

ITC Guidance  
On  
Standards for Audio  
Description

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# **1 INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1 Background to these Notes**

The Broadcasting Act 1996, Section 20(1), requires the ITC to draw up, and from time to time review a code giving guidance as to the how digital programme services should promote the understanding and enjoyment of programmes by sensory impaired people including those who are blind and partially-sighted.

Section 20(3) of the Act requires a minimum proportion of non-excluded programmes in a digital programme service to be accompanied by audio description. This requirement also applies to qualifying services. The minimum amount, interim targets and definition of applicable services can be found in the ITC Code on Subtitling, Sign Language and Audio Description on Digital Terrestrial Television.

These notes provide guidance on standards for the production and presentation of audio description. Audio description must of course comply with the requirements of the ITC Programme Code which covers the content of the programmes being described. Otherwise these notes are presented in the form of guidelines only, with no absolute rules. The ITC will in future review these guidelines in the light of experience gained with this new service.

The guidance provided within these notes is mostly based upon extensive studies carried out between April 1992 and December 1995 by the European Audetel (Audio Described Television) consortium. The consortium (see Section 7) undertook a thorough investigation of the technical, artistic, logistic and economic issues associated with the provision of an optional descriptive commentary of television programmes to enhance their enjoyment by visually impaired people. Such a commentary provides a carefully crafted description of actions, locations, body language and facial expressions and is reproduced in the gaps between the normal programme dialogue. Further information on the findings of the consortium and a videotape illustrating its work can be obtained from the ITC.

These guidance notes owe much to the dedicated work of broadcaster Veronika Hyks, editorial executive for ITV 1992-1995, who was responsible for a large proportion of Audetel's activities on description both as a vehicle for communication and as an art form. Four mechanisms were employed to gather the experiences upon which these notes are based:

- a) Blind and partially sighted people throughout the UK completed a questionnaire (distributed with the Royal National Institute for the Blind's 'New Beacon' magazine) about their television viewing habits and identifying the nature of their difficulties in following programme content over a number of classes of programme.

- b) Two hundred people of all ages and levels of visual impairment from around Britain took part in experimental viewing sessions at which they were asked to express their opinions about examples of audio described programmes and movies.
- c) An Audetel focus group was established to form in-depth critiques of described programmes.
- d) A trial national service was operated across peak-time ITV and BBC services between the months of July and November 1994 in which 100 special set-top receivers allowed viewers to enjoy 7-10 hours of described programming per week. The visually impaired viewers were regularly interviewed throughout the trial to gather their comments on all aspects of the service.

Among a large volume of valuable experience, the research revealed that there are many definitions of a successful audio description, not merely because describing styles differ, but because there are many fundamental differences in audience expectation, need and experience.

## **1.2 The Development of Audio Description**

Audio description is, of course, as old as sighted people telling blind people about visual events happening in the world around them. As a formalised means of enhancing entertainment for visually impaired people, it is generally thought to have begun at the Arena Stage Theatre in Washington DC in 1981 as a result of work by Margaret and Cody Pfanstiehl<sup>[1]</sup>. In the same year they founded the Audio Description Service, which promoted theatre descriptions across the whole of the US and, by the end of the 1980's, over 50 establishments there were producing some described performances.

By the mid-1980's the idea had 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. One of the patrons of the Robin Hood, the playwright Norman King, was so impressed by the benefits of the descriptions that he encouraged the Theatre Royal in Windsor to establish the service on a larger scale. After the necessary infrared transmission equipment had been installed to convey the commentary to the ears of the audience, the Theatre Royal described its first play '*Stepping Out*', on 6th February 1988<sup>[2]</sup>.

Today, with over 40 theatres involved, the UK still leads Europe in the number of venues which regularly offer audio described performances, with France's 5 theatres taking second place.

Cinema too is benefiting from audio description in several European countries. In Britain the Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff was the first to employ regular descriptions using live script readers, while in France the Association Valentin Haüy established a

portable service which travels throughout the country giving performances to visually impaired audiences.

The earliest known audio described television was transmitted in 1983 by the Japanese commercial broadcaster NTV. Its descriptions, which continue on an occasional basis today, are 'open'; that is, they are added to the normal programme sound and will be heard by all viewers. This makes them unsuitable for regular broadcasts during peak-time hours. In the late 1980's some occasional open broadcasts were also made by Televisión de Cataluña, in Spain. It is in the US, however, where descriptive services for television have really taken-off, with productions having been made since 1990 by the Descriptive Video Service working at WGBH in Boston. This service, which is largely funded by donations and foundations, produces some 6-10 hours of described programming per week and makes it available to 50% of US homes through the Public Broadcast Service network. These transmissions are possible in the US because of the presence of an additional audio channel on American cable television known as the Secondary Audio Programme<sup>[3]</sup>, but as it was not originally intended for this purpose, its audio quality is not ideal.

In 1991 the ITC founded the Audetel consortium which worked with partial financial support from the European Commission to explore all the issues associated with beginning regular broadcasts of described programmes in Europe<sup>[4]</sup>. In its initial years, it concentrated on the development of descriptive styles for all types of programming through interactions with many hundreds of visually impaired people. At the same time digital technology was being developed for conveying the describer's voice across the television network. Extensive testing of the reproduction quality of the descriptions was also carried out with elderly people to ensure that it was intelligible to those with less than perfect hearing.

Later work concentrated on the studio, where a computer-based workstation was developed to enable the describer to work as efficiently as possible. This system, with its associated software acts as a word processor, videotape controller and digital audio editor and is now a commercially available product.

Between July and November 1994 an ambitious trial of a full Audetel service<sup>[5]</sup> operated on peak-time ITV and BBC television, delivering over 6 hours of described programming a week to 140 receivers throughout the UK, mostly situated in the homes of visually impaired people. The service was carefully monitored to record practical engineering, logistical and editorial experiences as well as to generate a wealth of feedback from the users on receiver ergonomics and on the quality of the descriptions themselves. The trial was an overwhelming success, demonstrating not only the practicability of regular broadcasts, but also enormously increased comprehension and enjoyment among blind and partially sighted viewers.

### 1.3 Who Benefits from Audio Description?

Although the word ‘blind’ is widely used to imply a total loss of vision, in fact only about 18% of people who are registrable/registered as blind have no useful sight at all<sup>[6]</sup> and must rely solely on the television sound. The remaining 82% have some sight, the characteristics of which depend upon the nature of disability which gave rise to their visual impairment. This can range from loss of central vision due to macular degeneration, to tunnel vision in cases such as severe glaucoma, or patchiness and blurredness from cataracts, retinal detachment or diabetic retinopathy. Whatever the exact nature of their disability, it is evident that most visually impaired viewers will not be able to take-in the full screen or follow the subtle gestures and movements which are vital to programme comprehension and enjoyment.

Surveys carried out by the Audetel consortium showed that drama (including soaps and comedy) and movies benefit most from the provision of description, followed by wildlife programmes and then documentaries. News is regarded to have sufficient spoken content to be easily followed, as are game shows and chat shows. Many visually impaired people made specific mention of sport commentaries, which they generally regarded to be totally unhelpful because these commentaries are intended to augment the visual action. As the most exciting sports coverage is of live events, it is not practical to attempt to add a more detailed description to the words of a live commentator (see section 4.6). The only practical solution is to provide a separate description similar to that currently made available through the medium of radio.

