



**3PlayMedia**

# BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO AUDIO DESCRIPTION



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# What Is Audio Description?



# What Is Audio Description?

## Definition

**>>Audio description (also referred to as “description” or “video description”) is defined as “the verbal depiction of key visual elements in media and live productions.”**

## A Definition of Audio Description

Audio description, also known as descriptive audio or video description, narrates the relevant visual information contained in a video and is an accommodation for blind and low-vision viewers. Failing to provide audio description inhibits blind and visually impaired individuals from gaining a complete understanding of the given program.

The description of media involves the interspersing of audio description snippets within the program's original audio components, such as in between natural pauses in dialogue. This is to allow the individual the benefit of the description, without detracting from the existing content.<sup>i</sup>

# Quality Standards for Audio

## Description

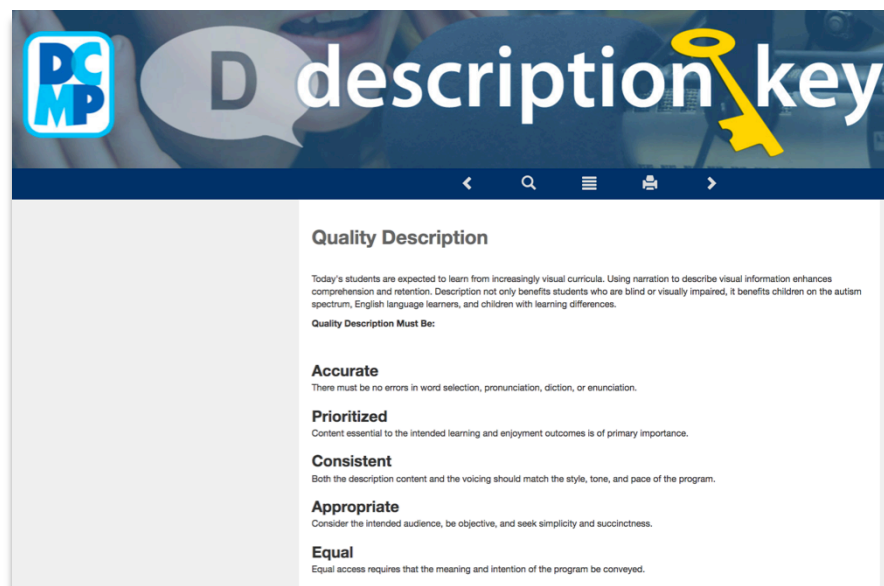


# Quality Standards for Audio Description

## Quality Description

There are several guidelines<sup>ii</sup> to keep in mind when describing. It's important to only describe the seen, and not the unseen, such as motivations or intentions. Although it may be instinctive to project emotions onto the characters, the job of the describer is to describe what is physically observable, not to provide the listener with personal assumptions or conclusions. With technology rapidly advancing, it is becoming even more important to ensure accessible content in entertainment, as well as education.

The DCMP description key<sup>iii</sup> and general guidelines for how to describe<sup>iv</sup> outline several key elements for creating high quality description.



# Audio Description

## Laws & Lawsuits



# Audio Description Laws & Lawsuits

It's important to stay on top of the legal requirements surrounding web accessibility in order to provide the necessary accommodations to individuals with disabilities, as well as to be in compliance with the laws and avoid potential lawsuits. With several different laws surrounding accessibility, you may find it hard to figure out what exactly you should be doing. Here's a rundown of laws that apply to audio description.

## Anti-Discrimination Laws

In the US, audio description is required under many of the same anti-discrimination laws<sup>v</sup> that require closed captioning for video. This includes the 21st Century Video Accessibility Act (CVAA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and Section 504 and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.



