

# STANDARDS FOR AUDIO DESCRIPTION

Of the California Audio Describers Alliance

Adopted October 28, 2006 by

AudioVision, Los Angeles Radio Reading Service, San Diego Opera,

We See TV, and Audio Description Los Angeles

Subsequently adopted by Vitac Described Media, and Audio Eyes

## 1. Definitions

- 1.1. Audio Description, either live or recorded, is the essential information provided by a trained describer that makes an event accessible to people who are blind or low vision.
- 1.2. Describer – the trained person who writes/creates the descriptions, in advance or live.
- 1.3. Narrator – the person who speaks the descriptions. In the case of live description, the narrator and describer may be the same.
- 1.4. Work – the work being described – a parade, a play, a television program, a dance performance, an opera, a film, a painting, a display, an exhibition.

2. The Purpose - To ensure that people who are blind or low vision have equal access to cultural events.

## 3. Background

- 3.1. A 1993 study conducted by the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) for WGBH Educational Foundation with a grant from the National Science Foundation found:

...that description had significant positive impacts...

Participants report that when they watch television they feel they generally miss information that is available to fully-sighted people. Adding description makes programs more enjoyable, interesting, and informative; description does not make programs more confusing.

Having audio description makes the participants more comfortable discussing programs with sighted friends. They are more able to talk about the program themselves and are more able to ask others about it.

Participants who watched the described video version of the programs remembered what was presented in the descriptions. Further, one to two months later, they retained significantly more information from the programs.

The participants prefer to have description for television programs in general and science programs in particular. They would seek out programs they knew would be described.<sup>1</sup>

3.2. Highlights of a research project to study the viewing habits of blind and visually impaired people and the impact of video description completed in 1997 by the American Foundation for the Blind reports:

- Blind and visually impaired people (approximately 3% of the U. S. population) watch television and videotapes about as often as those who are not visually impaired. In, addition, their households own televisions and VCRs, and subscribe to cable television, to the same extent as other households.
- The vast majority of those who have experienced formal video description say they would be more likely to watch a television show or video with description than without and that it is important to their enjoyment of programming.
- People who have experienced video description feel that it affords important benefits, which fall into the categories of enhanced viewing, learning, and social experiences watching television and videotapes.<sup>2</sup>

3.3. An article by Jaclyn Packer in New Technologies in the Education of the Visually Handicapped (1996) states:

Among the benefits of video description cited most often by blind and visually impaired viewers are the following: 1) Gaining knowledge about the visual world; 2) Gaining a better understanding of televised material; 3) Feeling independent; 4) Experiencing social connection; 5) Feeling equality with those who do not have visual impairments; 6) Experiencing enjoyment; 7) Relief of burden on sighted viewers with whom they watch.<sup>3</sup>

3.4. Included in the 1997 AFB study are the following comments from study participants:

“These services make me feel just like all other people and I can benefit so much more from the programs.”

“With description, I feel that my TV- and movie-watching experiences are tremendously enhanced. No frustration, sadness, or anger at having looked forward to a pleasurable

experience and feeling cheated out of it because of not being able to follow the action.”

“Described television and movies have widened my world. They have given me an awareness of how much I was really missing and added extra enjoyment and dimension to everything I have seen.”

“Being legally blind most of my life I never realized how many details I was missing out on when I watched TV. I really enjoy seeing it as it was meant to be seen by all.”<sup>4</sup>

#### 4. The History

- 4.1 The concepts underlying audio description were first developed in the 1970’s by Gregory Frazier, a professor at San Francisco State University and founder of AudioVision, Inc. His techniques were tested and refined between 1987-91 as part of a grant-funded pioneering project at University.
- 4.2 In the early 1980’s, the Arena Stage in Washington, DC, collaborated with a group of accessibility advisors, including Cody and Margaret Pfanstiehl from the Metropolitan Washington Ear, Inc., to develop an audio description program for its live performances.<sup>5</sup>
- 4.3 In March of 1988, Jim Stovall, founder and president of the Narrative Television Network, independently began descriptions for movies on cable channels.<sup>6</sup>
- 4.4 “Since 1972, WGBH in Boston has been a leader in making television accessible. In 1987, WGBH created Descriptive Video Services (DVS®), a subsidiary that provides audio description for television viewers. In areas where the local public television station is equipped to participate, DVS® uses a special audio channel available on stereo televisions to broadcast audio descriptions for various programs. DVS® has also engaged in providing audio description for first-run films in theatres nationwide.”<sup>7</sup>
- 4.5 By the mid-1980’s audio description crossed the Atlantic to a small theatre called the Robin Hood, at Averham, Nottinghamshire where the first described performances in Europe are believed to have taken place.<sup>8</sup>

