

Fundamentals of Audio Description

by Joel Snyder, PhD

Audio Description (AD) provides narration of the visual elements-action, costumes, settings, and the like-of theater, television/film, museums exhibitions, and other events. The technique allows patrons who are blind or have low-vision the opportunity to experience arts events more completely-the visual is made verbal.

AD is a kind of literary art form, a type of poetry. Using words that are succinct, vivid, and imaginative, describers try to convey the visual image to people who are blind or have low vision.

In developing AD tours for museums, scripting AD for video or film, or training museum docents and prospective audio describers for media or the performing arts, I emphasize four elements of AD:

1) OBSERVATION We must learn how to see the world anew. In his book, "Seen/Unseen: A Guide to Active Seeing," the photographer, John Schaefer, coins the phrase "visual literacy." That's what describers need to nurture. Schaefer refers to the need to 'increase your level of awareness and become an active "see-er." The best describers will truly notice all the visual elements that make up an event, just as Emily does in Thornton Wilder's "Our Town." Looking back from the grave, she sees for the first time: "I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Clocks ticking, Mama's sunflowers, food, coffee, new-ironed dresses, hot baths. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? Every, every minute?" The Stage Manager answers: "No. The Saints and Poets maybe, they do, some."

And effective Audio Describers!

2) EDIT Audio describers must then edit or cull from what they see, selecting what is most valid, what is most important, what is most critical to an understanding and appreciation of an event. Often, only a few precious seconds are available to convey those images.

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3) LANGUAGE We transfer it all to words--objective, vivid, imaginatively drawn words, phrases, and metaphors. For instance, how many different words can you use to describe someone moving along a sidewalk? Why say "walk" why you can more vividly describe the action with "sashay," "stroll," "skip," "stumble," or "saunter"? Is the Washington Monument 555 feet tall or is it as high as ten elephants stacked one on top of the other?

4) VOCAL SKILLS Finally, in addition to building a verbal capability, the describer develops the vocal instrument through work with speech and oral interpretation fundamentals. Meaning is created with the words we choose and also by the way we say them. Can you "make sense" by the way you voice the following phrase:

That that is is that that is not is not

We have an immense and varied culture in the United States. There is no reason why a person with a visual disability must also be culturally disadvantaged. All people need to be full participants in their nation's cultural life and that goal can be achieved through greater access to film, television, theater, museums, and other cultural venues. With a focus on people's abilities, we will come much closer to greater inclusion and total access; and when people are more engaged with their culture they become engaging individuals—and more employable. In these days of 70% unemployment for people who are blind in the United States, improvement in this area could be the most important effect of more meaningful cultural access.

Joel Snyder, PhD, one of the world's first audio describers, began describing theater events and media in 1981. In addition to his ongoing work in these genres ("Sesame Street," DVDs, and feature films), each year he develops audio described tours for major museums throughout the United States including the Smithsonian Institution, the Getty, the National Aquarium, several State museums and myriad National Park and Forest Service exhibit centers. He has introduced audio description/conducted audio description workshops in over 40 states and D.C. and in 62 countries. Dr. Snyder's PhD is in audiovisual communication/audio description from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. He is the President of Audio Description Associates (www.audiodescribe.com) and the Director of the American Council of the Blind's Audio Description Project (www.acb.org/adp). He can be reached at: jsnyder@audiodescribe.com -- 301 920-0218.