

## **Fundamentals of Audio Description**

**by Joel Snyder**

Audio Description (AD) provides narration of the visual elements—action, costumes, settings, and the like—of theater, television/film, museums exhibitions, and other events. The technique allows patrons who are blind or have low-vision the opportunity to experience arts events more completely—the visual is made verbal.

AD is a kind of literary art form, a type of poetry. Using words that are succinct, vivid, and imaginative, describers try to convey the visual image to people who are blind or have low vision.

In developing AD tours for museums, scripting AD for video or film, or training museum docents and prospective audio describers for media or the performing arts, I emphasize four elements of AD:

1) **OBSERVATION** We must learn how to see the world anew. In his book, "Seen/Unseen: A Guide to Active Seeing," the photographer, John Schaefer, coins the phrase "visual literacy." That's what describers need to nurture. Schaefer refers to the need to 'increase your level of awareness and become an active "see-er." The best describers will truly notice all the visual elements that make up an event, just as Emily does in Thornton Wilder's "Our Town." Looking back from the grave, she sees for the first time: "I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Clocks ticking, Mama's sunflowers, food, coffee, new-ironed dresses, hot baths. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? Every, every minute?" The Stage Manager answers: "No. The Saints and Poets maybe, they do, some."

And effective Audio Describers!

2) **EDIT** Audio describers must then edit or cull from what they see, selecting what is most valid, what is most important, what is most critical to an understanding and appreciation of an event. Often, only a few precious seconds are available to convey those images.

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3) LANGUAGE We transfer it all to words--objective, vivid, imaginatively drawn words, phrases, and metaphors. For instance, how many different words can you use to describe someone moving along a sidewalk? Why say "walk" why you can more vividly describe the action with "sashay," "stroll," "skip," "stumble," or "saunter"? Is the Washington Monument 555 feet tall or is it as high as ten elephants stacked one on top of the other?

4) VOCAL SKILLS Finally, in addition to building a verbal capability, the describer develops the vocal instrument through work with speech and oral interpretation fundamentals. Meaning is created with the words we choose and also by the way we say them. Can you "make sense" by the way you voice the following phrase:

That that is is that that is not is not

We have an immense and varied culture in the United States. There is no reason why a person with a visual disability must also be culturally disadvantaged. All people need to be full participants in their nation's cultural life and that goal can be achieved through greater access to film, television, theater, museums, and other cultural venues. With a focus on people's abilities, we will come much closer to greater inclusion and total access.

*Joel Snyder* was one of the first audio describers and chaired the founding Steering Committee of Audio Description International. He is the founder and President of Audio Description International. For over five years he directed the Described Media program for the National Captioning Institute producing description for *Sesame Street* and dozens of feature films. For more information on audio description, visit [www.audiodescribe.com](http://www.audiodescribe.com)