AMERICAN COUNCIL OF THE BLIND'S

AUDIO DESCRIPTION PROJECT

AUDIO DESCRIPTION STANDARDS

July 2009 – A Work In Progress

"Those who have never suffered impairment of sight or hearing seldom make the fullest use of these blessed faculties. Their eyes and ears take in all sights and sounds hazily, without concentration and with little appreciation."

Helen Keller

A Definition

Audio Description (AD) makes the visual images of theater, media and visual art accessible for people who are blind or have low vision. Using words that are succinct, vivid, and imaginative, describers convey the visual image that is not fully accessible to a segment of the population and not fully realized by the rest of us—people who see but who may not observe.

A picture is worth 1000 words? Maybe. But the audio describer might say that a few well-chosen words can conjure vivid and lasting images.

The Describer

The person responsible for developing the description to be voiced. As Canadian writer Joe Clark makes clear, describers and voicers serve the audience and the production, not themselves. He explains: "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."

Voicer (or Voice Talent)

The person who voices the description (in some cases, often in the performing arts, the describer also is the voicer).

PREFACE

These Standards have been "gathered" by a core committee of ACB's Audio Description Project chaired by ACB's Vice President Kim Charlson. The word "gathered" is used as the work is here is not, by and large, new: it is a "review of the literature," a culling of material that exists in documents that are widely available. Generally, those documents are not the result of scientific research. But they reflect and in turn these standards are based on many years of experience with audio description in a wide range of contexts.

The Standards are intended to be overarching in nature, i.e., they are written to apply to audio description generally no matter the particular format in which it is used. There are, of course, significant distinctions that arise as describers work within media as opposed to developing a tour for a museum exhibition. Consequently, we have developed sub-sets of these standards that focus on Performing Arts, Media, and Visual Art.

The initial draft of this document was reviewed by the aforementioned committee (including Thom Lohman of the Described and Captioned Media Program; Rick Boggs of We See TV; Bryan Gould of WGBH; Christopher Gray, the immediate past-president of ACB; Deborah Lewis, freelance describer; Rebecca McGinnis, Metropolitan Museum of Art; Pat Sheehan, the President of the Maryland State Council of the Blind; and Joel Snyder, Director, Audio Description Project) and will now be posted on the web for input from anyone interested via a wikidot.org page. The committee will monitor and review all contributions and a new version will be presented to the Audio Description Project Conference in Orlando, Florida, July 6-8, 2009. In addition, consideration Conference time will be allocated for further review of the Standards sub-sets on Media, Performing Arts, and Visual Art/Exhibitions.

Finally, we want to credit with a large measure of appreciation the original source material on which this document is based. All of the original material is available at the wikidot.org web page: _____.

The material includes:

- Art Education for the Blind's "Making Visual Art Accessible to People Who Are Blind and Visually Impaired"

- Audio Description Coalition Standards and Code of Conduct (the ADC Code of Conduct is reprinted, with permission, at the end of this document)

- "Audio Description Techniques" by Joe Clark (Canada)

- “Audio Description: The Visual Made Verbal” by Joel Snyder from The Didactics of Audio Visual Translation, edited by Jorge Diaz Cintas, John Benjamins Publishing, London, England and on-line course for Fractured University

- Described and Captioned Media Program “Description Key” (developed by DCMP and the American Foundation of the Blind)

- ITC (Independent Television Commission) Guidance on Audio Description (U.K.)

- National Captioning Institute Described Media “Style Guide”

INTRODUCTION

The Audio Description User – Who Are “The Blind”?

They are *not* "the blind." They are individuals -- housewives, scientists, artists, business people ... maybe you or me, sometime.

They are unique individuals with a living with some degree of vision loss as the result of a wide range of causes. Most users of description are not totally blind; indeed, only 1-2% of the legally blind are congenitally blind (blind from birth); others are adventitiously blind or developed total blindness later in life. Most at one point had all or some of their sight and now they may have only peripheral vision, they may see only shapes, light and dark, colors, movement, shadows, blurs, or “blobs” -- or have "tunnel vision." Only 10% know Braille.

The American Foundation for the Blind reports that 21.2 million Americans have vision loss. While description was developed for people who are blind or visually impaired, many others may also benefit from description’s concise, objective “translation” of the key visual components of various art genres and social settings.

Audio Description is an “Assistive Technology”; it is meant to enhance, not replace the user’s own powers of observation.

OBSERVATION

"You can see a lot just by lookin'."

Yogi Berra, philosopher and catcher/ manager, NY Yankees

The well-trained describer is an eye witness.

But an incredibly astute one. It's well-known in law enforcement that twenty eyewitnesses may relay twenty different versions of the same event.

- Describers 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 must 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 image …

… 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."

Richard Boleslavsky teaches us that "We think that we see everything, and we don't assimilate anything. But in [working as a describer] we can't afford that. **We are obliged to notice the material with which we work."**

Describers must see with a heightened awareness that allows us to inform even the sighted but casual observer.

However, audio description ends up being about describing far less than we see—there's never time enough to convey in words all that we see. As Cody Pfanshtiel remarked many years ago: "The eye is quicker than the fastest of mouths."

And so, the audio describer must **Edit.**

"Seize what we see."	**"See with exactitude."**
John Ruskin , British art critic	Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, German writer

EDITING

> **"The great struggle of art is to leave out all but the essential."**
> Oliver Wendell Holmes, American jurist

It's clear that even the finest describer can never convey with words all that is seen with the eye. Description, then, becomes an exercise in what *not* to describe. We leave out far more than we ultimately include in our descriptions.

Audio Description is provided for a broad range of users, i.e., people with varying degrees of vision loss from description enthusiasts who are congenitally blind to those who have a relatively modest level of low vision. Indeed, the percentage of people in our audiences who have never had any useful sight is quite small.

