**EBU Handbook**

**for**

**High Quality Audio Description on Screen**

Front cover illustration - Cinema interior with rows of seated people seen from behind in silhouette, facing a big screen that displays the blue European Blind Union logo with The words: EBU the voice of blind and partially sighted people in Europe.

Part one

2023 Launch Edition

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Contents

[1. General Introduction 4](#_Toc136877033)

[2. Purpose of this Handbook and Summary of Content 6](#_Toc136877034)

[3. The Basic Aims of Audio Description 7](#_Toc136877035)

[4. The Essential Principles of Audio Description 8](#_Toc136877036)

[5. Understanding the Needs of Blind and Partially Sighted Audiences 9](#_Toc136877037)

[Addressing a global audience 11](#_Toc136877038)

[6. Knowing your Project 12](#_Toc136877039)

[7. Best Practice for Screen AD 13](#_Toc136877040)

[Setting the scene 14](#_Toc136877041)

[8. Correct grammar and accurate vocabulary 15](#_Toc136877042)

[Using the present tense, the definite and indefinite article 15](#_Toc136877043)

[Using possessive pronouns or determiners 18](#_Toc136877044)

[Using appropriate, accurate and unambiguous vocabulary 18](#_Toc136877045)

[9. The four pillars of AD 20](#_Toc136877046)

[Pillar 1: Who is on screen - describing a character 20](#_Toc136877047)

[Naming a character or protagonist 21](#_Toc136877048)

[Physical Appearance 26](#_Toc136877049)

[Describing clothing/costume 27](#_Toc136877050)

[Describing Age, Height and Build 30](#_Toc136877051)

[Using degree adverbs or intensifiers 34](#_Toc136877052)

[Diversity 36](#_Toc136877053)

[Pillar 2: What is Happening on Screen - describing the action 42](#_Toc136877054)

[Recognising principal, secondary and non-essential activities 42](#_Toc136877055)

[Using descriptive and active verbs 47](#_Toc136877056)

[Defining non-essential details 48](#_Toc136877057)

[Giving additional information - signposting, post describing 49](#_Toc136877058)

[Not stating the obvious - letting sound effects be heard 51](#_Toc136877059)

[Using adverbs of manner - how actions are carried out 52](#_Toc136877060)

[Using active and passive verbs 55](#_Toc136877061)

[Pillar 3: Where is the action taking place - describing location 57](#_Toc136877062)

[Pillar 4: When is the action taking place - describing the moment 60](#_Toc136877063)

[10. Selecting content for AD 63](#_Toc136877064)

[11. Read more - the complete EBU Handbook 64](#_Toc136877065)

[Colofon 66](#_Toc136877066)

# 1. General Introduction

Audio description in its simplest form, is a means of explaining to a blind or partially sighted person what they are unable to see.

Since the 1980's the right for blind and low vision people to have improved access to entertainment has elevated the status of audio description (AD), alongside subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing, to the level of a professional skill, integral to television, cinema, online content, performing arts, museums and galleries and sports stadiums. The basic principles for all AD are the same, although this EBU Handbook focusses in the main on audio description for screen, which includes information videos, television and cinema releases.

AD on screen or video is a recorded commentary woven around the soundtrack of a programme or film, inserted in the available pauses between sound effects and dialogue, to describe screen action, characters, body language, gestures, locations, sound effects that are not readily identifiable and other on-screen information, necessary for the understanding of plot or narrative, that an audience with sight loss is otherwise unable to access.

It is thirty years since Audio Description (AD) was first explored as a means of providing blind and partially sighted people with better access to screen entertainment in Europe. The 1991-1994 EU funded Audetel Project, was Europe’s first in-depth research initiative into the feasibility of introducing an AD service to our screens, with input from broadcasters, organisations of the visually impaired, academic institutions and engineering bodies. After three years of consultation and experimentation with hundreds of blind and low vision participants being introduced to hours of video material, the result of the findings was compiled by Veronika Hyks into the ITC Guidance on Standards for Audio Description. This document has since served as the basis for most other guidelines that have appeared across Europe and beyond, adopted variously by broadcasters, broadcasting authorities, academic institutions, organisations of the visually impaired and more recently, global content providers.

The landscape of broadcasting has changed considerably since the 1990’s and although most guidelines that are currently available, are based on those early set of principles, the practicalities of providing audio description across the various networks, both public and commercial, and on countless new platforms have resulted in a significant dip in quality and consistency and a deviation from those sound principles in some areas of broadcasting and even infringing censorship in others. In the intervening thirty years, analogue TV has been replaced by digital and satellite TV and now increasingly online content which is harder to monitor. Anyone can produce online content, as long as it complies with current rules of acceptability, but there is no mechanism in place to monitor the standard of the AD that accompanies it, if it does at all. Broadcasters are processing ever greater volumes of audio described content but without the time or personnel to maintain the desired quality of AD. They are unable to provide adequate training, in part because there is very little quality AD training available.

Despite this expansion of content, current EBU research, including a survey to all its member organisations from 2021, indicates there are still European countries that have little or no audio description for their blind and low vision communities and the quality varies between AD producers. Many audio-describers and their employers have little or no contact with blind or partially sighted people and often miss proper training themselves, given the earlier mentioned lack of available (accredited) AD training. They follow theoretical guidelines by broadcasting authorities or individual broadcasters, without really understanding what they mean and how they need to be implemented. Many AD providers are guided by the increasing commercial imperative of how quickly an assignment is to be completed, in order to maximise revenue.

Although perhaps not every visually impaired person knows how much better an AD could have been and how much they have missed at the hands of a poorly trained describer, most do and they expect, as with any other public service, a consistently high standard of AD.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD), EU Accessibility Act and EU Web accessibility Directive, make it a legal obligation to provide accessible information, goods and services. This obligation for inclusivity extends to all art, culture, sports and leisure sectors as well. Audio description is an important tool that increases accessibility to visual information and blind and partially sighted audiences should enjoy the same high quality standard AD throughout Europe and beyond.

Successful advancement in accessibility and inclusion requires the active involvement of visually impaired people from the very beginning and throughout a project, as stressed in the UNCRPD. Nothing about us, without us.

EBU protects the rights and promotes the interests of over 30 million people with sight loss in geographical Europe. It s initiatives contribute to a more inclusive society with Equal rights and opportunities for people with sight loss to participate fully in all aspects of social, economic, cultural and political life. Its large network of national member organisations of the visually impaired from over 40 countries, brings together a wealth of knowledge and first-hand experience of blindness and partial sight and its implication on the daily life of millions of Europeans. EBU is a non-profit NGO and a trusted, valued partner in the international disability field.

# 2. Purpose of this Handbook and Summary of Content

The above illustrates that there is a need for new guidance that clearly explains what makes high quality AD and how to achieve it. The purpose of this EBU Handbook is to ensure that (trainee) describers, visually impaired editors, advisors and producers of visual content, as well as those seeking to contract audio describers, are armed with all the necessary tools to deliver the best AD possible.

In this Handbook EBU offers a set of quality standards to help those who are thinking of starting AD services, and to remind those who are regular providers of AD, that they need to review the basic principles to achieve and/or rediscover the meaning of consistent high-quality standards. Filmmakers and content providers, particularly of online short videos, are urged to do the same. As a teaching tool the Handbook is also available to universities and related institutes which offer AD training modules, as part of their (postgraduate) audio-visual curriculum.

Based on extensive, knowledgeable practical AD experience and the user perspective, the EBU Handbook makes the readers aware of visually impaired audiences needs in gaining access to visual materials. We offer constructive advice about the right and the wrong ways to approach AD and to understand what constitutes good and bad audio description. We will do this in three parts

In Part I, we explain the principles of good audio description, the correct use of grammar and vocabulary.

Part II expands on the audio descriptive principles with an analysis of broadcast AD samples to demonstrate and explain what is good, what is bad and why.

Part III is about the practical application of AD and how to use it in other disciplines. We examine the different approaches that are needed for a wide range of audio-visual content, including feature films, nature documentaries, arts programming, online short information videos, commercials, and more. We also discuss voice delivery, how to set up an AD team, and we end with tips for further reading.

The document that you are now reading is the 2023 launch edition of Part I. The complete Handbook will be available in the second half of 2023.

# 3. The Basic Aims of Audio Description

For most blind and partially sighted viewers, their experience of audio description is unsatisfactory:

* When the sound quality is muffled, too loud or there is interference.
* When a film is shown in cinemas with AD, but there is no AD on the DVD of the film or on a streaming platform.
* When the content cannot be accessed, because of an inaccessible app or webpage.
* When there is lack of information about audio described films or tv episodes.
* When there is no information available about an AD version of an information video.

Also overlapping dialogue or sound effects, saying too little or too much, stating the obvious, incorrect use of language and repetitiveness, the AD voice becoming a side show, are recurring complaints from AD users.

Audio description should be as effective as it possibly can be. It should accompany and complement the content, not draw attention to itself. What you should be hearing in a pleasing and appropriate voice is the verbal account of what is visual on screen - the on-screen story, delivered by a voiced narration. The AD should be objective but engaging. The AD should not leave the viewer confused, asking more questions than are being answered. The following should be avoided:

* Overly complex, esoteric or ambiguous words.
* Misleading, incorrect or unnecessary information.
* Inadequate knowledge of grammar and sentence construction, leading to clumsy AD.
* Needless repetition of words.
* Information overload or large gaps.
* Overt subjectivity.
* A dull, monotone voice or a voice that distracts from the narrative.

All these can cause the viewer with sight loss to lose the thread or abandon the AD or programme altogether.

This EBU Handbook highlights bad habits from the start, using real AD examples from some of the major service providers. If bad habits are allowed to creep in at the onset, it is hard for describers to change their approach to AD. Most of the samples are taken from broadcast audio description, in the English language, but the principles are the same, whatever the language.

# 4. The Essential Principles of Audio Description

AD is unlike any other form of creative writing. A screenplay often gives detailed descriptions of scenes, of character motivations, of the dramatis personae in a story, but without any time restrictions. Novels follow their own path, according to the whim of the writer and non-fiction textbooks offer whatever detailed and precise facts are needed. AD, which translates what is visual into words, is creative writing, but its scope is restricted by the time available to insert a description and the content is in response to what is on screen, on stage or on display.

AD for screen must not overlap dialogue or important sound effects, so the time to insert AD is considerably curtailed. Nevertheless, the AD must make sense and deliver a linear narrative to ensure that viewers have the information they need about characters, plots and visual details. AD in theatre and at other live performances offers the visually impaired patron an additional introduction, which precedes the live performance. This brief introduction sets out the background to the piece, gives details of the characters and cast, the settings and scene changes. The AD is then inserted in the gaps between dialogue and sound effects as the performance proceeds. AD for works of art in museums suffers no particular time restrictions, other than the duration of a guided/audio tour or presentation. A describer or a curator with knowledge of what a visitor with sight loss requires, can describe as much or as little of a work of art as the object demands, with no strict time limit.

There are many ways to write a good description, unlike mathematics, there is not one correct solution. The focus of this Handbook is to eliminate the ways of getting it wrong. Coherence, clarity, simplicity and judgement are four essential qualities needed to craft an effective description. Familiarity with and comprehension of the content and an in-depth knowledge of what blind and partially sighted viewers require, are the basic starting points for all AD, as is working with a visually impaired adviser or editor.

The concept of less is more, does not mean under-describing or giving infrequent AD, leaving long gaps of silence. It means reducing non-essential detail. Understanding what to include and what to omit, is one of the most challenging aspects of audio description.

# 5. Understanding the Needs of Blind and Partially Sighted Audiences

A fundamental requirement for every audio describer is to know the target audience. Whom am I addressing? Who will benefit from this AD? AD is targeted at people with sight loss, but benefits many mor, as research shows. Given the many levels and variations of blindness and low vision, AD has to cater for a wide spectrum of sight difficulty. A person who is born blind has a different reaction to the detail given in an AD from someone who has progressively lost their sight in their lifetime or who has residual vision (low vision/partial sight). Their needs may also change over time, as degrees of sight change or worsen. The experience of people whose visual impairment has occurred through a progressive degeneration of sight, accompanied by a visual memory, is quite different from those who were born without sight and who have no visual memory to draw upon.

In an ideal world, there would be several versions of AD to satisfy the needs of all these categories of sight loss, but that is unfortunately not a practical solution. We need to satisfy as many blind and partially sighted audiences as possible, keeping in mind that some details, though not helpful to some, will be essential to many others. The knowledge that a small percentage of the audience have never had sight, whereas the vast majority have become blind or partially sighted over several years, requires sensitivity on several levels.

The use of similes for example, has to be handled carefully. There are accepted expressions in the sighted world, to describe human features, such as in English a brush moustache; door-stopper beard; ghoulish demeanour, an hour-glass figure; a snake hipped singer, which someone blind from birth should be able to comprehend, once it has been explained. More examples: He picks up the melon sized ball. The table by the door is at knee-height. The chest high wall. The puppy, no bigger than a loaf of bread, wriggles in his arms. He dances like a demented chicken.

Using real people to make a comparison may not be as helpful. We cannot assume everyone will understand the references: She swings her Marilyn Monroe curves; the cowboy sports a Fu Man Chu moustache; the school teacher has a Trump-like thatch of yellow hair.  
Similes should enhance description, not distract from it.

Describing colour is a frequent subject of debate. To someone born blind, colour of hair, eyes and clothing, may seem irrelevant, but testimonies from many blind and partially sighted AD users confirm that colours can offer important information. Apart from helping viewers with low vision to identify characters and objects, it adds flavour to the images that the audience creates in their mind. Colour can also carry the additional significance given to it by the film maker or content producer, using the associations we all have with colour. Examples:

Red is fiery and hot, the colour of heat. A symbol of love and passion. Red cheeks can denote a healthy complexion or a fever or painful embarrassment. Red is the colour of blood with all its associations. A woman in a red dress, is asking to be noticed.