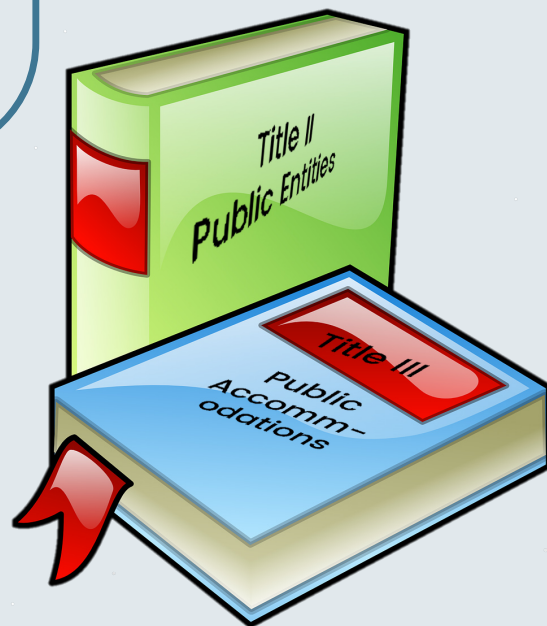


## The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

The ADA guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in employment, state and local government services, public accommodations, commercial facilities, and transportation. Title II and Title III of the ADA are known to most closely relate to web accessibility.

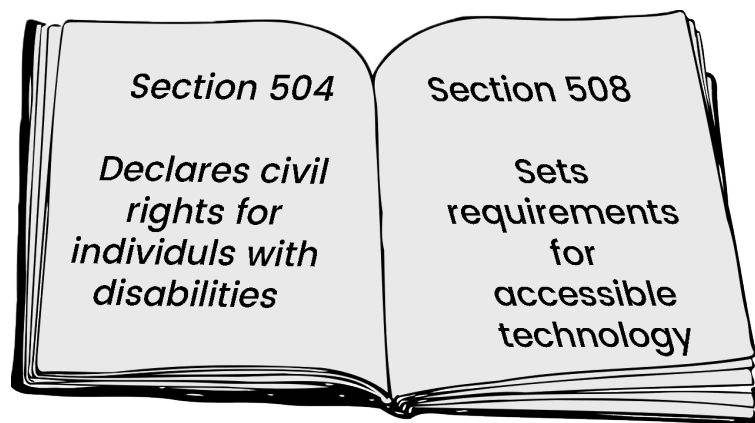
Titles II and III have had the most impact on video accessibility and audio description

While the ADA<sup>1</sup> doesn't specifically name audio description as a requirement, it's vague wording has been disputed in several lawsuits against Netflix, Broadway's Hamilton, AMC Theatres, and UC Berkeley for failing to provide auxiliary aids, in this case audio description, and thus violating Title III of the ADA, which prohibits disability discrimination by "places of public accommodation."



## Section 508 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

Section 504 protects the civil rights of people with disabilities by requiring that organizations that receive federal funding make accommodations for equal access. For users who are blind or low vision, audio description must be provided.



Section 508 to the Rehabilitation Act<sup>vi</sup> was signed into law in 1998 and requires Federal agencies to make their electronic communications and information technology

accessible. Therefore, all film, video, multimedia, and information technology produced or procured by Federal agencies must include audio description.

In early 2017, Section 508 experienced a refresh<sup>vii</sup>, which updates requirements for information and communication technology covered by Section 508. The Section 508 refresh, which will take effect in early 2018, assigns WCAG 2.0 success criterion to each existing section of the 508 Standards in an effort to modernize the requirements for both closed captioning and audio description.

## Audio Description Under the New Section 508 Refresh

Changes to Section 508 include:

- Categorization by functionality instead of by product type
- Revisions to improve ICT usability, including interoperability with assistive technologies
- Clarification on the types of ICT covered
- Correlation of WCAG 2.0 Level A and Level AA standards to all Section 508 requirements

The Section 508 refresh assigns WCAG 2.0 success criterion to each existing section of the 508 Standards. These standards modernize the requirements for prerecorded audio description as follows:

- Success criterion 1.2.3
- WCAG 2.0 Level AA
- 508 section 1194.22(b) and .24(d)
- Audio descriptions are provided for all video content