Thus, to a certain extent the describer's choices of what to describe are based on an understanding of blindness and low vision:

- going from the general to the specific—start generally, creating a context, then move to details to enhance understanding and appreciation. Provide visual perspective as appropriate and as time allows. The initial information presented about a scene will create a foundation in the minds of the audience members;

- use of color—the ITC Standards explain: "Most visually impaired people have at some time seen colours and either retained the visual memory of colour or can remember the significance and impact of a particular colour. … People who are blind from birth or from an early age cannot 'see' colours but they do understand the significance of a particular colour by its association. They may not 'see' green, but the colour of flower stalks, leaves and grass, which people can touch and smell does mean something." When asked about the perception of color, a congenitally blind audio description user in Oregon recommended reading Mary O'Neill's "Hailstones and Halibut Bones," a children's classic of poetry and color.;

- inclusion of directional information—whether on a screen, a stage, or in front of an exhibition, some AD users will "see" if you tell them *where* to look. In addition, directional "pointers" can help AD users organize the information they hear, i.e., going from top to bottom, right to left, clockwise, etc.

Echoing Justice Holmes' caution, noted above, remember:

- Describe what is most essential for the viewer to know in order to understand and appreciate the image being described.

The audio describer is part journalist, faithfully relaying the facts:

WHEN/WHERE

Time of day (is it light or dark? Cloudy or sunny?) and location.

For example: The sun sits low over the horizon. (Really? Is it a sunset or is the sun rising?) A full moon. A clock: 7:00 a.m. A city park. A 2-story brick townhouse. Under a wide portico. On a raised platform near a gazebo.

WHO
Who is in the image? What do they look like?

For example:

Age
One doesn't see someone's age unless the individual being described is wearing a button that proclaims, "I'm 60!" What does he/she look like? Those are the characteristics to cite, the things you see that prompt you to think that the individual is a certain age. In some description formats, of course, time is of the essence, and short-cuts include: In her late forties; in his sixties; pre-teen; teenage.

Hair/Build/Clothing
Cropped brown hair; long blond hair; red-headed woman; slim; tall; stocky; dressed in a white pantsuit; wearing a blue floral dress; in a bright red sweater; the tuxedoed "Bond."

Relationship
Mother, father, son, brother-in-law, etc.—but take care to only specify if it is known.

Characters / People
Describe individuals by using the most significant physical characteristics.

Identify ethnicity/race as it is known and vital to the comprehension of content. If it is, then all main characters' skin colors must be described—light-skinned, dark-skinned, olive-skinned. (Citing the race only of non-white individuals establishes "white" as a default and is unacceptable.)

WHAT
What's happening? What actions are most important for a clear understanding and appreciation of the image(s)?

Describe expressive gestures and movement (resist any temptation to convey what you may feel is inferred by them, such as an emotional state).

The oft-referenced “first rule of description” is to “Describe what you see” or

W.Y.S.I.W.Y.S. – “WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU SAY”

What is the critical visual information that is inaccessible to people who are blind or have low vision? Some have already been noted: key plot elements, people, places, actions, objects, unknown sound sources not mentioned in the dialogue or made obvious by what one hears.

Example: Mention who answers the phone—not that the phone is ringing. It’s not necessary to describe obvious sound cues. At times, the source of a sound may not be clear—a description may be appropriate

- Specificity creates images in the minds’ eye to a far greater degree than a general reference. It is more interesting to hear the items in a mound of clutter if time permits than to say, “The attic is cluttered.” If at all possible, don’t take a series of specific, separate actions/events/images and describe them as one. For example: is it just a smile or a broad grin? Similarly, is the image a photograph—color or black-and-white?—what size? how many? (5 men, 6 airplanes) position? (He comes up behind her. A car turns left.)

- Less Is More. Description cannot and need not convey every visual image on display. Quality audio description is not a running commentary. Listeners should be allowed to hear actors’ voices, sound effects, music, ambiance in a museum—or experience silence throughout the description.

The ITC Standards cautions that “However tempting it is to use colourful imagery and elegant turns of phrase, clarity is the main aim of audio description. As a rule, too much description can be exhausting or even irritating. The [image being described] should be allowed to breathe from time to time, allowing [it and its] atmosphere to come through The describer must learn to weed out what is not essential.”

And Joe Clark adds (in speaking of description for media), “Describe when necessary, but do not necessarily describe.”

“What is most critical to an understanding *(he points to his head)* and appreciation *(his hand is on his heart)* of that visual image?”

Think: Can I visualize what’s happening without becoming confused?

Feel: Did I correctly convey the emotion of the scene?

“I have only made this letter longer because I have not had the time

to make it shorter.” Blaise Pascal, French mathematician and philosopher

LANGUAGE

Audio Description is a literary art form. It's a type of poetry--a haiku. It provides a verbal version of the visual—we use words that are:

- succinct,

- vivid, and

- imaginative

to convey the visual image that is not fully accessible to a significant segment of the population and not fully realized by the rest of us--the rest of us, sighted folks who see but who may not observe.

Be clear, concise, conversational: Use “everyday” terms. Describe a technical term, *then* name it, e.g., “she bends at the knees, a plié”; limit the use of slang or jargon unless appropriate to the content/image being described. Describers are writing for a broad audience.

Point of View and NarrativeTense
Deliver description in present tense, in active voice (e.g., “Ted breaks the window,” is preferable to, “The window was broken by Ted.”) Use third-person narrative style to show neutrality and noninterference.

Consider your audience.
If you know that your audience is primarily young people, use simple language structure in your descriptions. Similarly, match vocabulary to the material being described.