Individuals seek different levels of detail and content from descriptions and these differences are most noticeable with age and degree of visual impairment. Most forms of visual disability occur through a progressive degeneration of sight and are accompanied by a visual memory. The experience of these people is therefore very different from those who were born without sight and who have no visual memory to draw upon. Some who have been blind from birth have little interest in the concept of beauty, the colour of hair, or description of clothing. Yet, for partially sighted viewers with visual memory, these are exactly the details that they would like within a description. One visually impaired person summed up the feeling of many:

**‘It may not mean *much* to me, but it might mean *something*. A man wearing a white shirt and dark trousers indicates somebody who is quite smart. If he’s wearing a tie, that also indicates tidiness and a seriousness of purpose.’**

The wide variety of backgrounds among the audience should be taken into account. Some will remember television and film quite clearly and may be familiar with cinematographic terminology. Others will have no experience of the media and may regard the describer merely as a storyteller. To many, expressions like *in close-up*, *pan across*, *mid-shot*, *crane-shot* etc, may not mean anything but it is important to try to understand why a director has chosen to film a sequence in a particular way and to describe it in terms which will be understood by the majority, if there is room to do so.

As audio description draws attention to the key visual elements of television scenes, it has also been found to be helpful in clarifying programme content for sighted elderly people whose cognitive abilities are declining (and probably younger people with learning difficulties). Work carried out within Audetel using a police drama and 62 elderly subjects revealed that comprehension of the plot and enjoyment of the programme were enhanced by the presence of an audio description. It was not obvious, however, that such a benefit would accrue. The study had to examine the possibilities that the description might have been a distraction, it might have become confused with the main programme dialogue and it might have overloaded the cognitive resources of the viewer.

Younger people, particularly aged between 15 and 20 are more independent and say they do not want to be treated differently from the rest of society. For them the descriptions should be short and precise.

Potentially the largest audience to benefit from audio description is simply those sighted people who do not always wish to direct their visual attention at the television screen. One general study of television viewing habits<sup>[7]</sup> carried out by interview with over 1000 respondents, revealed that 39% of viewers often or occasionally 'watched' television just for background while doing other things (cooking, knitting, eating, scanning the newspaper, ironing, etc). The ability to record described programme and movie soundtracks on audiocassettes and to play them while driving or travelling on a train is also a major benefit for sighted viewers. Audetel examined the implications of these forms of entertainment on the move for broadcasters and rights owners, and discovered significant commercial potential for the sale of pre-recorded described audiocassettes of popular programmes.

In summary, some people will rely heavily on the audio description whereas others use it only as a guide. The needs and wishes of visually impaired people are as varied as that of any sighted audience. Generally, most people interviewed throughout Audetel's work asked for the audio description to give as much detail as possible. However, some elderly viewers did find their attention waning after over long pieces of description, so clearly a balance needs be established.

## **2 THE PREPARATION OF AN AUDIO DESCRIPTION**

The general procedures outlined in these guidelines are aimed at new describers. With practice, the process becomes quicker and simpler and most describers tend to develop their own way of working within the seven-step framework below.

An audio describer needs good writing skills, a clear, pleasant and expressive voice and a thorough knowledge of the needs of a visually impaired audience. Of course, the narrator and the writer may not always be the same person. Occasionally, celebrity or other voices may be used for the final recording but it is important for the writer to be present to ensure that the tone of delivery are what was intended. Where a documentary is being audio described which has its own narrator, it is helpful for the audio describer to be of the opposite gender to the narrator, to avoid confusion.

### **Step 1 Choosing Suitable Programmes for Description**

Most visually impaired people like to watch the same sort of programmes as the sighted audience, with news, documentaries, soap and drama high on their list. However, popularity does not mean that all highly rated programmes are suitable for audio description.

Some programmes are too fast moving for a description to be really helpful to the viewer. Quiz programmes and game shows, though very popular, offer little opportunity for audio description because they both have tightly-worded almost continuous scripts. News programmes are also not particularly suitable.

Some films, which have more action than dialogue (and often have a continuous musical sound track), require almost continuous description and this can prove tiring to listen to. If the gaps between dialogue or commentary are too short, the audio description is more of a hindrance than a help.

### **Step 2 Viewing the Programme**

The programme will normally be available on a time-coded VHS format tape or optical disc (e.g. DVD). Particularly at the training stage, the describer should try to view the whole of it before starting to prepare the description. A useful way of assessing its difficulties is to ‘view’ the programme, without the picture for the first time, listening only to the dialogue and the sound effects. Another useful tool is the “simspecs” which are a pair of glasses whose lenses simulate visual impairments. Within a busy description schedule, there will not always be enough time for this blind viewing but initially it is a useful way of becoming used to the challenges of audio description.

When viewing new material, a few basic questions need to be asked. If it is a documentary, is it part of a series? If it is a drama, or a sit-com, is it a one-off, or a self-contained episode or part of a serial or a mini-series? If it is the latter, it will be helpful to put the episode in context. The characters, their names and their

relationships to each other need to be known and understood. Recent plot development is important. Specialist vocabulary requiring extra research, should be noted. Reference books and pictorial dictionaries/internet access such as '*Roget's Thesaurus*', '*The Pictorial English Dictionary*', '*The Book of Aviation*', '*What's What?*', '*A Visual Glossary of the Physical World*', etc. are useful. It is worthwhile spending time on getting things right.

Most production companies or presentation departments should be able to send a script with the VHS (or DVD) on request. Publicity departments can also send additional material, including cast lists and details of production crews, although there is rarely time to mention them all in a description. The scripts themselves can offer clues to sequences, which perhaps are not quite clear at first viewing. Therefore they should only be referred to for further information and not as the basis of a description, because the final edited programme or film often differs substantially from the original script.

There are three golden rules to description: describe what is there, do not give a personal version of what is there and never talk over dialogue or commentary.

NB. 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. The casual viewer rarely notices mistakes.

### **Step 3 Preparing a Draft Script**

The script is prepared taking into account principles such as are outlined in these guidelines. The assumption is that a PC-based workstation is being used as an aid to preparation, however the process would be similar, whatever installation is employed.

A work station normally consists of a number of items: a personal computer which acts as a word processor, time-code index, video edit controller, and prompting device for recording the description in the gaps between programme dialogue; a time-coded VHS or DVD player; an additional small monitor and associated loudspeakers (even if the PC has a video window); and a device which stores the descriptive audio.

The workstation should be capable of associating the elements of the written script with the programme time-code.

### **Step 4 Reviewing the Script**

Once the draft has been completed, it needs to be reviewed by an editor or senior describer. Script approval from the programme maker or film director/producer may occasionally be needed, though in practice it is unlikely.

The script should be rehearsed as live several times because many people read more slowly when recording than in rehearsal mode, so in order to save valuable recording time, be well prepared before the start of the recording.

## **Step 5 Adjusting the Programme Sound Level**

When a descriptive commentary is inserted into a programme, the background level of programme audio needs to be reduced so that the description can be clearly heard. This is important because the vast majority of visually impaired people are of an age where they are likely to suffer difficulty in comprehending speech in the presence of background sounds (known as presbycusis).

The narrative voice is fixed at a constant level at the start of the recording but the background level can be adjusted, often as a facility on the workstation. This level is normally pre-set at the beginning of a recording session but where there is a sudden upsurge of loud programme sound, or audience laughter, a further adjustment can be made. Where there is continuous traffic noise or laughter throughout the course of three or four consecutive descriptions, the fader can be kept at the lower level so that the full background volume does not burst through between the descriptions. If possible, music should be faded back up at the beginning or end of a phrase (as is done by some disc jockeys when talking over music); otherwise it can be very jarring.

Some early generations of audio description service decoders may not be able to reproduce any background audio while a description is being heard (this is due to the complexity of the additional digital audio circuitry required), although the fade-level information will be transmitted. This means that the describer must be sensitive to the fact that the final presentation could have a ‘jarred’ quality if a number of short descriptions are used within a short period.