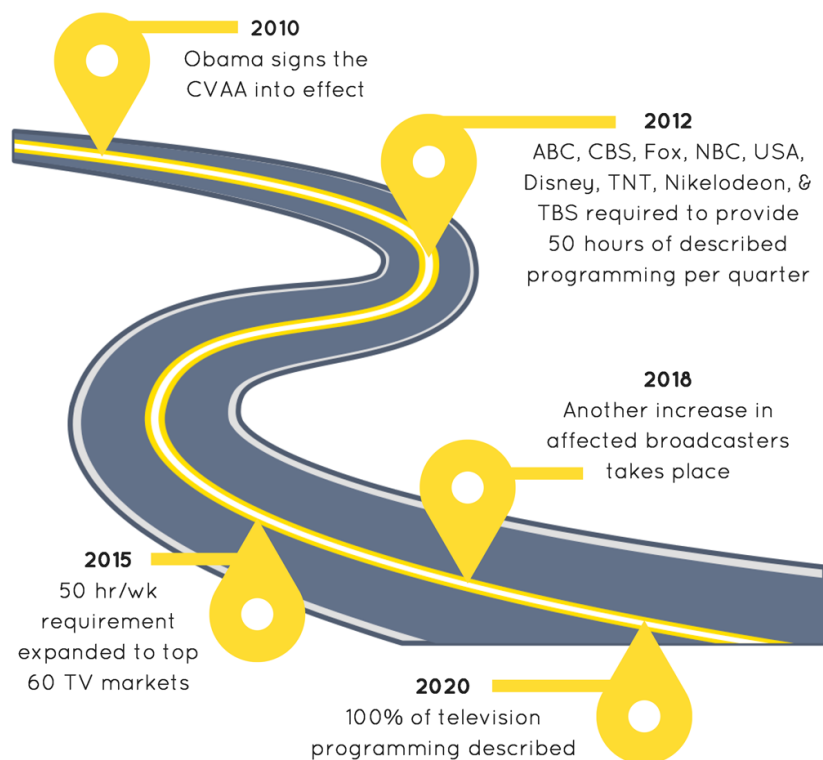
## WCAG 2.0 Guidelines for Audio Description

Additionally, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0, the international standard for web accessibility, requires audio description under guideline 1.2 for time-based media<sup>viii</sup>. WCAG 2.0 is the legal requirement under the revised section 508 standards and is often required by state laws. Most web accessibility experts recommend striving for WCAG 2.0 Level AA compliance, which requires that audio description be provided for all prerecorded video content in synchronized media.

## 21<sup>st</sup> Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act (CVAA)

In October 2010, Barack Obama signed the CVAA<sup>ix</sup> into effect, requiring that modern communications technologies be made accessible to all people regardless of vision and/or hearing loss. In implementing the CVAA, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) put forth a Notice of Proposed Rule Making (NPRM). This Notice set regulations for implementing audio description on video content intended for children and for prime-time viewing. The rules on video description required that ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, USA, the Disney Channel, TNT, Nickelodeon, and TBS each provide 50 hours of video-described prime time or children's programming per calendar quarter by 2012.

On July 1, 2015, the 50 hours per week requirement<sup>x</sup> expanded to the top 60 TV markets, and the next increase is scheduled for July 1, 2018<sup>xi</sup>. The intent is to gradually increase audio description and to have 100% of television programming described by 2020.



The FCC has learned from their experience with closed captioning that without firm requirements for caption quality, the accuracy, timing, stylistic approaches, and overall usefulness of closed captioning has fallen drastically. For this reason, the FCC commends several guidelines from the DCMP description key and general guidelines for how to describe, both of which outline key elements and best practices for creating high quality description.

## Audio Description Lawsuits

### American Council of the Blind v. Netflix

In an agreement between Netflix and the American Council of the Blind (ACB), as well as the Massachusetts-based Bay State Council of the Blind (BSCB) and a blind individual, Netflix has added audio descriptions to many of its programs. The



settlement<sup>xii</sup> required Netflix to provide audio descriptions for many popular titles in both its online streaming platform and disc rental service by December 31, 2016. You can browse movies and shows that currently have audio descriptions available by visiting [Netflix.com/browse/audio-description](https://www.netflix.com/browse/audio-description) from within your Netflix account. While Netflix isn't affected by traditional broadcasting regulations, the courts argue that Internet-only businesses should be considered “places of public accommodation” under Title III<sup>xiii</sup> of the ADA.

## Broadway's "Hamilton" Sued for Failing to Provide Audio Description

Earlier this year, a blind individual contacted the box office of the Broadway show "Hamilton" to inquire about audio description services for the Broadway musical. After being told that there were none available, he proceeded to file a class action lawsuit<sup>xiv</sup> against the producers of "Hamilton," as well as the owners of the theater where Broadway's smash hit is performed. The lawsuit<sup>xv</sup>, *Lasser v Nederlander Organization Inc et al.*, cites "systemic civil rights violations" against blind and low-vision theatergoers. It goes on to further explain that failure to provide this service directly violates Title III of the ADA, which prohibits disability discrimination by "*places of public accommodation*."



