

**Audio Description Best Practices, Presented at the 2018 Audio Description Project Conference  
as part of the National Parks Service Presentation on the UniDescription Project**

Hello everyone!

My name is Sajja, and I work as a research assistant on the [UniDescription Project](#). Today, I am going to briefly share some **best practices and recommendations in audio description** we have discovered. We have conducted rigorous literature reviews, plus many focus groups, surveys, interviews, and field tests with blind and visually impaired individuals since the beginning of this project. I will talk about some of the guidelines we have learned that seem to be commonly accepted in audio description in the United States. I want to emphasize that anything visible to the eye can be audio-described. Often times, when we think of audio-description, we think of movies and TV shows, but the fact is anything you can see (buildings, artifacts, toys, furniture...whatever) can be audio-described.

There are **3 main principles** you should keep in mind while drafting an audio-description. They are **objectivity, clarity, and brevity**. We recommend that audio-describers remain as objective as possible, and use of neutral language also is encouraged. Currently, there is no universal criteria that audio-describers can follow, and in the UK, it is okay to use terms such as pretty and handsome while doing narration, but research suggests **Americans value objectivity**. Describers should use third-person narration, and you should only describe what you can see (not what that sight makes you think about). In other words, **do not make assumptions and interpretations**. All relevant content in a scene should be described, and censorship of the topic because of a personal motivation or discomfort should be avoided.

When describing complex things, like a collage or an infographic, **move from a general overview to specific details**. Use simple and direct sentences, and refrain from using passive sentences. It is okay to use metaphors while describing information, but make sure that those comparisons are easy to understand. We have found that **usage of strong vocabulary is something blind people really value**. Use words that can capture the significance of the visual content. For example, if you are describing Mount Everest, say it is majestic, rather than big. Use words that are easy to understand, and do avoid slang. Judiciously use scientific or specialized terminology when necessary.

It might be a no-brainer, but only use pronouns when the subjects are clearly indicated. Also, consider the user experience, and be mindful of the length. Sometimes it may not be feasible to describe every piece of the content due to time constraints and other reasons, so **prioritize information**, and make sure to describe the most essential information to make it a meaningful experience. Although describers should stay objective while doing audio-description, they sometimes have to rely on personal judgement to determine what to describe and what to leave out. Currently, there are no national standards for audio-describers in the United States, and there is no single formula to produce audio-description to appease every consumer. Some want every little piece of information to be described while others prefer description of selective parts of the visuals.

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We have mostly written audio-descriptions for images in the national park brochures. We found that taking context and quality control into consideration while drafting an audio-description of images is very helpful. **Know the context of the image you are describing**—why is the image there, what would a blind person miss without that image, and determine the appropriate detail and length to provide. Whenever possible, **ask blind and visually impaired individuals for their feedback** when you are done with audio-description. There is a lack of empirical evidence to support one particular way of audio-description, so reaching out to your audience is a good way to set a benchmark and to follow it, in determining the quality of your description.

Audio-description is hard work, but I think it can be rewarding too. I am so glad and thankful that you are interested in this field because of my personal experience with audio-description. Once when I posted pictures of a hike on Facebook, my mother back home said that she cried when she saw the pictures. I thought it was natural beauty that brought tears to her eyes, but she said that she cried for the fact that in spite of being surrounded by immense beauty, I had no access to it.

If I had to give you one piece of advice as future audio-describers, it would be to always remember that **your work empowers, educates, and affects your consumers in a meaningful way**. I have met random strangers on a cruise ship who took it upon themselves to audio-describe the scenery for me because they wanted me to enjoy it like them, and I have had professors who would whisper audio-description in my ear while they showed videos in class although that was not necessary to get the assignments done. Bring that kind of passion to audio-description, and I think you will make a great audio-describer.

I am grateful to be here today, and I do hope our team's presentation was a good learning experience for you. I have brought some handouts about our project; please take one, and pass them around to anyone who might be interested. You also can experience the more than 50 brochures we have audio-described by downloading the free UniDescription app. Please don't hesitate to talk to me about this project after this presentation or any time in the future.

Thank you.

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