Blue is melancholy and cold. The colour of the sea and the sky on a sunny day. It is often used as a royal colour.

Yellow, the colour of the sun, denotes warmth, flames crackling on a fire, a sheaf of wheat, ripe and ready for harvest. It is also associated with cowardice.

Green is bright, fresh, the colour of renewal of foliage, grass and spring. One of the central bands of the Irish and Italian flags to name but two.

White is the colour of purity. In European culture brides wear white, in other cultures it is the colour of mourning. White and black correspond to light and dark.

Black is the colour of mourning, evil, menace, the abyss. It is the colour of coal, of a raven, a crow, the hair of a geisha; the clothes worn by members of an orchestra or cool and hip.

Colours can be further enhanced by adding adjectives to make the meaning crystal clear: ice-cold blue eyes, chestnut brown hair, platinum blond, pale gold, deep purple, baroque green, jungle green. These are all nuances of colour and can serve a useful purpose if associated with the context. Describers need to understand the context of colour and when it is helpful to mention it and when to omit it. In the middle of an action sequence, it may be distracting if the AD suddenly refers to a brown coat or pink leggings.

To recap, there are three main reasons why EBU recommends that colour should be included:

For someone who has been blind from birth, colours can say a lot about the person or character or object on the screen, even if we comprehend the meaning of colour intellectually, rather than literally. For people who have residual vision, the description of colours is a welcome detail and brings richness to the picture that those with visual memory create in their minds with AD. The more detail that is given, the easier it will be for the viewer with sight loss, to build up a picture of a character.

Secondly, including colour in the AD is a means of guiding the eyes of people with low vision around the screen. This is called guided looking. If a character is identified with black hair and another as blond or as wearing a red coat or a green jacket, those spots of colours will be discernible to many, giving a sense of where the objects or characters are in relation to each other.

Thirdly, primary colours have meaning and significance which content producers/artists may use deliberately to add nuance and richness to their content. The associations and significance will vary between countries and cultures.

There needs to be a reason to mention colour, at a particular point, not just because it is there. If one feature of clothing is described, then why not the rest? Singling out one person or object creates an expectation which may or may not be justified within the context of the piece. Judging what is relevant and necessary and what is best omitted, is one of the most challenging aspects of audio description. and we return to it throughout this document as well as to the relevance of working together with a visually impaired advisor or editor.

## Addressing a global audience

Although AD is a digital press button option for many television and digital platform users, there is currently no monitoring service to indicate how many viewers use AD, let alone who they are or indeed how the AD is rated. Understanding the various degrees of sight loss is essential but in the global world of communication, knowing who your audience is, is becoming more difficult. In Europe, some broadcast AD service may be catering exclusively for a local community where both describer and viewer share a commonality of experience. The AD can reflect that, in the use of language or even local dialect. The local colour described in the AD, may include local places, monuments, dress, festivals, special tools and of course food. For example, an Irish soap opera set in Dublin can introduce landmarks and geographic detail that will be recognised by its local audience but to someone not from the area, those details could be a meaningless distraction. This is the core of the problem that arises out of the global world of broadcasting and online AV material, where content is available anywhere and anytime in any number of languages. Much of today's AD is speaking to an unknown, world- wide audience. With streaming services widening their reach, many audio-describers are writing for a global audience, having to simplify details they would normally like to add, so that programming can be translated and localised and sold world-wide.

On the global platform, there is currently virtually no contact between AD providers, content producers and audiences, which explains why AD standards have been allowed to drop. Sometimes, the only source of feedback for audio describers are social media platforms where users discuss AD amongst themselves.

One important conclusion, after three decades of audio description, is that there will always be differences of opinion. The reactions of people with different degrees of sight loss are as varied as those of a sighted audience. All we can do is stick to the well-trodden path of providing the best AD we can. Consulting with and involving visually impaired AD advisers/editors from the onset, provides necessary input and feedback in the process of creating AD.

# 6. Knowing your Project

The approach to every new piece of content is to ask yourself what you are looking at, starting with the bigger picture first and then the detail. You need to familiarise yourself with the content, not just describing what appears on screen at a given moment, without taking time to find out what the overall project is about. The more you know, the more intelligently you will approach the AD. It is also important to remember that even with a well-studied set of rules or guidelines, there will always be exceptions to those rules.

Audio describers should not use guesswork. You should start from a position of knowledge. EBU stresses that describers make use of all the information available. There is no single approach; each project has to be handled with a fresh pair of eyes. You should not embark on the journey without knowing its destination. You need to be as informed about the content as much as you possibly can. You need to be accurate. You also need to remember the purpose of AD and if the information you are giving is relevant to the story, interesting, or perhaps already available to the viewer with sight loss and therefore unnecessary. Many working audio-describers seem to think their job is simply to ‘say what they see’ on screen or stage, without considering whether it is necessary or relevant.

In a dialogue-heavy piece, the focus is on what is being said and the insertion of, for example, “he stops, she stares, he looks at her, she blinks” etc are all interruptions to the flow of the dialogue. However, if a verb is strengthened by an adverb or phrase, it takes on more significance:

He stops abruptly, she stares in horror, he looks at her in dismay, she blinks nervously.

To those who argue that adverbs are interpretative, EBU maintains that adverbs are descriptive and helpful, if accurately selected. The problem with a lot of description is not that it is interpretative, but simply inaccurate.

Although these EBU standards cover a wide range of screen genre, it is drama which best encompasses all the principles of AD. Understanding what elements come together to make a drama and most particularly film drama, should help the audio describer stay within the tram-lines of what the AD needs to achieve. The AD should sound as close to your natural writing/reading style as possible and it should blend with the tone of the content.

# 7. Best Practice for Screen AD

AD should feature the most relevant and important actions/elements of a scene. It should avoid over or under description and always allow for dialogue, sound effects, music and intentional silence. The dialogue and the manner in which it is delivered are the drivers of any screen story. This is accompanied by non-verbal sounds like sighs, laughs, or sobs. There are sound effects - doors slamming, engines revving, phones ringing, water tinkling, children playing, dogs barking, police sirens blaring etc. The musical accompaniment or score reinforces the emotional tone of a scene. All these elements are available to a visually impaired audience, to a greater or lesser degree. The cinematography which gives the programme/film its look and the actions that take place, are the domain of the AD.

However, the AD should not be a transcript of everything that is on screen. Many describers feel the need or are told to fill every second of time available to them regardless of whether the information they are giving enhances the knowledge, understanding or enjoyment of “watching” the content. People often forget that someone with little or no vision has to concentrate hard to absorb all the voices they are hearing. Information overload can be exhausting. In addition, a substantial block of time, without dialogue, does not mean that there are no sounds at all and this is a common mistake among describers. The sound effects and score complement the action taking place on screen.

In a scene where a person unlocks his door, enters his apartment, tosses down his keys and turns on a light, the action is punctuated by relevant and audible sound effects: the unlocking and opening of the door, the keys landing on a surface and the switching on of a light. All of these sounds should be heard, because they complement the feel of the scene and allow the viewer with sight loss to form a picture in their own minds. In certain situations, all these details of each action might seem like overwriting. It all depends how well the AD sits with the programme output. The only time the AD can be allowed to overlap speech is if the dialogue is incidental, such as crowd chatter.

Noisy and action-packed content requires more concentration than a contemplative piece. The mind can only assimilate so much external stimulus. Too much AD can add to this discomfort. The concept of less is more, does not mean under describing, or leaving long silent gaps. It means reducing non-essential detail.

The skill lies in distinguishing what is or is not relevant or important information. This should not be at the whim of an individual describer but an objectively considered decision based on experience, knowledge of the needs of people who are blind or have low vision and understanding of the plot and/or context.

Constructing solid AD

Describing who and what is on screen, where and when, are the pillars with which you build a solid AD. They come together to form the whole picture, but the Who and the What are most closely linked. Who is doing what? What is happening at this moment? These questions cannot be answered without bringing in the first three absolute rules of good AD: the use of the present tense and the use of the definite and indefinite article ‘the’ and ‘a’, and of appropriate, accurate and unambiguous vocabulary, which underpins all audio description.

## Setting the scene

The AD should set the scene as far as is possible, telling the viewer what is happening in the moment. Sometimes we begin with who is on screen, rather than with what is happening. At other times, we begin with a time and a place, the where and the when. Sometimes an action or event is taking place and we don't know who the protagonist is. There may not be an obvious one. There is no prescribed order of preference. Similarly, it is not always possible to know immediately where an action/scene is taking place or what is happening or what an object may be, particularly if the intention of the film maker/video producer is to keep us guessing.

As mentioned earlier, a describer should try to find out as much as they can about the on-screen content. This may mean having direct contact with the programme maker or project manager or searching online for any information available. In most cases, post production scripts can be accessed. The audio describer needs to know the context of what is on screen. If the content is about a particular skill or craft or an historical setting, some reading around the subject never goes amiss. The AD needs to reflect knowledge or accurate information. If access to further information is unavailable, most of the time, you will find the answers you need by watching the content in its entirety. Above all, a describer should not use guesswork. If you really do not know what, where, when something is happening, it is better to omit it altogether, rather than give inaccurate information.

Who/What, may be a person, but it could just as well be an animal, an inanimate object, a landscape, a visual effect or a sound. In that case, Who becomes the pronoun What. Who or What is on screen should not be confused with What is going on, with the action. We explore the action in detail in a later section.

# 8. Correct grammar and accurate vocabulary

## Using the present tense, the definite and indefinite article

Whether we are describing who is on screen, what they are doing, where they are and when, we use the present tense in its many forms and the definite and indefinite article to clarify. As the following examples demonstrate, the use of the definite and indefinite article, the/a/some, is helpful as a means of clarification, but must be correctly used. If we cannot immediately identify the gender or identity of a person, we can begin with ‘a figure/ someone’:

In the gloom of the unlit house, a figure appears at the top of the stairs. Someone is standing at the bottom of the stairs.

We use the definite article ‘the’, if the location, house or dwelling has already been introduced. If that is the case, we can assume that stairs are a regular feature and so we use the definite article.

If we do not know the location, because it has been deliberately kept undisclosed, we say:

A figure appears at the top of “some” stairs. Or: A figure/someone appears at the top of a staircase leading down to a hall.

The location is unfamiliar, perhaps introducing an air of suspense. There may be more than one staircase, so we use the indefinite article “a".

But: a figure appears on the brow of a hill. Why do we use the definite article here? Because the brow of a hill is a figure of speech, as are these other examples:

He rides the crest of a wave. He climbs to the top of a hill. He clambers to the top of a church tower.

The choice of the word "figure" is particularly useful when describing someone in a thriller, where it is essential not to divulge the gender or identity of the person until the appropriate moment. When a somebody or something is unknown, we use the indefinite article "a" or “an". For example:

A man walks into an office building, where a female receptionist is busy on the telephone. The man glances behind him as he approaches her.

Note: once the man has been introduced, the definite article is used. However: a receptionist is busy on THE telephone. Here we use the definite article, because the telephone is an accepted concept (Am Telefon, au telephone, al telèfono). You would only use the indefinite article if the setting were a large property with several telephones.

The housekeeper walks across the hallway and picks up a telephone.

One hallway, but one of several telephones. If we know nothing about a setting, when a phone is heard ringing, we simply say: A/The woman picks up the phone.

The choice of definite or indefinite article depends on whether we have already been introduced to a person or a place. Other examples of rules and exceptions:

He goes to the fridge.

Most homes only have one fridge. But if we say:

She goes down to the basement and peers into a fridge.

The assumption is that there are several fridges in the house, though only one basement. An industrial kitchen will have several fridges.

What is the difference between:

He sits down on the bed.

He sits down on a bed.

In a bedroom, we assume there is one bed, unless otherwise stated.

He comes into the motel room and sits down on one of the two beds; He sits down on the bed nearest the window.

The implication is that there is more than one bed.

In an unfamiliar setting: He sits down on a bed set against a wall.

The definite article ‘the’ is used widely in a familiar domestic context: the washing machine, the bathroom, the jacuzzi, the cellar, the attic, the garden, the garage, the garden path, the basement, the mezzanine. The assumption is that there is only one of these in a particular location. By contrast, if we say:

He comes into a ballroom and sits down at a piano.

This implies that both the ballroom and the piano are unfamiliar.

He comes into/enters the ballroom and sits down at the piano.

This suggests that we are already familiar with the property. Some more examples:

He sees a large rickety house on three floors, at the end of a long drive. He walks towards it and climbs up onto the porch.

In most cases, a house only has one porch, like the fridge or the basement. However, the same house may have several balconies:

He approaches the house and sees a woman standing on a balcony.

Until a particular door has been identified, we say: He goes through a door; He approaches a door.

He goes through the door: using the definite article immediately creates a question, what door?

Unless we have already been introduced to the door, in which case the definite article is correct.

He opens the door to a bedroom.

In a reality series about house-hunting, the presenter (we know who it is) is showing the viewer and a potential buyer around a property, going from one room to another. He is opening one door after another, so here again we use the definite article:

He opens the door to the kitchen.

There are several bedrooms but only one kitchen.

These are subtle distinctions, but understanding the differences is part of creating coherent AD. AD is about plain speaking on the one hand, but also understanding nuance. We must not mislead the viewer by using the wrong word. Misuse of the definite or indefinite article can send the viewer in the wrong direction and the thread of the narrative can be lost.

She is ferried ashore in a small motor launch. (Time passes)

Later, she sits at the back of the launch, after her full day, enjoying the breeze and the afternoon sunshine. She looks up at a gull, flying overhead.

Good description uses all the tools that grammar can offer to create a clear picture.

## Using possessive pronouns or determiners

In addition to the definite and indefinite article, the possessive pronouns or determiners his/her/their add clarity to a description, but must be used correctly.