"Hamilton" is certainly not the only Broadway show lacking audio description, but with "Hamilton" in the spotlight, this lawsuit will likely set precedent for others in the industry. During the chaotic, busy months leading up to a show's opening, accessibility often gets put on the back burner. One explanation for why this happens is that producers are hesitant to spend the money on accommodations before they know how successful a show will be.

## US Department of Justice v. University of California, Berkeley

As technology rapidly advances the US Department of Justice's (DOJ) Civil Rights Division works diligently to ensure web accessibility for all people, regardless of disability. One way they're moving toward this goal is by following up on complaints submitted by citizens.



In October, 2014, as part of this effort, the DOJ began investigating the free, public MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) system offered by UC Berkeley. Two years later, the DOJ submitted a letter to the administration<sup>xvi</sup> at UC Berkeley, accusing the MOOCs of being inaccessible.

Among other things, the letter cited a lack of audio description on video content. During the investigation, it was found that roughly half of the videos on UC Berkeley's YouTube channel failed to provide audio description or an equivalent format for visual information. The DOJ also reviewed almost 100 lectures from more than two dozen of the UC Berkeley courses available on iTunes. Similarly, they found that these videos had no audio description or alternative format for conveying the visual content.

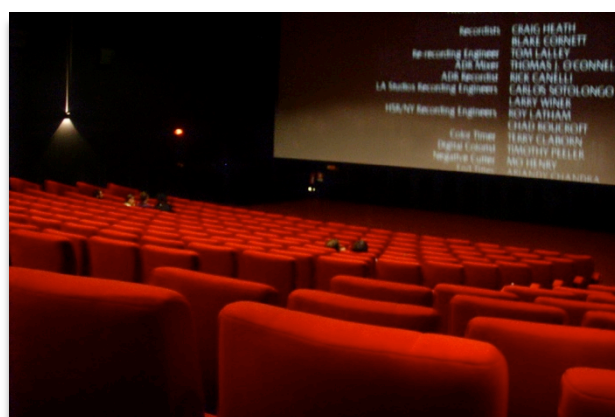
## AMC Theatres Sued for Failing to Provide Usable Audio

### Description

A San Francisco man who was consistently deprived of enjoying the movies with his family sued AMC Theatres for providing inadequate audio description services.

Although AMC Theatres claims to have the assistive technology to make movies accessible for blind and low-vision guests, these guests are frequently given equipment that is broken<sup>xvii</sup>, drained of battery, or even equipment intended for Deaf users rather than blind users. He

explained that if he gets the correct device at all, it's usually after AMC staff has gotten help from a manager, which takes additional time, and makes him late for the movie.



The lawsuit, *Blanks, et al. v. AMC Entertainment Inc., et al.*, seeks a court declaration that AMC Theatres discriminates against blind and low vision movie patrons, an order that AMC Theatres ensures its equipment works properly, and attorney's fees and legal costs for violating the ADA. This San Francisco man, as well as other blind and low-vision customers, miss crucial aspects of the movie, making it very difficult – or impossible – to enjoy the movies with their families or friends.



# Benefits of Audio Description



# Benefits of Audio Description

Although audio description was originally intended for people who are blind or have low vision, audio description has proven to be beneficial for a much broader audience. The concise and objective translation of visual content promotes a new way of learning through auditory means and can help individuals with language development, improve learning outcomes, and strengthen writing skills. Audio description can also assist those on the autism spectrum who may have difficulty recognizing emotional cues, and can be useful in eyes-free situations where you might have a TV on, but are unable to look at the visual cues.