## **Step 6 Recording the Description**

Having set background audio levels and checked timings, the script is then recorded. The current workstation gives the describer an advance cue followed by a countdown before the start of each description window. The description must not be hurried; every word should be clear, audible and timed carefully so that it does not sit uncomfortably close to incoming dialogue. Unlike sighted viewers, who have the benefit of both visual and aural information, an occasional misheard or missed word does not matter so much, but the visually impaired viewer will be relying on the clarity of every word.

Recording an audio description requires the same level of concentration, attention to delivery and intonation as any commentary or voice-over

Visually impaired people tend to hold strong opinions about people’s voices. If they do not like the voice, they will not listen.

Good audio description should be unobtrusive and neutral, but not lifeless or monotonous and the delivery should be in keeping with the nature of the programme. In a tense thriller or drama, the delivery should be steady and where the background music is menacing, the voice should reflect the tension, without becoming melodramatic. In

comedy, the narration should be steady but delivered with a slight smile in the voice. The describer should never join in with the laughter. In some instances, it may be a good idea to use professional ‘comic’ narrators to record comedy descriptions (see Comedy, section 4.9).

In most cases, male and female voices can be used interchangeably but there may be times when one or other would be more appropriate. The voice should not draw attention to it but should be a coherent element of the presentation. Its purpose is to paint pictures, convey plot, scenery and action.

Occasionally a slight regional accent may fit the bill, but each programme has to be assessed separately. A regional accent for a regional programme might seem logical, in practice it is quite difficult to find the accent which suits everybody. For example, there are many Lancashire variations, whereas standard English is at least understood by most people.

The average recording time for a one-hour description is approximately two to two and a half-hours.

The workstation will index the written script, the recorded description and all the associated background audio control information, precisely with the programme time-code. The resulting format is then suited to automatic playout from the studio centre when the programme is broadcast.

Archival storage of descriptions depends upon the operational arrangements within the studio concerned. In the past both DAT and CD-ROM formats have been used, but spare audio tracks on professional videotape formats or other digital media will be equally applicable. There is currently interest in archiving the time-code-indexed version of the written script too as a form of metadata which (like the text of subtitles) may be useful as a vehicle for searching for items of interest in the programme itself.

### **Step 7 Reviewing the Recording**

It is important to listen back to the recording, to ensure that each description has been recorded without mistakes, omissions or imperfect delivery. The work station should have a ‘review’ mode which allows the describer to be simultaneously presented with the visual in-time cues and out-time countdowns which aided the original recording process, as well as a rolling synchronised version of the written script. Where there are mistakes, the describer can simply over-record.

### 3 THE PRINCIPLES OF AUDIO DESCRIPTION USING PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

The preparation of an audio description is an absorbing and lengthy process and each programme comes with its own set of challenges. Though some programmes are more complex than others, the procedures should be the same. A two-hour film may take up to sixty hours to prepare, whereas a half-hour soap opera may take as little as an hour and a half. On average it takes one describer a working week to produce between one and a half and two hours of described programming.

#### 3.1 Use of the Present Tense

An audio description is a commentary, tells the viewer what is happening at a given moment, so it should be in the present tense, using the *present continuous* for on-going activities. The opening of the film, *'Dead Poets' Society'*:

**'A wall painting of a class of adolescent boys, - all with short haircuts, wearing ties and sports jackets. In front of the painting a boy aged about eight in a red school cap is having his tie adjusted. A teenage boy in a Scottish hat opens his bagpipe case, carefully fitting the pipes together. A master focuses a camera on the eight-year old, as an older boy in a boater puts his arm around the smaller boy. The bulb flashes. A white candle is lit. Another master is whispering instructions to an elderly former pupil.'**

The mixture of simple present and present participle gives the text a better narrative feel. If the simple present is used throughout, it can sound abrupt. Where there is the luxury of enough time, a description should read like a piece of writing that makes sense on its own. Situations can be put in context and the describer can sometimes refer back to an action, if there is time. From *'Close Encounters of the Third Kind'*:

**'The little boy has slipped out of his bed and is padding down the stairs in his Boston university T-shirt over his pyjama bottoms towards the open porch door and the bright light outside.... he turns his head towards another sound.... he toddles into the kitchen and stares wide-eyed at the mess on the floor. He raises his head towards the noise, his big round eyes fascinated. His mouth opens in calm surprise.'**

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.

**"he toddles into the kitchen."** The kitchen has already featured.

**"he stares wide-eyed at the mess on the floor."** Refers back to all the food falling out of the fridge.

**'Through the haze of a yellow sandstorm, a current of air buffets a scrap of rough scrubland as the glowing headlights of a jeep gradually come into view. It is the present day in the Sonora Desert, New Mexico. Several men climb out of the now**

**stationary jeep. Some hooded, others wearing caps, hold up their hands to their faces to protect them from the flying sand.'**

### **3.2 Prioritising Information.**

Setting the scene is an essential part of audio description. Scenes change in a matter of half-seconds and without guidance the visually impaired viewer can quickly lose the thread of a story or narrative. There may only be time to say one word, but it gives the viewer a starting point. 'Now...' can indicate a change of scene: 'Now on the stairs...', 'Now outside...', but it should not be overused. Any word that appears too frequently in a description, becomes a distraction and an upward inflection in the voice 'Indoors...', 'Upstairs...', 'In the bedroom...', 'That night...', 'The next morning...', is more effective.

The use of personal pronouns, 'We see...', 'In front of us...', should generally be avoided with the exception of children's programmes which sometimes need a more intimate tone.

**'Now he's coming towards us. His mouth hangs open, his arms are outstretched and he is breathing heavily... he's beckoning us to follow him...'**

When there are several people speaking at the same time it is important to clarify who is speaking at any given moment. **'Karen..., Roach..., Carver to Datta..., The policeman..., The mother...'**

In general it is helpful to repeat **proper names** frequently so the viewers are left in no doubt as to who is doing or saying what.

However tempting it is to use colourful imagery and elegant turns of phrase, clarity is the main aim of audio description. The describer must learn to weed out what is not essential.

In the opening sequence of the film *'Hear My Song'*, a young boy is waiting in a hospital corridor to be taken to see his dying mother. With no time restriction, the full description of the opening few seconds might go like this:

**'A black and white flashback of a small brown-haired, freckled boy aged six, sitting on a bench in a stark white-washed Victorian hospital corridor. He is wearing grey shorts and a grey school jumper over a white shirt and a grey school tie. He is playing Pandora's Box.'**

**A stout middle-aged nurse wearing a starched white uniform comes up to him.'**

That description includes the four main categories of information, ‘when’, ‘where’, ‘who’ and ‘what’. However, there are only six seconds to fill, so the description is pared down to the essentials:

**‘In black and white flashback a boy aged six sits on a bench in a hospital corridor...’**

**[The nurse:] ‘Are you Micky O’Neill’**

Because a woman’s voice identifies the boy immediately, there is no need to name him in the description. What is important, is to indicate his age and where he is. His school uniform and the game he is playing are details which enhance the description but are not essential.

**‘The elderly nurse takes the boy by the hand and leads him down the corridor. She ushers him into a room where a blond woman in her early thirties is lying in a bed. Micky looks at her, his lips slightly parted.’**

The woman identifies herself a moment later.

**‘Don’t die gasping for breath, son.’**

If someone’s name or a location is about to be introduced by the programme itself, there is no need to put it into the description.

