cities: Canadian Urban Population Loss in an Age of Growth (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021). The alt-text shown here does not match the alt-text in the book due to changing standards.

Sample Artwork (map)

FIGURE 4.1 Location and administrative boundary of CBRM in Nova Scotia



Caption:

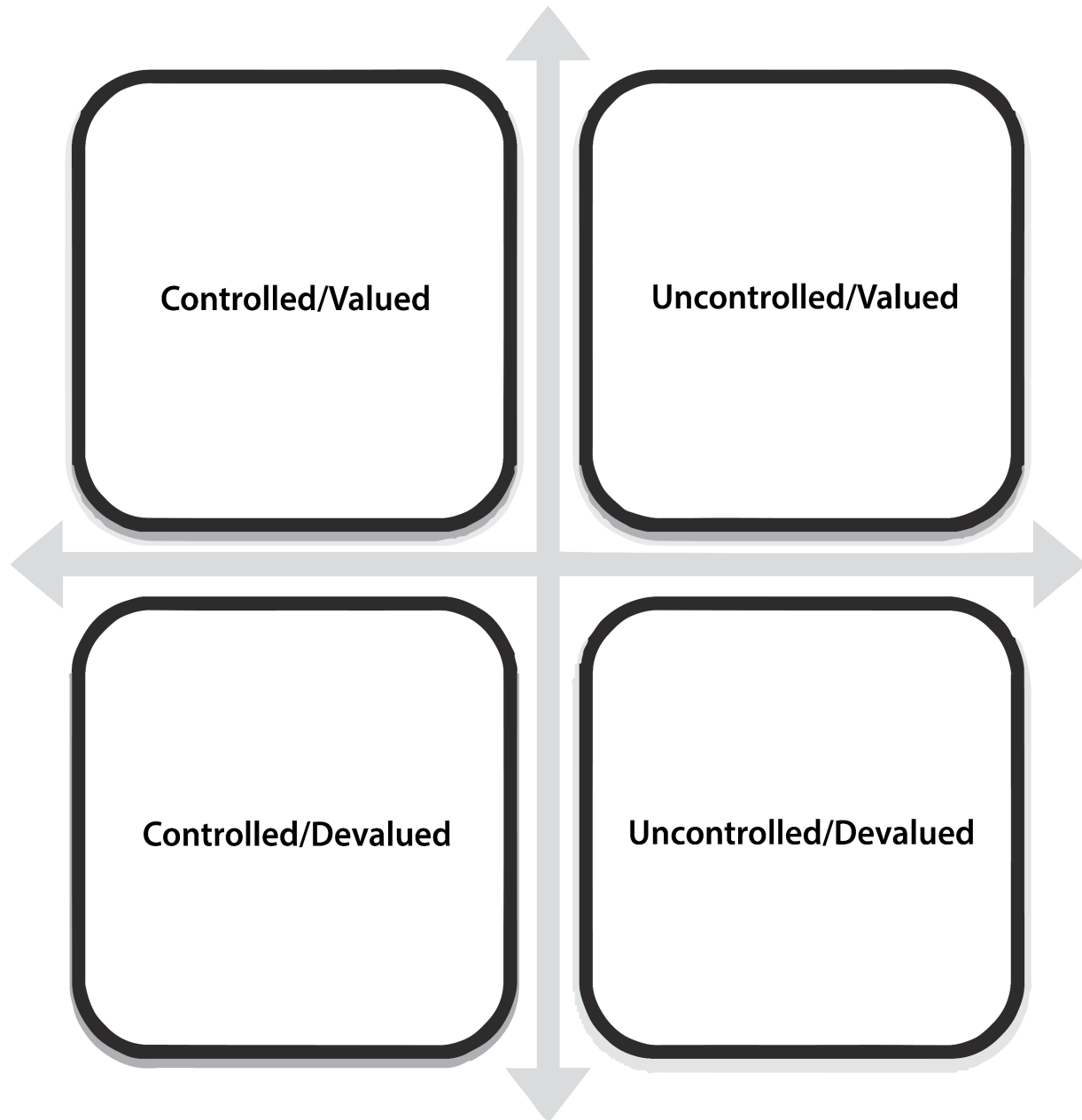
Figure 4.1: Location and administrative boundary of CBRM in Nova Scotia

Alt-text:

Map: Nova Scotia, with Halifax labeled and the Cape Breton Regional Municipality highlighted. There is an inset map showing Canada, with the province of Nova Scotia highlighted to show its location within the country.

