

The Audio Description Project

This document was drafted by the ADI AD Guidelines committee in 2003 and serves as a useful set of guidelines for audio describers.

© the Audio Description Project, American Council of the Blind

ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES

Definitions:

Audio Description is a means of providing access for people who are blind or have impaired vision.

The purpose of audio description is to give people who are blind or have impaired vision a more complete picture of what is being shown, enabling them to appreciate and to share in the presentation as fully as a sighted person.

Guidelines for Good Describing:

1. What to describe
2. How to describe
 - i. use of language
 - ii. style and delivery
3. Preparation

DETAIL

1. What to describe

Understand what someone who can't see needs to know; e.g.: Who is on-stage/on-screen, who is speaking, the set/location including entrances and exits, furnishings, furniture etc; the lighting, colours and textures, the costumes, the physical appearance of the characters, their facial expressions, the movements, actions, mannerisms, gestures, fights, and dances. Describe what is causing any unidentified sounds.

Read credits where time allows, and subtitles and captions, making clear by either a preface or just with the voice that these are not part of the description of the action.

Describe what is essential for the listener to know in terms of plot development and character.

How you prioritise and edit the information you give and the amount of detail you can give will be decided by how much time is available, how many times

what you say will be heard (i.e., whether or not it is going to be put onto a tape for the listener to hear at leisure) and how relevant and appropriate the information is in terms of their understanding and appreciation of the presentation.

Description should never confuse, mislead or distract nor should it interfere with the soundtrack/dialogue/songs. Good description enhances and complements the event.

2. How to describe

1. How to describe, in terms of language

Write simply, clearly and concisely. Ensure your description is easy to comprehend the first time it is heard.

Use language that is descriptive, accurate and appropriate.

Use complete sentences wherever possible, unless simply identifying a character.

Match your vocabulary to the show. Good description fits seamlessly with the "audio," creating an organic whole.

Avoid technical terms unless absolutely necessary.

Beware of using he, or she, when this can be misleading.

Do not use offensive or racist terms, (but do describe ethnicity where relevant), however, do not censor what you see, unless because of the Film Censors.

Work on expanding your vocabulary, especially verbs! (How many different ways can you describe someone walking from the room or sitting down?)

Avoid the term "we see."

Be aware of what is real and what is illusion for your listeners -- i.e., do not describe a ghost as a ghost if we are not certain if the figure is alive or dead.

2. How to describe in terms of style and delivery

Never override the dialogue unless it is absolutely necessary; e.g., if someone draws a gun. If you have to talk over the actors then do so over the least consequential dialogue.

Describe what you see without interpretation or personal comment.

Match your style, tone and pace to the show, scene or event you are describing or in other words, harmonize your delivery with the content of the presentation. Respond appropriately as a restrained but appreciative spectator.

Sound confident, interested, warm and authoritative. Be sensitive to the mood of the scene. Do not be patronising or chummy.

Do not be tempted to fill every pause. Allow the atmosphere and background noise to come through.

Employ good microphone technique – no extraneous rustles, bumping the mic, varying your distance from the microphone, sudden unnecessary changes in volume etc.

Describe at the same time as the action unfolds, or anticipate slightly, particularly with regard to comic or horrific situations to enable your listeners to experience the same emotions as the sighted audience at the same time.

Describe in the present tense.

Disappear. Good description directs attention to the presentation, not to itself.

3. Preparation

Observe closely and accurately, so you can describe closely and accurately.

Be the best audience this presentation could ask for. Do not diminish the experience for people who may enjoy this kind of presentation more than you do.

Prepare fully and practice your description. This is the only way to deliver a quality service.