Too much detail can become fragmented in the listener/viewer’s mind rather than giving a strong overall impression. For example:

**‘At the back of the large, floral papered rectangular room, a pair of French windows leads out into a patio, which has been planted on both sides with bushes of blue and grey lavender and deep pink oleander. On the left wall of the room above the marble fireplace, a gilt-framed portrait of a portly 18th century gentleman. On the mantelpiece two yellow and white King Charles spaniel china ornaments .....’**

A sighted viewer may see all these details but unless antiques and furniture are the subject of the programme, each individual item does not need a mention. A sighted viewer will form an impression of the room. The same applies to a visually impaired viewer. It is much simpler and clearer to say:

**‘A warm, book-lined, comfortably furnished drawing room in an 18th century country house.’**

As a rule, too much description can be exhausting or even irritating. The programme should be allowed to breathe from time to time, allowing the soundtrack and atmosphere to come through. In an episode of *‘The Bill’* a female police officer is walking around a

missing woman's bedroom, making notes. There is an element of mystery and unease in the room which is conveyed as much by the pauses as by the actual description.

**'Karen picks up her clipboard and walks in front of the shattered dressing table mirror...(pause)...she picks up a blood-stained lace mat...(pause)...she touches the corner of the red-spattered sheet on the bed...(pause)...she walks alongside the bed...(pause)...from the floor she picks up a broken silver framed photograph of the missing woman smiling broadly with her arms around a teenage boy...'**

Too much description can dilute the mood of a scene.

### **3.3 Giving Additional Information**

The describer should be completely familiar with the programme material in order to be able to pick out the key visual clues, which a visually impaired viewer may miss. If, for example, a knife is lying on a kitchen table and is used later as a murder weapon in a drama, it should be mentioned in a subtle way, because that is how the sighted viewer will see it.

Describers should not voice a personal opinion or interpret events. The description is there to clarify what is going on but occasionally a little additional explanation can help. For example in *'The Silence of the Lambs'* Hannibal Lecter steals a pen from his jailer Doctor Chilton. At that moment, there is no opportunity to mention it, but it is crucial to know about it in the horrific 'cage' scene. At a convenient moment the description says:

**'Chilton fumbles for the pen he last had in Hannibal's cell.'**

The audience now knows the pen is missing and its re-appearance in Hannibal's hands makes sense.

Describers in the US are not encouraged to add anything or offer any information that is not apparent on the screen at that moment. Rather than saying a character is angry, they describe the action as they see it and let the visually impaired viewer decide what that action implies. British research seems to indicate that additional help is appreciated, as long as it is not condescending or interpretative. For example, the following descriptions do not immediately convey what the facial gestures mean and by the time the viewer has worked them out, the programme has moved on.

**'She purses her lips and narrows her eyes.' 'Her mouth drops open and her eyes widen.'**

Whereas,

**'She narrows her eyes suspiciously.' 'Her mouth drops open in shock.'**

‘Support information’ can help to minimise confusion. In another scene from *The Bill*, a woman police officer speaks into her radio, having entered the bloodstained bedroom of a woman who has gone missing. She says: **‘We’re going to need CID and SOCO...’** A moment later a car draws up outside and a woman gets out. She takes a metal attaché case from the boot of her car and goes into the house.

CID is a well-known term but SOCO, though perhaps familiar to regular viewers of police series may not be generally known. Explaining SOCO dispels any doubts that might creep into the audience’s mind. Before adding this ‘support information’, however, the describer must establish whether viewers are being encouraged to think that the woman drawing up outside might be the missing woman. In this case, *The Bill*’s production office confirmed the woman was a regular character in the programme, but if a mystery or tease is intended, the description should not pre-empt it.

**‘Karen, the Scene of the Crime Officer, gets out of her car and pulls a metal attaché case from the boot.’**

Having explained the term once, it does not need to be repeated.

Later, three cars draw up and five men get out. There is no other time to identify them than as they arrive. They do not refer to each other by name, and without any identification, visually impaired viewers might be left with only a vague notion of who they are. Some viewers might recognise their voices, but not if they are new or incidental characters. The description goes as follows:

**‘A car pulls up. Plainclothes officers Roach and Carver from CID get out. Behind them two other vehicles bringing two forensics men and a police photographer.’**

No further description needs to be given. Having been introduced to them, the sound effects and dialogue become self-evident. When to identify a character or to offer an extra piece of information or give advance information is also a question of judgement.

**The information must never interpret or give away the plot.**

The beginning of a programme or film is often the most difficult for visually impaired people who are unable to pick up visual clues.

**‘In a taxi, Nancy wearing dangling diamante earrings, her hair in a topknot, puts on red lipstick with her purple gloved hand. She smiles to herself. The taxi pulls up outside Heartley’s nightclub. She is greeted by two burly men. Derek the shorter and balder of the two, pays the cab, Gordon opens the door.’**

Here, three of the main characters are identified by name at the beginning of the film. If Nancy were intended to be a ‘mystery woman’, as she might be in a thriller, it would

have been wrong to name her, but she is part of the main action right from the start and there is no mystery attached to her name. It would however have weakened the next scene, if she had been called Micky's girlfriend in the first description because that becomes dramatically evident the next few minutes of the film.

The two burly men are not mentioned by name in the film but without a name they would have to be described as the fatter, shorter man or the taller, dark-haired man, which is cumbersome, if repeated.

In the opening few minutes of the feature film *'Pretty Woman'* the male lead, Edward, is identified straight away on screen. The heroine is introduced more enigmatically:

**'Nearby, in a small hotel an alarm clock goes off. A shapely thigh stirs and turns to reveal black lacy panties and a red T-shirt on the upper half of this female body. An arm stretches out from the bed silencing the alarm at five to nine. Around her a few torn snapshots of herself with different men. Their faces have been scratched out. The girl eases on a stretchy cream top, attached by a metal ring to a short blue skirt.'**

Whilst the girl is only glimpsed partially as if in a peep show, it would be premature to name her as introduces herself in a significant way a few minutes later.

Early identification of principle characters allows the viewer to concentrate on the event, but if surprises are intended then they must not be given away,

### **3.4 Signposting or Anticipating the Action.**

Where possible, the description should mirror the action but 'signposting' is sometimes needed when there is no other suitable place to insert a description. For viewers with residual vision this can unfortunately cause confusion. In this description from *'Pretty Woman'* Vivien's return to the room has to be described before it actually happens:

**'Cautiously Vivien takes a croissant and walks barefoot onto the balcony. When she comes back into the room she sits on the edge of the dining room table near to Edward.'**

Because there are so many forms of visual impairment, some people will notice occasional timing discrepancies. For the describer, it is a matter of deciding whether information is vital or not. Even if it is, there will be some people who may not like it!

### **3.5 Stating the Obvious**

There are times when visually impaired viewers say: **'I didn't need to be told that, I could hear it.'** Or **'I could imply it.'**

A telephone or doorbell ringing does not need to be described, unless the actual sounds are unfamiliar. A continental telephone sounds different from a British phone, for example. When a car screeches to a halt, the sound should speak for itself.

**‘Her eyes widen, her head falls on the pillow, her eyes stay open.’**

**[a rasping sound]**

**‘She dies... Micky’s nose starts bleeding.’**

A blind audience was asked whether they needed to be told that the woman dies. Some said it was unnecessary, but others thought that it added to the drama of the moment. There will always be opposing views!

**‘Kitty Ryan stalks up to Micky. She clenches her fist.’**

**[sound of a blow]**

**‘Micky lands heavily on the floor.’**

It was not necessary to add **‘Kitty punches Micky in the face’** but some even thought that, **‘Micky lands heavily on the floor’** was unnecessary because it was obvious that Micky had fallen down. Then again, others said it was important to know where he landed.

The describer must get a feel for when it is helpful to state the obvious and when not, but should not be tempted to impose personal knowledge or expertise unless the programme or film calls for it. If a film is obviously set in London or Paris then it can be mentioned. If it is nowhere in particular, although the describer might recognise a location, it should be left unsaid.

### **3.6 Highlighting Sound Effects**

Usually a sound effect, or the event leading up to it, is described just before it happens:

**‘The burglar drops his sack.’**

**[thud]...**

Sometimes it can be even more effective after the action.