He pulls a wallet from his back pocket.

He pulls his wallet from his back pocket.

The back pocket is self-evident in both sentences, it is not anyone else’s pocket but his own.

He pulls out a wallet is a statement of fact, but one that we may not have anticipated. The wallet could belong to the person or not. If he pulls out HIS wallet, we may have already seen it before and it certainly is his wallet. Again it is quite a subtle difference, but there is a difference.

Describers may say that X gets out of HIS car, when we know that X has just stolen or borrowed it, so it is not his car. It should be: He gets out of the car.

Her slender clasped hand propping up her chin, she looks up at him with a fleeting expression of hope.

## Using appropriate, accurate and unambiguous vocabulary

Every language has its grammar and its own thesaurus and one of the ways to achieve coherence and richness, is to study the verbal tone of a programme, be it a drama, documentary or actuality. EBU recommends you use all the literary tools available to you to determine the appropriate vocabulary for the context, what words to use, when and why.

We need to understand the meaning of words.

A man walks down the street. What street?

A man walks down a street. Correct, indefinite article. Which way is he going?

A man comes down a street. This means a man is coming towards the camera facing us.

A woman goes down a street. This means she is moving away from the camera.

A man crosses a street. A woman walks along a street. We don't know if they are facing us or not.

A man walks through a market.

In English, the words enter and exit are used more as stage directions, rather than narrative terms. ‘Enter’ is used for larger scale entrances:

He enters the building. He enters the office building by the back door. She enters the room with trepidation. The bride enters the church, followed by six maids of honour.

To walk, to move, to make one's way, to direct one's steps are all neutral words to convey movement, but there are so many more to express the different nuances of putting one foot in front of the other: To stroll, saunter, amble, trudge, plod, hike, tramp, trek, march, stride, step out, wander, ramble, tread, prowl, promenade, roam, go. To stretch one's legs, go for a walk, advance, proceed, move, go yomp, go by/on foot, travel on foot, be a pedestrian, accompany, escort, guide, show, see someone out, convoy, conduct, usher, marshal, lead, take, attend, chaperone, steer, herd, shepherd.

To take and its variations: To take hold of, grasp, grip, clasp, clutch, grab, remove, pull, draw, withdraw, fish for.

To look: glance, gaze, gape, peer, fix one's gaze, focus, peep, peek, take a look, watch, examine, study, inspect, scan, scrutinise, survey, check, contemplate, consider, observe, view, pay attention to, take note of, mark, check out, glimpse, spot, spy, lay one's eyes on, catch sight of, eye, ogle, recce, clock, eyeball, behold, regard, consider, deem, judge, see, stare.

Nevertheless, sometimes the simplest word is all that is needed.

Though the tone of an AD should be neutral, with correct emphasis and culturally and historically precise vocabulary, it can be greatly enhanced. In addition to choosing the right word to describe the action, the describer has to find the right vocabulary to suit the tone of the content:

The two guys cruise down the streets of the city. They stop in a lay by to smoke a joint/ to take a leak/to make out.

The king and queen process along the aisle of the abbey.

Clearly different vocabulary to suit different genres.

In a period drama, a woman puts on hose or stockings, but not tights. Men wear breeches more often than trousers.

A dress can be a ballgown, a crinoline, a pinafore, mini skirt, floor length dress, a kaftan.

A dwelling can be described in many different ways. To call a building, a large house, is not wrong, but it can be so much more, be it contemporary, period or futuristic: Mansion, chateau, castle, substantial residence, sprawling property, thatched Elizabethan cottage, a high rise apartment block, a gleaming steel and glass tower, a villa, a low rise prefabricated home, caravan, mobile home, hut, cabin, a tenement building, a red brick institution, a ranch, a farmhouse, a spaceship.

Inside a house: hallway, corridor, vestibule, lobby, ante-chamber; staircase, steps; living room, sitting room, lounge, reception room; bedroom, bedchamber.

A moving vehicle: a car, automobile, hatchback, sports car, convertible, limousine, carriage, 4 by 4, SUV, cart, hansom cab, taxi, phaeton, horse drawn carriage, buggy, bus, coach, tram, stagecoach, van, truck, lorry, bicycle, tandem, tricycle, scooter, motor bike, motorcycle, quad, bike, skateboard, snowboard. A horse can be a mount, steed, steeplechaser, pony, stallion, colt, racehorse.

There are many items in a toolbox: screwdriver, spanner, hammer, pliers, axe, spade, shovel, trowel, clippers, shears. The AD should be as specific as possible. If a tool or object is unidentifiable, a generic word can be used.

It is important to select the correct word, but not one that is so obscure as to cause the viewer to ponder and lose the thread of the narrative. Clarity and simplicity and accuracy are the keys to good AD.

The main rule is to be clear and accurate and precise even in the smallest detail.

# 9. The four pillars of AD

## Pillar 1: Who is on screen - describing a character

The first task is to introduce the protagonist and put them into a setting as soon as possible, even though it may not always be evident the first time we meet them. Sometimes the setting is mysterious or fantastical, at other times it is familiar, but how it is introduced is crucial to the audience’s immediate comprehension. How well the first few moments of a programme or video are described, can determine if the blind or partially sighted viewer will stay with it or not. A sighted viewer uses all their senses to get the gist of what is happening, those with no or low vision cannot.

You should try to give the unknown figure or person an identity with a thumbnail sketch of their appearance if the name is not forthcoming. Example:

A slim, grey-haired man in a trilby and raincoat crosses a road (An image of a middle aged man immediately takes shape).

The AD continues: A uniformed officer standing outside a police station, greets the man as he approaches. (Dialogue) Good morning Detective. The grey-haired detective nods in response and goes inside, taking off his hat.

The repetition of “grey haired” and the hat reinforces that the man is the detective who is entering the police station.

Visually impaired viewers should have no doubts about the identity of a given person. Once the man is identified as a detective, he no longer needs to be referred to as ‘the man’ and if he is identified by name, as in this case, Detective Martin, the name or his title can be alternated with the pronoun ‘he’, to create a more harmonious, naturalistic sentence.

## Naming a character or protagonist

Very often, the first time a character's name is heard on screen, it is introduced by another character. Given that some viewers may not have perfect hearing and could mis-hear the name the first time the AD refers to that character, the proper name should be reiterated, so that it and their voice can immediately be associated with each other. The AD must ensure that the name has been heard and registered. A frequent wrong assumption made by some describers, is that the audience knows who is on screen and can remember everything about the characters, as they have been told.

In a TV series with familiar characters, episodes often launch straight into dialogue or into a recap. Some AD users may recognise voices, but many will not. A sighted viewer has the benefit of visual recognition as well as the aural, but a person with no or low vision may need to be reminded.

A description should not begin with the pronouns he/she/they. We cannot assume the viewer with sight loss will know the identity of the he or she or they. The name of the characters must be given. This is not just guidance, it is a rule of good practice. However, once the name has been established, it does not need to be tediously repeated. Many describers make the mistake of not understanding when to use the proper name and when it becomes superfluous and repetitious.

In a scene featuring only one person, once the name has been given, it only needs to be repeated when a second person appears or an event occurs that interrupts the narrative. Note the varied use of the definite and indefinite articles and pronouns in the following AD:

Bond slips through the half open door and peers down the hallway towards the kitchen. Removing his gun belt, he places it on a side table and starts rifling through a desk drawer. He looks towards the sound coming from the room above, grabs his gun and tiptoes towards the bottom of the stairs. A young blond female appears on the landing and Bond’s face lights up in wry surprise.

Sometimes, all we can glean from a character’s appearance is what they are doing, not necessarily who they are. If it is clear that they are a pump attendant or a traffic cop, that information is more useful than knowing their name, which may have no bearing on the rest of the piece and may never be heard again. A blind or partially sighted viewer has to assimilate so many details, particularly at the start of a TV programme/film/video. It is therefore important to reduce secondary or unnecessary information where appropriate. Naming somebody once, serves no useful purpose if they only make one appearance, but indicating their function in a narrative does:

A middle-aged woman in overalls is sweeping a pavement. Across the way, a bearded stallholder is setting out his wares. The street cleaner gives him a cheery wave and he waves back to her.

A simple, clear, coherent description. It may or may not have, a bearing on the rest of the narrative, but it sets the scene.

If the name of the main protagonist is deliberately withheld, you need to find a way of maintaining the mystery, but not endlessly repeating ‘the man, the woman, the figure’.

Even if the describer knows the name of a character, but the intention is to leave the viewer in the dark for plot purposes, the describer must resist the temptation to name the character. If the role of a character can be revealed on an unforced manner, so much the better. Example:

A tall, heavy-set man in a farmer’s smock, sets off down a village street towards a small thatched cottage set back from the road. A little girl scampers out of the front door and starts towards him. (Sound effects and dialogue: Papa! Papa!) The AD continues: With a wide grin, the child’s father scoops her up in his arms.

Thereafter, he can be referred to as ‘the father’ until we learn his name.

Feature films tend to be more enigmatic and take time to set up their scenarios, but in some series/films/video content it is useful to introduce the names at the start. It might be a romantic comedy or a documentary or an infomercial, where the audience does not need to spend time speculating about them. It is all about the story or the subject under discussion. Examples of instant introductions:

Michelle and Mike, a young couple in their twenties, walk up the path of their brand-new house.

Joanna Phelps, a mechanical engineer, talks to the camera.

Presenter Ingrid Nielsen.

Minister for the Environment, Lars Jonsson.

It is easier for new characters to be defined by the roles that they play, the jobs they have or their relationship to each other. The given names of minor characters are less important. Even though the name of a character has been heard, the describer should not assume that it need not be repeated from time to time. A visually impaired viewer relies on the sound of people's voices to recognise them and an occasional reinforcement of the name can be helpful. Similar good practice is to reinforce the proper name or title with the function that a person plays in the narrative. Viewers with reduced or no vision are following all the aural clues that are available through the musical soundtrack, sound effects and dialogue. The AD should ease the comprehension of the narrative, without adding complications.

In more complex scenarios with foreign names or a large number of characters, an occasional thumb

nail reminder can be useful: Miss Cheng, the school mistress; John Brown rounds on his daughter Jenny.

However, proper names should not be overused. Some guidelines are misleading in this respect. Instead of over repeating the name, a helpful tip is to alternate between the person’s name, their role or their relationship to other characters: Golda Meir, the prime minister, turns to her chief of staff. Dialogue: Dado, what is the situation? Dado shakes his head, as he consults the chart.

As her husband enters the room, Diana looks at him imploringly. Charles doesn’t react.

The following is an example of repetition and lack of coherence, from a broadcast audio description:

A car comes down a winding road. The car leaves a cloud of dust. The car stops near a house. Maria walks around the car towards a fence. Maria sees her father at the entrance of the house. Maria waves to him. Her father greets her. Her father smiles. Maria walks towards him. Maria and her father hug.

This paragraph shows no understanding of a narrative flow. It is jerky and overly wordy. Names are repeated in no coherent order. (We also don't know if Maria is the driver and do we hear her getting out of the car and what is the significance of the fence? The description needs to flow, bearing in mind that sound effects are already clear indications of given actions. AD should sound as natural as possible. The re-worked AD might look like this:

(sound effect of car) A black car comes down a winding road, leaving a cloud of dust behind it. (Sound effect of car stopping) It stops near a hacienda-style house. Maria, behind the wheel, sees her father at the front door and waves to him. He greets her with a big smile. (sound effect of car door opening) She walks towards him and they hug warmly.

Similarly, the repetition of noun + verb should also be avoided:

John sits down at the table. John picks up some toast from a bread basket. John puts it on a plate and realises he has forgotten something. John goes to the fridge and takes out a butter dish. He sits down. John starts to butter his toast. He sees his wife in the doorway and John looks up with a warm smile.

This is wordy, repetitive with an incoherent use of the proper name and lacking the flow of a narrative.

The use of the present participle adds variety to a sentence, see more in the section on use of verbs. This is how it can be applied to the same scene, although itis rare that a description requires this much mundane detail:

John sits down at the table and reaches for a slice of toast from the bread basket. Putting it on his plate, he realises he’s forgotten something. Crossing to the fridge, he brings out a butter dish. Sitting back down at the table, he looks up to see his wife standing in the doorway. Putting down his butter knife, he gives her a warm smile.

Starting a sentence with a relative clause using the present participle, also brings variety to the description. As above, once a character has been identified, there is no need to repeat it. You should repeat a proper name if another person becomes the subject. In the above sequence, the wife standing in a doorway is whom John sees. He is still the subject of the sentence.

Note: Where there is only one person on screen who has been named, the pronoun he/she/they should be used. The description should sound as natural as possible.

Once the name of the person is known, the focus shifts to what the person is doing or what is happening. When a second or third person appears in the narrative, the proper name should be repeated. This is particularly important, when an action involving two people takes place. For example:

Mary and Beth are sitting by the window, Mary combing her hair.

We need to be sure who is combing whose hair:

Mary and Beth are sitting by the window and Mary is combing her younger sister’s hair.

This is clear. One pronoun refers to the relationship between them, the other to the hair. More examples:

Mike sees Tom coming towards him. He waves at his old school friend.

Who waves? Adding the word “and’ solves the problem:

Mike sees Tom coming towards him and he waves at his old school friend. Or: Mike sees Tom coming towards him, waving at him.

Here there is no doubt who is doing the waving. Another example:

Tom passes Mike a bowl of noodles and he goes off to find a table.

Who does what? If the description is recorded by a live voice, the pronoun ‘he’ can be stressed to make it clear who is carrying out the action.

Tom passes Mike a bowl of noodles, which he carefully places onto a tray and goes off to find a table.

The relative clause confirms that it is Mike who goes off to find a table.

Every description has to be judged individually. This is what you should not write:

Tom passes Mike a plate of food, who goes off to find a table.

