

# Audio Description Coalition

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## Standards for Audio Description and Code of Professional Conduct for Describers

*based on the training and experience  
of audio describers and trainers  
from across the United States*

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### Introduction

Audio description helps to ensure that people who are blind or have low vision enjoy equal access to cultural events by providing the essential visual information. Audio description uses the natural pauses in dialogue or narration to insert descriptions of the essential visual elements: actions, appearance of characters, body language, costumes, settings, lighting, etc. Descriptions are delivered through a wireless earphone to permit people who are blind or have low vision to sit anywhere in the audience.

The Standards for Audio Description reflect audio description's origin as a means of making live theatre performances accessible; however, the spirit of these principles applies to almost all audio description situations. Other art forms and media call for variations from these original principles, which are discussed in separate sections later in this document.

The Code of Professional Conduct for Describers, near the end of this document, addresses the responsibilities of audio describers and trainers in terms of obligations to clients and consumers, privacy and confidentiality, behavior, business practices, and continuing development.

Throughout the Standards, examples appear as boxed text.

### Standards for Audio Description

These standards are not intended as a do-it-yourself guide to becoming an audio describer. One should learn and practice the skills and techniques of audio description in a workshop setting led by an experienced audio description

trainer to coach and critique a beginner's first efforts. Once trained, newcomers should look for opportunities to observe the work of experienced describers and to refine their own developing abilities in peer groups of local describers. Trained audio describers are expected to deliver the best possible description.

Some suggestions for building audio description skills: Attend performances and listen to description by fellow trainees and/or veteran describers and afterwards discuss why and how they made the choices they did. Gather a small group of beginning describers and critique each other as you describe brief segments of a movie.

Movies with theatre-like pacing work best, and it's also great to use two copies of the same film—one with pre-recorded description and one without. After someone describes a segment and the group discusses it, check to see how your decisions differ from the recorded description.

Audio description grows and changes as people hone and share their skills, the material to be described evolves, and the technology for delivering description improves. In reading and practicing these standards, words like "never" and "always" must be applied with common sense. Nevertheless, the most basic principles or "rules" of audio description should not change.

### Basics

#### Describe what you see.

- This is the first rule of description: *what you see* is what you describe. One *sees* physical

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appearances and actions; one *does not* see motivations or intentions. Never describe what you *think* you see.

We see “Mary clenches her fists.” We do not see “Mary is angry”—or worse, “Mary is angry with John.”

- Preview the material with an eye toward including the visual information that is inaccessible to people who are blind or have low vision. These include key plot elements, people, places, actions, objects, unknown sound sources, etc. not mentioned in the dialogue or made obvious by what one hears. Concentrate on that which is the most significant and least obvious from the dialogue or other audio information. Describing everything is impossible—describe what is essential in the allowable time.

Mention who answers the phone—not that the phone is ringing. It’s not necessary to describe obvious sound cues.

- Describe essentials first and then, as time permits, describe further elements such as the decorative details of the settings, the physical appearance and mannerisms of the characters, architecture, clothing style, technology, color, light and texture. This sort of description works well during long pauses in the action or during scene changes.
- Description should not fill every available pause. Less is more. Audio description is not a running commentary. Listeners should be allowed to hear the emotion in actors’ voices and in the tension of the silences between characters.

- Be sure to describe, as nonchalantly as possible, seemingly insignificant things the sighted audience will observe without knowing their later importance.

For example, describe that Mary is toying with a pistol and then places it in the top desk drawer. Later, when John and Mary are having a heated argument and Mary edges toward the desk, the sighted audience will suspect she’s headed for the gun. By describing both actions, listeners can join in the suspenseful anticipation.

### Describe objectively.

- Allow listeners to form their own opinions and draw their own conclusions. Don’t editorialize, interpret, explain, analyze or “help” listeners in any other way.

This does not preclude using pre-show notes to explain something that sighted audience members easily discern but would be difficult for audio description listeners to imagine without additional information. For example, most sighted audience members see how the plant puppets in *Little Shop of Horrors* operate and then “believe” in the story’s voracious plants. It’s appropriate to give listeners this same opportunity.

- If the conclusion is that a character is angry, describe what led to that conclusion—the gestures/facial expressions of the character. Character’s moods, motives or reasoning are not visible and, thus, not subject to description.
- Use only those adjectives and adverbs that do not offer value judgments and that are not themselves subject to interpretation.

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“Beautiful” says only that something is not ugly. But what exactly makes it beautiful? Instead of saying the person, clothing, object, etc. is beautiful, describe the things observed that caused your conclusion—so listeners may draw their own conclusion.

- It is more interesting to name the items in the clutter if time permits than to say, “The attic is cluttered.” Don’t take a series of specific, separate actions/events/images and describe them as one.
- When describing sizes, round-off to the next logical increment to give listeners numbers that are easier to hear and comprehend. Don’t add “about” or “approximately” to qualify the estimated dimensions—this just adds words that make the information more cumbersome to grasp.

When the onstage swimming pool is 11 feet 8 inches across, 6 feet 3 inches wide, and 3 feet 7 inches deep, listeners will more easily “picture” the pool’s size when they hear a less cumbersome “12 feet across, 6 feet wide and three and a half feet deep.”

- Use the first person when the director has created a “first person” point of view as a means of including the audience. This sensation is part of the experience of sighted audience members, and it must be shared with listeners. This allows the describer to avoid mentioning “the audience” when, for instance, a character turns to address the audience. The same would hold true for other actions, effects, etc.

Say, “She turns to *us*” instead of “She turns to the audience.” “His flashlight shines in *our*

eyes.” With film and video description, the same would apply—“the shark swims toward us,” not “the shark swims toward the camera” or “we move through the forest” instead of “the camera moves through the forest.”

### **Allow listeners to hear the dialogue.**

- Listeners want to hear the performance first and the description second. The dialogue is telling the story and must be heard. This rule is broken only when the confusion by omitting the description is greater than maintaining the integrity of the dialogue.

When two people are speaking at the same time, such as an actor and a describer, listeners usually cannot understand either. If you absolutely must describe over dialogue, speak loudly and insistently. Listeners, however, can usually understand simultaneous spoken words and sung lyrics.

- In most instances, a describer may talk over background music or underscoring as well as the lyrics of a repeated chorus of a song. One shouldn’t describe during significant arias, the verse of a song or its first chorus. Use caution in talking over a “song played on the radio” because its recognition by the audience and/or the audience’s hearing its content may be important to setting a mood, recalling an era, making an emotional statement, etc.

Deborah is talking non-stop about making a pie, but she is quietly taking a gun from a drawer. The describer must speak over her dialogue because the audience will hear a gunshot before she stops talking about making the pie.

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- The dialogue from radio, television or other speaking characters may be important to the story or may be considered background sound. If it is background noise, it is permissible to describe over it, assuming the description is vital.
- Don't talk in paragraphs or elaborate sentences. Use short phrases in place of full sentences. Try to speak at least two or three words so listeners have the opportunity to switch focus to the describer's voice. Unless absolutely necessary, try not to interrupt with just one word.

When there's the luxury of plenty of time: "Ken walks across the room, picks up a knife and butters the toast."

When time is tighter: "Ken picks up a knife and butters the toast."

When time is extremely tight: "Ken picks up knife butters toast."

### **Trust listeners' ability to comprehend the material.**

- Trust listeners, who, in most instances have made the choice to attend the performance, to grasp the meaning of the material and the description. Don't condescend, patronize, or talk down to listeners.

Because the women wear bustles, the term will arise in describing the costumes. To confirm that everyone knows what a "bustle" is, tuck this into the pre-show notes without calling attention to it, with something like, "The women's long skirts puff out in back, padded over the hips and under their skirts, with bustles." If it's important to the plot, try to repeat the information during

the description for those who didn't hear the pre-show notes.