**‘Waving their arms they run towards the platform..’**

**[Chuff chuff... the sound of a train pulling away]**

**‘The train is pulling out of the station.’**

If the available time is short, pronouns and articles can be dropped.

Generally, the describer should try not to talk over sound effects, but occasionally if they are part of the background atmosphere and there is important information to be described, the background level may be lowered to allow for the audio description.

**‘An ambulance man is carefully raising the woman’s head from the ground.’**

[Sounds of the police radio system and the sirens of other approaching police vehicles]

These sound effects lend atmosphere and the individual words audible from the radio, are part of the ambience only and not central to the story.

### 3.7 The Use of Proper Names and Pronouns

It is extremely important for visually impaired viewers to be quite clear about who is doing what. In one sequence of a cooking series, the presenter prepares a fish dish. She is the only person on screen and so it is enough to use **‘She...’**

**‘In her kitchen, she puts on a white apron and out of a piece of greaseproof paper, she unpacks three pieces of hake.’**

There is the potential for ambiguity when there are several people on screen at once:

**‘Kowalski stumbles down the stairs and doesn’t see T-Shirt attaching the rope to the back fender of a car. He jumps into the driver’s seat and starts the engine as Babsy lopez exhaustedly into view. He hears the car engine then sees the rope moving past him...’**

Does Kowalski or T-shirt jump into the driver’s seat and who hears the car engine? For clarity, repetition of names is helpful:

**‘T-Shirt jumps into the driver’s seat...’**  
**‘Babsy hears the car engine...’**

### 3.8 Adjectival Descriptions

The use of descriptive adjectives is very important in audio description. A few well-chosen words can enhance a scene considerably, but they must not reflect the personal view of the describer.

**‘She sits down on a dark green moth-eaten sofa.’** is an objective statement.

**‘She sits down on a hideous dark green moth-eaten sofa.’** is subjective and would only be acceptable if the ugliness of the sofa were the issue.

The question of whether to comment on physical attractiveness produces two opposing responses. Some viewers feel they should make up their own minds as to whether a character is attractive or not. It does help to indicate the level of attractiveness where beauty or ugliness is relevant to the issue. For example, although a female TV presenter may be pleasant to the eye, her appearance is not relevant to the subject of newsgathering.

In a drama, it may be necessary to mention someone’s looks if they have some bearing on the way other characters react to them:

**‘Her deep blue eyes focus on him as she pushes back her long shiny, corn yellow hair. Her perfectly chiselled face betrays no emotion as she slowly uncrosses her long slim legs.’**

Describing clothes is important, but it has to be done at the right moment, otherwise it can seem inappropriate to the action.

**The man in a yellow coloured jumper and neat blue slacks shoots the blonde who is wearing a turquoise low cut dress.** Is this a fashion show or a thriller?

### 3.9 Use of Adverbs

The most effective use of adverbs is to support the description of an action, as a corroboration but they should be used carefully.

**‘brusquely, carefully, cautiously, jovially, eagerly, haughtily, anxiously’** are all descriptive and specific, whereas **‘characteristically, clearly, instinctively, arguably, suitably’** are vague and interpretative.

**‘She stamps her right foot impatiently.’**

**‘She grins at him mischievously.’**

### 3.10 Colours / Ethnic Origins

One of the questions most frequently asked of describers concerns colour: Why should colours be described to people who have never seen them?

The percentage of people who have never had any useful sight is quite small. Most visually impaired people have at some time seen colours and either retained the visual memory of colour or can remember the significance and impact of a particular colour. For the majority of people, colours are an important part of the description. People who are blind from birth or from an early age cannot ‘see’ colours but they do understand the significance of a particular colour by its association. They may not ‘see’ green, but the colour of flower stalks, leaves and grass, which people can touch and smell does mean something. Green is fresh, the colour of renewal and nature in spring. Red is the colour of fire and heat, exuberant and overt, blue is more reserved, yellow is the colour of the sun and ripe corn, etc. A person wearing bright colours is making a personality statement, wanting to be seen. Someone else wearing black may be being dramatic, mysterious or sad, depending on the situation. If the grass is brown, it may have been deprived of rain. And so on. Colours have meaning and should be described.

If there is time to describe the physical features of a person, the colour of hair and skin should be mentioned, along with other physical features. If the colour or ethnic type of a person is central to a storyline, it should be mentioned. If it is incidental, it can be mentioned at an early stage, but if repeated too often, viewers might be misled into thinking that the racial type is more significant, than it actually is. Multi-racial casts are becoming the norm.

In a car chase, it can be helpful to identify the make of cars involved:

**‘The green Ford veers off to the left, but the white Lancia is right behind.’**

It is not necessary however to identify all the cars that the Lancia and Ford pass in the road unless it is directly involved. A sighted viewer would not do it, because the chase is what is important.

**‘The Lancia skids round a corner; in the middle of the road a parked red Chevrolet. The driver of the Lancia tries to brake, but it’s too late. He smashes into the side of the red car.’**

In a nature film, there may be wildlife in the distance, but if they are too far away to identify, there is little point in examining them through a telescope. If they were more than incidental to the sequence, they would have been filmed in close-up.

### **3.11 Use of Verbs**

The use of the correct verb can make all the difference to a description. One of the most frequently used verbs is ‘walk’. If the only information needed is to convey the simple action, then it is the right word to use. **Swagger, lope, tiptoe, march, sidle, shuffle** etc are examples of specific ‘walks’.

### **3.12 Logos and Opening Titles**

Some opening titles using computer-generated text can move too rapidly for any helpful description to be given. A popular alternative is to provide the viewer with some useful information about the programme, for which there might not be time later. In other cases, the musical theme tune can be enjoyed for its own merit, without any description over it. But with American programme material there may be a contractual obligation to describe the opening logo.

*‘The Bill’* opens with a fast-moving sequence of images from the series which cannot be read in the time available. It can be more useful to introduce the episode like this:

**‘In tonight’s episode of ‘The Bill’, ‘Occupational Hazard’, written by Carolyn Sally Jones and directed by Jean Stewart, young black PC Gary McCann gets his first crack at crime-busting. In the CID room at Sunhill Police Station detectives Burnside, Lines and Carver are looking through the file of suspected con-man Harry Osborne. Detective Viv Martella was the officer in the case.’**

### **3.13 Cast Lists / Credits**

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. However, most of the people questioned, like the majority of sighted viewers, are not too interested in the names of production teams and technical crew. Many broadcasters today prefer their announcers to talk over end credits or to go straight into a trailer or ad break. A monthly bulletin or electronic programme guide could give important information about audio described films and programmes in advance of the transmission date. This will have to be decided on an individual basis.

With described film video releases, many American movie companies insist on every credit being read out at the end of a film, even if this means a voice reading the names over a blank screen. This is unlikely to be acceptable in the context of television because airtime is too valuable. If it is ever necessary to read out all the credits, it saves a lot of time if the credit list is acquired on computer disk from the distributor and attached to the end of the audio description text. Typing all the names is laborious.

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.

The credits following soap operas scroll very quickly, sometimes at speeds that sighted viewers can hardly follow. During the Audetel trial transmissions a shorthand approach was adopted where a few names from the cast are read after each episode. As there are several episodes each week, the whole cast list can be built up over each complete week. Generally, the time taken for the credit roll will allow for six to eight of the cast to be mentioned after each episode with three or four of the main production team: e.g. After Monday's Coronation Street:

**'Among the cast today:  
Emily Bishop was played by Eileen Darbyshire  
Audrey Roberts... Sue Nichol  
Liz McDonald... Beverley Callard  
Raquel Wolstenholme... Sarah Lancashire.  
Written by Adele Rose,  
Director Brian Mills  
Executive producer Carolyn Reynolds  
Producer Sue Pritchard'**

And after Friday's programme:

**'Among this week's cast:  
Mike Baldwin was played by Johnny Briggs  
Bet Lynch... Julie Goodyear etc .etc**

## 4 PROGRAMME CATEGORIES

### 4.1 Feature Films

Preparing the audio description of a film is always a lengthy process but it can vary significantly from film to film. *'Close Encounters of the Third Kind'* and *'Basic Instinct'* each contained three hundred descriptions but Spielberg's film took almost two weeks to prepare because of the long sections of science fiction visual images which had to be accurately described. The thriller took one working week.