Consider the material
Use language that is consistent with the content of the material.

“We See”
Avoid telling your guests that “we see” or notice or view—it’s a given.

Vary Verb Choices
How many different words can you use to describe someone moving along a sidewalk? Why say "walk" when you can more vividly describe the action, as appropriate, with "sashay," "stroll," "skip," "stumble," or "saunter"?

Definite/Indefinite Articles
Use “a” instead of “the”—a sword, instead of the sword, unless there’s only one sword. If the sword has already been introduced, it becomes “the” sword.

Pronouns
Use pronouns only when it is clear to whom or what the pronoun refers.

Multiple Meanings
Identify words that have multiple meanings; be sure that the intended meaning is conveyed.

Adverbs/Gerunds -ly words and -ing words
Suspiciously, furiously, nervously. Ask yourself: "What is it that you *see* that prompts you to think that he/she looks suspicious, furious, or nervous? Instead: "raises her eyebrows", "clenches her fists", "twists a napkin".

Use "-ing" words in phrases, not as continuing present tense, e.g., "Stomping up the stairs, he…" instead of, "He is stomping up the stairs."

"We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are."
Anais Nin, French writer

"What we see depends on the history of our lives and where we stand."
Walter Lippman, American journalist

Objectivity

The best audio describers objectively recount the visual aspects of an image. *Subjective* or q*ualitative judgments or comment* get in the way—they constitute an interpretation on the part of the describer and are unnecessary and unwanted.

Let listeners conjure their own interpretations based on a commentary that is as objective as possible.

So we do not say "He is furious" or "She is upset. " Rather, "He's clenching his fist" or "She is crying. " Rather than "It's a dream." or "She dies.", the objective describer might say: "Now, through a white mist, Joan runs through a field." or, "His head lolls back and his eyes close."

As Nin and Lippman observed (in the text box, above), there is no specific, objective thing.

Metaphor/Simile
Describe shapes, sizes, and other essential attributes of images by comparison to objects or items/areas that are familiar to the intended audience.

For example, is the Washington Monument 555 feet tall or is it as high as fifty elephants stacked one on top of the other? Thus, we try to convey our descriptions with a kind of "inner vision" that results in a linguistically vivid evocation of the image being described.

There aren't any elephants there—but you may evoke them in order to convey a particular image (the height of the Washington Monument). Yes, a contradiction of the describer's "first rule"—Say Only What See—but it works in certain instances because of what Paul Valery and Jonathan Swift observed:

"Seeing is forgetting the name of what one sees."
Paul Valery, French poet and philosopher

"Vision is the art of seeing things invisible."
Jonathan Swift, Irish writer

Labels

Since the ultimate goal is an image created in the minds of our constituents, avoid labeling with an interpretation that is inevitably unique to you, the describer.

Indeed, "labeling" – "naming" is not *describing*. Labels lead us to pigeon-hole and we tend to then dismiss the thing we see.

Censorship

Within the constructs of quality description, describers must convey *all* of the visual elements of the material being described. Describers must not censor information for any personal reason such as their own discomfort with the material or a political belief, i.e., describers must relay objectively the visual elements of nudity, sexual acts, violence, etc. Our constituents have the right to know the critical visual material that is evident to sighted people and we have the obligation to convey that material. If a describer feels that describing particular material will make him/her uncomfortable, s/he should not accept this assignment.

VOCAL SKILLS

We make meaning with our voices.

Some studies suggest that within face-to-face spoken interpersonal conversation the majority of content is communicated non-verbally, either through gesture and facial expression but also through a variety of speech and oral interpretation fundamentals:

Pronunciation

Enunciation

Breath Control

Volume

Pause

Inflection

Pace

Tempo

Phrasing

Tone

For instance, say the following phrase aloud:

WOMAN WITHOUT HER MAN IS A SAVAGE

If you agree with its sentiments, I suspect that you have few female friends.

If you don't, say the same words aloud—don't change their order—and with your voice alone, change the meaning so you convey a sense that is quite the opposite of the "original."

Punctuation allows us to make visible what we do with our voices quite naturally in conversation; what I hope you were able to accomplish in this exercise with your voice alone.

With punctuation, here's the alternative meaning:

WOMAN: WITHOUT HER, MAN IS A SAVAGE

Enunciation / Word Rate

Speak clearly and at a rate that can be understood.

Generally, a rate of 160 wpm (words per minute) is an acceptable pace. Try speaking descriptions to yourself to make sure they flow casually.

Pronunciation

Prepare in advance and/or use transliterations to indicate pronunciation.

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

Consonance

Vocal delivery should be consonant with the nature of the material being described. The voice should match the pace (including word rate, noted above), 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.

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

AUDIO DESCRIPTION STANDARDS/TECHNIQUES

PERFORMING ARTS

Theater

General:

- With most performing arts, 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, and downstage as well as words like "enters" and "exits."

- Avoid theatrical references or jargon, especially names for technical equipment and devices, which would draw listeners' attention away from their involvement in the story ("break the fourth wall") and may introduce confusing, unknown terms.

Example: 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."

The exception to the "maintain the illusion" caution 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.

- Some organizations utilize a pair of describers to cover a performance. 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 where reception equipment is distributed.

- 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 previews or pre-show notes to provide background information or preliminary description of certain general elements, consider using some silences to describe the "big picture" rather than what is specifically onscreen.

To Script or Not To Script:

- Some performing arts description producers will have a describer preview a performance (as production schedules allow) enough times to allow for the development of a description script. Others depend on one or two previews where notes are made and the describer provides description in a more “extemporaneous” manner. If time and schedules allow, the development of a script permits the careful consideration of the various fundamentals of description outlined earlier in this document. The describer using a script does not, of course, read the script without looking at the live performance; he/she must know the script well enough to use the script as a prompt and be free to describe extemporaneously when “change happens.”