- If the play has a complex plot and/or a confusing set of characters, there's probably a synopsis in the playbill. Just as this information will be helpful to sighted audience members, sharing this information with listeners during pre-show notes may aid their appreciation of the performance and the description. Make clear that the information comes from the program so listeners understand that everyone has access to this information—that the describer is not providing special information because the listener may have trouble following the material.
- Without making assumptions that too broadly characterize the listeners, what does the describer know about their age range, their educational level, their cultural knowledge, etc.? The better one can assess listeners' common frame of reference, the better one can choose descriptions that resonate with the majority.

People who are congenitally blind (born without sight) are often comfortable with the level of information they glean from what they routinely hear and sometimes don't realize how much visual information is available.

On the other hand, people who are adventitiously blind (born with sight but lost it later) know that there's a great deal of visual information and don't want to miss it. For many diverse reasons, some people prefer minimal description for essential clarifications and others

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want as much description as time allows. The describer's responsibility is to find the median.

Different listeners prefer varying amounts of description. Accordingly, the describer should honor the rules of good audio description to include the visual information that is inaccessible to people who are blind or have low vision without filling every available pause.

### **Censorship is unfair to the material and to listeners.**

- Describers who censor information because of their own discomfort fail their listeners. Describers must say the factual information about nudity, sexual acts, violence, etc. Listeners should know everything that is evident to sighted people. If a describer feels that describing particular material will make him/her uncomfortable, s/he should not accept this assignment.

### **Keep the language consistent.**

- Choose language that is consistent with the content of the material.
- Use language appropriate for the listeners. Children's programs should use vocabulary suitable for the age group. Make every effort to pronounce words properly—actors' names, directors' and designer's names, characters' names, the names of objects and places. Ask the theatre staff, producer, etc. for correct pronunciations when necessary. If characters' names or the names of places or things are given an unusual pronunciation in the material, be sure to use that pronunciation.

When describing for young listeners, remember that they may not have the life experience to

know common expressions like "cat and mouse game."

- Once the describer establishes a name for characters, places, objects, etc., always use that same name.
- In general, describers should avoid metaphors, similes, etc.; however, common comparisons that should be recognized by most listeners are acceptable as a means of saving time.
- Not all listeners will understand slang, colloquialisms, and regional terms. Use within context of the performance.
- Use the correct terminology so long as the majority of listeners will understand that terminology.
- Use the most descriptive words and concise phrase or sentence structure.
- Use vivid verbs. People frequently "walk" but they also amble, stagger, shuffle, saunter, and stroll. Choose the word that best matches the action.
- Use pronouns carefully. If there is only one female in a scene, then "she" is fine. If there is more than one, proper names will be clearer.
- Address time shifts (flash backs or visions of the future) in relation to the character. Music and visual effects may further identify time changes.

"Lighting shifts to pale amber as George sits next to his sister at the family dinner table."

- Use "while" and "as" to join two actions only if there is a connection between them.

"John picks up the knife as Jill turns away."

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- Describe colors both to help people with low vision to locate what's being described and to share the emotional "meaning" of the color in the production. People who are blind or have low vision usually share the common attributes we assign to color, such as blue and green are cool and serene while red and orange are hot and tempestuous, etc.

"The dress is burgundy" rather than "the dress is red" more richly describes the dress. Avoid, however, unusual color words: "cyan", "cerulean," "dun," "puce," etc.

### Race, Ethnicity and Nationality

- Sighted audience members don't see a character's race, ethnicity or nationality; rather, they see skin color and facial features. Accordingly, the describer should simply describe each person's skin color and, if time allows, facial features. In a dramatic work where characters' backgrounds develop over time, the writer, director and actors will help the audience learn where each character fits into the world of the play—socio-economic level, educational level, relationship to other characters, race, ethnicity, nationality, etc.—to the extent that some or all of these are important to the storytelling.
- In describing *appearance*, describers should avoid offering their judgment about a character's cultural background. For example, avoid "African American" because not all people with brown skin have African heritage.
- Describing skin color and facial features is an all or nothing proposition. If it's important to note this for one character, then describe this for all characters.

- Rely on factual, clear, straightforward, commonly used terms that the majority of listeners will understand. Avoid disrespectful, derogatory or condescending terms as well as vague, poetic or euphemistic language. Do not use the terms "light-skinned" or "dark-skinned" because these phrases are sometimes associated with value judgments in the African American community.

Terms such as these may be helpful in describing skin color:

brown  
dark brown  
fair complexion  
light brown  
light tan  
olive  
pale pink  
ruddy complexion  
tan  
white

- In a dramatic work where, perhaps because of the story and its setting, the characters' race, ethnicity, nationality is largely apparent to sighted audience members and integral to the plot, delineating the "sides" as part of the description would be helpful.

In *West Side Story*, the plot is much more understandable if one knows who's a Jet and who's a Shark—and that the Jets are Caucasian and the Sharks Puerto Rican. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, there would be no story without knowing that the primary focus is an African American family and that the antagonist, Carl Lindner, is Caucasian.

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### Describe from the listeners' perspective.

- Surprises should, ideally, come at the same time for all audience members. If characters' appearances or actions, hidden identities, costumes, sight gags, sound effects, etc. happen as a surprise to sighted audience members, don't spoil the surprise for listeners by describing (and revealing) them in advance.

If a character is in disguise, he becomes "the man" rather than "John wears a disguise." Use a neutral term "the figure in red" when characters are disguising their gender.

- If the action that accompanies a sound effect will result in a reaction from the audience, treat this as if describing a sight gag. Time the description to allow listeners to react at the same time as sighted audience members.

If the audience sees something happen that might "warn them" of the possibility of, say, a loud noise, be sure to describe that action. For instance, "Pat" loads a rifle, so we know that there's a possibility s/he will fire it.

### Good techniques make for good description.

- Be certain to describe entrances and exits—who and where—especially when there's nothing audible to indicate someone has joined or left the scene.
- Use a character's name only when sighted audience members know the name. When an unknown character appears, refer to the person by a physical characteristic used in his/her initial description until his/her name is revealed. Once everyone knows the character's proper name, tie the name to the

physical description at the first opportunity ("John, the redheaded man") and afterwards use only the character's name.

Although characters are often listed in the playbill in order of appearance, sighted people probably don't remember that the first man is John, the second is Fred, and the third is Charles. So, until the character's name is used in the action, refer to the person by a physical characteristic, such as "the blond man."

- Establish and use one consistent name for each character as early as possible. This will be simpler for the describer and for the listeners.

A female character is first called "Mother," so refer to her as "Mother" until we learn another name for her. Later, other characters call her "Mary" and "Aunt Mary," but she's called the three names equally. Because, however, her greatest significance to the plot is as "Mary" (not "Mother" or "Aunt Mary"), refer to her as "Mary."

- If the characters are referred to by difficult names—long names, full names, formal names, foreign names, etc. or many variations on their names (for instance, Chekovian characters)—be sure to use the one name that best serves the storytelling.

A tip: Create a list of the established names for each character for reference during the description. A list of commonly paired couples may also be useful in plays with difficult character names.

- Once the material has identified a character, match the character's name with the actor's voice by mentioning the character's name just

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before s/he speaks. Although the describer usually doesn't need to repeat the voice identification, this might be necessary after a character has been silent or absent for a long time or if several voices are similar and it's important to know exactly who is saying what at a particular point.

- Allow the material itself to provide information to listeners.

If a character is about to call a newly-entered character by name, or to refer to a new location by name, the describer doesn't need to provide this information. The relationships between characters may not be apparent, but it is the playwright's responsibility—not the describer's—to reveal these relationships.

- Guide people with low vision by stating the location where they should focus.

For example, in a theatre performance, say, "At the left, John enters from the kitchen." In subsequent descriptions, if the only door at the left is the kitchen door, it's fine to say, "Mary goes to the kitchen." [In film and video, say, "At the right, the hazy orange sun sets behind the mountain."]