- 4.6 In October 1990, the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences awarded Emmys to Margaret Pfansteihl, PBS, Jim Stovall and the late Gregory Frazier.<sup>9</sup>
- 4.7 Beginning in 1994 the Los Angeles Radio Reading Service brought description to Los Angeles with the first live description of the Tournament of Roses Parade, adding a television Sap broadcast in 2000.
- 4.8 In November 1999, the FCC announced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking for phased in video description for television; they voted July 2000, to implement the rules, effective April 2002. A Federal Appeals Court in November 2002 vacated the FCC July 2000 rule.
- 4.9 The Civic Theatre in San Diego purchased audio description equipment in 2002 and the arts organizations using the Theatre assembled and shared a pool of volunteer describers to provide description at Broadway/San Diego, San Diego Opera and La Jolla Playhouse. Since January 2003, the San Diego Opera described Wednesday evening performance and has expanded their description calendar to include Tuesday evening and Sunday matinee performance as well.

## 5. The Basic Rules.

- 5.1 Describe what you see. This is the first rule of description. What you see is what you describe. The work is previewed with an eye toward including the key plot elements, objects, places, etc. not mentioned in the dialog or made obvious by the sound effects, music or other audio elements.
- 5.2 Describe objectively. Do not editorialize, interpret, explain, analyze or in any other way “help” the audience. Allow them to form their own opinions and draw their own conclusions. The visually impaired audience is not a passive receiver of Audio Description. Rather, their contribution to the process is to be the interpreter of the work. The audience makes the connection between the program and the description.
  - 5.2.1 AudioVision states: “You are a translator – translating an audio-visual event into an aural event. You are like a ‘talking camera.’ Cameras and describers are objective. They do not render judgments, opinions or

interpretations. Make sure you are describing the event, and not interpreting it.”<sup>10</sup>

5.2.2 Character’s moods, motives or reasoning are not the subject of audio description. If the conclusion is that a character is angry, describe what led to that conclusion – the gestures/facial expressions of the character. Let the audience draw the conclusion. Not “the lonely orphan holds the dog in a motherly fashion.” Rather “the little girl cradles the puppy in her arms.” “He puts the gun in the drawer to hide it” should be “He puts the gun in the drawer.”

5.2.3 The careful choice of adjectives and adverbs is crucial. Choose only those words, which are not themselves subject to interpretation – “beautiful” says only that something is deemed not ugly. It begs the question “What makes it beautiful?” “A few well-chosen words can enhance a scene considerably, but they must not reflect the personal view of the describer.”<sup>11</sup>

5.3 Do not talk over dialog. The dialog is telling the story and must be heard. This rule is broken only when there would be greater the confusion by omitting the description. This, of course, presupposes the description is vital.

5.3.1 Lyrics should be treated as dialog. If there are repeated choruses, you may describe over them. According to M. Pfanstiehl, “. . . our theory has been, if it's the main song you don't want to talk over it, because that's like spoken lines.”<sup>12</sup>

5.3.2 The dialog from radio, television or other speaking characters may be important to the story or may be considered background sound. If background noise, it is permissible to describe over it, again assuming the description is vital.

5.3.3 The description of opera differs and will be discussed separately.

5.4 Do not summarize. Don’t take a series of specific, separate actions/events/images and describe them as one. Not “John gets ready to go.” Rather, “John puts on his coat, retrieves his keys and leaves.” In an action scene, “they

fight” is probably evident – but who is doing what to who may not be.

5.5 Do not patronize. Don’t be condescending to the audience. Trust them to grasp the context. They may well know more about what you are describing than you do.