Scheduling of Description:

- Typically, audio description is offered at one to three performances throughout the run of an extended series of performances, often one evening performance and one matinee. This, of course, limits the AD users in their flexibility in scheduling attendance at performing arts events. Some organizations ask for advance notice of two weeks or more in order to provide AD as a special request. In an effort to put the AD user on a par with any other performing arts patron, certain producers will “cast” a describer who can attend selected rehearsals, develop an AD script and be available at every performance (similar to an understudy). If no desires the service, the describer is free to go.

- For touring productions, experiments have been made with scripts that have been produced in one locale that can be shared with describers in another city.

- Increasingly, certain productions have recorded description keyed to lighting cues and accessed via PDAs attached to seatbacks. The descriptions (as well as captions and simultaneous translation) are available at any performance.

Equipment:

- With the exception of recorded description noted earlier, audio description is delivered wirelessly via microphones (headset or steno-mask style), transmitters, and receivers with earpieces used by AD patrons. Generally, the transmissions are accomplished via infra-red (line-of-sight) or FM radio systems. FM systems can be portable and are often shared by multiple theaters.

Pre-Show and Intermission Notes:

- 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. Most describers prepare scripted pre-show notes to be sure that they're covering everything in a coherent, organized and timely manner. Productions with intermissions provide a second opportunity to provide additional information.

- 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.

Note: 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). 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 ("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") and then describe the specifics for each costume.

- If the play has a complex plot and/or a confusing set of characters, there may be a synopsis in the playbill. Just as this information is 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. For example, if a character wears 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 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.

Note: 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.
"Stepping On Lines":

- Descriptions are usually delivered during pauses between lines of dialogue or quiet moments, avoiding other critical sound elements. But since it is more <u>important to make a production understandable</u> than to preserve every detail of the original soundtrack, the describer will speak over dialogue and other audio when necessary. In most instances, a describer may talk over background music or underscoring as well as the lyrics of a repeated chorus of a song.

- And, as noted earlier, it is appropriate to let pauses or quiet moments pass without a description. Listeners want to hear the performance first and the description second. The dialogue, the sounds—and even the silences—are telling the story and must be experienced.

- 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.

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

Sound Effects:

- Include any sound effects in the timing of descriptions, e.g., he turns away from her and she pulls out a revolver. [BANG] He falls over a desk [CLATTER].

- Usually a sound effect, or the event leading up to it, is described just before it happens: "The burglar drops his sack." [THUD] Sometimes it can be even more effective after the action. "Waving their arms they run towards the platform..." [Chuff chuff... the sound of a train pulling away] "The train is pulling out of the station."

- In a live setting, it may be warranted to alert AD users of upcoming sound effects as they could affect guide dogs accompanying a patron.

Identification:

- Identify characters as they have been identified in the production. Introduce them only after they've been introduced in the dialogue. Consistently identify people/characters by name. 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.

- 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.

Note: It may be helpful to 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. Some AD users have suggested that once the material has identified a character, the describer could match the character's name with the actor's voice by mentioning the character's name just 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.

Timing:

- Theatrical 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.

Example: 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.

Example: If the audience sees something happening 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.

- 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.

Example: 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."

Sounds:

- Describe the source of sounds that may not be immediately recognizable within the program but are pertinent to understanding and appreciation of the content.

Dance

Note: The narrative that follows is based on concepts put forth originally by Rudolph Laban, codified under the rubric "Laban Movement Analysis" (LMA). It is offered here as a basis from which standards for dance description may be developed.

LMA offers describers an expanded range of seeing and a more specific vocabulary for describing movement. There is a significant difference between saying what someone is doing and describing how they do it. Description is often about what a mover is doing. But to convey as much information in as few words as possible, they often need to describe how the mover is accomplishing the action. What sort of pathway in space does the mover follow? How does the shape or "attitude" of their body convey character or context? What dynamic qualities of the movement flavor its meaning? The describer needs to choose concise wording that will capture the primary elements, communicating to the listener the most essential visual cues.

Laban wrote that:

> "Pure dancing has no describable story. It is frequently impossible to outline the content of a dance in words, although one can always describe the movement. … the artist playing the role of Eve can pluck the apple in more than one way, with movements of varying expression. She can pluck the apple greedily and rapidly or languidly and sensuously. … Many other forms of action are possible, and each of these will be characterized by a different kind of movement. … In defining the kind of movement as greedy, as sensuous, or detached, one does not define merely what one has actually seen. What the spectator has seen may have been only a peculiar, quick jerk or a slow gliding of the arm. The impression of greed or sensuousness is the spectator's personal interpretation of Eve's state of mind…"

Here Laban suggests the objectivity principle of Audio Description and the acronym: WYSIWYS: what you see is what you say. AS noted throughout these standards: it's

important to describe accurately and vividly, but to allow the listener to create meaning. (Eve snatches the apple “with a quick jerk of the arm” not “with a look of greedy guilt”.)

A blind AD user once commented, “I never go to dance because all I get is the music, and if I don’t like the music, it’s really boring!” When asked what he would need to hear in the description in order not to be bored, he replied, “the story”. Of course, in the case of modern dance often the images are abstract—there is no story!” With dance description, it’s important to find the “story” it tells: what main idea does the dancing communicate to the viewer, what is the essence of the dance? What information would be most important to allow a blind audience member to experience the performance as fully as possible, to help him follow the meaning of the choreography? Which elements comprised the structure and themes of the choreography, and what words would most succinctly convey those ideas?