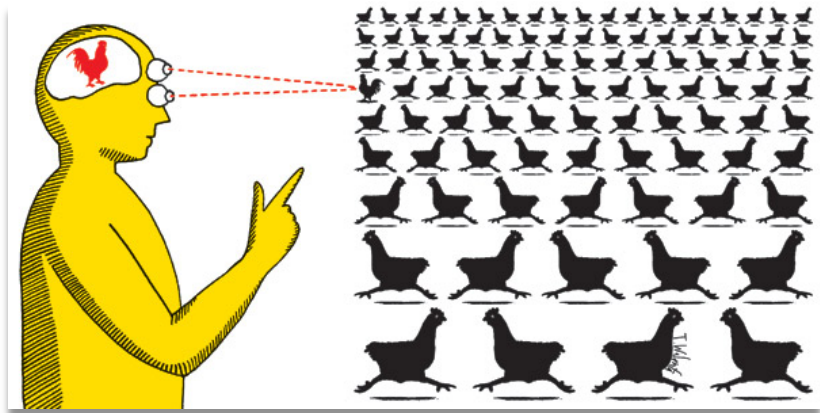
## Improved Learning Outcomes

Research into how the brain processes information reveals that there are two channels<sup>xviii</sup> –visual and auditory. So, it makes sense that when the brain uses both channels simultaneously – for example, by utilizing audio description – it can accommodate and process a greater amount of new information. It is for this reason that audio description is a useful resource for all individuals to acquire new information and develop several important learning skills in the following areas:

- 🔗 Language Development: Listening is a key step in learning language.
- 🔗 Auditory Learners: It's estimated that 20–30% of students retain information best through sound.
- 🔗 New Media Literacy: Listening is a building block in the ability to understand and produce communication in many forms.
- 🔗 Writing and Speaking: High quality description is succinct and context-relevant, making listening to description a useful tool for improving written and oral communication skills.

## Inattentional Blindness

Have you ever had the experience where there was just so much going on in a video that you completely missed something until it was pointed out to you? If so,



you're not the only one! In fact, this phenomenon is referred to as inattentional blindness<sup>xix</sup>. Typically, this "temporary blindness" causes individuals to fail to see objects that are unexpected given the context. Audio description actually prevents this inattentional blindness from occurring by supplementing the visual content with an audio track, and thus helping individuals to take in more stimuli.

## Audio Description and the Autistic Spectrum

In addition to being a learning aid, audio description also helps individuals on the autistic spectrum<sup>xx</sup> by giving more information about emotions and social cues. It is common for people on the autistic spectrum to struggle with understanding human emotions and social interaction. Since audio description is designed to provide purely visual information in an audio format for blind users, a describer might dictate that someone “walked into the room with a frown on their face.” This description is extremely useful for people on the autistic spectrum, as it helps identify an emotion that may be difficult for them to otherwise pinpoint. It also provides another sense (visual) to reinforce the information, helping them gain a better sense of understanding. Providing additional viewing support through audio description allows people on the autistic spectrum to watch TV or movies without relying on family and friends to answer questions such as ‘What does that mean?’, ‘Who’s that?’, and ‘Why did that happen?’

## Audio Description for the Multitasker

Sighted people often watch TV as background noise while engaging in other tasks such as cooking, exercising, working on a project, or cleaning. When multitasking, it’s easy to miss visual cues since you may not be directing your full visual attention at the TV screen. Audio description<sup>xxi</sup> is a great tool for this, as it describes the visual content in audio format. Similarly to audiobooks, audio description of TV shows or movies could also be beneficial to a driver who can’t take their eyes off of the road.

# What Is the Cost of Audio Description?



# What Is the Cost of Audio Description?

## Is the Cost of Audio Description a Barrier to Accessibility?

Across all markets, from the education industry to the entertainment industry, cost is a leading barrier for providing accessible content. Despite the legal requirements to implement audio description into web media content, many do not comply. Creating accessible content takes a lot of time, and often utilizes costly tools and technologies.

## Cost of Audio Description

The cost of description differs greatly<sup>xxii</sup> from provider to provider, and even from video to video. This is because the need for description varies so much. While some videos have no spoken audio, thus requiring a lot of description, some videos only have brief silences or pauses where the describer must make careful and deliberate word choices. The precision and care necessary for creating high quality audio description takes a lot of skill and time.

At prices traditionally ranging from \$15-\$75 per minute, significantly higher than the cost of captioning, many don't have the budget to spend this kind of money on

implementing audio description. There are several reasons that description is so costly. Creating audio description requires a lot of time, attention to detail, and a high level of skill. It also requires many people and a lot of expensive equipment to create and add audio description. When you have multiple hours of content to describe, all of these costs begin to add up very quickly.