This is a common grammatical mistake in the English language, where the function of the subject and the object in a sentence is misunderstood. The plate of food does not go off and find a table.

Another example:

He picks up a photograph of his father in a frame, who is smiling happily.

The frame is not smiling. The “he” is the subject and he is smiling. It is crucial to understand word order and how its use or misuse can change the meaning of a sentence.

He picks up a framed photo of his smiling father.

Smiling happily, he picks up a framed photo of his father.

He picks up a framed photo of his (cheery looking) father and smiles at it fondly.

A person or main protagonist should be named as soon as possible; the name should be alternated with the pronouns ‘he/she/they’. It should not be overused, but if it is introduced by someone on screen, the AD should repeat the name the first time that person is described, in case it was not heard or understood by the visually impaired viewer. It should not be introduced too early if the plot relies on their anonymity.

Never begin a description with he/she or they. The audience may not know who they are.

## Physical Appearance

Most guidelines agree that AD should prioritise an individual’s appearance, addressing their most significant physical characteristics, such as skin colour, hair, build, height, age and clothing. These details bring richness to the AD, particularly in period pieces or unusual settings. In a contemporary setting, the colour of a tracksuit top may sometimes seem irrelevant, unless it is white and covered in blood. If time allows, it is helpful to mention the colour characters are wearing or the colour of their hair, to help viewers with sight loss identify them more easily in their minds and on screen (See above in section 5).

The AD should incorporate physical descriptions as early as possible. Describers must recognise the right moment to insert physical description and detailed clothing description must be relevant or necessary. At all times, the describer has to piece together the reasoning behind what is on screen and decide what is important and what is not. How do we decide whom to describe? If we describe one person, what about all the rest? There is rarely time to describe everyone. Because action and plot are essential information, appearance is regarded as less essential, but much appreciated by AD users, so it is a question of adding colour and detail where possible and giving an overall flavour of appearance.

## Describing clothing/costume

A man in a green T- shirt walks into a pub.

Is it important to mention the colour of the T- shirt? It would certainly seem relevant if a man in a green T shirt walks into an Irish pub. Green is a colour often associated with Ireland, so the mention of it perhaps indicates that the man is being patriotic or he simply likes green, or just happens to have put it on without any additional meaning attached. You need to answer these questions before you incorporate the physical description.

The placing of the description of appearance and clothing is crucial. It should be as near to the beginning of a sentence as possible, if it is meant to be a simple descriptive introduction to a character but otherwise not particularly significant. However, if a man walks into a pub, in a green T-shirt, this information appearing at the end of the sentence, invites the listener to take note of the colour of the T-shirt. We would hope to find out shortly thereafter why the colour is important. For example, continuing with the same scene:

He joins a group of friends at the end of the bar, also wearing green T shirts. One of the group grins at him. (dialogue follows).

From this simple example, we can deduce they are all members of a friendship group or all of them are Irish or something similar.

The normal structure of a description is Subject + description+ action.

A man in a green T-shirt walks into a pub.

The colour as such has no dramatic relevance. It is merely descriptive.

A man in a green T-shirt walks into an Irish pub.

The colour green is associated with Ireland, so here it gains some relevance.

A man in a skimpy green T-shirt walks into a pub.

The addition of the adjective ‘skimpy’ already begins to tell a story.

A man in a blood-stained T-shirt staggers into a pub.

This is a dramatic introduction to a story.

A dark-haired guy in his 30´s in T-shirt and jeans, comes into a pub.

This indicates his age group and that he is casually dressed. The description of his clothing is wrapped into the narrative.

A dark-haired man in his 30's dressed in a smart blue suit, comes into a pub.

The man’s appearance is wrapped into the sentence as a statement of fact. If the description of clothing is placed at the end of a sentence, our response is different:

A dark-haired man in his 30’s comes into a pub, dressed in a smart blue suit.

We are immediately alerted to the suit. Has the man been for a job interview? Is he on the way to attend court or get married? Or is he a businessman stopping to have a drink on the way to or from work? All these questions pop into our minds when we are given descriptive information located at the end of the sentence. We all make snap judgments, based on our experience and use mental shorthand all the time. Describers must anticipate what conclusions might be drawn from a description and ensure that they are accurate.

Keep in mind, that every outfit that appears in screen drama has been designed and planned to create a picture. The AD has to select what is merely ambience and set dressing and what is key to the narrative and express it in the correct way. The describer must recognise what is relevant and significant and when to give such descriptive information. The following is an example of descriptive detail wrongly positioned

Wearing a blue coat, she climbs over a wall.

There is no connection between the colour of the coat and the act of climbing. The thoughts are unconnected. However:

Climbing over, a/the wall, she catches the hem of her smart blue coat on a jagged nail.

This description indicates that she is doing something unusual in the clothes that she is wearing. The coat “wrapped “into the sentence, becomes part of the action.

A little girl in a blue coat is climbing over a wall, is a simple clear thumbnail description of what is on screen.

The Thumbnail Sketch and Wrap Around Description®️

In Part III we look at new ways of incorporating more AD into video material. At the present time, a good way to introduce a person in a matter of a few words is the use of a thumbnail sketch which offers an instant brief image:

A dark haired besuited man in his 30's, a bespectacled woman with a suitcase; a man in a pinstripe suit; a guy wearing a military style coat over a T-shirt and jeans. A round faced, white haired old woman; a chubby toddler; a glamorous middle-aged blond; a bowlegged cowboy; a wizened native American.

How best to incorporate physical descriptions into a sentence and why word order matters.

EBU agrees that a screen character should not be introduced like a stage character or the subject of a painting. In a stage production,10-15-minute introductory notes precede a live audio-described performance and each character is fully introduced before the start of the play in a stand-alone description. Stand-alone means not part of a narrative. An example:

King Lear is a stooped man in his mid-70's. His doddery movements belie the fierce expression on his face and the piercing stare in his ice-cold eyes. When we first meet him, he is dressed in the trappings of royalty, a gilded crown on his head, encrusted with gemstones, a purple cloak around his shoulders, a copper breastplate over a cream tunic and black trousers tucked into knee high black boots.

In screen AD, given that there is little opportunity for a descriptive preamble, any physical description needs to be smoothly incorporated into the narrative, not as a stand-alone description which interrupts the flow of the narrative. This is what is called Wrap around description®️, which needs to be succinct, relevant and a part of the action. Example:

Lear, a stooped man in his 70's, wearing a bronze crown, totters unsteadily into the chamber.

Descriptive information, such as clothing, decor, appearance, should be given at the start of the description. If placed at the end of the sentence, it takes on different weight, becoming plot significant and no longer merely scene setting and descriptive. Because there is rarely time on screen to give a full description when first meeting a character, in addition to a thumbnail sketch, adding descriptive details as the film or video progresses, wrapping them into the narrative is the solution. Examples:

Anne runs her fingers through her long blond hair.

Maggie tosses back her head, her long wavy brown hair cascading down her back.

He removes his glasses and wipes them with a piece of tissue.

Painfully he gets to his feet, his arthritic hands clinging to the table.

Tears well up in her dark brown eyes.

These descriptions are all wrapped into the narrative.

Physical description is not always straight forward. In the film The Father, taken from Florian Zeller's play, the central character has increasing dementia, gradually losing his cognitive powers. The story is told as he sees the world and through our eyes. The line between what is real and what is not, becomes blurred but it is not the role of the audio describer to try to explain the anomalies, merely to present them. In this film, describing clothing and physical features and their setting is important, not because they are remarkable in themselves, but because they represent the changing reality of what the Father is seeing. We meet characters we do not recognise, yet they have the names of characters we have met, in the setting that also appears to have altered, but the AD has to remain neutral yet as detailed as it can. The AD begins:

In bright sunshine, a 45-year-old woman with short dark hair wearing a loose beige raincoat, over a blue sweater and black slacks, walks briskly along a terrace of red brick mansion flats, fronted by a long hedge.

Character and location are introduced. We do not know the woman’s name until later, and because of the film’s enigmatic nature, we hold back from identifying her. Within minutes, we learn that she is the man's daughter and eventually that her name is Anne and her husband is Paul. When other people appear, who also call themselves Anne and Paul, we need to convey differences in their clothing and hair colour to convey what the fully sighted viewer is seeing and how the father’s character sees them. The film director assists the process in part by referring to the changed Anne as Woman.

The woman calling herself Anne now has blond hair and wears a pink shirt.

This is just one example of the challenges describers are faced with. We examine altered reality and fantasy in the section on Pillar 4.

## Describing Age, Height and Build

Age

Knowing the age or approximate age of a character is crucial in building a picture of that person. A describer rarely knows the actual age of a character, unless it is given as a caption, or part of a narration or in the dialogue:

“Now that you’ve turned 16, things are going to get more interesting.”

As a rule, the describer must deduce the age of the character by the physical evidence.

A white-haired man is crossing the road: describes an elderly person. If the character’s hair is grey, but he is clearly in his thirties, the AD might need to add “prematurely” grey’, but generally we deduce the age of a character from their appearance. Describers should use recognisable age categories: a new born baby, a toddler, a little girl, a girl of 9 or 10, a prepubescent boy, a young teen, a teenager, a teenaged girl, a woman in her early 20´s, 30´s, 40´s, mid 60´s, 80´s, a man with wiry greying hair, an old man using a walking stick, comes out of his front door. Some of these categories are approximations, but readily identifiable.

EBU suggests that most narratives reveal the age of the character if it is relevant to the plot.

The AD should describe the age of the character as depicted, not the actor playing the role. There are exceptional cases where an 8-year-old actor plays a child of the same age, but often the part of a young person is played by a young looking actor who may be ten years older. In many musicals and films set in high schools, characters are often played by actors who are far older than them, in order to be able to sing the parts. Famously Judy Garland was sixteen when she played 11-year-old Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz and efforts were made by the Hollywood studios to keep her looking as young as possible.

So, as far as describing a character’s age is concerned, the AD will be specific where possible, but at other times vague of necessity.

Attractiveness

In some biopics for example, actors who play real people are frequently better looking than the actual person was/is. This, EBU contends, is not a detail that needs to be stressed, but the AD should not describe a screen character as beautiful, if the real person, they are representing was not a famous beauty. However, if beauty is itself an actor in the story, the AD need not shy away from describing a character as handsome or beautiful. If the character is meant to be attractive, the AD can draw attention to it, but the context is always important.

In most American television series, the featured actors are attractive, so that is not an aspect which needs underlining. In factual current affairs or presenter-led programming, it is regarded as inappropriate to call attention to the presenter's looks or the clothes they are wearing. Traditionally, television viewers have been used to seeing good looking people on screen, although that is beginning to change in some countries, but a newsreader's appearance, be they handsome or not, is not relevant to the content, unless a programme is satirical or comical.

In a 2022 feature film about a female politician who was famously less than handsome, the make-up designer went to great lengths to transform the actress, to look like the real woman. The AD describes her as she appeared on screen:

Her dull eyes stare out from beneath heavy dark eyebrows; a large bulbous nose protruding from her weathered sunken face. Her greying wiry hair tied back loosely in a low bun at the back of her neck.

Generally though, the age and demeanour of a character and how they behave are as relevant as their appearance.

A middle-aged female executive strides into the room in high heels.

Middle aged in the 21st century can be someone between 40 and 60.

Height

Judging a person’s height on screen is not always easy, unless they appear next to someone much taller or shorter. Characters are predominantly filmed in mid shot or close up, so their height is not the most noticeable physical characteristic. A viewer may not realise that there is a difference in height between two characters, unless one person is extremely tall.

Towering over others. Or: dwarfed by his brother-in-law. Or as in the 2022 film of Cyrano, starring Peter Dinkage, the actor´s small stature becomes the central feature of Jo Wright's adaptation of Edmond Rostand's classic story of a poetic soldier with a deformity. In this case the AD focuses on Cyrano’s lack of height. Abraham Lincoln was famously tall and in Lincoln, the biopic of his life, the cinematographer used sophisticated lighting to show the man towering over others, but that is rare.

Describing the height of a person is less than essential information, unless, as above, it is central to the narrative. Screen actors are often of average or less than average height: Paul Newman, Tom Cruise, Robert Downey Jr or Dustin Hoffman, to name but a few. If the AD points out that someone is short, that becomes a principal notion, when in most cases it has nothing to do with the drama or narrative.

A lot of films and TV drama is based on real people and events and some are closer to the truth than others. Actors are cast foremost for their acting ability and where possible with a few similar characteristics to the person being depicted. Nevertheless, on occasions the talent of an actor outweighs the necessity to be a physical match of that person. In a globally esteemed, award-winning drama, there are two famous sisters, both small in stature, depicted over seventy years and played by different actresses. In the first series, one of the sisters is played by a tall actress, in the second series, it is the other way round. Tom Cruise, has been starring in a franchise, playing a character from a novel who is just under two metres tall. Does this matter and is it a detail that the AD should mention?

The AD is describing a scenario. What is vital is that the actor performs in the spirit of the character and it is not the job of the audio describer, to break that illusion, however tempting it might sometimes be. The describer is a narrator, not a commentator.

Build

The build of a person is easier to describe and creates a strong, instant image using any one of many adjectives:

Slim, slight, wiry, scrawny, emaciated, athletic, muscle bound, rotund, bony, corpulent, stocky, broad shouldered, obese, paunchy, thin shouldered, hunched, long legged, curvaceous etc.

Each creates a strong image. Every word must be weighed up carefully to ensure that it is accurate, relevant and objective. Some adjectives are more negative than others. The AD has to select the right word for each situation.

Describing build, hair and clothing enriches a description, especially if the setting is unusual, unexpected or set in the historic past or in the imagined future. However, describers must recognise the right moment to insert physical descriptions and detailed clothing description must be relevant or necessary.