- Match vocal delivery to the pace, energy and volume of the material. Allow the performance to set the tone and rhythm of the description, remembering that the performance, not the describer, should be the focus. Just as the describer should not assume a detached, lecturing or clinical tone, the describer should not attempt to project him- or herself into the performance as another performer. Dramatizing the delivery of the description is distracting and perhaps insulting because

listeners may feel as if the describer is telling them how to respond.

The language and delivery to describe a fight scene would differ from that used to describe a love scene.

- With experience, describers learn to gauge when laughter and applause have peaked and begun to die down. If possible, hold description until the audience begins to quiet. If not, speak loudly when describing over loud laughter, music or applause.
- When an effect will be repeated, try to describe it the first time in a way that allows a "shorthand" reference later.

In a play where characters vigorously smoke cigarettes to underscore their tension, describe the first instance as, "Mary and John light cigarettes, inhale and exhale deeply." On later occurrences, as listeners understand the pattern of their behavior, simply say, "Smoking again."

### **Standards Unique to Live Description**

These standards apply to audio description for all types of live events, especially theatre performances. Dance and opera performances require some specific techniques, which appear following this section.

#### **Basics**

- With most plays and musicals, the describer should allow listeners to participate in the "willing suspension of disbelief" by describing in terms of the story rather than the theatrical experience. Avoid stage directions—stage right, house right, downstage, etc. As well,

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avoid theatrical references or jargon, especially names for technical equipment and devices, which would draw listeners' attention away from their involvement in the story and may introduce confusing, unknown terms.

Say "John [character's name] is 6 feet tall with curly black hair ..." instead of "the actor playing John is 6 feet tall ...." "Susan runs from the kitchen" rather than "Susan exits the stage."

- Some organizations utilize a pair of describers to cover a production. For instance, the first describer describes the performance while the second describer prepares, and sometime delivers, the pre-show notes (and intermission notes if applicable) and serves as backup describer. A backup describer is prepared to describe the event if the original describer is not available.
- Give listeners a means of providing the management with feedback on the description by announcing the process at the end of the description and/or providing a Braille/large print handout at the equipment counter.
- In addition to performing arts events, live description may be provided for live broadcast programs such as Presidential inaugurations, space launches, national disaster news coverage, etc. With no opportunity for pre-show notes to cover the essential "overall" information, consider using some silences to describe the "big picture" rather than what is specifically onscreen.

### Pre-Show and Intermission Notes

- Live description provides a period before the performance for pre-show notes and productions with intermissions provide a second opportunity before the second act begins. Most describers prepare scripted pre-show notes to be sure that they're covering everything in a coherent, organized and timely manner.

Listeners are trying to absorb and remember a great deal of verbal information. Describe settings and costumes in the order they appear. As much as possible, describe each setting in the same order (left to right and top to bottom, for example).

- The purpose of pre-show notes is to prepare the patron by including descriptions that the describer will not have time to give during the performance. In addition to the credits on the playbill, the pre-show notes cover descriptions of the sets, with their entrances, exits, levels, placement of furniture, etc.; the physical characteristics of the characters, the roles they play, their costumes, any gestures or mannerisms they use repeatedly; dance movement; recurring staging techniques; and any props that are significant. Because time permits, all these descriptions should be complete and detailed, tightly organized and not exceed 10–15 minutes.
- When many of the characters wear costumes that are variations of the same style, it's helpful to establish the basic style of the male and female costumes and then describe the specifics for each costume.

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“Most of the men wear three-piece suits, white shirts and string ties while the women’s dresses are high-necked, long-sleeved and have straight skirts to the floor.”

- The pre-show notes are also the place to define any terminology that might be used in the performance. In a period piece, terms of clothing or architecture might be explained. Unusual props can be defined.
- The remaining time before the curtain can be filled with the director’s notes, articles about the playwright, the actors’ biographies, the appearance of the audience, etc.
- If there’s a delay in the start of the performance or during a scene change or an emergency in the audience, describe what the sighted audience can see—a large group has just arrived and is being seated, the curtain is caught on a piece of scenery, etc. Remember the rule of “say what you see”—don’t report something you hear on the backstage intercom, etc. If it’s not apparent why there’s a delay, it’s fine to say so and that reassures listeners that the describer is still there.
- In productions with intermissions and a great deal of information to cover in pre-show notes, consider limiting the pre-show notes to overall production information (credits, etc.) and the first act’s details (settings, costumes, characters, etc.). Then, return during the final minutes of intermission with notes to describe the second act’s details, important reminders from the pre-show notes, and, if time allows, share additional information from the playbill.

At the end of the pre-show notes and at the end of the first act, tell listeners that during

intermission what you will share with them so they may decide if they want to return in time to hear that information. Assuming that some of the listeners will not hear the full intermission notes, repeat the essential information during the second act whenever possible.

- If the new information for the second act is very brief, listeners may appreciate its inclusion at the end of the pre-show notes or while the house lights are dimming for the second act so they won’t have to shorten their intermission activities to return for the second set of notes.
- Don’t assume that all listeners have heard the pre-show notes or that all remember everything they heard. As time allows, repeat the essential information as part of the description during the performance.
- We know that we are at the theatre, so repeated references to the stage are unnecessary. Reinforce the magic of the “fourth wall.”

During pre-show notes, establish that the living room is to the left and the kitchen is to the right. During the performance, refer to the “living room” rather than “the left of the stage.”

- If scene changes, including intermission changes, take place in enough light to be in full view of the audience, describe them. When sighted audience members have the opportunity to watch, listeners should have access to the information. Because the action of the material is interrupted and everyone is aware that the scene change is happening, it’s appropriate to describe this theatrical activity.

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- The exception to this would be when the style of the production is presentational, calling attention to its theatricality. Because the production makes the audience aware that it is “watching a play,” it’s appropriate for the describer to do so as well.

*Our Town* is a good example where describing the theatricality is fitting. The characters “pantomime throwing newspapers, cooking breakfast, etc.” Another example would be when a character “breaks the fourth wall” to sit on the edge of the stage.

### **Standards Unique to Dance Description**

Dance is a language of movement. The core nature and intent of this body language is conveyed through the broad aspects of mood, main ideas, themes, narrative plot (if any), structure, and patterns derived from particular movement details. Focus on describing a choreographic piece’s broader “big picture” and how it is created, while allowing key sound elements (e.g., musical score or soundscape) to be heard.

Overall, a good describer of dance: (1) understands foundations of the specific movement style or genre; (2) immerses her/himself in the vocabulary of the style to be in tune with its spirit and cultural influences; and (3) describes the basic components and elements or qualities of movement expression.

Use pre-show notes to introduce dance-specific vocabulary for selected movements that will be used during a dance, and then integrate this vocabulary during performance. For example,

“*chasse*” may be defined as a “gliding step, with one foot stepping to the side and the other chasing it.” Once defined, the term “*chasse*” offers verbal shorthand for describing the movement it identifies in a choreographic number.

Being aware of appropriate dance-specific vocabulary allows the describer to be more aligned with the cultural origins and essence of a dance type.

When describing tap dance, it is helpful to know step names like “buffalo,” “shim sham,” and “falling off the log.” These add “seasoning” to other words and phrases evoking a dancer’s attitude and style.

To situate the listener within the domain of dance as an art form, also infuse commonly understood words associated with dance (e.g., “choreography,” “ensemble”), as appropriate. This provides a context for use of selected vocabulary specific to a particular dance genre.

Dance can move very quickly, and an entire company of dancers may not move in unison. This can necessitate complex and time-sensitive description choices. Make choices that communicate the gist of dance’s visual imagery. Select words that clarify specific qualities of the movement and its meaning in context. Use words that are clear, to the point, and evocative of dance/movement images.