5.5.1 Censoring material is not the responsibility of the describer.

5.6 Do not intellectualize. Don’t assume a lecturing or clinical tone. Some connection to the work is essential and is reflected in the describer’s choice of language and tone of voice. Keep your voice in tune with the emotive content of the scene.

5.6.1 Avoid metaphors, similes and similar literary devices.

5.6.2 Audio description is not an opportunity to show off your education or vocabulary.

5.7 Create harmonious description. “You are creating an aural work of art. If the person were listening to your work, ideally that person should not tell where the original program left off and the description comes in. Harmonious description renders the describer ‘invisible’ and virtually indistinguishable from the event. The describer is at once there and not there.”<sup>13</sup>

5.7.1 The describer and the description should mirror the emotional state of the work. A tender love scene should have appropriate vocabulary that matches the sense of the scene.

5.8 Do not describe obvious sound cues. Mention who answers the phone not that the phone is ringing. The only time that sounds are described is if the sound could be misinterpreted. If the gun goes off, who falls?

5.8.1 If possible, follow the action. Allow the sound effects to occur then identify the action. There will be times when leading the action is necessary.

## 6. Techniques

6.1 Description should not fill every available pause. Less is more. Audio description is not a running commentary. As Laurie Everett of DVS® states: “...because pacing and

breathing are the audio equivalent of ‘white space’ in print and both are extremely important to the aesthetics of the experience.”<sup>14</sup> “Too much description can dilute the mood of a scene.”<sup>15</sup>

6.1.1 The musical score is a vital part of the work; audio description over it can diminish its impact and enjoyment.

6.2 What to describe. Focus on that which is the most significant and least obvious from the dialog/audio. Describing everything is impossible: describe what is essential in the allowable time. Emphasize the elements that advance the story, plot or characterization.<sup>16</sup>

6.3 Maintain the magic of the fourth wall.

6.3.1 “A describer watching a programme several times may notice mistakes in continuity or in the editing. Pointing them out to the viewer, is not necessarily helpful, merely distracting from the programme.”<sup>17</sup>

6.4 Set up sight gags to allow the visually impaired audience to “get-it” when the sighted audience does.

6.5 Be careful not to give away secrets. If a character is in disguise, they become “the man” rather than “John wears a disguise.” Use a neutral term “the figure in red” when characters are disguising their gender.

6.6 Read verbatim words that appear – “Words appear: One year later.” Likewise, read subtitles verbatim – “Subtitles appear: That guy’s the biggest jerk I’ve ever seen.”

## 7. Language

7.1 Keep the language consistent.

7.1.1 Use the present tense. The story is unfolding now, in the present.

7.1.2 Use the same name for characters, places, objects, etc. throughout.

7.2 Use the most descriptive words and concise sentence structure.

- 7.3 Use vivid verbs. People frequently “walk” but they also: “amble” “stagger” “shuffle” “saunter” and “stroll.” Choose the word that best matches the action.
  - 7.4 Use pronouns carefully. If there is only one female in a scene, then “she” is fine. If there are more than one, proper names will be clearer.
  - 7.5 Use language appropriate for the audience. Children’s programs would use vocabulary suitable for the age group.
  - 7.6 Work with violence, sex, and/or profanity should have matching vocabulary as well. The describer’s feelings about the content are not relevant.
  - 7.7 Use the correct terminology as long as that terminology would be commonly understood.
  - 7.8 Colloquialisms and slang should be avoided.
  - 7.9 “Colors have meaning and should be described.”<sup>18</sup> “The dress is burgundy” rather than “the dress is red” more richly describes the dress. Avoid, however, unusual color words: “cerulean,” “dun,” “puce,” etc.
  - 7.10 Use “while” or “as” to join two actions only if they occur at the same time. “John picks up the knife as Jill turns away.”
8. Know your audience
    - 8.1 Assume the audience is nationwide.
    - 8.2 The audience will want varying amounts of description. “According to the Pfanstiehls, the amount of narrative detail preferred often depends on whether an individual is congenitally blind (was born without sight) or is adventitiously blind (was born with sight but lost it at some point in life). M. Pfanstiehl explained the differences in preference: ‘The congenitally blind often have little concept of how very visual the world is. People who have always been blind from birth and have never had useful vision, have a ... poor idea of just how much nonverbal communication is always going on... They will say, “I don’t need it. From the dialogue, I get everything I need. I can imagine all the rest ... I want just the script description. If you’re going to describe to me at all, I don’t want you to say very much. Just a phrase



here or there is sufficient to clarify things.” And then you have the adventitiously blind who are saying, “I’d like as much detail as you can possibly give me.”