AD should avoid inserting physical descriptions in the middle of an ongoing narrative, if they have not already appeared at the start of the piece:

Bond, abseils from the helicopter, wearing cream slacks and a blue v neck sweater.

Is Bond a secret agent or a male model? The effect of describing the clothes in the middle of an exciting action sequence, makes it funny and therefore inappropriate, which should not be the intention.

How much description of clothing and appearance is the right amount?

Detailed description is rarely possible in the time available. Sometimes there is opportunity to write fully:

The crew of the rocket go about their daily chores on roller skates, dressed in sleek green body cons; their faces green with daubs of white; silver skull caps on their heads.

The Queen’s diamond tiara catches the light, as she enters the elegant room, packed with well-dressed middle aged couples quaffing champagne and chatting in small groups.

At other times the addition of one or two words of thumbnail description can suffice to give a strong image:

A well-cut suit; a filthy vest and scuffed boots; a glittering ballgown; a threadbare coat.

In modern drama, clothes are largely casual so the mention of a hoodie and jeans more than once is unnecessary, unless the clothing plays a part in the narrative. In a costume drama, there is greater scope for embellishment, but again discretion is needed and judicious decisions have to be made. In the sumptuous series Downton Abbey, there is limited space for AD, given the way the series is edited together. Decisions have to be made as to where the focus should lie. If a character is trying to look seductive or splendid for someone in the story, then there is a case for saying:

Lady Mary glides down the stairs in a dazzling off the shoulder cream and gold satin gown.

Where a character is defined by the clothes they choose to wear, like the editor of a fashion magazine, the AD should include such information, but with other characters, such details may not be as important.

Note that the AD should incorporate physical descriptions as early as possible. Breaking the narrative with a sudden detail of clothing, interrupts the flow, unless it is relevant to the plot. There is rarely time to describe everyone, so an overview is an effective solution:

Four heavily made up, mini skirted teenaged girls come through the door.

It cannot be stressed enough that there is no absolute rule. Sometimes clothing is essential information, but at other times it is not.

Some viewers find that facial demeanour and body language convey more than a dress fabric or the cut of a coat but most consider the inclusion of such details as basic to their enjoyment of a description. EBU reminds describers that people with sight loss are as varied in their tastes and needs as anyone else. The aim of the AD is to please as many people as possible, in the knowledge that it is difficult to please everyone.

**Using degree adverbs or intensifiers**

In normal conversation we frequently use modifying words, such as ‘very” and “extremely’. These are known as degree adverbs or intensifiers, because they specify the degree to which an adjective or another adverb applies. Degree adverbs include: almost, barely, entirely, highly, quite, slightly, totally, utterly, extremely, fairly, nearly. Of these, some are objectively descriptive:

The painting is hanging on the wall at a slightly crooked angle.

Her tears are barely visible.

She has almost reached the top of the hill.

The grass is nearly waist height.

However, ‘quite, utterly, extremely, fairly’, are regarded as subjective and are to be avoided. The AD should never express the audio describer´s opinion. The AD should concentrate on the physical aspects of a person, but remain neutral and objective. We do not describe a woman as ‘quite pretty’ because that sounds like a subjective assessment. There are other ways to convey or imply attractiveness, but not necessarily in terms of beauty:

Agreeable, charming, bright eyed, with an easy smile, pleasing demeanour.

Adjectives should be accurate, but not critical. They should only exist in the context of the narrative. Adjectives referring to bodyweight have to be treated with caution. Even though statistically, being overweight or obese are not unusual, an audio describer needs to use discretion when referring to a character as overweight. If describing a documentary about a real person, we should not draw attention to someone being overweight or having less than skinny ankles, because that could be construed as needless criticism and is regarded as inappropriate and unacceptable. If we are describing a fictional character, then we are in safer territory because how we see that character is how a writer, director or a costume designer has intended them to be. A decision has been made that they should be tubby. If a dramatic part calls for it then that is a different matter.

In the smash hit British play and film, Everyone is Talking about Jamie, the central character is a 16 year old boy who wants to be a drag artist. He has bleached blond hair and wears makeup even when he is in his school uniform. His mother, who supports him in his choices, is an overweight working-class woman; the assumption being that she lives off ready meals and cheap fattening foods, which have both sustained and comforted her through life’s disappointments, but also so that she can buy her son the clothes he craves. That is the character as written and the actors chosen to play the part of the mother, are all large women.

With sensitivity governing a lot of current opinion, AD has to navigate carefully between trying to avoid causing discomfort, but equally not giving into the tendency to silence any truth of what is actually visible on screen, if it appears somewhat harsh. If an uncomfortable visual truth is there for all to see, that information should be transmitted equally to all audiences. EBU believes strongly that AD must be allowed to be truthful, otherwise truth is being censored. The exception to that and there are always exceptions, is when the material is comical or farcical. Then the same restrictions of sensitivity do not apply.

A scrawny witch with a hunched back and knobbly knees.

This is not an insult to an individual. It is the portrayal of a character in costume and make up that intentionally creates that hideous impression. The mission of AD is to relay visual information, and should not be hindered by whether or not we agree with the cliched way that some filmmakers choose to depict certain characters, in this case, a witch.

## Diversity

Disability

Increasingly people with disabilities are appearing on TV screens as broadcasters embrace inclusivity. In the event of a visually impaired person or someone small or in a wheelchair appearing on scene, the AD should reference the ‘disability’ but as with colour and gender (see below), one mention is enough, unless the disability is central to the story, then it can and will be referred to again. Examples:

The chief inspector wheels himself into the room.

People hurrying down the street, bump his wheelchair with their bags without so much as a backward glance.

If a person of small stature is made to sit at a desk that is too high for them, then that is a part of the story, highlighting the thoughtlessness or cruelty of others. The describer must use their discretion and judgement, having acquired a thorough understanding of the context.

Diversity of race and ethnicity

Self-description is becoming an important topic. How do we describe people’s ethnicity or gender? How do people wish themselves to be described? One of the ongoing developments in character AD over the last thirty years, is the way we convey ethnicity, race and gender.

Race refers to a group sharing some outward physical characteristics and some commonalities of culture and history. Ethnicity is defined as belonging to a social group with which one shares cultural, traditional, and familial bonds. Both terms are used to describe human identity, which brings to mind questions of skin colour, nationality, language, religion, cultural traditions or family ancestry. Both race and ethnicity encompass many of these descriptors and continue to be used as ways to describe human diversity. How audio description addresses this diversity in the language it uses, is currently the subject of intense debate.

When AD was first developed in Europe and the US, it was designed for society in general, but from a white, English speaking and non -disabled default position. In Japan, where AD also developed several decades ago, the default was always Japanese society.

It is safe to say that diversity was not uppermost in the minds of most film-makers and tv producers.

How should a non-white person be described to a blind and partially sighted audience? In the past, the word black was used to describe the skin colour of a non-white person, be it Caribbean or of African origin. It is still used now, but never without serious consideration.

The attitude of some practitioners insists that if the skin colour of a non- white person is described, then so must the skin colour of everyone else. Can we go on assuming that white is the default? The answer is unhelpfully yes and no. If we describe brown and black skinned people, should we not also mention the skin colour of everyone else? Individual countries will decide on this issue. In multiracial, multicultural countries, this is a matter that is continually addressed, even though the percentage of non-Caucasian people is still relatively low, compared to the rest of the population. In certain European countries the percentage of non-European citizens is lower than that. The default ethnic background in most Scandinavian, Lowland and Slavonic countries is still Caucasian, although there has been a shift and these countries are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse.

EBU believes that it would not serve the enjoyment and comprehension of people with sight loss, if all skin colours were to be listed, depending on the context. A non-Caucasian protagonist on screen should be acknowledged, particularly in drama where their participation may be central to the plot, usually they are not on screen by accident (See below).

An opposing argument in the diversity debate is that skin colour is irrelevant and should be ignored altogether. EBU believes the contrary, that by ignoring skin colour, white Europeans, who in the case of France for example, still represent 95% of the population, are contributing to the erasure of the history and existence of as many as three million non-white inhabitants if they ignore the ethnic origin of a person who appears on screen. Secondly and crucially, audio description should by no means be political and we must take care not to offend people with sight loss by denying them the visual information that everyone else has. If there are people of colour on screen, the audio description should reflect that.

Audio describers need to balance the demands of an aware society with the enjoyment that a film or TV programme or informative video should bring.

The notion of diversity continues to evolve as does what is correct and appropriate and unambiguous terminology. Although it is still the case that the main push towards diverse forms of expression and attitudinal change has come from the English-speaking world, Europe is not far behind.

Audio description should reflect what is seen on screen. Scripting styles may differ from country to country but the principles and standards should remain the same. EBU strongly believes that blind and partially sighted people should be kept informed of such changes in perception and evolution of thought. This is particularly pertinent when it comes to the description of ethnicity and race.

In an attempt to demonstrate fairness and awareness of diversity, some UK theatres producing shows with multi ethnic performers inviting their cast members to declare how they themselves identify, rather than letting the predominantly white British theatre audio describers do it. Self-descriptions vary from black, to a person of colour, non-white, brown, light brown, olive skin, African American, Afro Asian etc. However, whereas it used to be acceptable for an audio describer to introduce a beautiful slave girl as oriental, exotic, dusky with almond shaped eyes, such terms are no longer acceptable, particularly when used by someone who is not of that ethnicity.

An important step towards equality in diversity is colour blind casting or non-traditional casting where ethnicity, skin colour, body shape, sex, gender or disability are not determined by the content. This is by no means new: In 1961 Grace Bumbry became the first black singer to sing at the Bayreuth festival when she sang the role of Venus in Wagner's Tannhauser. In Ridley Scott's film Alien, all the parts were written to be unisex and became male or female depending on who was cast. Eventually Sigourney Weaver was cast as Ellen Ripley. In the 1993 remake of Dr. Doolittle, black actor Eddie Murphy was cast in the eponymous role; Miss Moneypenny in Skyfall was played by Naomi Harris, a British mixed-race actor and in the 2016 stage production of Harry Potter and the Cursed Child, Hermione Grainger was played by black actor Noma Dumezweni.

In theatre audio description, multi racial casts are always acknowledged.

In American film, conflicting debates are currently raging. Why should the AD mention the skin colour of a character if in the view of a film producer or broadcaster it is not relevant to the story? Yet at the same time, in an attempt to show their diversity credentials, following on from the #Oscars so White movement, that grew from the glaring absence of people of colour in film, many producers are doing their utmost to employ more people of colour as writers, directors, cast and production personnel. The portrayal of African Americans in “white” films did for a long time, restrict them to playing villains, mammies and maids. Alongside a genuine desire to right the wrongs of the past, there is nevertheless vehement resistance from some factions of the viewing public and the film industry. In 2018, the award-winning film “Black Panther” was a seismic success. The film depicting an entirely black kingdom featured only one white character, but it was not audio described in its first release. And when after a legal challenge was made, the film was eventually described, the choice of narrator was a British white man, which according to blind podcaster Thomas Reid, “jolted blind people out of the scene, diminishing their experience of the film”.

In the 2018 film adaptation of “A Wrinkle in Time”, from a novel by Madeleine L'Engle, contradictions abounded. It was directed by black director Ava Duvernay. The lead character Meg and her mother, who were white in the novel, are played by black actresses. The film features a dozen actors of colour, among them Oprah Winfrey and yet the film´s distributor forbade the mention of colour in the AD of the film. The same distributor demands that AD classifies everyone whose ethnicity may be from anywhere between India and Japan as ‘Asian’.

EBU is unequivocal in its response to such a policy, condemning in the strongest terms, any kind of censorship which prevents blind and partially sighted people from knowing what everyone else can see on screen. It is up to the viewing audience to decide if skin colour is relevant or not. AD bodies need to resist the growing tendency of some media corporations, to prevent viewers with sight loss, from being told the colour of a character's skin, even though it is plain for everyone else to see. Such censorship denies the importance of black skin, especially in screen content that centres on the subject of race, slavery and the history of non-white people.

When describing skin colour, EBU recommends that it should be bookmarked as a wrap-around description, as early on as possible and then not be referred to again, unless the ethnicity is central to the drama. In a mixed-race cast of a contemporary drama series, the AD can hint at a person’s ethnicity:

She brushes her long shiny black hair. He narrows his intense dark eyes. His corn-row curls glint in the sunlight. He runs his fingers through her afro hair. She smooths her olive skin.

Their ethnicity may or may not necessarily have any bearing on the story, but it is a reflection of the casting. If a story centres around race, which many do, then the AD should reflect that central conflict. The terms, black and brown skin can be used without prejudice. Visually impaired viewers pick up information not only from what the AD offers but also of course from the ambience and the sound of people’s voices. Some people speak with a foreign accent, but there are also those of diverse ethnicities, perhaps the children of immigrants who have been born in their parents’ adopted countries and who do not have a foreign accent. In that instance, the viewer with sight loss may need supplementary information.

In 2021 a popular British romantic drama series, Bridgerton, created a world in which black people rise to prominence in Regency England, a situation which is entirely fictional. Because this was such a novel conceit, the AD needed to reflect the knowingness of the casting and the deliberate plot twist. This was not enlightened casting, it was casting based on the plot. The black characters acknowledge their ethnicity. Queen Charlotte is played by a black actor, as is the highly placed society gossip Lady Danbury. The hero of the first series was a handsome black actor who made all the ladies swoon:

Her eyes widen at the sight of a tall, handsome black man in an open necked white shirt and tight dark blue breeches, coming through the door.

Gender

Given the widening definition of gender, it is essential to understand how this might impact on viewers with no or low vision. Each country will assess the situation in its own context. In many European countries, the use of traditionally male and female pronouns have been the norm, offering an essential alternative to using proper names, as explained earlier:

Mary does this, Mary does that. He talks to her. She smiles at him.