For example, one piece might be mostly “about” spatial patterns and sequences of group clustering and scattering; the dancers’ specific movements may be less important, and their individual characteristics (gender, hair color, body shape, etc.) may not matter at all with respect to the content being expressed. In another piece, where each dancer plays a unique character, those particulars, along with various movement combinations and body attitude, can be meaningful factors.

Attached below is a portion of the describers’ script for one of Axis Dance Company’s pieces: “Dust”, choreographed by Victoria Marks. The script is designed to be spoken while the movement occurs; viewing a tape of the piece, you would notice that much has been left unsaid in order to focus on communicating mood, theme and choreographic structure, while leaving aural space for the impact of the musical score. We invite you to test the description by having it read aloud to you. To what extent does hearing the dance allow you to see?

Audio Describers’ Script for a Live Dance Performance (segment)

DUST
By Victoria Marks

<u>GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR DESCRIBERS</u>:
This dance is structured to employ many types of <u>contrasts</u>. Examples include….

Visual contrasts: light/dark, warm tones/cool tones, patterns/full light, one or two dancers/large group.

Sound contrasts: nature sounds/music, quietness (serene sounds)/active (agitated) sounds.

Choreographic idea contrasts: stillness/mobility, passive/active, initiator/follower, intensity (seriousness)/lighthearted busyness, isolation/interaction.

Note that the activeness/passivity, stillness/mobility of each dancer at any given choreographic moment is <u>not</u> based on who's in a wheelchair/"disabled" or not. Sometimes the choreographer purposely turns that around.

<u>DESCRIPTION</u> Descriptions delivered in real time.

1
A small pool of light reveals a woman lying still, face down. From left, a second woman drives her motorized wheelchair into the light.

2
She pauses next to the prone woman, then reaches down to lift the woman's shoulder and change her pose.

3
The woman in the wheelchair continues to pose the other, moving one body part at a time. The woman on the floor moves only as she is molded, holding each new shape.
[SLIGHT PAUSE]
The mov-er steers her wheelchair to gently nudge the mov-ee onto her back.

4
The passive dancer on the floor is softly pulled and pushed, her head lifted, her back lightly touched, to bring her to sitting. The wheelchair presses into her from behind; she slides to a crouch, then a squat. In stages, her partner stands her up. The standing woman now turns her head—on her own—toward the wheelchair dancer. Light fades to black.

5
Light comes up. The standing woman faces a new dancer. She who was passive is now the initiator. One press of her forefinger against the other's breastbone sets off a cascade of movements. The first backs away and watches as the new dancer flails and dangles, drops to her knees, her elbow, then splays onto her back. Lights fade out.

6
The circle of light comes up. A new dancer stands beside the splayed woman, slicing the air with sharp arcing arm movements. The splayed woman lifts her head, as the other gazes upward. Light fades to black.

[PAUSE, MUSIC CHANGES]

7
Full stage lights up. From left, a man and woman, in time to the music, prance and dip forward. They are met, from right, by a dancer motoring her wheelchair on, dragging another who hangs on to its back. Now dancers converge and scatter busily all over the stage—two drive wheelchairs, five are on foot. Greetings, hugs, taps, re-groupings.

Dancers wave, bump, tease, chase, shove, lean, flop onto and roll or climb over each other, scurrying and whizzing playfully from place to place.

8
Now, as lights begin to dim, the dancers spread across the stage and slow to stillness, pausing in tableau. Lighting creates an uneven geometry of shadows slashing across the floor.
In unison, the dancers begin to turn slowly in place. Now all are seen in right profile.

9
Now their backs all face us.

10
[CHIMES]

11
The dancers continue their slow-motion rotation.

12
Now all are in left profile

13
At left, suddenly a wheelchair dancer sweeps her arm up and circles her chair to the right. At this cue, a man at right spins, then reaches out to draw her to him. While some continue their slow, in-place rotation, others break rank and repeat some of the earlier greeting, reaching, running, and pushing. Each always returns to a still patch of light and rejoins the ongoing group rotation.

14
Small groups step forward, then back into place. Now all pause, in tableau again, their backs to us.

15
In unison, all look over their right shoulder then turn toward us.

16
They are still.

17
The two at right turn away.

18
The two at center turn away.

19
The remaining three turn away.

20
Steadily, evenly, all rotate to their left, to face the far left corner.

21-22
Abruptly breaking the spell, a woman dashes from right to left, slicing through the group. She flings herself to the ground, then scrambles up and races back as the others pull away from her and stride off left. She repeats the run and slide, left alone on stage. The lights have brightened and the floor pattern disappears. The lone dancer runs off as others return along her same diagonal path (from far left to close right). They are tugging, shoving, catching and lifting each other. Some push, roll and dart past others to advance along the diagonal and scatter offstage right.

23
Now all but two have exited. They pause, stare at each other, and one runs off right, leaving the other standing alone.

24
Body erect, she gradually turns her back to us…

25
…then pivots slowly on one foot then the other to complete her rotation.

26
Now she looks at us, then walks forward, gazing across the audience.

27
The light brightens on her as she bends forward, hands to her right knee, and unfastens her prosthetic lower leg. She sets it upright in front of her. It stands alone as she kneels behind.

28
Crouching, she slides left on her knees.

29
She glances at us, leans forward to peer at the leg, reaching out slowly with her index finger to poke the leg and tip it over. As she sits up, another dancer, in a separate pool of light to the left, reaches upward, arching her back, then crumples to the floor, face down.

Opera

TO BE DEVELOPED

Special Events

TO BE DEVELOPED

AUDIO DESCRIPTION STANDARDS
MEDIA

General:

- Audio description for film, broadcast television and DVD 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 during the available pauses between dialogue or critical sound elements.

- Read the script aloud at the rate it will be read for recording to verify its timing.

- 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.

