

National Park Service

Audio Description Core Concepts

These core concepts are a guide to apply to all National Park Service media types. Audio Description is an art, not a science. No two descriptions are exactly alike, but that does not mean that either is unacceptable. As audio description continues to develop as a profession and as more users provide feedback, these concepts will evolve.

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Use Plain Language

Do This

- Use common words and terms understandable by the general population, including children.
- Use a diverse but precise vocabulary.

Description Example

“They walk.” “She strolls.” “He struts.” All of these words can be used to define how someone might be moving forward, but should not be used just for the sake of variety. Sometimes walking is just “walking” and should be used repeatedly if it is the most accurate descriptor.

Avoid

- Generic words that are common but not informative.
- Unnecessarily poetic language.

Description Examples

“A large crowd.” “A very big lake.” “A big hill.” “A small mountain.” What if anything do these adjectives tell us about the size?

“An azure blue sky” versus “A cloudless blue sky.” What do these adjectives tell us plainly, yet in a descriptive manner about the quality of the sky? “Cloudless” is descriptive and can reach audience members of different ages and with different concepts of color.

Translate Accurately

Do This

- Describe tangible, visible features and actions.
- Strive for objectivity.

Description Example

- “Erin smiles broadly” versus “Erin is ecstatic.” “Smiles broadly” is descriptive of the tangible visible features. “Ecstatic” is a subjective value statement.

Avoid

- Information not visually present or obvious in the larger context or content.
- Subjective adjectives that are personal judgements or impressions.
- Describing actions based on assumptions and opinions.
- Describing visual media techniques. The vantage point is what is relevant, not the media technique.

Clarification

- In a video, Civil War soldiers may be crossing a stream. You may want to name the stream they are crossing. But does a sighted audience know what that stream is? If it is obvious or stated in the narration, then it is probably ok, but be judicious about these types of additions.

Description Examples

- “A dark storm cloud” is descriptive. “A frightening storm cloud” is subjective.
- “From above, snow-covered mountain peaks” describes the vantage point versus “An aerial view of snow-covered mountain peaks,” which describes a camera technique.
- “Three hikers on a trail walk towards us,” not “Three hikers walk toward the camera.” “Towards us” conveys the information and direction, not the camera action. “Us” is the audience, not the camera.
- “Soldiers train in the sweltering hot desert.” How do we know it is hot? Is this our impression?

Stay Focused

Do This

- Because it is impractical to describe everything, select visual features relevant to the content, context and intended experience.

Description Example

- “A library brimming with books, furnishings, decorations and animal trophies.” The describer won’t be able to describe every detail within the library. “Animal trophies” may be a detail, but it also may be the detail that provides a nugget and insight into this particular library.
- Use culturally appropriate language to identify physical characteristics that are factual and to the point.

Related to Race and Ethnicity

A historical photograph from the late 1800s is of a group of Buffalo Soldiers. It is OK to include in the description that it is a group of African American soldiers. This is a known fact.

Related to Age

If the age (or age range) of the person or people is known, say it if it is relevant to the story or is an intended part of the messaging. General categories can be used, but make sure they are used accurately--children, young adults, adults, etc. Examples: When describing a portrait of Lincoln if his age is known: “A seated 50-year old Lincoln.” If the age of a person or group is unknown, but age may be a relevant detail for the messaging: “Three adults and two children.”

Related to Colors

Don’t shy away from describing color. Some people who are blind or have low vision may have had sight and know color. Regardless, color is factual information and often a critical part of the story, such as the color of a soldier’s uniform. There is no need to describe the quality of the color--i.e. “red-hot, cool blue.” Stick to basic or primary colors and adjectives, such as, “blue,” “light blue,” and “dark blue.”

Avoid

- Making the listener guess by not identifying obvious historical figures, well-known individuals, locations, items.
- Repeating visual information in the original content
- Describing irrelevant visual characteristics just because there is time and space to do so
- Using personal interests to determine what is important to describe.

Clarification

- President Lincoln is a well-recognized individual. Don't make people guess who he is by only describing his physical features.
- If the narration or text has pertinent information, don't repeat it in the description. For example, "Caption: Abraham Lincoln, Pres't U.S. Entered according to Act of Congress by Alex Gardner, in the year 1865 in the Clerk's of the District Court for the District of Columbia." The caption already provides a general timeframe and identifies the President. The description should focus on some of the details: "Black and white photo of a seated Lincoln."

Description Examples

- "A female hiker with brown curly hair and an orange raincoat walks on a trail." Stays focused and ask what is the purpose of the message? Is this a clothing company promoting its outdoor gear? Is this a video focused on safety? Is this a photograph communicating recreational activities? Based on the answer, the color and type of hair of the person may be irrelevant. The color of the hiker's raincoat might convey safety information, but it may be irrelevant if the intent is to convey weather conditions or outdoor recreation.
- "A soldier with short hair and a beard." A lot of civil war descriptions note the facial hair of the soldiers. Facial hair was a common feature. There may be other visual details that communicate more information. What is the soldier doing? Is he sitting, standing, or pointing a rifle? Is there anything about his uniform that might indicate his rank? If there aren't additional details to communicate, leave the space open. It is OK to not fill every opening with description.
- "A bouquet of flowers on a table" vs. "a bouquet of red roses, baby's breath, white carnations and purple irises on a table." Is this describer describing the flowers in detail because he or she is particularly interested in flowers? If the describer is describing the general features of a room, the details of the flowers may not be important and may take up needed time to describe other relevant components.

