Instructor’s Guide to Audio Description

# What is audio description?

Audio description is the narration of various actions within a film. Audio description informs the non-sighted audience members of the various characters and their actions in a movie. For instance, if a character walks into a room, a narrator will describe this action auditorally to the viewers. Audio description is typically heard between character lines, making it easier for the viewer to follow the storyline of the given film.

# How is audio description done?

Audio description can either be an extra recording that is mixed in with the regular film audio or it can be done in person by a sighted viewer who is within responsible hearing distance of the non-sighted viewer. Audio description was not mandated to be in regular motion pictures until 2010 under the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act. There were only a handful of movies that were made in 2009 that had audio description. Anything before that time had zero audio description, making movies inaccessible to blind and visually impaired viewers.

Although audio description is not found in older movies, that does not mean that it cannot be accessible to a student. Students who are blind or visually impaired can still have videos shown in class described to them by their instructors. Instructors are the individuals in the room that have prior knowledge of the video and the subject area, which makes them the best candidate in the room to be the audio describer. It is not preferred that other students describe videos to blind or visually impaired classmates because they might over describe (to be explained in the next section).

# How to audio describe:

Anybody can audio describe, but when it comes to a student who is trying to understand the subject material, it is best to have an instructor be the audio describer. An instructor should have the most knowledge of the subject they are teaching and the video they are requiring their class to watch.

**Before showing the video:**

* The instructor should view the video before showing it in class so they can become familiar with characters, character actions, and the sequence of the storyline.

**While showing the video:**

* The instructor should be sitting right next to (not in front of or behind) the visually impaired or blind student so that the student can hear the instructor describe the video to them.
* Do not repeat lines that the characters say unless the student asks you. A visually impaired student can usually hear what the characters are saying, but not see what they are doing. For this reason, please do not repeat what the characters are saying.
* Explain body language and all major visual actions that are necessary to the storyline. There is a big difference between a character doing something without emotion versus a character doing something with emotion. For instance, it would not be relevant to describe a character as “standing in a doorway” versus describing the same character who is “standing in a doorway with a curious expression on their face.” It is important that you tell the viewer exactly who is in the scene, what their body language is saying, and what actions they are doing.
* Is there such a thing as over describing? Yes! The viewer does not necessarily care about or need to know certain things. For instance, if a character is sitting in a chair, that is all the viewer needs to have described. It would not be relevant to describe that “so and so is sitting in a wooden chair that has an oak finish on it that was probably made in 2003 …”
* Videos can be paused. If an instructor feels that they need more description time than the few seconds between character dialogue is allotting, then they can pause the video at any time they please. If the instructor chooses to pause the video for this reason, it is important that they address their audio description to the entire class so as to not single the non-sighted viewer out from the class.
* Blind and visually impaired students may have recording devices that they use to record lectures and take notes. They will most likely want to record your audio description as well. This is their way of taking notes on the film. This is especially needed if the students are required to watch the film more than once (sometimes videos are posted on BlackBoard for multiple viewings). Although some students have family members they can rely on at home to do the audio description for them, remember that instructors have the best knowledge of the film and the subject it applies to. Therefore, instructors can more easily pinpoint what needs to be described and how. This also makes for better word consistency. Having multiple versions of audio description can confuse viewers so it is best to have as few audio describers as possible.

**After showing the video:**

* If an instructor posts the video in BlackBoard for students to view multiple times, they need to make sure that the student has access to audio description whether it is audio description that came with the movie or the audio description that the instructor verbally supplied themselves in a recording.
* It is suggested that the instructor summarizes the important aspects of the film to the visually impaired student after the movie is finished to make sure that the student has a complete understanding of what they watched.

# What if my class is online only?

Even if a class is online only, instructors can get audio description to their students in multiple ways:

* Find out if the movie has audio description. Remember, if the movie was made in 2009 then it might have audio description, but anything before that, it definitely will not. If the movie does have audio description, then that version should be offered to the blind or visually impaired student as an alternate format.
* Instructors can make appointments with students to watch the film together. While watching the film together, the instructor can describe the film to the student. The student can record the instructor’s descriptions so that they can use the descriptions for multiple viewings.
* Instructors can record themselves audio describing as they watch the film and then send the recording to the student. Instructors need to make sure that the audio description falls into alignment with the movie so that students can follow along accordingly.

\*If an instructor cannot provide audio description in their classroom, then they need to connect with the Accessibility Resources office prior to showing the video.