When looking at dance, think about what parts of the body are active, what forms the body assumes, how the body moves through space, and the energy expended. Consider the following dynamic elements when choosing energy-related words and phrases: continuity—

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fluid or restrained movements; relationship to gravity and time—gentle or strong movements, sustained or sudden; and focus of dancer—laser-like or multi-focused movements.

*[Components and elements or qualities of movement mentioned in the above paragraph are part of the Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) framework developed by Rudolph von Laban. Introductory information on the LMA framework may be found at sources such as [www.dancersdreamland.com/soulmovement/styles/SM-Styles-MovementStudies-Laban.pdf](http://www.dancersdreamland.com/soulmovement/styles/SM-Styles-MovementStudies-Laban.pdf) and <http://movement.nyu.edu/projects/lma/intro.html>]*

Details such as the height and technique of movements like jumps are unique to each choreographer’s style and dancer’s strength. For example, describe the dancer leaping three feet in the air, legs and arms extended, one out in front and one in back, traveling airborne across the stage.

Incorporate detailed description of the movement with description that expresses the “tone” or “texture” of the dance, as both types of information combine to complete the whole dance picture. For example, description of a particular dance from West Africa, beyond identifying how dancers move body parts, would also clarify that the parts move with different simultaneous rhythms. The dancers’ aerobic stamina and flexibility, the marriage of drumming/rhythm and dance, and the collective sense imparted through the dance are other sample “textural” characteristics to describe. Describing the dancers’ appearance, costumes, set and props, lighting, etc., also helps to fill out the scene.

Don’t assume that the musical or sound score will allow listeners to imagine the specific movements, rhythms, and dynamics of a dance. Without dialogue, you have more opportunity to describe dance components but use this time judiciously. If the dancers are making sounds (e.g., body slaps), describe the source of the sound.

Musical theater offers opportunities to describe dance scenes within the narrative. Generally, the lyrics are an extension of the narrative, so description should be provided using the natural pauses in lyrics. However, description may be provided over a repeated chorus, if absolutely necessary, or during instrumental segments within a musical piece with lyrics.

The Ascot Gavotte from *My Fair Lady* prompts phrases about configuring of groups, poses, and spatial direction. Description of costumes, their frills, and color is also essential.

In some musicals, dance sequences without lyrics provide an opportunity to describe more details of the narrative.

In the ballet dream sequence in *Oklahoma*, each dancer assumes the role of a character in the narrative, so it is vital to describe visual markers of their attitude, facial expressions, and costumes, as well as set elements and props that help move the narrative forward.

Pre-show backstage sensory (tactile) tours can help patrons learn more about a performance by experiencing its varied components through touch. Patrons can learn about the history of the dance, explore the props and costumes, and sometimes hear from the dancers as they explain their part/character in each dance.

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Dancers may also hold some key movements or poses that recur or are important to the dance, while patrons learn to identify these via touch.

### **Standards Unique to Opera** **Description**

Most opera productions often have a limited number of technical or dress rehearsals and a limited number of performances, which means describers will likely have fewer opportunities to preview the work before the described performance. To augment the few rehearsals and performances available for previewing, look for every opportunity to become familiar with the music and the plot.

One might listen to a recording, read through the score (if able to read music) or view a video recording of the same opera, in order to become more familiar with the music and the story. It would be wise to do this early in your preparation, as it is common for singers to vary their interpretations and/or for elements within the musical score to have been abridged and/or removed entirely.

In video recordings, the costumes, scenery and action will be different from the live performance to be described, but repeated listening and/or viewings of the recorded opera will allow the describer to become more familiar with the timing of the music in relationship to the storytelling—and to identify opportunities when the music will allow the insertion of descriptions.

Contact the opera company's accessibility manager or other appropriate administrator to secure advance information about the scenery and costume designs.

This same individual may be able to facilitate your attending the *sitzprobe* (the seated rehearsal to integrate the singers with the orchestra) to hear any changes that have been made for this production (in comparison to the recorded production(s) you've previewed) and to mark them in the score. Even if you don't read music, the lyrics in the score can guide your preparation.

If the opera company has educational programs for students, teachers and/or subscribers before performances, these events may also be helpful as part of your preparation.

Operas are often performed in languages other than English, which makes plot synopses printed in programs and supertitles (surtitles) important to understanding the story. Be sure to incorporate the synopsis in the pre-show notes, making clear that the information comes from the program so listeners understand that everyone has access to this information—that the describer is not providing this as special information for people who are blind or have low vision.

Because supertitles appear continuously throughout the performance, it's impossible to read all of them without talking throughout the singing. Secure a written copy of the supertitles before previewing the performance and, while previewing, mark the supertitles which convey critical information—hopefully, appearing at a time the performance allows their reading.

You might mark a copy of the score (relying on the lyrics alone if you don't read music) with the text of the supertitles and when you will read them. Noting significant action, lighting cues,

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etc. may also help you keep your place if you don't read music. Be careful that looking down to read these notes does not interfere with your watching the action you need to describe.

One of the most significant elements of an opera performance is the singing—especially the famous arias. *Never* describe during an aria—unless it's to tell something of “life-or-death” importance. Just as one describes during the pauses in the dialogue of a play, the best time to describe in an opera, is during the pauses in the singing.

The other opportunity for description, if there's essential information to convey, is during a recitative. (Recitative is the narrative or dialogue parts of opera sung in the rhythm of ordinary speech with many words on the same note.)

While listeners have difficulty separating what is essentially “overlapping conversations” when presented with spoken description on top of spoken dialogue (as in a live theatre piece), spoken description over the sung words of a recitative is generally more understandable. The describer, however, should allow the singers to “establish” the chorus or recitative before interjecting the description. As always, describe judiciously, avoiding description throughout the singing.

### **Standards Unique to Film and Video Description**

#### **Basics**

- Most audio description for film and video is scripted and recorded on an audio track separate from the material's soundtrack. This process allows the describer to write

complete, accurate descriptions that will precisely fit the available pauses. Be sure to read the script aloud at the rate it will be read for recording to verify its timing and to check for tongue-twisters. (Because the spaces for film and video description are often quite brief, the narrator usually speaks more rapidly than a describer for live performances. It's wise to rewrite to remove every possible tongue-twister.)

- The material's producer should approve the descriptions before the recording session—with the understanding that there will almost certainly be minor script adjustments to refine the timing during the recording.
- Because pauses in the material are often brief, use concise phrases or sentences. Shorter descriptions are also easier for listeners to grasp.
- If a description is essential and a silence is especially short, the describer may have to step on the first syllable or two of dialogue or narration. This often occurs when the “next voice” must be identified so listeners will understand the speaker's vantage point.
- If the musical scoring for a film or video contributes significantly to the material's emotion, try to allow listeners to be carried along with the music without interjecting descriptions. Only interrupt for vital information that must be described during the music in order to be timely.
- The narrator's voice should complement the material—it should be distinct from the voices of the characters and/or the program's narrator and mixed to sound as natural to the

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work as possible. The description serves the production and should blend into it.

- If there is a great deal of dialogue or narration on the soundtrack and the film or video will be shown live rather than broadcast, the producer may agree to “pre-show” description during the less important beginning credits or during an added period of pre-show “black screen.”

One producer has allowed as much as 60 seconds of black screen for pre-show description. To occupy sighted audience members while the pre-show description is playing for those listening via earphone, the house lights dim to half, then fade completely out, etc.

- With a series of rapidly changing images, a technique sometimes used to establish locale or mood, briefly describe all views if possible. If not, describe the images that are most important to the plot or subject and the most visually distinguishable images to help guide people who have low vision.

### Race, Ethnicity and Nationality

- Plays and full-length films or videos allow time for audiences to develop an understanding of the characters, including—when these classifications matter to the audiences' understanding of the material—their race, ethnicity or nationality. In other situations, such as brief interviews in video clips, visuals in museums and exhibits, etc., the listener's opportunity to learn about an individual is usually quite brief. If the subject matter deals with race/ethnicity/nationality or there are unexpected inclusions of people from multiple

racial/ethnic/national backgrounds, listeners will want to know this specific information about individuals' cultural heritage rather than the observable skin color and facial features.