Structure the Information

Do This

- Establish the visual foundation (the “big picture”), then prioritize visual components and details for the listener to fill in the frame.
- Deliberately reflect on how the first descriptor establishes the emphasis of the visualization.
- Provide a consistent order throughout.

Description Examples

- “A rectangular room with a long oval table and 25 chairs around the table. A screen is at the front of the room where there is also a podium.” vs. “A podium is in the room, there is a long oval table with 25 chairs. A screen is in front of the room. The room is rectangular.”
- “A field of wildflowers in the foreground. In the distance a mountain range. A blue sky is above.” vs. “In the distance, a mountain range. A blue sky is above. A field of wildflowers in the foreground.” By focusing on the flowers first or last, this component may be interpreted to have more or less emphasis within the image.
- “From right to left,” “from top to bottom,” “coming from the east,” “heading north.” These orientations can establish an obvious and consistent order.

Avoid

- Using a consistent order or orientation when it is forced or ineffective.

Clarification

- It may generally work to describe photographs from left to right. However, one photograph may have a prominent feature in the center that merits describing first.

Limit Jargon

Do This

- Use scientific or specialized terminology when helpful or necessary.
- Use scientific or specialized terminology in conjunction with additional description so both those with and without knowledge of the term can benefit.

Description Examples

“Hidden in a tree, a sharp shooter aims his rifle. On the field an infantry soldier points his musket.” This description communicates critical component for users who have more knowledge of military history and weapons, but it can still be understood by someone with less knowledge. In addition, the weapon type is an important part of the story.

“...A swimming school of medium-sized white fish, mouths gulping. A slender, snake-like fish coiled around underwater reeds. Silvery fish with black vertical stripes. A small spotted fish snaps and eats an even smaller fish. Close-up of the eye of a fish. Scallop opening and closing its shell like a chewing mouth. A school of round, flat silvery fish. An ethereal white and translucent jellyfish with many tentacles. Floating plankton. In front of red reeds, a sea horse flexes its neck. A bulky fish with brown spots and a snout-like head crawls along the bottom on its finger-like feelers. A greyish-pink, round, flat ray, like a stingray, swimming by flapping the edges of its flat body. A blue crab with orange-tipped pincers. A glowing pink anemone with dozens of floating tentacles. A croaker, a fat grey fish, swims past.” This description is from a film sequence about underwater life off the shore of Cape Lookout National Seashore. Many species are not identified by name. In some cases the action is more important. In other cases, the species’ name is identified along with additional description.

Avoid

- Scientific or specialized terminology and acronyms that are not understood or explained by a general audience.

Be Concise But Detailed

Do This

- Include contextual details that contribute to the uniqueness of the visual.
- Give enough descriptive information for the user to ask for more description.

Description Example

“Roosevelt’s library, brimming with books, furnishings, decorations and animal trophies.” Often times descriptions must be concise, but including a few details, such as the animal trophies, provides a detail that distinguishes this library from others.

Avoid

- Being so brief that the description does not contribute to the comprehension of the content.
- Irrelevant detail that is repetitive or does not contribute to the content, context or intended experience.

Description Example

“White clouds.” Sometimes descriptions are so brief and quick they don’t add much. In addition, some images may be used as background or a transition and may not be the most critical visual component.

Production Considerations

From the beginning, remember that audio description is a part of the final product. It requires time, money and skills. Think about audio description early and often throughout the course of the production.

Budget

- Will the audio description be done in-house or contracted? Decide who will write and produce the audio description. Include these costs in your production estimate.
- Whether the audio description is produced in-house or contracted, both require time and collaboration. Allocate time for the production and reviews of the audio description.

Content

- Allow the time necessary within the product, such as a film, to insert audio description.
- Audio description is critical for filling in the important visual information, but it does not have to be the only way to convey this information. Think about how to include visually descriptive details in the original sound track or text.

Narration Delivery Considerations

For high-end media productions, such as theater-dedicated films, synthesized voices are not recommended.

If Using a Human Voice

- Use trained professionals.
- Create a complimentary tone and mood that fits the content and subject matter.
- Ensure that the audio description narration is distinct and recognizable from other narrated content.
- Avoid an overly dramatic, embellished tone that draws attention to the audio description.
- Provide phonetic information to the narrator for unique words, such as place names or scientific names.

If Using a Synthesized Voice

- Use the most realistic option available when compared to a human voice.
- Adjust spelling, spacing and punctuation to improve pronunciation and pacing for the recorded synthesized voice.