Using a non-binary term such as ‘they’ can create problems for people with sight loss, particularly the elderly who may not be as aware of adapted language to reflect changes in attitudes.

In France, the term ‘iel’ is recognised, though not yet widely used as an alternative to he and she.

In a feature film exploring lives of trans and non-binary individuals, each has to be examined on its own merits. If a character is male, but identifies as female, the audio describer has to decide which pronoun to use and when. If in a screenplay, the writer uses ’she’ rather than ‘he’, it has to be made clear to a visually impaired audience. If a character is a male transvestite, then he effectively keeps his gender, unless he expresses as part of the film that he wishes to be referred to as ‘she’. If a character is trans, the pronoun used, should identify with that person’s adopted gender.

In English, the words ‘they/their’, neither male nor female, are becoming standard. This can create a problem for blind and low vision people, when a singular verb suddenly becomes ‘plural’:

Lola comes into the room in a sequined bodycon. They look around with a wry smile on their lips.

How does a visually impaired viewer understand that a plural pronoun describes an individual? One way is to avoid using the pronoun at all, but that is just a transitory policy:

Lola comes into the room in a sequined bodycon and looks around with a wry smile.

In romance languages, it is difficult to talk about a person in a gender-neutral way. However, academics and LGBT+ activists today have already come up with ways to be gender neutral. In Spanish for example, gender-inclusive versions of ‘Latino’ and ‘Latina’ are: ‘Latinx’, ‘Latine’ or ‘Latin@’. Instead of ‘él/ella’, the word used is ‘elle’. ‘Bonito/bonita’ becomes ‘bonite’. The Dutch language does not have any official gender-neutral pronouns, although other sets of pre-existing pronouns, as well as neo pronouns have been adopted by , Non-binary people and it is becoming the standard to use the neutral ‘die/diens/hen’. The German language has developed a comprehensive set of gender-neutral expressions. ‘Mensch’, a person, becomes: Menschi. Instead of ‘Mädchen, Junge’: ‘Bub’.

In Polish, there is no standard non-gendered pronoun like ‘they’. ‘Oni’ is the third person plural masculine pronoun, used when a group has at least one male in it, or the genders of the group are unknown. ‘one’ is the third person plural non-masculine pronoun, used when a group has no male members, or for groups like young children, animals, objects or intangible concepts. There is a neuter singular pronoun ‘ono/jego’ but that can be considered dehumanising, similar to ‘it/its’ in English.

If gender specific words can be avoided, that helps to make AD more inclusive.

EBU recommends that the audio description of race, ethnicity and gender needs to be considered per country, in consultation with the relevant groups, to find what works best. On no account should describers and viewers with sight loss allow themselves to be pressured into denying what is there for all to see.

The discussion around diversity, race, ethnicity, gender and disability is ongoing and is to be continued in the next edition of this Handbook, with reference to the latest developments.

## Pillar 2: What is Happening on Screen - describing the action

Although we have already described action in the context of the protagonist under Pillar 1, this section details how we set about describing actions as they happen. We examine the use of verbs and adverbs, the present tense.

The AD should explain clearly and coherently what is happening in the moment, what action is taking place as it occurs or who is doing what. One action may follow another; a second may result from the first; two actions may happen simultaneously but are not connected. They may be of equal significance or importance, or one action may be the primary event, the other the secondary. Understanding the difference between primary and secondary actions is fundamental.

Literary coherence requires ideas in a sentence to flow smoothly from one to the next. The narrative should be linear, unless the content deliberately breaks continuity by means of flashbacks or additional non-sequential activities. Another undisputed rule requires describers to refrain from giving blow by blow descriptions of a fight or battle which are invariably accompanied by a forceful musical soundtrack and atmospheric sound effects. Many blind or partially sighted viewers cannot assimilate or tolerate such an abundance of auditory stimuli.

## Recognising principal, secondary and non-essential activities

AD should be written in the present tense, combining simple and the continuous present participle to make a more harmonious sentence and an efficient way to convey as one thing is happening, something else, that is unconnected, takes place, or as one thing is happening, something else happens at the same time, or how one action causes another action to happen. Cause and effect.

Descriptive sentences can be linked using connector words ‘as’ and/or ‘and’, other pronouns and sentence patterns. Examples:

Peter is kicking (continuous present) around a football, as his little sister steps (simple present) down into the garden.

Peter's little sister finds him kicking around a football in the garden. Kicking the football is an ongoing activity, hence the continuous present.

A man is coming down a hill towards a main road.

This describes an ongoing action, so again continuous present

A van appears from around a corner and heads straight for him.

The simple present to describe an immediate action. Another example:

Spotting a man peering through the kitchen window, Maggie picks up a knife.

The first part of the sentence involves two ongoing actions, Maggie spotting the man and the man peering in. The second part of the description is a direct consequence of the first two actions. You could also simply say:

Maggie spots a man at the kitchen window and picks up a knife.

Using the present participle at the beginning of a sentence, as in the first example, offers an alternative to always starting a description with the proper name. ‘Maggie this, Maggie that’ becomes tedious to listen to, because it breaks the flow of the narrative, it is not a natural way of speaking, yet too many describers do it.

Sometimes, two actions happen at the same time, but are not necessarily related. Such activities should not be connected with ‘as’.

Peter pours himself a coffee in the kitchen. In her garden, Mary sits down in a deck chair.

Two unrelated activities. You can sense the filmic cut between the two locations. Another example:

As Peter sits down with his coffee in the lounge, Mary takes her cup of tea, out into the garden and flops down in a deck chair.

Here the actions are linked and followed through. Peter and Mary are both in the same house. As he sits down, she leaves him in the lounge and goes out to the garden. Our focus is principally on Mary. As one thing happens, another happens at the same time and this calls for the use of ‘as’.

This next sentence is not quite as smooth because of the positioning of ‘as’:

Peter pours himself a coffee in the kitchen as Mary sits down in a deck chair in the garden.

There does not seem to be a natural link between the two activities. This is partly because the length of time it takes to perform the two activities may not be the same. Some take longer than others, so they need to be explained as such. These two activities are better described as follows:

Peter pours himself a cup of coffee in the kitchen and Mary sits down in a deck chair in the garden.

In this case, there are two activities going on, without any need to link them. They are purely descriptive. Whereas this next sentence uses ‘as’ again to link the activities:

As Peter pours himself a cup of coffee in the kitchen, Mary unfolds a deck chair in the garden.

‘As/and’ are the default connecting words that keep the action in the present, but their use needs to be understood.

‘While’ can also be used as a linking word, but only in certain circumstances. ‘While’ refers to an activity that takes more than just a moment. We do not say:

He comes into the kitchen while Mary is preparing breakfast.

The action of coming into the kitchen is a simple quick activity, the preparation of breakfast takes more time. It is correct to say:

He comes into the kitchen and finds Mary preparing breakfast.

The main verb is find and Mary preparing breakfast is a relative clause.

He comes into the kitchen where Mary is preparing breakfast.

She is in the process of preparing breakfast. You can also say:

While Mary prepares breakfast (an ongoing activity that takes a while), he runs upstairs to fetch his school bag (an activity that also takes a while).

While his associate searches the back garden, the detective tries to force the lock.

During the time that the search is taking place, the second activity happens.

While she is getting dressed, he runs about looking for his keys.

‘While’ should not be used as an alternative to ‘as’ to describe a simple action. You should not say:

She waves at him while he shuts the door. You should say:

She waves at him as he shuts the door.

The word ‘when’ is also frequently misused as an alternative to ‘as’:

She is sitting at her desk, reading, when the door opens.

‘When’ pulls the description out of the immediate present tense. It is used in literature but not for the description of the immediate present.

We use ‘when’ to ask about the time or to refer to a particular time, but not as a linking word for an immediate action.

You might describe a scene at a railway station where a woman is pointing to a departure board and the guard is looking at his watch. It is safe to say that the woman is asking the guard when the next train is due to leave. That is what is known as reported speech or an “assumed” activity. An assumption based on the visual evidence, but not pure guesswork. Other instances where we might assume a situation or conversation, is if a snippet of a foreign language is used in a film or video. Rather than reproduce the verbatim subtitle, which can interrupt the flow, a describer can adopt the third person to precise the dialogue.

The soldier orders her to put down her case.

Many describers cannot differentiate the principal activity from the secondary one, so fail to create coherent sentences, a fundamental key to good AD. Examples:

Lee looks up, as three teenage girls stroll past him.

The girls coming past Lee, prompt him to look up.

He looks up from his book, just as three teenage girls come past.

These are two simultaneous activities. The first is not prompted by the second. They just happen at the same time. Another example:

As he comes out of his front door, a car veers around a corner

In the simple present, two events happen at the same time. One present participle, a simple verb of action, followed by the object of the verb, a car, as it performs an ongoing activity:

Coming out of his front door, he sees a car speeding down his street.

However, you cannot say the following:

Coming out of his front door, a car speeds down his street.

Who is the subject and who the object in that sentence? As written, a car appears to be coming out of the door. You can say:

As he comes out of his door, he sees the car speeding towards him.

However, you cannot say:

As the car veers around the corner, a cat sits in the garden.

This is incorrect for two reasons. As written, the cat has no relevance to what is going on. It is not part of the main narrative, unless we are already familiar with it or something involving the cat is about to happen. Is it essential information or incidental? You cannot connect an active verb with a static verb. You can connect to verbs of action:

As the car veers around a corner, a cat comes into the front garden near the road.

The AD is setting up what might happen. The cat is now a protagonist, rather than simply an added detail.

The verb to sit is often used wrongly: A cat sits or lies down-the action of sitting or lying down- in the garden. Or: a cat is sitting or lying in the garden. -a description using the present participle.

As the car veers around the corner, a cat, sitting in the garden, looks up in fright.

As one thing happens, another thing occurs as a result.

A car veering round the corner sends a cat diving into the bushes. (cause and effect)

(Sound: screech of brakes) A car veers round a corner, a cat sitting in a garden, looks up and a woman standing in her doorway, gasps.

Three things happen more or less in the same moment and there is a built-in sense of urgency if the connectors are omitted.

Other frequent grammatical mistakes which demonstrate a lack of understanding of grammar, are demonstrated in this example:

Andrew is sitting at the kitchen table and he picks up the milk jug.

The first part of the sentence is a description of a man seated at a table, using the present participle. The second is a simple action. In English, we cannot combine a verb in the continuous present, which serves as a passive description, with a verb of action. The sitting and the pouring are not linked in this first example. However, if you add a verb of action in conjunction with the descriptive present participle, the narrative flow:

Andrew is sitting at the kitchen table, reading a paper. (Pause) He reaches for the milk jug and pours the contents onto his cereal bowl.

Now we have a coherent descriptive set up: (sitting) a continuous active verb, (reading) and subsequent active verb.

Here both activities are of equal importance.

Or the sentence can be simplified:

Andrew, sitting at the kitchen table, picks up the milk jug.

However, this example poses a question:

Andrew sitting reading at the kitchen table picks up the milk jug.

Does he put the book down and pick up the jug or does he do both things at once, with one hand holding the book and one the jug? A simple illustration of how important grammar and word order are in the creation of a clear linear description.

## Using descriptive and active verbs

The verb “to sit” needs to be precise and is often used wrongly. If we say:

Peter sits at the kitchen table. Or: Anne sits on the bed.

Are these descriptions of action or setting the scene? Many describers confuse the simple present with the present participle:

Peter sits down at the table.

Clearly an action, emphasised by the addition of the word ‘down’.

Peter is sitting at the table.

A descriptive present participle, used in scene setting. Or: Peter is seated at the table.

Similarly, Anne sits on the bed.

Is she sitting onto the bed, or is she already sitting on it? This is a simple grammatical rule which is probably more significant in English than in other languages, where the rules are more prescribed and precise. Some languages use reflexive verbs and so the difference is clearer. In Spanish: Esta sentada en la mesa (She is sitting). Se sienta en la mesa (she sits down at the table). In French: Elle est assise (she is sitting down). Elle s'assoit (she sits down, using the reflexive verb). In German: Sie sitzt am Tisch (She is sitting at the table). Sie setzt sich (she sits down). In Czech: Sedi u stolu (she is sitting). Sedne si ke stolu.

Examples to summarise these grammatical differences:

She is coming downstairs and licks a lollipop.

Wrong. You cannot mix present participle with a simple present.

She is coming downstairs, licking a lollipop.

This is correct. The present participle +descriptive verb-two ongoing activities.

She comes downstairs, licking a lollipop.

Correct. Simple present + present participle: two simultaneous activities.

She is licking a lollipop as she comes downstairs.

This is also correct. Two simultaneous ongoing activities, but a little wordy.

She comes downstairs and licks a lollipop.

does not make much sense. It would make sense if there were additional information: She comes downstairs and licks the lollipop that she was holding behind her back! A more logical example:

She comes downstairs and puts on her shoes.

Two simple verbs of action.

The AD should differentiate between descriptive and active verbs.

## Defining non-essential details

One of the main comments from viewers with sight loss is that there is sometimes too much description and that too many details distract from the main story line or narrative. For example, it can be a distraction to list the make of every vehicle when a scene is taking place in a city street.

One exception to that rule would be if there were a car chase, in which case it is helpful to differentiate the vehicles:

The Ford Mustang turns sharply down a narrow street, leaving the Fiat floundering in the middle lane of the busy road. The Ford roars under a bridge etc.

Likewise, in a film set in Cuba or on the Italian Riviera in the 1930’s, it would be failing the visually impaired viewer, not to mention the make and look of the cars which belong to the classic vintage variety.

At a fairground, there is no need to describe all the rides, except if they are featured in the narrative:

They run into the busy fairground, pushing past a gang of teenagers eating hot dogs, straight into the haunted house.

The best way to define what is non-essential is to ask yourself if the main thread of the action, will become incomprehensible or lose its impact without that detail.