- 8.3 C. Pfanstiehl explained that people who once had sight ask for more detail because they can remember how they perceived things before the onset of vision loss. Stovall agrees with this concept.<sup>19</sup>

## 9. Maintain the focus for your audience

- 9.1 “If something is identified by name or has already made an appearance, the definite article “the” is used. If the subject or object is new, the indefinite “a” is preferable.”<sup>20</sup> If a car has been mentioned and it is seen again, it is “the car” to reinforce that this is the same car.
- 9.2 “If someone’s name or location is about to be introduced by the programme itself, there is no need to put it in the description.”<sup>21</sup> If one character is going to use another’s name don’t intrude. Let the writer do some of your work for you.
- 9.3 Do not use stage directions – stage right, House right, down stage. “Susan leaves the kitchen” rather than “Susan exits the kitchen.”
- 9.4 We have established that we are at the theatre, so repeated references to the stage are unnecessary.

## 10. Standards Unique to Live Description

- 10.1 Program notes - Unlike video description, live description provides a period before the performance for program notes.
  - 10.1.1 The purpose is to prepare the patron by including descriptions that the describer will not have time to give during the performance. In addition to the credits on the playbill, the program notes should cover descriptions of: the sets, with their entrances, exits, placement of furniture, etc.; the appearance of the characters, the roles they play, their costumes, any gestures or mannerisms they use repeatedly; repeated staging techniques; and any props that are significant. Because time permits, all these descriptions should be complete, tightly scripted and not exceed 10 – 15 minutes.

- 10.1.2 The program notes are also the place to define any terminology that might be used in the performance. In a period piece, terms of clothing or architecture might be expanded. Unusual props can be defined. The remaining time before the curtain can be filled with the director's notes, articles about the playwright, the actor's bios, the appearance of the audience, etc.
- 10.2 At a parade, reading from the souvenir program would be desirable.
- 10.3 At an exhibit or display, reading the placards and describing any promotional material designed for it bring the curator's emphasis to the audience.
- 10.4 Live description may be provided for live broadcast programs: Presidential inaugurations, space launches, and national disasters. Live description allows deviation from the expected. If something unplanned occurs, a live describer can respond. Be alert to the unexpected.
- 10.5 Style
  - 10.5.1 When the characters are first seen, mention their names as they speak, which identifies the name with the voice to the audience.
  - 10.5.2 Short phrases during the pauses in dialog can be used in place of full sentences.
  - 10.5.3 Announce where you will be after the performance and actively seek the patrons for their feedback. While differences in the amount of description may be expressed, it is beneficial to get to know your audience.
- 11. Standards Unique to Video Description.
  - 11.1 The pauses in the work may be brief for the placement of description. Use complete, concise sentences. Shorter sentences are also easier to listen to.
  - 11.2 The narrator's voice should match the work – It should be distinct from the characters in the work and mixed to sound as natural to the work as possible. The narration serves the production and should blend into it. "Gerry Field, DVS® Operations Manager explained: ...contrast is one of the most important things. ...we work very hard to make sure

that the volume of the voice is not standing out above the program, that it has to work with it.”<sup>22</sup>

- 11.3 Characters. Unlike live theatre description where character’s names are in the playbill, characters in television and film may be introduced but unnamed. Some physical characteristic must be found to identify them until they are named in the work – “the bald man” “ the red headed boy.” Once they have received a proper name, that name should be used. Tying that name to the physical description once is desirable – “John, the redheaded boy...”
- 11.4 Since there may not be time for a complete description, choose that which is most revealing about the character. The age of the character may be reasonably judged by the sound of their voice. If that is not the case, mention their age. If they are dressed differently than other characters, that might be appropriate. Are they much taller, or shorter than everyone else? Are they the only blonde? Do they have blue eyes, when everyone else in the family has brown? Is their race important?
- 11.5 The relationships between characters may not be apparent. It is the filmmaker’s responsibility to reveal these relationships.