- If sighted people will presume the race, ethnicity or nationality of a person and, thus, have a sense of “where the person's coming from,” the describer should share this information with listeners. Whether the visuals or comments seem to follow racial expectations, sighted visitors are aware of the race of the person or persons depicted. Audio description listeners should have the same information.
- Check with directors, producers, etc. to determine the correct information rather than making what might be ill-founded assumptions.

In a series of homesteading photographs, the describer should identify the African American family in front of the wood frame lean-to and the Caucasian family in front of the sod house.

In a collection of video interviews about the 1957 integration of Little Rock's Central High School, sighted people are aware that this comment is made by an African American male and that comment is made by a Caucasian female.

### Techniques

- Preview video the first time with no picture to help identify auditory confusions—sounds that could be mistaken for something they aren't, characters with similar voices, silent changes of scene, etc.

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- Establish the location before describing anything else.

“On a downtown city street, buses, taxis, cars, bicycles and pedestrians.”

- Characters in film and video may be introduced but unnamed. Use a significant physical characteristic to identify them in descriptions.
- Without the extended time for pre-show notes, use the most revealing information about a character in place of a complete description. The age of the character may be reasonably judged by the sound of their voice. If that is not the case, mention their age. If they are dressed differently than other characters, that might be appropriate. Are they much taller or shorter than everyone else? Are they the only blonde? Do they have blue eyes, when everyone else in the family has brown?
- The relationships between characters may not be apparent, but making it so is the filmmaker’s responsibility—not the describer’s—to reveal these relationships.
- Scene changes can be confusing particularly when the soundtrack does not indicate a change. Keep them simple and short. “In the bedroom,” “at the police station,” etc.
- As well, actions, characters, and details can be confusing if we don’t know where we are. When there’s a change of place, start the description with the location, even when the resulting sentence seems awkwardly structured—the information will be well-structured for comprehension.

“In their bedroom, John and Mary embrace tightly and kiss on the lips” is better than “John and Mary embrace tightly and kiss on the lips in their bedroom”—because the preceding scene took place with the whole family gathered around the dining table and nothing on the soundtrack indicates we’ve changed locale.

- Just as a describer for a live performance should avoid theatrical jargon or references, which would draw listeners’ attention away from their involvement in the material, a film or video describer should avoid calling attention to filmmaking errors such as mistakes in continuity or editing for the same reason.
- Although one should generally avoid filmmaking jargon and describing filmmaking techniques, sometimes the brevity and simplicity of something like, “The screen fades to black” is appropriate.
- Sometimes a describer may use the word “now” to indicate a change of scene in the middle of a segment of description. Because there will be many opportunities that seem to call for the use this word, use it only when absolutely necessary.

“In the bedroom, John irons a shirt. Now, on the driveway, Mary dribbles a basketball.” In this instance, there’s a confusing change in the audio (how does ironing a shirt cause “bounce, bounce, bounce”?) Without the word “now,” do listeners assume we’re still in the bedroom and maybe hearing Mary through an open window? The simple word “now” is a great help to alert listeners that we have changed locales—just as the words that follow will help a person with low vision to focus on the new setting.

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- Sometimes a describer must use a silence to describe both what's onscreen now and what's about to appear because there's no silence for the later information when it does appear. Because the audio description and the current background noise tell us we're at a waterfall, the describer needs to say "soon (or "next"), a NASCAR racetrack with a dozen cars circling the track." Without the simple word "soon" or "next" listeners would be easily confused by the describer only saying "a NASCAR racetrack ..." while the waterfall is still splashing. As well, the words "soon" or "next" alert viewers with low vision that the racetrack isn't onscreen at present.
- Occasionally there's no silent opportunity to describe something essential to listeners' understanding while that "something" is on the screen. The describer may need to omit a less significant description of what's onscreen in order to interject the critical description.

If a film about the Wright Brothers never affords a silence while one of their planes is onscreen, the describer should describe the plane when a silence presents itself and the onscreen content is less important.

- Describe the point of view when appropriate—"from above," "from space," "moving away," "flying low over the sandy beach," etc.
- We have established that we are watching film or video, so repeated references to the screen are unnecessary.
- Treat logos as any other image to be described and be sure to read the company name(s).

- Reading disclaimers and credits at the beginning and end of films, videos and television programs is an important function of audio description. As well, the describer should read text and subtitles.

Because the describer can never read as rapidly as the onscreen credits appear and disappear, work with the producer to determine the most important credits to include.

Often, some or all of the opening credits appear over the beginning of the action. In this situation, attempt to describe the action in sync with the material and read the credits before or after their actual appearance, introduce text or subtitles with a phrase such as, "Words appear" or "Subtitles appear."

### **Standards Unique to Museum and Exhibit Description**

Audio description for museums and exhibits melds the description of visual elements with an abbreviated version of the exhibit's posted text. Visual elements include the layout/arrangement of the facility and the exhibit's components as well as the content such as dioramas, artifacts, reproductions, graphics, diagrams, drawings, illustrations, paintings, photographs, works of art, maps, video kiosks, computer interactive stations, etc. If the exhibit includes touchable objects, the description would also guide users' exploration of these items. Text elements include the titles, explanatory text, quotations, legends, and captions.

#### **Basics**

- In order to provide an experience similar to that of sighted visitors, audio description users

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must be able to choose which portions of an exhibit or gallery to explore and which to bypass. To accommodate such random access, audio description ideally should be available for all displays, however, not every element will warrant the same level of detailed description.

- Audio description for museums and exhibits is much like pre-show notes for live performances, which allow time for organized and coherent sentences rather than quick interjections between the actors' dialogue. Nevertheless, describers must write with economy to convey the essential information in a timely manner.
- The rates at which sighted people silently read text and the rate at which people speak written text aloud differ considerably. Listeners take a great deal more time to *hear* information read aloud than to *see* and *read* it for themselves.
- In the interest of time, focus the description on details that enhance listeners' understanding and appreciation of the significance of the item. Much like making choices when describing live performing arts, film, video and television, leave out the details that merely bloat the description without providing meaningful information.
- Charts, diagrams and timelines are examples of "less is more" often being the best description. Rather than describing every cell on a table-like chart, every part on a diagram, or every milestone on the timeline, take clues from the accompanying signage to

concentrate the description on the major points of the illustration.

- When selecting portions of the Museum or exhibit's text to read as part of the description, remember that exhibit text is usually written in the inverted pyramid format with the most important content at the top. Accordingly, audio description typically uses the first part of the exhibit text.
- Describing the contents of a museum, gallery or exhibit is much the same—whether the type of museum/exhibit is air and space, aquarium, arboretum or botanical garden, fine art, children's, cultural museum, historic home or site, history museum, maritime, military, natural history or anthropology, nature center, planetarium, science or technology, transportation, zoos, or just about anything else.

### Techniques

- As with any other type of description, always describe from the observer's point of view. ("At the left," means to the left as we are looking at the item.) When describing the contents of a free-standing display case, establish where one should stand so that the orientation of the description make sense to the listener.
- The most basic principle is to go from the general to the specific, from the "big picture" to the "little picture." Give listeners a sense of the whole before providing details.
- Before describing the items on display, what is the *setting* or the *context* for the display? If the building's architecture, exterior or interior or both, is notable, describe it.

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See example #1 at the end of this section. Because of the length of these examples, they appear at the end of the Audio Description for Museums and Exhibits section.

