

Standard techniques in audio description

By Joe Clark

At the very least, the field of audio description needs general techniques. This list of techniques is offered as something an organization like Audio Description International could adopt or ratify in the way international conferences adopt or ratify statements or resolutions. The adoption would be nominal and non-binding, with no enforcement mechanism. In effect, adopting the techniques would act as a gesture, an indication that audio description is actually rule-governed and is not self-explanatory and that the nascent audio-description industry can agree on baseline measures.

Only later would we develop training programs and certification or testing schemes. Agreeing on basic techniques is where we would need to start; only much later on, after considerable further discussion, would this declaration of standard techniques be improved on, enlarged, and transformed into separate standards, training, and certification programs.

We are not talking about standards, training, and certification programs in this section. As explained above, those are prolonged processes that require time, expertise, and money.

Definitions

Some quick definitions are in order.

- *describer*

The person who writes or generates the descriptions, whether in advance or live on the spot.

- *narrator*

The person who speaks the descriptions aloud. Can be the same as the describer, and can theoretically be a machine using speech output.

- *production*

The single, discrete artwork being described – a play, a television program, a dance performance, a film, a photograph. Describing a complete television series, by contrast, involves a sequence of productions.

Standard techniques in audio description:

The list

1. Describe what you observe.

- **Explanation:** It's the most basic requirement of audio description, but one that is routinely ignored.
 - **Change history:** "Describe what you see" is something of a buzzword among describers, but "Describe what you observe" may be slightly better, prompting the describer to actually think about what is seen rather than jotting down a bare-bones and rote description.
2. Describers and narrators serve the audience and the production, not themselves.
 - **Explanation:** You're not providing descriptions to show off your vocabulary or to highlight your beautiful voice. You work for the production and the audience. A certain self-effacement is required.
 3. If time limits force you to be selective, first describe what is essential to know, such as actions and details that would confuse or mislead the audience if omitted.
 - **Explanation:** Triage is the norm in audio description; we cannot describe absolutely everything.
 4. Whenever possible, describe actions and details that add to the understanding of personal appearance, setting, atmosphere, and mise-en-scène.
 - **Explanation:** Audio description is not strictly functional; our aim is not simply to provide basic and minimal understanding of a production. When time permits, tell us what everything looks like.
 5. Descriptions are usually delivered during pauses or quiet moments. It is permissible to let pauses or quiet moments pass without a description. Conversely, since it is more important to make a production understandable than to preserve every detail of the original soundtrack, it is permissible to describe over dialogue and other audio when necessary.
 - **Explanation:** I wonder about adding "It is also permissible to refrain from describing in order to preserve or respect the dialogue and audio." Put together, these principles state, in effect, "Describe when necessary, but do not necessarily describe," but that expression is too twee and clever by half. In any event, the principle that understanding the production is more important than hearing every snippet of dialogue must be advanced.
 - **Change history:** This rewritten and expanded technique covers pretty much every possibility: Talk during a pause, don't talk during a pause, talk whenever necessary.
 6. Describe as consistently as possible, using the same character names and terminology throughout a production or across several related productions, unless exceptions are warranted.

- **Explanation:** If a TV show refers to a character as Peter in nine episodes but as McKinley in a tenth, use “Peter” in the first nine and “McKinley” in the tenth. If a vehicle is described as a Suburban in one episode, it should not suddenly become an SUV or a truck in another.

7. Describe any obvious emotional states. Do not attempt to describe what is invisible, as a mental state, reasoning, or motivation.

- **Explanation:** There are several right ways of describing facial expressions and other manifestations of emotion. Some describers believe you should describe only the physical configuration (e.g., frown, smile, grimace), while others believe it is not wrong to add a description of emotion if it is clearly visible (e.g., impatient frown, cold smile, frustrated grimace). Either approach is defensible. However, it is always wrong to describe a motivation or anything else that is not visible. All the following, for example, are out of order:

- Her prayers answered, Joan looks up with tearful eyes.
- Reassured, Mackenzie nods to Jack.
- The lieutenant is surprised, and favourably impressed, by this progress.
- Jim Chamberlain finally gives in to frustration. He sidesteps Kate and her sympathy and walks off by himself.
- Kate’s reporter friend, June Callwood, is surprised by this rumour.
- Kate wonders briefly if she’s done the right thing, then shrugs, and smiles.

8. Deliver descriptions in a vocal style that melds into the surrounding audio at the point of the description.

- **Explanation:** We may need to add this qualifier to the principle: “Descriptions must not sound self-contained, prepackaged, or delivered according to a predetermined pattern.” This principle seeks to solve the problem of description snippets recorded in isolation that all sound the same and do not match the actual production.

9. Narrators’ voices must be distinguishable from other voices in a production, but they must not be unnecessarily distracting, as with recognizable celebrity voices.

10. Read titles and credits wherever possible, including subtitles in a foreign-language production.

11. Do not censor. Violence, sexuality, salty language, political imagery, or anything else a describer or narrator may personally dislike must nonetheless be described where applicable.

- **Explanation:** Describers and narrators do not get to pick and choose what to describe purely to satisfy their personal biases. (“Salty language” here refers to

visible salty language, like a bumper sticker or T-shirt. Narrators may be required to utter words they would not ordinarily use.)

12. Do not specify an exact passage of time unless indisputable visual evidence supports it.
 - **Explanation:** Say “nighttime,” not “that night,” unless you can prove from visible evidence that it is that night. To do otherwise essentially lies to the audience.
13. Extended descriptions – giving, for example, background on the production or definitions of terms – can be provided where possible, but must limit themselves to the production actually at hand.
 - **Explanation:** So-called E-descriptions (a poor choice of words: Does it mean “electronic descriptions”?) let you pause the program and listen to much more detail than a real-time playback of the production would allow. In theatrical description, the describer will often discuss the cast, the layout of the theatre, and sets before the performance actually begins. However, you may not recap last week’s episode of a soap opera, for example; you cannot see last week’s episode, and you may describe only what you see.
14. Describe in the language of the audience, not the production.
 - **Explanation:** A program with segments in French and English should be described in English on an English-language television station. A Spanish-language production with Dutch subtitles should be described in Dutch on a Dutch TV station even though the surrounding audio isn’t in Dutch. Truly bilingual programs on truly bilingual stations are rare, and in those cases the describer would still comply with this principle by describing in either of those languages (or by switching from one to another).