## How Process Dictates Cost of Audio Description

The process for creating audio description varies; however many audio description providers use humans for the entire workflow. In most cases, description writers create the description transcript, then human actors deliver the description within the specified timecodes. (For extended audio description, the amount of time allotted to writing and voice acting can increase dramatically.) Voice talent is often quite expensive. In addition to the voice actors, paying the writers is costly as well, as they are skilled laborers that require high wages. Paying these individuals, in addition to the cost of all of the tools necessary to record and implement the audio description can be very costly. On top of the cost of the actual description, the cost of publishing is a resource cost to the content owner that is not even included in the description pricing.

However, despite generally high prices, there are measures that can be taken to bring the cost of audio description down, and in doing so, make the service more widely available. One of the main ways to bring costs down is by taking advantage of current technology.

## Utilizing Technology to Bring Costs Down

3Play Media is taking a new approach to audio description, utilizing technology to bring costs down. At 3Play, combining humans and technology has been a critical part of our captioning process – so why shouldn't it be a part of the description process? We're using a combination of humans and technology in every step of the description process. By employing technology, we're able to make the process of writing and time coding description easier, faster, and more cost-effective.

Additionally, we use certified human describers to write high quality descriptions, then utilize synthesized speech to vocalize these descriptions. In addition, one of the hidden costs of audio description is the resource-intensive process of publishing audio description. Again utilizing technology, we are developing a plugin that will alleviate the need to produce a second version of your video with audio description. Using a combination of human editing and advanced technology, the cost of audio description can be significantly decreased without sacrificing quality.



# How to Add Audio Description to Videos



# How to Add Audio Description to Videos

## How Is Audio Description Published?

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), an international community that develops Web standards, lists several *sufficient techniques*<sup>xxiii</sup> for adding description to audio-visual material. All of these methods are reliable ways to meet the WCAG Success Criterion.<sup>xxiv</sup>



### Adding a second, user-selectable soundtrack with audio descriptions

Most devices don't have the capability of merging multiple sound tracks. This method accommodates for that by providing an option which allows users to replace the original soundtrack with a new version of the soundtrack which contains audio description. Audio description focuses on key visual elements that are crucial to the comprehension of the content, such as characters and scene changes. For example, a movie file has two audio tracks, one of which includes audio description. Users can choose either one when using a platform that can accommodate two audio tracks to play

simultaneously, a secondary audio track containing just the description is sufficient.



#### Providing a second version of the movie with audio descriptions

This approach adds the audio description to synchronized media by utilizing a second version of the movie where the original soundtrack and additional audio description are combined into a single track. In this case, the description is added into the original sound track during pauses in dialogue and sound effects. Although this ensures that the description doesn't obscure original content, it limits the amount of supplementary information that can be added. An example of this method is two versions of a video of a concert are available. The first version includes solely the music, while the second version includes both the music and voice describing the actions of the performers on stage.



#### Extended audio descriptions

This approach involves providing a second version of video content with extended audio descriptions. One of the main obstacles in creating traditional audio descriptions is trying to fit a vast amount of into a very short window of time (such as during pauses in the dialogue.) Typically, a version of the movie with extended audio descriptions and a version without descriptions are available, or the

audio descriptions can be turned on and off.



#### Using a static text alternative

This method is considered an alternative to audio descriptions, and is best used for media that doesn't have important time based information in the original video portion of the media. For example, this technique would be sufficient for "talking head" videos such as a press conference or lecture, where an individual is speaking in front of a static background and there are no important visual elements to describe. This technique is not suitable for a situation where there are several speakers, and where the identity of the speakers is not made clear in the audio track.



#### Using a WebVTT track

HTML5 video allows for the use of a WebVTT description file. This file would be included as a `<track>` element with the `<type>` "description." Screen readers should be able to read this file to provide description to users. However, this functionality has very limited support across video players.

## Audio Description Output Formats

You can download your file as an MP4, MP3, or WAV. These files include both the description and original content. If you would like to download text formats, you can

download your file as a WebVTT, DOC, or TXT file. These downloads only contain the descriptions. However, we also offer the option to download a Merged DOC and a Merged TXT file. The merged files will include both the description and transcript.

## How to Publish Using the Audio Description Plugin

Being that most popular video players and platforms do not support WebVTT description tracks or secondary audio tracks – although there are exceptions – we provide an audio description plugin for simplicity.