- In the exhibit space, what's the size, the décor, the key features of the setting? What do the display cases look like? What is the basic content of the museum or exhibit? What are the key features? Are there common features to the items on display or the methods of displaying them? Describe this sort of thing once and save endless repetition.
  - Listeners will be trying to process and comprehend a great deal of verbal information. The more orderly the description, the more easily the listener may form a mental picture. Much like pre-show notes for live performances, describe things in the order they appear.
  - Starting with the "big picture," what is it? Is it two- or three-dimensional? Is it a painting, a sculpture, an artifact, an animal, etc.? Is it oil or watercolor, marble or bronze, wood or ivory, taxidermic specimen or live? Is it a still life, a landscape, a portrait? Is the sculpture abstract or is it realistic?
  - Size should be the next element addressed. Measurements are generally more helpful than comparisons to objects listeners may not have handled. Round off measurements to the next logical increment. Listeners will more easily comprehend an item's size when it's described as "10 feet wide by 4 feet high" rather than "9 feet 9 inches wide by 4 feet 3 inches high." (Children, however, may be more comfortable with size comparisons to things they will know.)
- If a metaphor—"the size and shape of a baked potato"—seems apt, be certain that this will be familiar to the intended audience. Letters can provide an easily recognized shorthand for shapes—C-shaped, J-shaped, L-shaped, S-shaped, T-shaped, U-shaped, etc.
  - What are the colors? Be descriptive and be specific. As noted earlier, describe colors both to help people with low vision to locate what's being described and to allow listeners to consider the emotional and/or intellectual meaning or associations of the color.
  - Describing something visual by comparing it to another visual is usually ineffective. If one has never seen the night sky dotted with brilliant stars, then saying that the diamonds on the queen's skirt create this same effect will have little meaning.
  - If the item cannot be touched, are there significant textures to describe? Again, choose vocabulary that will be meaningful for the intended audience.
  - With two-dimensional works of art that depict depth (paintings, photographs, drawings, prints, mixed media, etc.), a useful approach is to describe in segments—the foreground, middle ground, and background. Unless the primary focus is elsewhere, start at the "front," the foreground, and move through the middle ground to the background.
  - With abstract two-dimensional works of art or three-dimensional objects, the order in which to describe the material will often be apparent.

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With a top-heavy Franz Kline piece, describing from top to bottom may allow the description to flow better and be more clear. A horizontal Jackson Pollock may be better with the description moving from left to right.

- If there's a striking feature that catches the eye of sighted visitors—a huge red flag that dominates a painting, for example, this might be worth describing first. It's the dominant feature that attracts viewers, and it may be a helpful focusing cue for people with low vision. Where are things located in the painting, in the display case, etc. What is the spatial relationship between things? Again, locating the features helps people who are blind to imagine the item, and helps people with low vision to locate items. The numerals on the face of a clock provide a good orientation mechanism—at three o'clock, at nine o'clock, etc.
- If the material presents no logical method of organizing the description, move from top to bottom, from left to right.
- Not every item in every display should receive an equal amount of description. For instance, dozens of similar photographs or actual objects have an overall impact, but a detailed examination of one after another would be tedious to view *or* to hear in detail. A summary of the overall content and then more complete descriptions of several notable examples is more fitting.

See example #2 at the end of Audio Description for Museums and Exhibits.

- When describing outdoor exhibits, scenic vistas, ruins, gardens, sculpture gardens, etc.,

be sure to consider how the description might be different during different seasons. In the spring and summer, does foliage hide the mountain range in the distance, while the bare trees of fall and winter bring the mountains into view?

The Universal Design Education Online Web Site suggests two good tests for description: 1) Read your descriptions aloud. Does it give you a mental picture similar to the visual version? Can you "see" the picture accurately? 2) Read your descriptions to someone who has never seen the image. Then show your listener the image and ask how the image they imagined was different from the actual image.\*

\*Universal Design Education Online Web Site: © 2002-2004 (Center for Universal Design, N.C. State University; IDEA Center, University at Buffalo; Global Universal Design Educator's Network)

### Finer Points

- When reasonable, describe each display in the same order. For example, in a grouping of objects, start at the top left and move to the bottom of that row, then move to the next row to the right and move from top to bottom.

See example #3 at the end of Audio Description for Museums and Exhibits.

- If an object is touchable, guide the experience of touching the item. If the actual object is not touchable, might the staff provide a touchable facsimile? Touch is much more than a substitute for sight. Touch provides information about texture, temperature, volume, weight, etc. Museum gift shops often have merchandise that will work as suitable

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replicas. These substitutes, however, may be made of materials that do not represent the feel, weight, etc. of the real object. In such cases, be sure to state the similarities and differences between the real and the substitute item.

See example #4 at the end of Audio Description for Museums and Exhibits.

### Computer Interactive Stations and Video Kiosks

With touch screen computer interactive stations, the audio description must provide three types of information—operational instructions, visual descriptions and the essential text from the content. Depending on the complexity of these three elements and the purpose of the station, the balance between the time appropriate for each element will shift.

- The first concern is how to operate the touch screen. If the operational instructions can be covered in a short time, users tend to be interested in listening to more detailed description of the visual information and the reading of essential text. On the other hand, if the station's operation is complex, the "how to interact" description may take enough time that the visual description and text will need to be abbreviated, perhaps significantly.
- Short videos shown in kiosks can be described in two ways. In the first type of video, there might be a series of visual impressions to establish a display's ambiance. Here, most sighted visitors watch for a few moments rather than viewing the complete video. For this type of video, "overview," non-

synchronized audio description would be appropriate.

See example #5 at the end of Audio Description for Museums and Exhibits.

- In the second type of video, there might be a brief story that should be seen from beginning to end. For this type of video, the same type of audio description used for dramatic and documentary film and videos—moment-by-moment, synchronized description that fits between the silences in the video's soundtrack—would be appropriate.

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**Note:** *In the examples of museum and exhibit description below, the use of italicized text indicates excerpts from the posted text accompanying the display.*

### Example #1: The Setting or the Context for the Display

Welcome to the Gathering Space of the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center. This 308,000 square-foot facility was built on a north-facing slope of the Mashantucket Pequot Reservation. The exterior cladding is a combination of aluminum, glass, limestone, granite, fieldstone, zinc, cedar and stucco. Two of the five levels of the building are below ground, and a landscaped terrace overlooks the adjacent cedar swamp.

The facility is composed of three primary elements: First, this Gathering Space, unites the museum and research center and serves as the central arrival area and houses the gift shop and restaurant. Second, the Museum, which

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includes the permanent exhibits, classroom, and auditorium. And third, the Research Center which includes the library and the conservation and archaeology laboratories. Outside, a 185-foot high stone and glass tower at the eastern end of the building provides visitors with views of the countryside.

Here, the 20,000 square-foot Gathering Space features a curved outer wall of glass 55 feet high that joins a glass ceiling. The arc of the outer wall runs 275 feet from the left end to the right end, and the ceiling is 85 feet above the floor at its highest point. The exposed gray-colored steel frame supports the 450 glass panels of the wall and ceiling.

The floor is deep blue terrazzo embedded with light-colored flecks of seashells. Overhead, two canoes are suspended from the ceiling.

Near the left end of the wall of glass, you may use a ramp or an elevator to go down to the beginning of the exhibits on the lower level. To hear more about the logo, press 123. To hear more about the canoes, press 456.

### **Example #2:**

#### **Describing Repetitive Items**

On this black wall, 25 feet wide by 12 feet tall, there are 41 black and white photographs of immigrants in small groups or individual men, women and children. The photos range from approximately 12 by 15 inches to 3 1/2 by 6 1/2 feet. The caption under each photo is handwritten in white on the black background.