Biographical details about the stars, directors and writers can be obtained from press releases. The describer should know whether the film is being premiered on television or whether it is a re-run. One of the most important rules of feature film description is to be true to the film in mood and style. If available, a screenplay or shooting script may be used as a guide, but not relied on as the accurate basis of the audio description. With classic films like *'The African Queen'* or *'The Maltese Falcon'* it may be unobtainable, so the describer must rely on what is on the screen and on any background notes available from film reference books.

### 4.2 Musicals

The main challenge for the describer is where to place the description. Many film songs came from stage shows and are well known and viewers want to listen to them without the describer talking over them. The describer must either try to pre-empt a song with a brief description of a dance or costumes, or, must judge carefully when to intervene and when to stay silent during a song, to cause least offence. The third option is to let the music play and say nothing at all. (See 4.9 Children's programmes)

When describing a dance sequence, it is more important to convey the look and general movement of the dance rather than a step by step description. It is better to do nothing than to do it badly.

In *"Singing in the Rain"* Donald O'Connor sings a comic song, *'Make 'em Laugh'* and between the verses performs a remarkable comic dance routine which does need to be described, keeping pace with the music and making room for the sound effects:

**'Cosmo sits down on the end of a green sofa... at the other end a white headless dummy. He acts coy, flipping his hat back and forth along the back of the sofa. He edges closer to the dummy, propels himself over it and lands in its lap. He picks the dummy up and whirls it round and round.**

**Now they're sitting on the back of the sofa. The dummy's hand touches Cosmo's knee, he pushes it away... again and again. He kisses the headless torso, they fall backwards behind the sofa... they appear to be struggling, first the dummy flies up into the air... then Cosmo. The dummy shoots out over the sofa with Cosmo in pursuit. He slips across the floor, tries to pull**

**the dummy up by its arms... it won't budge and seems to pull him down on top of it. Cosmo kicks the dummy out of the way, falls down and somersaults to pull himself up again. Falls again... gets up again... his feet are stuck together... so he can't get up... it's up and back down, scrabbling to his feet... falling flat on his face and head... again and again... Propelling his body around the floor he whirls round like a spinning top.**

**He runs up a piece of scenery wall, does a backward somersault... lands back on his feet. He runs up another wall and flips over... gaining speed he runs towards a third wall and crashes through it. It's made of paper... he crawls back through the hole in the wall, and falls exhausted to the floor.'**

The choreographer's copy of a musical film script would be an invaluable aid, though not necessarily very easy to come by. With such a complex routine pronouns and prepositions can be dropped where appropriate, to help maintain the pace and rhythm of the song.

### **4.3 Soap Opera**

Most soap opera does not allow for lengthy description, since dialogues follows rapidly and there are very few purely visual sequences. However, when they do occur, viewers find descriptions helpful. From *'Coronation Street'*:

**'Outside in drizzle a small Mini is being driven very slowly. Reg is at the wheel. He passes a house with a yellow garage door. He peers through the car window, stops the car, winds down the nearside window, looks into his notebook, looks back at the house and smiles gleefully.'**

Over the opening credits which are always the same, a brief summary of the previous episode is an option.

**'Last time Norman decided to put in an offer on Rita's house. Rita and Ted are going to Florida for two weeks leaving Mavis and Derek to look after the shop and Reg with serious misgivings about Ted. This morning the postman delivers some mail at the Wiltons. Mavis and Derek are at breakfast.'**

**'Last time Reg was making enquiries into the death of Ted Sullivan's first wife. Rita had an insulting offer on her house from Norman and Mavis and Derek can't wait to be in charge of Rita's shop.'**

Most regular visually impaired viewers of soaps soon become familiar with the characters' voices but when a new character is introduced, audio description can help to speed up the familiarisation:

**'In today's episode Molly Brown comes to the Street. She is small, dark-haired, in her late twenties and looks permanently tired. When she's**

**nervous she tends to pull at her left ear lobe.'**

There is no need to provide extra biographical information because the script will do that over the subsequent weeks but the physical aspects of a new character are important.

#### **4.4 Nature Documentaries**

There is considerable scope for audio description in the realm of nature documentaries. Audetel's trial showed that these programmes are very popular, particularly with middle-aged and elderly audiences. They tend to be slower in pace and very visual. They usually have their own commentary, but filmmakers generally let the wildlife take centre stage. Presenter-led documentaries like the wild life programmes of David Attenborough leave little space for audio description, but where there are long pauses with only the natural sounds being heard, the describer has an ideal opportunity to insert descriptions. From *'The Queen of the Beasts'*, a Survival Special:

**'The shaggy red-maned head of a male lion peers across a field of dry grass. The camera closes in on the lion's motionless gaze. Two lionesses running side by side pounce onto the back of a wildebeest, knocking it off its feet, pulling it down and biting into its sinewy dark neck.'**

Some visually impaired people may have never seen a lion or a wildebeest but they do have an idea of the kind of animals they are. There will be very few viewers who have never come across a domestic cat. Not having a mental image of something does not mean that a person has no understanding of it.

#### **4.5 Current Affairs Documentaries**

Current affairs programmes offer less scope for description because they tend to be wordy, but each programme should be assessed individually. On-screen subtitles, for example, are particularly frustrating for visually impaired people and when they appear in short bursts, audio description can help.

#### **4.6 Sport and Live Events**

The description of sport and other live programmes, in the presence of an existing commentator, is impractical since it is impossible to know when the commentator will speak or what he or she will say. A few sports such as horse racing do have such comprehensive commentaries that description is virtually unnecessary. Unfortunately, however, commentators of team sports assume that the viewer is able to see the action and, apart from identifying the player with the ball, they set out to augment the entertainment with a series of background facts and supplementary details. The broadcasting of a separate commentary specifically for visually impaired viewers implies the complete fading-out of the main programme audio (in order to remove the voice of the commentator), and this necessarily removes the sound of the crowd which

adds atmosphere to the whole event. The resulting description therefore owes nothing to the original television transmission.

Although it might be tempting to suggest that such a description belongs on the radio, where there is excellent descriptive coverage of sports like cricket and tennis, this may not address the social issue that audio description aims to achieve – a simultaneous shared experience for sighted and visually impaired people alike. Of course, increased awareness by television commentators of the requirements of visually impaired people could improve their enjoyment of live sport without the need for audio description (by reducing reliance on on-screen text and tabular data, for example).

Pre-recorded sport does offer some opportunity for describing around the commentator, but in practice such a lot of description is required for an action sport that any intervention by the television commentator can make for an incongruous overall presentation. Of course, there will often be insufficient time to prepare a description for pre-recorded sporting events since they are usually broadcast only after a short delay.

Live ceremonial events such as the state opening of Parliament or the inauguration of the Olympic Games are normally narrated with an understanding that there will be visually impaired viewers watching. Usually no more description is necessary; the background sounds of the ceremony should be allowed to be heard as much as possible, since they lend atmosphere and a sense of occasion to the event.