Our plugin is a simple embed that references your video and plays the secondary audio description track along with your video, making it a great option for video players that don't support audio description in a usable way. It's also a great alternative to having to create a second version of the video with description.



The audio description plugin is keyboard and screen reader accessible. !

## Conclusion

3Play Media strives to make video accessibility easy. As technology continues to advance, video accessibility will continue to become more and more important – both in terms of legal requirements, and the needs of our society. Audio description is crucial to understanding visual content when the viewer cannot see, but the benefits of audio description don't stop there. Seeing users find description helpful for learning new languages, remembering content, and understanding human emotions.

## About 3Play Media

3Play Media provides cost-effective, premium quality captioning, transcription, and audio description to more than 2,000 customers in higher education, enterprise, entertainment, media, and government. 3Play Media simplifies the process of making videos accessible through flexible API's, integrations with video players and platforms, simple plugins, and a user-friendly online account system. 3Play Media is based in Boston, MA and has been operating since 2007.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> <http://descriptionkey.org/index.html#1>
- <sup>ii</sup> <http://www.acb.org/adp/guidelines.html>
- <sup>iii</sup> [http://www.descriptionkey.org/quality\\_description.html](http://www.descriptionkey.org/quality_description.html)
- <sup>iv</sup> [http://www.descriptionkey.org/how\\_to\\_describe.html](http://www.descriptionkey.org/how_to_describe.html)
- <sup>v</sup> <http://www.3playmedia.com/resources/accessibility-laws/>
- <sup>vi</sup> <https://www.hhs.gov/web/section-508/what-is-section-504/>
- <sup>vii</sup> <https://www.access-board.gov/guidelines-and-standards/communications-and-it/about-the-ict-refresh>
- <sup>viii</sup> <https://www.w3.org/TR/2008/REC-WCAG20-20081211/#media-equiv-audio-desc>
- <sup>ix</sup> [http://www.descriptivevideoworks.com/faq/FCC\\_mandate\\_guide](http://www.descriptivevideoworks.com/faq/FCC_mandate_guide)
- <sup>x</sup> [http://www.descriptivevideoworks.com/faq/FCC\\_mandate\\_guide](http://www.descriptivevideoworks.com/faq/FCC_mandate_guide)
- <sup>xi</sup> <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/05/27/2016-10816/video-description-implementation-of-the-twenty-first-century-communications-and-video-accessibility>
- <sup>xii</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2015/04/18/400590705/after-fan-pressure-netflix-makes-daredevil-accessible-to-the-blind>
- <sup>xiii</sup> <http://www.adatitleiii.com/2016/04/netflix-agrees-to-add-audio-description-to-many-of-its-shows-and-dvd-rentals/>
- <sup>xiv</sup> <http://variety.com/2017/legit/news/hamilton-lawsuit-broadway-accessibility-1201970837/>
- <sup>xv</sup> <https://www.classaction.org/blog/hamilton-production-companies-hit-with-civil-rights-class-action-lawsuit>
- <sup>xvi</sup> <https://news.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2016-08-30-UC-Berkeley-LOF.pdf>
- <sup>xvii</sup> <https://consumerist.com/2016/02/18/lawsuit-claims-amc-theatres-makes-it-hard-for-blind-people-to-enjoy-going-to-the-movies/>
- <sup>xviii</sup> [http://listeningislearning.org/background\\_description-no-bvi.html](http://listeningislearning.org/background_description-no-bvi.html)
- <sup>xix</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inattentional\\_blindness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inattentional_blindness)
- <sup>xx</sup> <http://mindfulresearch.co.uk/2011/08/29/autistic-spectrum-captions-and-audio-description/>
- <sup>xxi</sup> <http://universaldesign.ie/Technology-ICT/Irish-National-IT-Accessibility-Guidelines/Digital-TV-equipment-and-services/guidelines-for-digital-tv-equipment-and-services/Audio-description/>
- <sup>xxii</sup> <http://terrellthompson.com/blog/813>
- <sup>xxiii</sup> <https://www.w3.org/Consortium/>
- <sup>xxiv</sup> <https://www.w3.org/TR/UNDERSTANDING-WCAG20/media-equiv-audio-desc-only.html#media-equiv-audio-desc-only-techniques-head>