A traffic light turning red or green when that is not relevant to the story, what two women going into a department store are wearing, how many seagulls are flying across the sky, how many boats there are in a harbour: such details are non-essential, unless the audience needs to know in order to follow the plot. This leads us to the next section, which deals with ways in which to include details that are crucial.

## Giving additional information - signposting, post describing

It is not the role of the describer to tell the viewer more than what is on screen, but there are instances when it is helpful to add a small detail. In the case of a character entering a room whilst others are speaking, for example, the AD can say:

Anton turns to Elise, who has just come into the room.

Without that information, the viewer would have no idea whom Anton is addressing.

Similarly, when events occur which cannot be described in the actual moment, the audio describer has to find a way of anticipating the action before it happens. Example:

The family gathers round, waiting for the arrival of the birthday cake, or: ahead of the arrival of the birthday cake.

If a character in a police drama uses jargon or slang which may be unfamiliar to a listener, if time allows, a few words of explanation can be useful.

(Dialogue) You call the Yard and I’ll get SOCO over.

Without being condescending, the AD can say:

DCI Smith goes off to alert Scotland Yard, while his colleague calls the Scene of the Crime Officer.

This is being explanatory rather than repetitive. Some might say that a sighted viewer might not know those terms either, but they can see what is going on and make a guess. For visually impaired viewers, an unusual word, an unexplained sound can interrupt concentration and comprehension can easily be lost. EBU feels that a subtle helping hand where appropriate, is part of an audio describer’s remit.

However, if the description comes more than ten seconds before an event, the describer has to consider if too much time may have elapsed for it to be useful to insert the AD.

It is important to remember that AD cannot fill every gap. Some information will just have to be dropped, but better to omit than to include it in a clumsy fashion.

Most descriptions lasting one second or under can be a distraction and an annoyance to the viewer with no or low vision. Typically, one second equals three spoken words. Any AD shorter than that, is unhelpful.

Later: at home.

Michael, the priest.

he goes, she jumps.

Some describers omit the pronoun or the name and just use the verb. EBU finds that unsatisfactory.

Sign posting

Sometimes, it is necessary to set up a subsequent scene, which we call sign-posting or anticipated AD where we allow an important sound effect to be heard, rather than talk over it.

Monica approaches the doors of the school hall, clutching an axe.

This sets up what will happen next, to explain the sound of mayhem.

A simple way of ensuring a sound effect is heard, is to precede or follow with AD as closely as you can, depending where it comes in a scene.

She goes up to the front door. (Sound of knocking/doorbell, followed by a door opening.)

Her husband covers his mouth with a look of discomfort. (followed by sound of violent coughing.)

The two detectives run out to their car parked by the kerb. (Sound of huge explosion.) Glass and sheets of metal are strewn across the road, amid smoke and flames. The car is a burnt-out shell.

Signposting performs another important function which has to be handled carefully, especially in the case of a thriller. A scene begins, for example, in a farmhouse on a sunny morning. The camera moves the eye of the viewer through the front door and down the hall into a messy kitchen. The camera lingers over a sink piled with dirty crockery, then across to the table where two plates of food sit untouched next to an open toolbox. The director is subliminally alerting the viewer to the box. The describer has to incorporate it into the description, without drawing too much attention to it. Either because it might spoil the surprise of a scene of carnage that may follow, or it is pointing out a detail that will turn out to have no bearing on the action. What should be signposted and how best to do it? AD for the above scene could be:

In a cluttered country kitchen, the sink counter is piled high with dirty crockery; a toolbox spilling its contents, is sitting on the kitchen table next to two plates of food that appear to be untouched.

By placing the toolbox at the beginning of the sentence, its significance is tempered, because the listener is being encouraged to think about the two plates. This too is a subliminal technique.

Post describing

Post describing is easier to incorporate. For example, assuming that there has been constant dialogue and no reference to a forest in a conversation, with no room to describe the journey as it happens, at the first available moment, we can say:

Having trudged through the dense forest, the two children arrive at a cottage made entirely of gingerbread.

Having picked up the milk bottles from his front doorstep, George steps into the lift (the sound of bottles may have been heard).

## Not stating the obvious - letting sound effects be heard

Viewers with no or low vision often say they like to deduce situations for themselves where possible. They dislike when a recognisable sound effect is heard and is commented on in the AD:

The phone rings. He knocks on the door. He gets out of his car. She plays the piano. They start to sing. They applaud.

It is essential to let sound effects and silence speak for themselves, but the AD can confirm what has been heard if something was not crystal clear, In some circumstances:

(Sound effect of bells ringing is heard) AD: A bellringer lets go of the thick rope and wipes his brow.

(Sound effect of banging on a door) AD: A pale cheeked teenager opens the door.

Please note that some mobile phone ring tones do need explaining. Generally, nobody dials a number on their portable telephones; they make a call, they key in a number, they tap out a number. And they end the call; they do not hang up!

In a highly charged action film, it is particularly important to let the audience with sight loss immerse themselves in the full soundtrack of a battle, without trampling over it with AD. Few people can visualise a blow-by-blow battle, but they can imagine it if they hear the soundtrack.

A major bugbear is when the describer reinforces, to little effect, something that has just been said in the course of an on-screen conversation. If the script, acting, sound effects or music are clearly telling us something, the AD does not need to repeat that information. For example, in a spoken dialogue a female character says: I am so unhappy, I don’t know what I am going to do. It is unnecessary to say/add: She looks unhappy. What you can say/describe instead is: She fishes for a handkerchief. Another example:

(Dialogue) She: You are so funny! (followed by laughter). It is unnecessary to say: She bursts out laughing. Or: She looks amused.

You can say: She skips away, shaking her head.

(Dialogue) He: I’m gonna follow you and gun you down if it’s the last thing I do. It is unnecessary to say: He glares angrily.

Avoid descriptions that are surplus to requirement. Use your judgement at all times.

Another major fault is to over describe physical reactions. If the dialogue indicates a character’s feelings, we do not need to describe the expression on the character’s face, unless it is different from what might be expected. The describer should always bear in mind that less is more.

Furrowing his brow, he squints his eyes, and tilts his head.

This is an overly detailed literal description of body language which actually fails to convey the emotion behind the facial expressions the character is making.

He looks at her sceptically.

This is clear and succinct and leads us to the next section.

## Using adverbs of manner - how actions are carried out

Not only does AD convey physical actions, it can also serve to indicate the state of a person’s mind, if it is not evident from the dialogue and the tone of voice in which it is delivered. Adverbs of manner can describe the physical action and the emotion that accompanies it. However, the describer should not intervene if that information can be understood from what and how something is said.

Where there is sparse dialogue, an increasing phenomenon in feature films, an adjectival adverb or a turn of phrase that expresses emotion or a state of mind, is often useful:

He looks at her warmly. His eyes soften as he gazes at her. She eyes him coldly. He stares at her through clenched teeth. She gives a deep sigh. He looks taken aback by her penetrating stare. He eyes her fiercely. Her lips tighten as she tries to contain her anger.

A description is only as effective as the way it is expressed. It is not the function of the AD to interpret a person’s state of mind or to put thoughts into their heads directly, but adverbs of manner are descriptive and able to convey the desired emotions. A physical facial gesture or movement of the body followed by an adverb, best conveys emotion. The AD should not state categorically that a character is feeling angry or is unhappy, nor should it try to interpret a person’s feelings. The AD can say: He looks angry as he marches towards her. He looks at her angrily.

When selecting words of emotion, a describer should ensure that they have chosen the most accurate word to convey that emotion or intention.

Which of these three descriptions is correct?

She opens the fridge door intending to find something to eat.

She opens the fridge door and looks for something to eat.

She opens the fridge door with a hungry look on her face.

The first is overly interpretive: the AD is assuming knowledge of the person’s intent. The other two are correct observational descriptions, expressed in different ways.

Some words convey sudden feelings and others an ongoing state of mind. “She looks sad” is an overused description. It is a state of mind brought on by an event or inner thought. It implies that something has happened in the past, which has resulted in a state of sadness. It should not be used as an immediate, sudden emotion. The same applies to ‘happy and unhappy’. These are states of mind and rarely the correct word to use to convey a sudden emotion. There are other ways to convey happiness:

She smiles happily, she beams in delight, she gasps in pleasurable surprise, she gives him a contented smile, she looks thrilled.

There are as many ways to convey displeasure:

She looks taken aback, she bows her head despondently, a look of disappointment spreads across her face, she eyes him sullenly, her lips curl, he eyes her frostily, he recoils from her flinty eyed look, she comes towards him with a murderous glint.

Sometimes the descriptions are literal, at other times they can be idiomatic phrases and even comical, but the describer must judge if these are appropriate to the content material.

His jaw drops, her face falls, he is looking under the weather, she is looking right as rain, she cuts him dead, she shoots him a look of pure evil.

One of the most overused expression in English AD seems to be: He looks shocked. Shock is an extreme reaction, not a quotidian word. The power of the word is diminished, if overused.

‘See’ is also a regularly overused word. Consider whether ‘spots’, ‘notices’, ‘spies’, or ‘finds’ work better, or whether you can do without it at all.

She sees him coming out of the bank.

If the AD is told from a character´s point of view, we say:

She sees him coming out of the bank.

Or:

Opening his eyes, he sees the blurry image of a chubby faced boy grinning at him.

Do you use the expression `We See’? This is a question for AD users in each individual country to consider. In the US, `We See` is used frequently, arising out of a more intimate laid back theatre description approach, where their describers typically address just a handful of people, with “Hi folks, how are we today?” Some AD users feel that the expression ‘We See’ does not represent them and is thus an irritant. In Europe, AD users generally prefer a more neutral stance, especially for film and television where the relationship is between the AD user and what is on screen, without an uninvited intermediary:

The view opens out. A man is walking along a long straight road. He looks into camera. A bird’s eye view. The bus draws nearer.

The exception to this neutral stance is for some children’s content, where a more storytelling tone is adopted:

A large grey creature with long curvy tucks is coming towards us. We can almost touch him. The train is coming towards us. He turns to face us. We are flying above the clouds towards a huge yellow planet.

There is no absolute right or wrong in this case. It is a matter of preference for AD users.

## Using active and passive verbs

When describing actions, we use active and passive verbs. There is a subtle difference between:

He opens his mouth (verb of voluntary action) and

His mouth is open (descriptive) as he waits for his dentist to begin drilling.

His mouth drops open (involuntary action).

He rolls his eyes/ he gives her an eyeroll (a deliberate action to show impatience, astonishment, cynicism).

His eyes roll (this implies more of an involuntary action. Perhaps the person is falling unconscious).

We need to know the context of the AD: what happened just before this moment, how did we arrive at this point in the story or in the narrative thread. Does the present action connect to anything that has gone before?

Some verbs need adverbs of manner to clarify the way the verb is effectuated.

His eyes drop.

This is a clear enough description, conveying both the physical and the psychological.

He looks down.

This is a frequently occurring description, which should come in response to what is being said. It needs a context but is often used without explanation and therefore of little value. A character is being admonished, so he looks down in embarrassment. Or a character is looking guilty, so he looks down. Or something makes a noise by his feet, so he looks down.

The describer has to understand the intention in order for the audience to understand or benefit from the AD.

He drops his gaze (already more informative).

He averts his eyes (a deliberate movement).

‘He looks at her’ is widely overused and largely unnecessary. If the look is saying something, it should be noted, but as a general indicator of his eye-line, it is superfluous, because most people look at each other when they are talking. The debate here is between simple description and what some call interpretation.

Adverbs are objectively selected to add nuance, clarification and colour to a simple verb. They are not an individual’s interpretation, they describe a director's intention, an actor's performance, the pace of an activity.

His jaw drops (overused cliche, but clear in its intention).

His mouth opens. He shakes his head. These verbs are less clear. They may need clarifying in certain situations:

His mouth opens in astonishment. He shakes his head in dismay, in bewilderment, in disbelief, emphatically.

She looks alarmed, speechless, devastated.

A smile is one of the most frequently described facial gestures. Sometimes the dialogue indicates the type of smile, but not invariably, so a descriptive qualification may be needed:

She smiles shyly, wryly, reluctantly, hesitantly, cruelly, primly, apologetically, warmly, softly, invitingly, seductively, teasingly, coldly, sarcastically.

Where should an adverb of manner be placed?

Placing the adverb before the main verb, especially a verb of action, gives it deliberate emphasis:

He skilfully turns the key in the lock. Slowly he approaches the large wooden door. Gingerly, he steps over the pool of blood.

When the adverb is placed after the verb, it refers more to an intention than a physical action:

He watches cautiously/carefully/intently as the two men start to unwrap a bundle.

Where we place adverbs in a sentence needs careful consideration.

She smiles shyly as she looks into his eyes (simultaneous).

She looks into his eyes and smiles shyly (sequential).

As she looks into his eyes, she gives him a shy smile (almost simultaneous).

All three alternatives convey a similar feel.

He forcefully grips her arm (a sense of immediacy and urgency).

He grips her arm forcefully.

Both are clear and descriptive and of the moment.

The adverb “suddenly”, should only be used as an adverb of manner, to convey unexpectedly, not as an adverb of time:

Suddenly a car veers towards him. If a sentence starts with suddenly, it breaks the present moment.

A car suddenly veers towards him.

It suddenly starts to rain.

He looks up to the sky at the sudden clap of thunder.

These are all unexpected events.

She comes to a sudden stop. Sudden means abrupt in this context.

We explore other adverbs of time in the When section (Pillar 4).

Describing varieties of emotion adds richness to an AD, but they must be accurate and well expressed. A viewer with sight loss selects a programme, film or video to watch or listen to, because they are interested in the content. Every time there is a grammatical or syntactical mistake, a repetition or an unnecessary AD, the viewer is distracted from the content.