The large photograph in the upper left corner shows three young boys of stair-stepped heights, standing side-by-side in matching plaid suits with short pants, double-breasted jackets

and tam-like caps with ribbons hanging down to the side. *Bela, Valentine, and Andrew Solyom in Fiume, Austria-Hungary before sailing to America in 1912.*

Below this, a young Asian boy wearing a student's military-style cap and a serious expression. *Hisaka Konishi came to the U.S. in 1910 at age 8 from Shikoken, Japan.*

Two photographs to the right, in the center of the wall, a very young girl with dark skin stands on the seat of a wicker chair. She's wearing a plaid pinafore over a light-colored eyelet dress. *Muriel Marjorie Petioni came with her mother and sister from Trinidad and Tobago to join her father Charles in New York in 1919. ...*

### **Example #3:**

#### **Describing a Display**

WACANTOGNAKA—Generosity. Inside this floor-to-ceiling glass-enclosed exhibit case, 12 feet wide, 9 feet high and 4 feet deep, items are displayed on the walls and floor that's raised 18 inches above the museum's floor.

the back light gray wall, at the left, a large white silhouette of a stork-like bird and the words "WACANTOGNAKA—Generosity." This introductory text appears on a display panel to the left:

*We are known for what we give, not what we keep, as our bodies are our only real belongings. So we use the ritual giveaway to celebrate spiritual, social, and other events such as a young man's first hunt.*

Here are descriptions of several of the dozens of objects displayed in this case. When you finish, you may listen to the descriptions of additional items by pressing 015+1.

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Below the introductory text, a reproduction of a colorful painting, which shows two women standing side by side. The woman on the left wears a blue-green ankle-length dress and a yellow cape; the woman on the right wears a burgundy ankle-length dress and a green cape. Each woman has a single feather at the back of her head. *Through hunka (making relatives), a rite promised by White Buffalo Calf Woman, this white woman became a relative. From a muslin painting by Tom Haukaas, Sicangu, 1993.*

To the right, at the top of this display panel, a buckskin dress with a beaded yoke or collar. The beadwork, in geometric patterns of dark blue, white, red and yellow, is on a fringed rectangular piece of fabric 3 feet wide and 2 feet deep. The beadwork allows a hole for the neck and is worn with the 3 foot width across the shoulders and hanging down onto the upper part of each arm. The 2 foot depth hangs an equal foot onto the chest and the back of the wearer. *Even a cuwignaka ksupi (beaded dress) as special as this one, circa 1920, made by Jennie LaFramboise Claymore, Hohwoju, might be given away.*

Below, to the left, a medium brown long-sleeved shirt with an open collar. A band of red ribbon is sewn along the outer edge of the collar and each cuff. Three ribbons of red, yellow and white are sewn straight across the chest, and their loose ends, 8 inches long, hang free. Below and to the left, on the platform floor, a folded, multicolor shawl, primarily dark blue in color, with an 8-inch-long fringe of thread. *The late Governor George Mickelson and his wife, Linda, received this wapahlate ogle (ribbon*

*shirt), 1990, and sina (shawl), 1990, at a wacipi (powwow). ...*

### **Example #4:**

#### **Describing a Display with Touchable Objects**

TONI KIC'UN—He Gives His Life. This slanted display board begins with text and then includes 15 touchable items. *Tatanka has provided for our bodies and spirits. We boiled and roasted and dried his flesh. His hide gave clothing, tipis, and ...*

To the right of this text, are the touchable items. In general, we begin at the top of the display board and move down. Each time we reach the bottom of the board, we move a few inches to the right and back to the top of the board.

At upper left, a pair of white milk teeth, which were decorations for women's dresses or strung together as necklaces. The flat, spade-like teeth, including the slender root, are 1 1/2 inches long. Below this, a brown hoof, which was used as a container for beads or strung together for tipi door rattles. To the right, three brown dewclaws, which were used as noisemakers for rattles or sashes, strung on a short strip of hide. Above this, a brown horn spoon, 8 inches from left to right, with a leather thong tied at the narrow end, the point of the horn, to the left. Half the horn is cut away and the wide end of horn has a rounded edge. At its widest point, the horn is 2 inches in diameter. ...

### **Example #5:**

#### **Non-Synchronized Overview Description for Video Kiosks**

A 21-inch video monitor shows silent, vintage black and white motion pictures of scenes such as the Statue of Liberty; the New York harbor

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filled with steaming ships; people hanging over a steamship's railing and waving; people disembarking from ships, burdened with bundles of luggage ...

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*You may also be interested in learning about other approaches to description in art museums. Many museums have developed methods specific to their needs. One concept is referred to as "verbal description," a concept developed for museum tours serving patrons who are blind or have low vision.*

*The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, offers a program known as Verbal Imaging tours. Applied to both live tours and recorded audio guide stops, verbal description goes beyond objective audio description by including evocative information—the mood, the time of day, etc.—things they've concluded from observing the work of art.*

*Verbal description live tours encourage questions and discussion to check that patrons are building a coherent mental image of the artwork. Verbal description also uses other senses—guides might help patrons trace shapes in the air or pass around tactile materials, such as fabrics like those in a painting, stretched and unstretched canvas with examples of different paint applications, or pieces of marble or stone when talking about sculptures.*

For more information about verbal description, contact Rebecca McGinnis at [rebecca.mcginnis@metmuseum.org](mailto:rebecca.mcginnis@metmuseum.org) or (212) 879-5500 ext. 3561 (voice) or (212) 570-3818 (TTY).

### **Code of Professional Conduct for Audio Describers and Audio Description Trainers**

*Although these principles focus on the responsibilities of audio describers, they apply equally to the conduct of audio description trainers.*

1. Audio describers shall respect the privacy and confidentiality of the client (the entity engaging the services of the describer) and the individual(s) the client is serving (the consumer(s) of the audio description).
  - a. The audio describer's obligation is two-fold: to the organization engaging the services of the describer (client) and to the user(s) of the audio description (consumer(s)).
  - b. In some situations the audio describer may have direct contact with the consumer. In this case, the describer is placed in a confidential relationship with that individual and as such must maintain that individual's right to privacy and confidentiality.
    - (1) For example, in a theatre, the consumer who is blind may be on a date, with their family, or in any of a number of social situations. The describer should respect this and only initiate contact or conversation with the individual as necessary to ensure that the audio description services are delivered and received.
    - (2) For example, an organization engaging a describer may be doing so under a contract or grant, thus the describer would be violating the client's confidentiality if they were to discuss the work, whether or how much they are being paid, etc., outside of what is necessary to seek advice and counsel from a fellow describer.
2. Audio describers shall accept only those assignments for which they possess the requisite skills and knowledge.
  - a. There are many different media to which audio description may be applied and not every describer is trained or knowledgeable about description in all media.
    - (1) For example, an audio describer may be trained and have the requisite skills and knowledge to describe live theatre performances but not dance, or opera, or film and video, or museums and exhibits.
3. Audio describers shall conduct themselves professionally and in a manner appropriate to the situation in which they are providing audio description.
  - a. Audio describers shall dress and behave in a manner that is appropriate to the specific environment in which they are providing audio description.
    - (1) For example, audio describers describing the audio/visuals at a business conference should dress and behave in a business-like manner. Audio describers who must climb a ladder to reach the audio description booth in a small live theatre should dress and behave accordingly.

- b. Audio describers should avoid accepting assignments where the content to be described would make them uncomfortable. Before accepting any assignment, audio describers should try to ascertain whether it will place them in an uncomfortable situation and decline the assignment.
  - (1 ) For example, if an audio describer is asked to describe a program that contains nudity, sexual acts, violence, etc. and the describer feels this will make him/her uncomfortable, the describer should not accept this assignment. If the describer were to accept the assignment, s/he may fail to fulfill his/her obligation to the client and consumer(s) by editing or censoring things s/he is uncomfortable describing.
4. Audio describers shall demonstrate respect for the diversity of clients, consumers and colleagues.
5. Audio describers shall maintain ethical business practices.
  - a. Audio describers shall promptly notify clients should problems or conflicts arise with assignments they have accepted.
  - b. When paid for their services, audio describers shall charge appropriate fees and present professional invoices on a timely basis.
6. Audio describers shall take every opportunity to improve and develop their skill.
  - a. Audio describers shall attend workshops and conferences.
  - b. Audio describers shall mentor and be mentored by other audio describers.
  - c. Audio describers shall take every opportunity to listen to and experience other audio described activities.