#### **4.7 Foreign Language Drama**

The same simple procedure applies to drama where the foreign language is used sparingly. In Central Television's *'Sharpe's Rifles'* two Spanish guerrillas, Teresa and Diego, are sitting on a rocky escarpment watching the activities of an English officer. They are speaking Spanish:

**'On the other rocky face Teresa watches Sharpe. She says to Diego, "I need this man"... Diego looks at her quizzically... "As an ally", she replies. "Just as far as Torrecaastro".'**

If the foreign dialogue has not been subtitled, the describer should resist the temptation to show off personal knowledge. Translating the spoken lines might be interpreted as spoon-feeding and not what the programme producers intended.

#### **4.8 Foreign Language Material in Britain and Smaller European Countries**

Britain, in common with other European countries, imports a considerable percentage of its programming from the United States and Australia. The audio description for those programmes is in English and should present no real problems.

In the Netherlands and Scandinavia, viewers are used to watching English-language imports in their original version, since dubbing is expensive and English is the *de facto* second language in these countries. Most such programmes are given sub-titles in the local language of the country concerned and this also helps people with hearing difficulties. For a visually impaired audience with little knowledge of English, these programmes will remain inaccessible. Equipment is available which can read teletext-delivered subtitles aloud, but the expressionless quality of a synthesised voice is not suitable for an entire drama or a film, and it is not feasible to recognise a variety of different speakers within the programme.

Bi-lingual viewers in Scandinavia were asked if they would prefer an audio description in English or in their own local language, when it accompanied an English language import. The English audio description would have the advantage of matching the programme language and might be available to purchase with the programme but it would not reflect the culture of the target audience. A description in the local language could help to clarify any difficult English programme dialogue, and would avoid any miscomprehension of an English description which might arise. Opinion was unanimously in favour of a local language description.

In Belgium, where programmes are broadcast in Flemish and French, English material carries both Flemish and French subtitles, although occasionally they are dubbed. An audio description would have to be in an appropriate native language (or possibly both).

In France, Germany and Italy for example, most foreign language material is dubbed. Audiences are accustomed to it and are not particularly concerned. John Wayne has been speaking German for 50 years! A French film being shown in Germany will be dubbed into German and would carry a German audio description. The standard of dubbing in these countries is generally excellent whereas in Britain, where only a handful of programmes are dubbed, it is not always as good, so the describer needs to assess whether a programme or film will really benefit from being described. The Eric Rohmer classic film *'Ma Nuit Chez Maude'* for example, is a conversation piece, full of philosophical comment and very little action. Dubbed into English, in order to accommodate an English audio description, the whole mood of the film changes. If the essence of the film is lost through the dubbing, there is a strong argument for recommending that the film be left in its original language with subtitles and is therefore not suitable for audio description.

#### **4.9 Children's Programmes**

Blindness in children is often accompanied by other physical and learning difficulties and for some of these children audio description may remain inaccessible. Visually impaired children are more likely to have delayed language than other children. There is evidence that speech and music are processed by different centres of the brain and children with damaged speech centres may nevertheless be able to process verse and melody.

Describers should avoid speaking over songs where possible, but if vital information needs to be conveyed, it should be fitted in after the first verse or during repetitions in the song or during instrumental passages.

There are as many visually impaired children, who are ardent and intelligent television watchers and who are very sure of their likes and dislikes. In Audetel focus group sessions, many older children asserted their independence by expressing a wish that descriptions should be kept to the absolute minimum.

The viewing habits of young people do not appear to differ greatly from those of an adult audience. Soap opera is popular with many of them because the characters quickly become familiar, their voices recognisable and there are very few extended visual sequences. The fact that the subject matter is not specifically aimed at children does not seem to be important. For example, *'Home and Away'* is enjoyed by children from the age of 6 onwards.

Where a description is being written specifically for children's programmes the vocabulary and sentence construction should be suited to the age group for which the programme is intended. The tone of the narration should also reflect the tone of the programme. Where the voice is describing an exciting adventure sequence, the sense of adventure should be apparent in the voice but without undue exaggeration. Feature-length cartoon films, particularly from Disney, require a great deal of thought and sensitivity. The descriptions should reflect the 'cute' aspect of the animations where appropriate.

**'Goldfish with long curly eyelashes... a baby deer with big brown eyes...'**

Interesting adjectives and expressive adverbs should be used where possible.

Here is an example from the film *'Dumbo'*

**'Inside the wagon Mrs Jumbo's eyes widen and her face broadens into a big smile as she sees Dumbo's little trunk appear through the bars on the window. She lopes towards him but the chains on her feet stop her from reaching him. Undeterred she stretches her long grey trunk out of the window and searches for him like a hand in the dark. She finds Dumbo's little trunk, strokes his face and rubs his cheek. Dumbo smiles and wraps his trunk around hers. Two plump teardrops fall from his eyes... he wipes them with his mother's trunk.'**

#### **4.10 Comedy**

Comedy programmes possibly present the greatest difficulties for the describer, because it is not easy to produce a description, that is both amusing and does justice to what it is happening on the screen.

The most popular television comedy is the sit-com performed in front of a live audience or post-produced with canned laughter, the humour appearing both in the verbal script and through visual jokes which range from simple facial expressions to complicated ‘bits of business’. Canned laughter can make a weak joke appear better than it is, helping to create a heightened expectation of something comical. When the visually impaired viewer hears a burst of laughter, he or she will hope the description will support this.

Firstly, the describer has to decide very carefully where to place the description of a visual gag. If a line of funny dialogue is followed by a visual joke over laughter, the only possible place for the description is over the audience reaction, which means the sound level of the laughter must be substantially reduced. If the description is inserted in this way, some viewers may feel robbed of the natural audience response. Instead of joining in with the general laughter following a joke, they have to concentrate on listening to the audio description of something that is happening or about to happen, which will lessen their enjoyment.

Secondly, the describer has to write a description that will make the audience want to listen: **‘The man slips on a banana skin and falls to the ground.’** is a literal and rather bland description of a comic situation and although humour is very individual, the describer can help the process by using words that sound funny in themselves.

**‘The man’s foot catches a banana skin, he flips into the air and flops to the ground.’**

It is not easy to describe a pratfall, but careful use of language can give more of an idea.

At the start of an episode of the comedy series *‘Men Behaving Badly’* one of the principal characters, Tony, is in bed with his girlfriend Pat. The scene starts mysteriously building up to humour:

**‘A room in half-light... clothes and magazines are strewn on the floor... an electric guitar stands propped up against the wall... an empty bowl of soup, a yellow plastic duck. A toe overhanging the edge of a bed is attached to a hairy male leg... the leg belongs to Tony flat on his back asleep under a red duvet.’**

Unexplained laughter is irritating. When there is a non-verbal comic sequence with audience laughter, the description must be so timed that the visually impaired viewer will understand the joke at the same moment as the sighted audience. The pauses become crucial.

**‘Gary is pushing a supermarket trolley. He stops to add two rolls of floor cloths to join the long-handled floor sponge already in the trolley. He puts in some floor cleaner, polish and more floor cleaner... He spots an upright dustpan and brush... He drops his car key on the floor... looks around him then brushes the key deftly into the dustpan... He smiles at his great**

**achievement.**

**He walks to the checkout banging a man on the head with the handle of the mop as he passes... He walks on unaware.**

There should be a sense of humour in the delivery and not all describers will be particularly suited to comedy. During the Audetel trials, the late comedian and broadcaster Willy Rushton was asked to describe the first few minutes of Jacques Tati's classically whimsical film *'Monsieur Hulot's Holiday'*, Rushton was given a script but asked to be quite free with his interpretation:

**[Noise of a car backfiring]**

**'Monsieur Hulot, as you may have gathered, has arrived. He lopes in through the door conveniently marked "L'entrée de l'hotel"...**

**'Now a country road. A small veteran car chugs into view... attached to its right side... one of those butterfly nets, and a fishing rod standing upright like a sort of flag pole... The little car spews out smoke as it splutters along...'**

The people who remembered seeing the film, laughed a lot and thought the description excellent. They enjoyed Rushton's opinionated asides and characteristic comments. Others, who had never seen the film, enjoyed listening to Willie Rushton but not having experienced the visual jokes for themselves, and no film dialogue to vary the rhythm found their interest waning after a while. Rowan Atkinson's *'Back to School Mr Bean'* was audio described for the Audetel test transmissions and received a similarly mixed reaction. Comedy that relies entirely on the visual does not seem to engage the visually impaired viewer. *'Mr Hulot's Holiday'* belongs to the 'classic film' category and therefore there is a stronger case for describing it. Mr Bean, and other totally visually humorous programmes, without a proven comedy writer on hand, may well be an example of a programme that will not be suitable for audio description.