- Allow listeners to appreciate the media's score without interjecting descriptions. Only interrupt for vital, timely information that must be described during the music.

- The narrator's voice should be "in consonance" with, 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 work as possible. The description serves the production and should blend into it.

Identification:

- As with other art forms, characters in film and video may be introduced but unnamed. Use a significant physical characteristic to identify them in descriptions.

Note: The relationships between characters may not be apparent, but making it so is the filmmaker's responsibility—not the describer's. Refer to these relationships only after they have been revealed within the context of the media.

Scene Changes:

- Scene changes can be confusing particularly when the soundtrack does not indicate a change. Simplicity is always a guide: "In the bedroom," "At the police station," etc. 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 ("general to the specific").

Example: "In their bedroom, John and Mary embrace tightly and kiss on the lips." The preceding scene took place with the whole family gathered around the dining table and nothing on the soundtrack indicates we've changed locale.

- On occasion describers use the word “now” or “next” to indicate a change of scene. Because there will be many opportunities that seem to call for the use this word, use it only when absolutely necessary.

- As time permits, describe montages of images, but be succinct and clear. Similarly, a series of still images, such as those often used during a documentary interview, can be summarized to highlight certain subjects being discussed by the person or people being interviewed.

Passage of Time:

- As with scene changes, indicate passages of time that are essential to the comprehension or appreciation of a program’s content. Do not interpret the passage of time specifically, however, unless objective evidence supports it.

- When describing certain passages of time, such as flashbacks or dream sequences, describe the visual cues that let the audience know there is a flashback. For younger audiences, it is sometime impractical to use describing conventions that one might use for adults. In some cases, it is necessary to explicitly tell the audience what is happening rather than describing the action (e.g., flashback or dream sequence).

- Address time shifts (flash backs or visions of the future) in relation to the character. Music and visual effects may further identify time changes.

Example: “Lighting shifts to pale amber as George takes his childhood place at the family dinner table.”

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

Example: “John picks up the knife as Jill turns away.”

“Foreshadowing”:

- Sometimes a describer will describe what’s about to appear because there’s no silence for the information when it does appear. For instance, the audio description of what’s currently occurring and the current background noise may indicate that a waterfall; the describer may need to say “In a moment, a NASCAR racetrack with a dozen cars circling the track.” This alerts 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 specific visual image 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.

Consistency:

- Utilizing the same character names and/or vocabulary throughout a production or series of productions is essential. For instance, on a longer production, often more than one description writer will work on its description script. It's critical that the draft final script is reviewed in its totality for consistency.

Jargon:

- Just as a describer for a live performance should avoid theatrical jargon or references, a film or video describer should avoid calling attention to the filmmaking process. Generally it's appropriate to avoid filmmaking jargon and reference to filmmaking techniques, e.g., "close-up" or "fade to black."

Point of View:

- Describe the point of view when appropriate—"from above," "from space," "moving away," "flying low over the sandy beach," etc. It is understood that a film/video/DVD is being viewed; repeated references to the screen are unnecessary.

- Occasionally, the audience is directly engaged, particularly with children's material or educational productions. An on-screen character might ask the audience to "Watch me and follow along," or an instructor might ask, "Can you see what color the liquid is turning in the beaker?" In such cases, it is important for the audience members to know that it is they who are being addressed (as opposed to an on-screen character). One way to accomplish this is to refer to the audience as "you."

Logos / Credits:

- Treat logos as any other image to be described and 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. In addition, the describer should read text and subtitles. Generally, on first appearance, text or subtitles can be introduced with a phrase such as, "Words appear" or "Subtitles appear." Subsequently, tone of voice may be employed to draw a distinction between description of on-screen action and the reading of text or subtitles.

Note: Because the describer can never read as rapidly as the onscreen credits appear and disappear, the describer must "edit" this material and may include a line such as "Other credits follow."

- 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.

Enhanced Description

– For DVDs, enhanced description can be employed to provide additional detail via a link to a pop-up window or even a hyper-link to a website.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION STANDARDS
VISUAL ART / EXHIBITIONS

Note: Much of the material in this section is adapted from guidelines posted at www.artbeyondsight.org and Art Education for the Blind's (AEB) landmark 1996 publication *Making Visual Art Accessible to People Who Are Blind and Visually Impaired.* AEB refers to audio description for visual art as "verbal description."

Definition:

- Verbal description uses nonvisual language to convey the visual world. In a museum or at an exhibition of any sort, a verbal description includes standard information included on a label, such as the name of the artist, nationality, title of the artwork, date, dimensions or scale of the work, media and technique. More important, verbal description includes a description of the work.

Museum Tours

- Verbal description as part of a touch tour enhances the visitor's tactile experience. It can also provide access to a museum's collection when the works of art are not available to touch. When a group of visitors includes blind, visually impaired, and sighted visitors, museum professionals or docents can incorporate in-depth verbal description into their regular tour. If a classroom teacher conducts the tour, it is advisable for educators to visit the museum or historical site first to prepare the verbal description.

Audio Guides

- Some museums create an additional audio guide for blind and visually impaired visitors or include extensive verbal description of artworks in their standard audio guide. Sighted museum visitors report that they benefit from this practice as well. Following a "universal design" concept, exhibit designers are increasingly combining standard audio tours with audio descriptions, an "all-in-one" concept.

Classroom Lessons / Literacy

- Verbal description and discussion about the work of art can be a part of a class that precedes or follows a museum visit. Teachers can incorporate verbal description of art, architecture, and design objects into history, social science, math, and other classes. Precise and organized description is one of the basic tools of effective communication. It can improve students' awareness of their environment and enrich their vocabulary.

- This notion represents a relatively new application for audio description: as an aid to literacy. As you might imagine, some "picture books" for toddlers are deficient with respect to the language skills they involve—they rely on the pictures to tell the story.