### About The Audio Description Coalition Standards and Code of Professional Conduct

The Audio Description Coalition Standards and Code of Professional Conduct represent the combined training, experience, knowledge, and resources of a group of audio describers and trainers from across the United States. Working from the Standards for Audio Description of the California Audio Describers Alliance, the founders of the Audio Description Coalition developed this expanded document between August 2006 and August 2007.

The founders of the Audio Description Coalition first met at the Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability (LEAD) Conference in Washington, DC, in August 2006 and continued to meet via email and conference calls over the next year.

The founding members of the Audio Description Coalition include:

Janet Zoubek Dickson, McCarter Theatre, Princeton, NJ

Ruth M. Feldman, Yale Repertory Theatre, New Haven, CT; present: Access4Arts and Audio Description Solutions

Celia Hughes, VSA arts of Texas, Austin, TX

Deborah Lewis, Ethel Louise Armstrong Foundation, Altadena, CA; Arts Access Now, Altadena, CA; present: Audio Description Solutions

Michael Mooney, Paper Mill Playhouse, Millburn, NJ; present: MichaelTMooney.com

William V. Patterson, Audio Description Solutions, New Oxford, PA

Betty Siegel, The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, DC

Jessica Swanson, The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, DC

The members of the California Audio Describers Alliance include AudioVision, Los Angeles Radio Reading Service, Ethel Louise Armstrong Foundation, San Diego Opera, and Audio Description Los Angeles. The California Audio Describers Alliance standards were created by a committee of audio describers based on original audio description training materials from Gregory Frazier of San Francisco State University and Alan Woods of the Ohio Theatre Alliance, who was trained by Margaret and Cody Pfanstiehl of the Metropolitan Washington Ear. The California Audio Describers Alliance worked together for over a year to combine materials and techniques and adopted its final draft in October 2006.

Special thanks to Ermyn King, audio describer, audio description trainer, and consultant, for her collaboration on the Standards Unique to Dance Description section.

Special thanks to Margaret Pfanstiehl, co-creator of audio description, Metropolitan Washington Ear, and Mary Ann Graziano, describer for Pittsburgh Opera, for their collaboration on the Standards Unique to Opera Description section.

Special thanks to Rebecca McGinnis, Metropolitan Museum of Art (NY); Hannah Goodwin, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MA); and Beth Ziebarth, Smithsonian Institution (DC) for their collaboration on the Standards Unique to Museum and Exhibit Description section.

### A Brief History of Audio Description in the U.S.

*This history, to the best of the Audio Description Coalition founders' knowledge, represents the milestones in the creation of audio description, its development beyond its use in live theatre, and laws that require audio description.*

As a supplement to this history, we would like to document the spread of live theatre audio description across the U.S. Please send information about organizations that have fostered audio description for live theatre in your community to [info@AudioDescriptionCoalition.org](mailto:info@AudioDescriptionCoalition.org).

- 1974 – While working on his broadcasting master's thesis in "television for the blind," Gregory Frazier develops the concepts underlying audio description.
- 1981 – Margaret and Cody Pfanstiehl of the Metropolitan Washington Ear collaborate with Arena Stage in Washington, DC to create and develop an audio description program for live theatre performances. The service premieres with the Arena Stage production of *Major Barbara*.
- 1982 – The Metropolitan Washington Ear works with the producers of the PBS "American Playhouse" television broadcast to simulcast audio description on radio reading services.
- 1986 – The Metropolitan Washington Ear creates the first audio description cassette tours of museums or exhibits, the Statue of Liberty and Castle Clinton (NY), two national monuments managed by the National Park Service.
- 1987 – Professors Gregory Frazier and August Coppola found the AudioVision Institute at San Francisco State University.
- 1987-1988 – The Metropolitan Washington Ear works with the WGBH Educational Foundation, Public Television Playhouse, Inc., and the Public Broadcasting Service in a year-long nationally broadcast test of what would become Descriptive Video Services. For the first time, synchronized, pre-recorded audio description was broadcast via satellite on the Second Audio Program (SAP channel) for the season's 26 "American Playhouse" productions.
- 1988 – James Stovall of Tulsa, OK, produces audio description of classic TV shows and movies for home videos.
- 1989 – James Stovall founds the Narrative Television Network to offer description for movies on cable television.
- 1990 – WGBH Educational Foundation launches Descriptive Video Services (DVS®), a subsidiary to provide audio description for television viewers.
- 1990 – The Metropolitan Washington Ear creates the first audio description soundtracks for IMAX and OMNIMAX films and National Park Service films and videos.
- 1990 – The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences awards special Emmys to four organizations that brought audio description to television: AudioVision Institute (Gregory Frazier), Metropolitan Washington Ear (Margaret Pfanstiehl), Narrative Television Network (James Stovall), and PBS/WGBH (Barry Cronin and Laurie Everett).

### Audio Description Coalition

- 1991 – Gregory Frazier establishes AudioVision, Inc. to offer description services in the San Francisco Bay Area.
- 1992 – WGBH begins its Motion Picture (MoPix) Access project, which leads to providing audio description for first-run films in selected theatres nationwide.
- 1994 – The Los Angeles Radio Reading Service provides the first live network television description with Tournament of Roses Parade.
- 1982 – The Metropolitan Washington Ear describes the first opera performance, *Madame Butterfly*, for the Washington Opera at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.
- 1994 – At an Association for Theater and Accessibility pre-conference meeting, Rod Lathim gathers audio describers from across the U.S. who commit to a follow-up conference the next year.
- 1995 – Audio Description International (ADI) has its first meeting hosted by The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. ADI incorporates in Washington, DC in 1998.
- 1998 – Congress amends the Rehabilitation Act by adding Section 508 to require Federal agencies to make their electronic and information technology accessible to people with disabilities. Beginning in June 2001, all film, video, multimedia, and information technology produced or procured by Federal agencies must include audio description.
- 1999 – The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announces its Notice of Proposed Rulemaking for phased-in video description for television.
- 2000 – The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) implements rules requiring major broadcast networks and cable companies in the top 25 television markets to provide 50 hours of described programming per quarter effective April 2002.
- 2002 – The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts coordinates and hosts the second national meeting of Audio Description International (ADI).
- 2002 – The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia reverses the FCC ruling requiring Audio Description for television, finding that the FCC had acted beyond the scope of its authority in adopting those rules.
- 2003 – Representative Ed Markey (D-MA) introduces a bill to update the FCC's authority to adopt audio and video description rules. The bill does not pass.
- 2005 – Senator John McCain (R-AZ) introduces a bill to update the FCC's authority to adopt audio and video description rules. The bill does not pass.
- 2006 – California Audio Describers Alliance adopts California Standards for Audio Description and shares them with the Audio Description Coalition for development as national standards.
- 2006 – Audio Description Coalition forms to develop standards for audio description and code of professional conduct for describers.
- 2007 – Formation of the Coalition of Organizations for Accessible Technology (COAT), to advocate for legislative and regulatory safeguards that will ensure full Communication Access and Video

Programming Access, including video description. Audio Description Coalition is one of more than 200 national, regional, state, and community-based disability organizations, which comprise COAT's membership.

- 2007 – Audio Description Coalition publishes the first version of its Standards for Audio Description and Code of Professional Conduct for Describers.
- 2008 – Described and Captioned Media Program, working with the American Foundation for the Blind, publishes its Description Key, guidelines for the description of educational media.
- 2009 – American Council of the Blind launches its Audio Description Project to offer training, establish standards, encourage growth, disseminate information, and encourage studies of audio description.

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