The above illustration and its caption appear in Hartt, Quietly Shrinking Cities: Canadian Urban Population Loss in an Age of Growth (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021). The alt-text shown here does not match the alt-text in the book due to changing standards.

Sample Artwork (diagram)



Caption:

Figure 8: Settler colonial attitudes to land

Alt-text:

Matrix graph: four quadrants are laid out on an X axis from more controlled to less controlled and on a Y axis from more valued to less valued. A long description follows.

<Long description: Matrix graph: four quadrants are laid out on an X axis from more controlled to less controlled and on a Y axis from more valued to less valued. Read clockwise from upper left, the quadrants thus have two characteristics each: "Controlled/Valued," "Uncontrolled/Valued," "Uncontrolled/Devalued," and "Controlled/Devalued.">

The above illustration and its caption appear in Barker, Making and Breaking Settler Space: Five Centuries of Colonization in North America (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021). The alt-text shown here does not match the alt-text in the book due to changing standards.

Sample Artwork (photograph)



Caption:

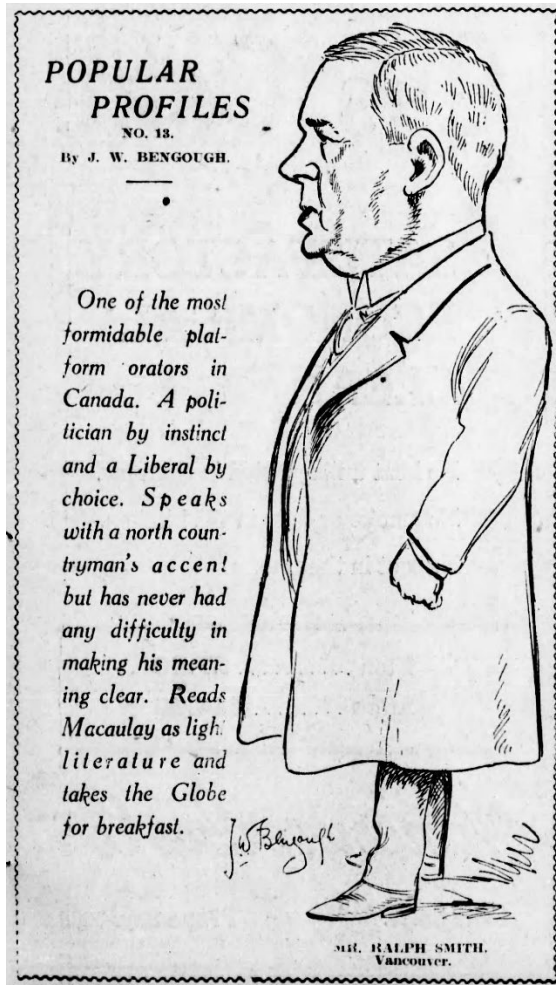
Figure 5.5: Mary Ellen Spear Smith at home in a modest apartment

Alt-text:

Photo: a middle-aged White woman wearing an ankle-length dress sits in an armchair close to a fireplace. There is an open book on her lap.

The above illustration and its caption and alt-text appear in Strong-Boag, A Liberal-Labour Lady: The Times and Life of Mary Ellen Spear Smith (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021). The alt-text shown here does not match the alt-text in the book due to changing standards.

Sample Artwork (political cartoon)



Caption:

Figure 4.4: Ralph Smith, 1916. | J.M. Bengough, "Popular Profiles," *Vancouver World*, September 9, 1916.

Alt-text:

Cartoon: an overweight man in profile, wearing a suit and overcoat, identified as Mr. Ralph Smith of Vancouver. There is a short biography of Smith, the text of which appears in the long description.

<Long description: Cartoon: an overweight man in profile, wearing a suit and overcoat, identified as Mr. Ralph Smith of Vancouver. There is a short biography of Smith which reads: "Popular Profiles No. 13, by J.W. Bengough. One of the most formidable platform orators in Canada. A politician by instinct and a Liberal by choice. Speaks with a north countryman's accent but has never had any difficulty in making his meaning clear. Reads Macaulay as light literature and takes the Globe for breakfast.">

The above illustration and its caption and alt-text appear in Strong-Boag, A Liberal-Labour Lady: The Times and Life of Mary Ellen Spear Smith (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021). The alt-text shown here does not match the alt-text in the book due to changing standards.