Trainee describers often explain away an unnecessary description, because they feel they “should say something”. Either something needs saying or it does not. Over-description, which often goes hand in hand with inaccurate or clumsy description, is worse than no description at all.

It cannot be stressed enough, that AD should be accurate and appropriate but simple and easy to follow, at the same time. There are many instances when a verb will suffice without any embellishment. The AD user should not be stopping to think beyond the moment:

Glancing over her shoulder as she starts to leave, Diana exchanges a private wave with James, followed by a wider wave to her admiring onlookers. She slides into the back of her limousine with one last wave and her public smile vanishes.

## Pillar 3: Where is the action taking place - describing location

Although the Who and the What are the two main pillars of AD, the third and fourth, Where and When, are also important. Occasionally, there is no screen time to fully describe the What or the Who, but a one- or two-word indicator can at least introduce the location or time.

At other times, a scene begins with a visual introduction describing a location as a preamble to the action:

On a sun-baked desert highway stretching far away into the distance towards distant mountains, a pick-up truck, pulls into a service station, set back from the road.

Where is the action taking place:

At the school, at the Brown’s, in Heidi's kitchen, downtown, at home, in her bedroom, at the quarry, at HQ, at the house, down by the river, in Stockholm, across town. Elsewhere in the wood, upstairs, next door, downstairs, on the porch, on a highway, out in the garden, on a hill, under the stairs, in space, on earth etc.

On screen, distances and directions can be deceptive, because camera angles rarely give the full picture. Describers often refer to right and left without any further explanation, which to many viewers means nothing. There has to be a context.

In the top right-hand corner of the screen. A car is parked in the middle of a street. The car takes a right turning.

If it is necessary to refer to a direction, it is more effective to simply say: She looks sideways. She turns to her side.

If a character is filmed face on, describing right and left can be confusing. If the camera is following a person from behind and therefore the viewer is following them, the AD can say: He turns right, down an alley. He turns to his right. She turns to her left. Her left leg is in a cast. She is wearing a ring on the fourth finger of her left hand.

In tightly edited sequences, directors frequently use establisher shots to facilitate cuts. These give the describer the chance to insert a change of scene or setting. In a familiar soap opera, few words are needed, but it helps to know that the action moves from place to place. In a familiar series such as Friends, the location transitions need to be swift and barely noticeable. The dialogue dominates and the AD should never intrude.

At Monica's; across the hall; at the Perk; at Chandler's; downtown.

Once an episode has begun and the viewer is familiar with the settings in a particular story, these signifiers can be cut down to a bare minimum or made more specific.

Monica comes out of the bathroom. Rachel goes to the fridge.

We know where they are, generally speaking, so we do not repeat it, unless something unexpected happens:

Monica comes out of Chandler’s bathroom!

A frequent grammatical error when introducing a character in a location:

In Mary's room, she is sitting on her bed.

This is incorrect grammar. It could be anyone sitting on the bed. The correct AD is:

In her room, Mary is sitting on her bed. Or simply: Mary is sitting on her bed.

When we say, Mary is sitting on ‘the’ bed, we do not know where the bed is. The person is the subject of the sentence.

Often we see the exterior of a house and hear voices coming from inside. The exterior serves purely as a location setter to the ensuing scene and does not need its own mention, unless it is going up in flames!

At the Jones' house (generic location) the whole family is sitting around the dining table. At the Schmidt's house, Elsa and Michael are watching TV, or making breakfast, or doing their homework.

At their house/at home, Elsa and Michael are watching TV. The location introduces the action.

In factual programmes, real locations are often captioned: Paris, France; London, England etc. In drama, locations are sometimes introduced by a caption, but not invariably. A building may be featured without a caption. The describer has to decide if it is sufficiently well known to be identified, such as the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Colosseum, Tower Bridge, the Empire State Building. A place or building known to local people may not mean much to the public at large. The name of a little-known French river would probably be meaningless and thereby distracting to a visually impaired viewer from another country.

EBU suggests describers should canvas opinion about landmarks to ensure that they are not naming places that are unknown, but also not ignoring well known sites.

A tall iron slender tower, fanning out at the base, could describe the Eiffel Tower, but it is much simpler to call it by its name.

In historical drama, such as Netflix's The Crown, palaces are featured as part of the narrative, but they are rarely the actual buildings. Nevertheless, the describer needs to remain faithful to the idea that the building that is sometimes captioned, but not invariably, is indeed Balmoral Castle for example. The dialogue and story indicate that this is the case, so the AD must reflect that. If a building is featured on screen, but not identified or discussed, it is just: a castle. The describer should resist the temptation of informing the viewer of the name of the place, because of a personal association with it. The AD needs to be accurate and informed, but not all knowing. If the sighted viewer cannot identify a place, the AD should resist from doing so.

Similarly, if a piece of music is being played or an opera is staged without a caption or identified in the dialogue, the describer should resist from offering that information. However, if on a stage, Othello is about to murder Desdemona, or Tosca jumps from the battlements, that information can be imparted. If an audience is entering a theatre and the name of the show is up in lights above the door, then the AD should mention it.

The describer must be in full possession of the facts, but must decide how much of that information is needed. Successful AD is all about making the correct choices.

## Pillar 4: When is the action taking place - describing the moment

As we have already shown, AD is delivered in the immediate present tense, But the actions or locations are not always taking place in the present moment, and this is where the fourth pillar comes into play. Captions often offer dates:

London, 1660. Four years later. Ten years earlier.

The time of day should be expressed as you would describe it in conversation:

By day. At dawn. In the cold light of early dawn. In the early morning. It is a bright sunny morning. In late afternoon. As the sun is starting to set. As the light starts to fade. At twilight, dusk, at nightfall. In the moonlight. In the dead of night.

These markers are all recognisable notions of time periods in a 24-hour day. The seasons and the weather also add colour to the setting of a scene.

Later

Sometimes, a sequence cuts to a different place and time and to explain that transition, we use the word ‘later’ which is both an adverb and an adjective. If a character is having breakfast in one sequence which immediately cuts to that person shaving in the bathroom, we might say: Later, he is shaving.

If a scene takes place in a house and then we see the protagonist in a street, we say: Later downtown. This shifts the action in both place and time. ‘Later’ indicates that some time has passed between one action/location and another.

Then/ Next/ When/Meanwhile

These linking words need to be used carefully, because the AD should remain in the present tense as far as possible.

‘Then’ is used when an event in the past is being recounted:

He put down the phone, shut the door behind him and then ran off down the garden path (A sequence of actions in the past tense).

In a narrative sentence in the present, it breaks the moment to use ‘then’:

He picks up the dagger from the floor, then wipes it clean and then goes into the hall.

In that sentence, we are no longer in the moment. Correct AD is:

He picks up the dagger from the floor, wipes it clean and goes out into the hall.

We are seeing the action as it happens in all its immediacy.

Another way to accentuate drama or the power of the moment, is to use ‘now’:

Now he’s clambering up a wall; reaching the top, he glances behind him and holds his breath. (Sound effect of Splash) Now, he’s fighting against the current in a fast-moving stream.

‘Now’ can be useful, but should not be overused.

Another time indicator which causes confusion, is ‘next’, which is an adverb of time, a pronoun as well as an adjective. It should not be used within a dramatic narrative, because it breaks the flow of the action. It can be used when describing a procedure, such as baking a cake. In a silent sequence without a voice over, the AD acts as a virtual guide, describing the process:

First, she pours flour into a bowl, next, she adds salt and a thimbleful of sugar, then she mixes them together. The third person can be used as an alternative to noun + simple verb.

Flour, salt and sugar are mixed in a bowl, next, a half-litre of milk is added to the mix.

‘Meanwhile’ can also be a useful linking word for ongoing and sometimes contradictory activities happening at the same time in different locations:

Detective Brown sits down at his desk and starts rummaging through his paperwork. Meanwhile, his wife has just brought the dinner to the table.

‘Meanwhile’ can also link contradictory conversations:

(Dialogue) He’ll soon be home love, don’t you worry (the father placating the mother). Meanwhile:

(dialogue) Oh yes, I’d like to buy a ticket to London (the son is on his way to London).

Flashbacks, fantasy, re-enactments

These sometimes appear in black and white or visually different from the present. In fictional narratives or real-life re-enactment, there are stock phrases that can smooth the transition from the present moment to a remembered or an imagined past by means of Flashbacks.

In a screen narrative, flashbacks are used to demonstrate what happened earlier or what is happening in the mind of a protagonist, as a memory crosses their mind:

He flashes back. He remembers. He relives. He recalls. He sees his younger self.

His mother sitting in her garden comes to mind. In a flashback, he sees his father coming towards him with a raised shotgun. As he closes his eyes, the image of Mary, with her long blond hair glistening in the sunlight, floats into his mind.

The flashback ends. She wakes from her reverie. She is brought back from her daydream with a start. Back in the present.

In a previous chapter, we recommend that the AD should not assume or interpret what a character is feeling, without some kind of visual evidence. However, in the case of flashbacks, this is a device that is being employed to heighten the narrative, to act as a reminder of previous events, or flashforward to suggest what might happen in the future, and as such the describer can select their own way of conveying this device, within the narrative.

A flashback shows what did happen in the past, whereas a dream or a fantasy is make believe. Sometimes a sequence begins involving the main character where he finds himself in a strange setting and usually the sequence will end very dramatically or frighteningly. At that moment the main character wakes with a start or with beads of sweat on his forehead. Even though the describer knows this was a dream, a sighted viewer might not, so the AD should not divulge the secret before everyone else is made aware.

In another circumstance, a character might see herself in a fanciful costume, in the arms of the prince of her dreams, but again the AD should refrain from commenting till afterwards:

She wakes with tears rolling down her cheeks.

A character might be hallucinating or in the case of this short example from a film about a talented English artist who fought her demons for much of her life and was always on medication. She sees people in a different light from everyone else.

The hallway is suddenly filled with light, her face unusually smooth, her expression blissful, as she spots the long haired bearded homeless man, Jesus in her eyes, standing in the doorway.

The AD is there to subtly explain what is happening in the eyes of the character.

Re-enactments/reconstructions occur, when a sequence of events is re-imagined, explained or simply reconstructed as in a true or fictional detective story or documentary. The action is told in the present tense, but the sequence may need a preface to explain that this is not live action in the moment.

Re-caps are used frequently for long running series, where each episode begins with a precis of the previous episode, usually with a simple caption or a verbal message: “Last time”. Generally, there is no room for AD of the short recap, because the sequences are usually cut together with no gaps. The same applies to trailers, which we examine in Part III of this Handbook.

Finally, describers should always ask themselves when completing a project: Is my description clear, accurate, adequate, overwritten, underwritten and unambiguous? Have I used the correct grammar and appropriate vocabulary for the context?

Does it make sense, is it accurate, is it true to the spirit of the content and can it be visualised?

# 10. Selecting content for AD

In many large organisations, the programmes chosen for audio description are selected without consultation with AD experts or blind and partially sighted AD users. It is true that most people with low or no vision, like to watch the same sort of programmes as the sighted audience. However, not all highly rated programmes are suitable for audio-description. Some programmes are too fast moving; some have tightly-worded almost continuous scripts, like news, quiz programmes and game shows. Some films require almost continuous description and this can prove tiring to listen to. If a programme is nonstop dialogue or narration, such as news or current affairs, that is generally deemed unsuitable for AD or a waste of resources.

For thirty years AD professionals have been stressing that drama and documentaries benefit most from AD. Yet, time and time and again, easy content, quick to deliver, is chosen over more time-consuming material. Content delivery supersedes quality for many service providers and broadcasters. Do not make the same mistake.

Drama and documentary have always lent themselves well to AD, offering substantive benefits to viewers. When organisations of the blind and partially sighted, are involved in the AD output or the creation of a service, they can suggest what content will benefit from AD. If the client is a national broadcaster, film maker or video content producer, the professional audio description practitioner should be allowed to advise.

Apart from the cultural and moral obligation to provide audio description where possible, there is also the legal obligation. At the present time, the European Directive on Web accessibility (EDWA) and European Accessibility Act (EAA) legislate for online video and games on a country-by-country basis, and as of the 1st June 2022, streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon, Apple etc. have had to comply. Currently, there is no specific legislation in Europe for mandatory online AD, other than for public sector bodies, but online content is on the increase. As per June 2025 the EAA requires producers to deliver accessible information, goods and services. And although the EDWA and EAA may not cover all aspects of content, the UNCRPD, does apply (See in particular articles 1, 9, 21 and 30).

# 11. Read more - the complete EBU Handbook

The EBU Handbook for High Quality Audio Description on Screen, consists of 3 parts. The first part was launched May 2023 and the complete Handbook is to be presented in the second half of 2023. More information can be found on EBU´s website. We warmly invite you to read it:

Part I explains the principles of good audio description, the correct use of grammar and vocabulary.

Part II expands on the audio descriptive principles with an analysis of current broadcast AD samples to explain what works, what does not and why.

Part III is about applying your learned AD skills in other disciplines. We also examine the different approaches that are needed for a wide range of audiovisual content:

* Short information videos/documentaries
* Feature films/Musicals/comedy
* Sexually explicit/ violent content
* children’s content
* Drama series/soap opera/ documentaries/nature/history/general interest
* Foreign language content/dubbing and subtitles
* Sports and Live Event AD
* Logos/opening and closing credits
* Commercials / Programme Trailers
* Part III also discusses AD Voice Delivery, Recruiting an audio description team and ends with Tips for further reading.

# Colofon

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Any amendment to the present document, can only be made after prior approval from the authors. In turn, the authors will inform EBU of any changes to be made with a view to regular updates, incorporating new developments in the field of AD or adding any other relevant information.

*Picture 6

Flag of the European Union. Twelve small yellow stars on a dark blue background*This publication has been co-funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme of the European Union.

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