## 12. Style

- 12.1 Scene changes can be confusing particularly when the audio track does not indicate a change. Keep them simple and short. “In the bedroom.” “At the police station.” “Outside.”
- 12.2 It is not necessary to use the terms "now" when beginning to describe a new scene. It is assumed that what is being described is what is currently being shown on the screen. It is also assumed that time in the work moves later and later, so saying "later" becomes superfluous. The use of “later” might be appropriate, as in “Later that day” or “Later that evening” but it should be very clear by some visual clue that this is the case. In that instance, using the visual clue might be preferable.
- 12.3 Time shifts (flash backs, or visions of the future) should be made in reference to the character – “Emily sees the dead

girl playing.” “George sees himself much older.” Music and visual effects may further identify time changes.

12.4 There will be times when leading the action is necessary. Be aware, however, that leading the action is distracting for the non-visually impaired who also may be viewing the film.

12.5 Do describe the point of view when appropriate – “from above”, “from space” “moving away.”

12.6 We have established that they are watching television, so repeated references to the screen are unnecessary

12.7 Logos. Treat logos as you would any other image to be described, and read the company name(s).

12.8 Credits/Disclaimer.

12.8.1 Reading the credits at the beginning and end of films and television programmes is an important function of audio description as it is an area in which visually impaired people feel they particularly miss out.

12.8.2 The opening credits often appear over an important action sequence and it may be necessary to compress them into a shorter space or to read them in advance of their actual appearance on screen, in order to be ready to describe the action as it begins.”<sup>23</sup>

12.8.3 Disclaimers for televised films may or may not be required. They are generally difficult to read in the time allotted.

13. Overview. Audio Description is a means to an end. It is translation to the visually impaired of what is going on visually. The Audio Describer is a facilitator to the people who can't see. No rule is set in stone; words like “never” and “always” need to be applied with common sense. Gregory Fraizer views description as an evolving art.<sup>24</sup> When the art is well done it can have this response: “The description [of a movie] was so well done, I can't remember if I saw it before I lost my sight or after, it was described so vividly.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), [www.afb.org](http://www.afb.org) Adding Audio Description to Television Science Programs.

<sup>2</sup> AFB, [Video Description](#).

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- <sup>3</sup> AFB, Video Description in North America.
- <sup>4</sup> AFB, Who's Watching? A Profile of the Blind and Visually Impaired Audience for Television and Video  
2.
- <sup>5</sup> Association of Science-Technology Center (ASTC), Accessible Practices: Live and Recorded Media, Audio Description, [www.astc.org/resource/access/medmain.htm](http://www.astc.org/resource/access/medmain.htm).
- <sup>6</sup> Washear, 1
- <sup>7</sup> ASTC.
- <sup>8</sup> ITC, ITC Guidance on Standards for Audio Description  
[www.itc.org.uk/itc\\_publications/codes\\_guidance/audio\\_description/audio\\_1.asp](http://www.itc.org.uk/itc_publications/codes_guidance/audio_description/audio_1.asp) (May 2000) 4.
- <sup>9</sup> Washear, 2.
- <sup>10</sup> AudioVision, The Three Golden Rules of AudioVision
- <sup>11</sup> ITC, 20.
- <sup>12</sup> AFB, Project to Conduct Research on Described Video's Audience and Methods of Distribution (U.S. Department of Education Grant #H026G40001, June 1997) 6.
- <sup>13</sup> AudioVision, Golden rules.
- <sup>14</sup> AFB, Project, 4.
- <sup>15</sup> ITC, 15.
- <sup>16</sup> Gregory Frazier, Rules and Techniques for Description
- <sup>17</sup> ITC, 8.
- <sup>18</sup> ITC, 21.
- <sup>19</sup> AFB, Project, 2.
- <sup>20</sup> ITC, 12.
- <sup>21</sup> ITC, 14.
- <sup>22</sup> AFB, Project, 1.
- <sup>23</sup> ITC, 24.
- <sup>24</sup> AFB, Project, 4.
- <sup>25</sup> Comment by Eugenie "Jolie" Mason at an audio describers training session.