But the teacher trained in audio description techniques would never simply hold up a picture of a ball and read the text: "See the ball." He or she might add: "The ball is red--just like a fire engine. I think that ball is as large as one of you! It's as round as the sun--a bright red circle or sphere." The teacher has introduced new vocabulary, invited comparisons, and used metaphor or simile--with toddlers! By using description, these books (or children's videos) are made accessible to kids who have low vision or are blind and simultaneously all kids develop more sophisticated language skills.

- Numerous studies have shown the value of captions to children in the development of literacy. In a similar vein, a comparable benefit might be observed in children exposed to audio description. Description—with its focus on observation, clarity, and efficiency of language use—can build more sophisticated literacy in children who are blind, who have low vision and in *all* children.

Multisensory Books

- Multisensory art books created for people who are blind or have limited sight integrate verbal description, high-resolution reproductions of the images, a tactile component, and sometimes an audio component.

Practical Considerations:

For Educator or Docent-Led Tours

- Verbal description is used throughout an exhibition to describe displays, to respond to particular questions, and to encourage dialogue. The pace and level of detail of description can be adapted to individuals based on their degree of sight loss and their prior experience making art or looking at art.

- When planning a tour, keep in mind that verbal description adds time. Therefore, fewer works may be included on a tour. A general rule of thumb is to use half the number of works you would use in a tour without verbal description. So it's important to carefully select the works for your tour.

- Develop verbal description scripts for the objects on your tour and review them with visually impaired advisors for effective language, clarity and length of the descriptions, and appropriate pace of the tour. Verbal description is also an essential part of a touch tour or a tour that includes tactile diagrams or tactile elements. As verbal description skills increase, these scripts will serve as guidelines, rather than as a text to be memorized.

- When first meeting a group that includes people who are blind or visually impaired, briefly describe the lobby or meeting space. Then, so that you may adjust your tour to your visitors needs, find out more about the type and degree of visual impairment. As with all audiences, try to relate the individual's life experiences to the content in the work of art. Throughout your tour, include brief descriptions of gallery spaces through which

you pass and museum architecture. You might include the size of the space, type of art, or other general information about the atmosphere or ambiance of the museum.

- It is important to keep verbal description separate from information about the historical context. If your tour includes both sighted and visually impaired people, present your verbal description first. This creates equal opportunity for further discussion of historical context, biography of the artist, or other information important for all audiences to understand the work.

- One strategy frequently used during school-aged group tours could be used with all groups: elicit audience response through directed questioning. If you have an integrated class, with both sighted and visually impaired students, include everyone in the verbal-description process. Ask sighted students to describe elements in the work through directed questioning. This creates an engaging atmosphere and strengthens observation skills. At the end of each description, restate student responses and summarize observations.

- Get feedback. After the description of the first work, ask one of the tour participants if the description is meeting their needs or if you need to make any adjustments.
At the end of a tour for people with visual impairments, take the opportunity to emphasize the organization's accessibility features and programming. Create a sense of welcome and encourage a future relationship with the organization.

<u>For Audio Guides or Audio-described Self-guided Tours</u>

- Once you have developed verbal-description scripts, adapt them to create an audio guide that all visitors can use in the galleries independently. For the user with visual impairments, incorporate verbal description with navigational and orientation cues. When designing a tour, consider the effect of frequent physical changes in the galleries, such as chairs that are moved, deinstallations, or construction.

- Museum staff who distribute audio guides to visitors should provide a short orientation on how to use the player and guide. The player should have some type of neck strap so that a user has both hands free to use the buttons, hold a tactile, or use a cane or other assistive device.

- Depending on the needs and resources of a particular organization, delivery mechanisms will vary. Some choices include: audio cassette, CD, digital wands, or concealed triggering mechanisms. The last three mechanisms are digital methods that allow for layers of description and the option to choose between various exhibits.

- Generally, visually impaired visitors need orientation and navigational information that can be incorporated throughout the described tour. Some tours will keep this information on a separate track or layer of the tour allowing the sighted user to skip such information.

- Using infrared or FM systems (similar to those used in a performing arts or movie theater setting), AD users can privately access an audio description of a program, lecture, video, or performance.

Creating the Descriptions:

Subject, Form, and Color

- The basic object-label information is followed by a general overview of the subject matter and composition of the work. Generally, a coherent description should provide visual information in a sequence, allowing a blind person to assemble, piece by piece, an image of a highly complex work. First describe the explicit subject, that is, what is represented in the work. For example, "This painting features a recycled Savarin coffee can filled with about eighteen paintbrushes." Next describe the composition and give an overall impression of the work. With respect to works of art, include in this description the color tones and the mood or atmosphere. Many people who have lost their sight have a visual memory of colors.

Orient the Viewer with Directions

- Specific and concrete information is required to indicate the location of objects or figures in a work of art. A useful directional method is to refer to the positions of the numbers on a clock. Most blind people are familiar with this method of providing direction. For example, in referring to a person's face, you would describe the mouth as being at six o'clock. Also, when describing a figure depicted in a work of art, remember that the image is the equivalent of a mirror image. Right and left can be very ambiguous terms unless they are qualified. Accordingly, you should describe the figure according to its right or left, and always qualify this description. Refer to the viewer's orientation to right and left, as well. For example, "The woman's right hand, which is on your left, holds a small goblet."

Focus on the Style

- The style of a work of art refers to the features that identify a work as being by a particular artist or school, or of a movement, period, or geographical region. Style is the cumulative result of many characteristics, including brushwork, use of tone and color, choice of different motifs, and the treatment of the subject. After the basic information about subject, composition, and mediums are conveyed, the verbal description can focus on how these many elements contribute to the whole. In a tour that includes several works of art, comparisons are an effective way of making stylistic features tangible.