#### **4.11 Sexually Explicit or Violent Programmes**

Describing sexually explicit material has to be sensitively handled. Just as in works of literary fiction some sex scenes work better than others, the same applies to the audio description of such scenes. If handled insensitively they may be embarrassing, crude or just very dull.

Films on TV are generally shown in one of three slots. If shown at 7.30 pm the film will be most heavily edited, if it contains scenes of sex or violence. The second slot, after the 9.00 pm watershed, will have fewer edits. The late night slot will allow the film to be shown with very few changes, but it is rare for an adult film to be transmitted without some minor alteration. Films on video however, have no such restrictions and describers need to familiarise themselves with these different demands.

The broadcasters' compliance committees very carefully monitor strong language and a high proportion of editing is concentrated on the removal of offensive language. With audio description, the describer has to be even more sensitive. Explicit language needs careful consideration. In the BBC's dramatisation of *'Lady Chatterley's Lover'*, shown in a prime time slot, none of D H Lawrence's sexual language was ever included.

The describer has to convey the atmosphere and the feeling without descending into crudeness, clinical coldness or undue sentimentality. Describing the events leading up to a seduction or love scene is almost more important than the love scene itself. The sound effects and background music help to create the mood and once a love scene is in progress it does not need an ongoing description unless something extraordinary happens such as the production of a hidden weapon, as in *'Basic Instinct'*. Too much description would become comical which is not the desired intention.

The following two extracts come from the film *'Pretty Woman'*, a huge box office success. The sex scenes are erotic but gentle and that aspect needs to be expressed in the audio description.

**'He holds her gently by the waist, letting his head drop and pressing it against her. She cups his head in her hands and strokes his hair. He starts to untie her robe... runs his hands down the sides of her slinky black satin negligée. He picks her up in his arms and sits her on top of the piano. He touches her hair and pulls her towards him. He tries to kiss her, but she moves her mouth away and kisses him on the neck. Gently he prises her legs apart and stands between them. She lies back on the piano and his hands caress her body through the black satin. He lifts the edge of her slip, kisses her belly and presses her towards him. The picture fades.'**

This kind of description needs pauses so that the viewer/listener has time to let the images sink in and to imagine what is going on.

**'Upstairs, Vivien in a long white satin nightdress comes out of the bathroom fluffing up her hair. Her face softens into a gentle smile when she sees Edward, sitting up in bed, head resting on a pillow... asleep. She sits in front of him giving one of her dazzling smiles. She presses a finger to her own lips and then to his. Her fingers touch his chin. She leans slowly towards him and kisses him on the cheek... hesitates, then kisses him on the mouth...'**

*'Basic Instinct'*, unlike *'Pretty Woman'*, is an aggressively sexual film about people who are expressing more than love in their sexual experiences. In the notorious "crossed legs" scene when the audience is left wondering exactly what they did see, Catherine, a murder suspect is being interviewed at a police station. The sighted viewer knows that she is naked under her dress from the previous scene. The describer needs to provide that essential information so that the visually impaired viewer knows what is going on: **'She slips on a sleeveless dress , would not be sufficient information, without over her naked body'**. She sits in front of a police interrogator and slowly uncrosses her legs.

The viewer sees nothing specific but merely the knowledge that she is naked creates the sexual tension of the scene and this has to be conveyed to the visually impaired viewer in an acceptable manner, yet leaving the viewer in no doubt of what is going on.

**‘Corelli looks over at Nick and then at Catherine. His jowly face sweats as she uncrosses her legs in front of him. She crosses them again and brushes one against the other.’**

At the end of the film Nick and Catherine are involved in a crucial love-making scene. The first few minutes of the scene are devoted to the ‘seduction’. Halfway through the scene Catherine seems to be mirroring the activities of the mystery blond murderess in the first scene of the film, so that aspect needs to be described in precise detail. The sighted audience is asking: ‘Is she going to stab him?’

**‘Her nails dig into his back... she pulls him over so that she is on top again...’**

It is important to describe sexual behaviour that is relevant to the plot but too much description of the act itself can make it seem banal. Sound effects can be very eloquent in this situation.

As a general guide, the describer should try to convey the kind of sexuality (loving, aggressive, tender, tentative, etc) without embarrassing the viewer.

Sensitive material certainly benefits from a second opinion.

Scenes of violence require the same level of sensitive consideration. Many viewers, sighted and visually impaired, find violence more shocking than explicit sex scenes and whereas sighted people can look away if they cannot bear to look at what is being shown, the visually impaired viewer listening to the audio description cannot protect himself from a terrifying image. The rule, if at all possible, is to find a form of words to conjure up the intention of the scene, without undue discomfort.

In *‘The Silence of the Lambs’* Hannibal Lecter carries out a gruesome crime and the most effective way to describe the details is to keep them simple and to the point.

**‘Lieutenant Boyle hangs crucified on the cage bars, his stomach cut open, his insides removed.’**

The images are gruesome enough without verbal embellishment.

#### **4.12 Advertisements / Programme Trailers / Product Placement**

There is an increasing tendency in television advertising to produce visually enigmatic commercials which omit the verbal identification of the product. Similarly, programme trailers rely heavily on eye-catching visual content and often do not report verbally the name or broadcast time of programme being trailed. These practices frustrate visually

impaired viewers, who cannot see captions and have little idea what is being advertised, if there is nobody to tell them. Among television viewers there is a large community of visually impaired consumers who are not being reached, and though some advertising may prove difficult to audio describe, it is nevertheless an area which is worth exploring. It will be up to advertisers and individual broadcasters to decide whether the audio-description of advertising or trailers should be attempted.

Product placement is on the increase in commercial television and broadcasters and service providers need to consider whether contractually the product placement needs to feature in an audio description.

## **5 RIGHT TO PERFORM AND BROADCAST AUDIO DESCRIPTIONS**

The *Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988* (Section 80) introduced the moral right of the author of a copyright dramatic work or the director of a copyright film, not to have his work subjected to derogatory treatment. This right arises without the need of the author or director to assert it.

The addition and public broadcasting of a descriptive commentary, which significantly modifies the original programme audio, may be considered to be a ‘distortion or mutilation of the work’. It is therefore essential to obtain the written consent of the author or director to perform and broadcast the description, bearing in mind that this person (or people, in the case of joint authorship or directorship) may not necessarily be the copyright owner. This is because copyright can be assigned through normal commercial practices but moral rights cannot be transferred. Unless waived, they remain the property of the individual.

Where programmes or films are commissioned from a production company, it is suggested that a clause be included within the associated contract, through which the author or director waives his moral right to object to derogatory treatment of the work specifically for the case of audio description on television. Of course, the soundtrack of an audio described programme or film can become an entirely separate form of, purely audible, entertainment which may be distributed via audio storage media or broadcast on radio. The rights associated with commercial exploitation in this way are far more complex and must be clearly delineated from the application to television.

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