General to the Specific

- Clear and precise language is crucial to any good description. After the general idea of the work is conveyed, the description should be more vivid and particularized. Describe pertinent details, and focus on different parts of the work.

Art Conventions

- Art terms and pictorial conventions such as perspective, focal point, picture plane, foreground, and background should always be defined for your audience. Typically, it is useful to introduce the definition or concept when the discussion turns to that aspect of the work of art.

For example: “The scene shows Christ and Peter placed in the center foreground, with disciples and contemporary citizens arranged in rows on either side of them. Perugino directs the spectator to focus on the heart of the painting: the transferring of the keys. Perugino does this by exploiting the pictorial convention of one-point perspective. Let's recall the definition of one-point perspective, a way of projecting an illusion of the three-dimensional world onto a two-dimensional surface. All parallel lines appear to converge at a single point on the horizon, called the vanishing point. Jesus is presenting the large gold key to the kneeling Peter. In the space between the two figures, a silver key hangs from the same chain at the very center of the composition. The perspective lines of the pavement, comprising the brickwork design, lead the spectator's eyes into the distance, converging at the door of the centrally placed temple.”
-Fredericka Foster Shapiro, *Fifteenth-Century Italian Art*

Indicate Where the Curators Have Installed a Work

- Generally, a work's placement in an institution reveals important information about its meaning, as well as its relationship to other works in the collection. Tell the AD user where the work is located in the institution. Include in your discussion a description of the gallery or sculpture garden where the work is installed, and mention the surrounding artworks. Describe how the work under discussion relates to these other works, as well as to the viewer and the surrounding space. For example, the work may confront the viewer or it may be installed off to the side.

Refer to Other Senses as Analogues for Vision

Try to translate a visual experience into another sense. Other senses, such as touch or hearing, enable AD users to further construct highly detailed impressions of a work on display. For instance, refer to the sense of touch when describing the surface of a sculpture. A comparison between the rough-hewn texture of Auguste Rodin's *Balzac* (1892-97) and the glasslike finish of Constantin Brancusi's *Bird in Space* (c. 1927) can be very instructive. Or compare a Japanese tea-ceremony jar, with its irregular shape and unfinished surface, with a highly refined Chinese white-porcelain statuette from the

eighteenth century. In both of these ceramic works, the degree of surface refinement is an integral part of the work's formal value, as well as of its meaning.

For example: The following passage draws upon the sense of hearing to experience the grandeur and sensual richness of Annibale Carracci's ceiling decoration (1597-1601) for the Palazzo Farnese, in Rome.

“Imagine being in a very large room with superb sound speakers placed just below the ceiling. The sound from the speakers is exactly what you might hear in a garden. Imagine hearing plants rustling in the wind, birds singing, and the splashing water of the fountains. In addition to these natural sounds, you hear snatches of conversations and the cheerful laughter of children playing. Imagine these sounds coming from many different directions.”
-AEB and Paula Gerson with Virginia Hooper, *Baroque Art in the Seventeenth Century*

Explain Concepts with Analogies

- Certain kinds of visual phenomena, such as shadows or clouds, may be best described with a well-chosen analogy. To construct a helpful analogy, choose objects or experiences from everyone's common experience. In a description of Pablo Picasso's *Cubist painting Girl with a Mandolin (Fanny Tellier)* (1910), you might compare the image of the figure to a shattered wine bottle whose fragments have been reassembled in different positions.

Encourage Understanding through Reenactment

- Sometimes, it may be helpful to have the exhibit visitor *experience* the image, i.e., the AD user could mimic a depicted figure's pose. Since everyone is aware of his or her own body, this activity provides a concrete way of understanding difficult poses depicted in a painting. Additionally, by assuming the pose, the AD user can directly perceive important formal characteristics of the work, such as symmetry or asymmetry; open or closed forms; implied action or repose; smooth, flowing lines or angular ones; and the degree of engagement with the viewer.

Incorporate Sound in Creative Ways

- Sound can serve an interpretive and descriptive purpose, particularly as an auditory analogue for a work of visual art. A uniquely designed soundscape can evoke the experience of a display.

- Another way to use sound creatively is to provide on-site recordings of architectural spaces. For instance, a listener could hear the bustling sounds of St. Peter's piazza in Rome as he or she approaches its depiction.

Allow People to Touch Works of Art or Artifacts

- Providing an opportunity to touch three-dimensional works gives visitors who are blind or visually impaired an immediate, personal experience with an original work of art. Direct touch is the best way to explore an object. For conservation reasons, however, some museums require people to wear thin gloves made of cotton or plastic. An informal poll at the Museum of Modern Art in New York indicated that most people prefer plastic gloves to cotton because the texture and temperature of the work's material can be felt.

Alternative Touchable Materials

- When it is not possible to touch original works of art, alternative touchable materials can be provided. In some instances, alternative materials can provide a fuller and more complete understanding of a work because they can be touched without gloves. These auxiliary aids include three-dimensional reproductions; samples of art-making materials such as marble, bronze, clay, and canvas; examples of the tools used in various media, such as paintbrushes, chisels, and hammers; and replicas of the objects depicted in a display. Additionally, it is helpful to have a range of information available on the unique characteristics of the materials and the way in which the medium dictates the form.

Tactile Illustrations of Artworks

- Most museum visitors want as much information as possible. Tactile diagrams or three-dimensional dioramas of a work of art are effective ways of making visual art accessible. Diagrams are tactile illustrations of artworks, and they are essentially relief images. They do not represent the actual object in every detail; they are intended to be used in conjunction with verbal descriptions.

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.