

Literacy and Audio Description

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One of the first audio describers (c. 1981), Joel Snyder, PhD and Audio Description Associates develop audio description for media, museum tours, and performing arts worldwide. He has produced description for dozens of museums and visitor centers, nationally broadcast films and network series including “Sesame Street” broadcasts and DVDs. He has introduced description techniques in over forty nations and throughout the United States.

What better way to begin this discussion of description than with description of a favorite cartoon:



“The Fan” by John McPherson

On a stage – at left, a woman in a flowing gown, her hands clasped in front of her, stands before a kneeling man in a doublet and feathered cap. He croons, “Why dost thy heart turn away from mine?” At right, a man at a microphone speaks: “Basically, the guy with the goofy hat is ticked because this babe has been runnin’ around with the dude in the black tights.” The caption reads: “Many opera companies now provide interpreters for the culturally impaired.”

Description is principally an access technique designed for the benefit of people—all people, including children—who are blind or have low vision. I think of it as a literary art form, a

kind of poetry—a haiku. It provides a verbal version of the visual--the visual is made verbal, and aural (he points to his ear), and oral (he points to his mouth). Using words that are succinct, vivid, and imaginative, it conveys the visual image that is not fully accessible to a segment of the population and not fully realized by the rest of us—the rest of us, sighted folks who see but who may not observe.

We translate visual images into words--objective, vivid, specific, imaginatively drawn words, phrases, and metaphors. For instance, is the Washington Monument 555 feet tall or is it as high as fifty elephants stacked one on top of the other? Both, of course. But which characterization conjures the most vivid mental image. How many different words can you use to describe someone moving along a sidewalk? Why say "walk" when you can more evocatively describe the action with "sashay," "stroll," "skip," "stumble," or "saunter"?

But good describers also strive for simplicity, succinctness—"less is more." In writing to a friend, the 17th century mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal noted: "I have only made this letter longer because I have not had the time to make it shorter."

At the same time, a describer must use language that helps folks see vividly—and even see beyond what's readily apparent. The great novelist and humorist Jonathan Swift knew that "Vision is the art of seeing things invisible." Those elephants aren't really there but it may be that suggesting them helps people imagine the height of the Washington Monument. As Mark Twain so elegantly chided: "You cannot depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus."

Finding words—we all deal with that, just about every moment of our waking lives. But children or people with learning disabilities have particular needs that might be addressed effectively through the use of description. [In developing a rather elaborate audio described tour for the Connecticut Children's Museum in New Haven, CT, complete with navigational/directional information and tested by people who are blind.]incomplete sentence While there I conducted a workshop in New Haven with day care workers and reading

teachers on what I think represents a new application for audio description—literacy. We experimented with developing more descriptive language to use when working with kids and picture books. These books rely on pictures to tell the story. But the teacher trained in audio description techniques would never simply hold up a picture of a red ball and read the text: "See the ball." He or she might add: "The ball is red--just like a fire engine. I think that ball is as large as one of you! It's as round as the sun--a bright red circle or sphere." The teacher has introduced new vocabulary, invited comparisons, and used metaphor or simile—with toddlers! By using audio description, you make these books accessible to children who have low vision or are blind and help develop more sophisticated language skills for all kids. A picture is worth 1000 words? Maybe. But the audio describer might say that a few well-chosen words can conjure vivid and lasting images.

Several years ago I led a team of describers who provided description—for the first time—for *Sesame Street*. I was heartened by a letter I received from a blind parent of a sighted child who, for the first time, could follow along with her daughter the antics of Elmo, Bert, Ernie, and all the other denizens of *Sesame Street*. We also provided description for the Spanish version of *Sesame Street*—*Plaza Sesamo*—and added descriptive tracks to all newly released *Sesame Street* DVDs.

In live presentations, I often ask people to listen to an excerpt from the feature film *The Color of Paradise*, first with no picture on the screen and no description—just as someone with no vision might experience it if he or she had no access to description. Then I play the same excerpt as I described it for national broadcast: and finally, one last time with the video intact so a sighted viewer can make his or her own judgments about the effectiveness of the descriptions. Let's try it –

- audio w/o description
- audio w/ description
- audio and video w/ audio description

What follows is an annotated script of the description for this brief excerpt. The notes will afford you some insight into our reasoning for choosing the precise language used—why I selected particular words to bring these images to your mind’s eye.

ANNOTATED AUDIO DESCRIPTION SCRIPT FOR THE COLOR OF PARADISE

Cues in CAPS; descriptions preceded by “>>.”

Annotations are at the end of the script, keyed to numerals within description text.

Note: The appearance of the character “Mohammed” is described earlier in the film.

>> Mohammed kneels and taps his hands
through the thick ground cover of brown **1.**
curled leaves.

...[CHIRPING/RUSTLING :02]

>> A scrawny nestling struggles on
the ground near Mohammed's hand.

...[GASP/CHIRPING :02] **2.**

>> His palm hovers above the
baby bird. He lays his hand lightly
over the tiny creature. Smiling,
Mohammed curls his fingers
around the chick and scoops **3.** it into
his hands. He stands and strokes
its nearly featherless head with

a fingertip.

...[CHIRPING/RUSTLE :01]

>> Mohammed starts as the bird nips his finger. He taps **4.** his finger on the chick's gaping beak. He tilts **4.** his head back, then drops it forward. Mohammed tips **4.** the chick into his front shirt pocket. Wrapping his legs and arms around a tree trunk, Mohammed climbs.

...[HEAVY BREATHING/CLIMBING :11]

>> He latches onto a tangle of thin, upper branches. His legs flail for a foothold. Mohammed stretches an arm between a fork in the trunk of the tree and wedges in his head and shoulder. His shoes slip on the rough bark.

...[SCRAPING :03]

>> He wraps his legs around the lower trunk, then uses his arms to pull himself higher. He rises into thicker foliage and holds onto tangles of smaller branches. Gaining his footing, Mohammed stands upright and cocks his head to one side.

...[CHIRPING/FLUTTER]

>> An adult bird flies from a nearby branch. **5.** Mohammed extends an open hand. He touches a branch and runs his fingers over wide, green leaves.

...[RUSTLING :03]

>> He pats his hand down the length of the branch. His fingers trace the smooth bark of the upper branches, search the network of connecting tree limbs, and discover their joints.

...[RUSTLE :02]

>> Above his head, Mohammed's fingers find a dense mass of woven twigs--a bird's nest.

...[CHIRPING :03]

>> Smiling, he removes the chick from his shirt pocket and drops it gently into the nest beside another fledgling.

...[CHIRPING :03]

>> He rubs the top of the chick's head with his index **6.** finger. Mohammed wiggles his finger like a worm **7.** and taps a chick's open beak. Smiling, he slowly lowers his hand.

NOTES

1 – Color has been shown to be important to people with low vision, even people who are congenitally blind.

2 – Timing is critical in the crafting of description. We weave descriptive language

around a film's sound elements

3 – Vivid verbs help conjure images in the mind's eye.

4 – Description, like much poetry, is written to be heard. Alliteration adds variety and helps to maintain interest.

5 – What to include? This image is important – the adult bird returns in the next scene.

6 – Be specific-- precision creates images!

7 – Similes paint pictures!

It is my firm belief that audio description can build verbal literacy, in particular. It's clear that describers and all lovers of language have much to share, and a lot to learn together about observation, clarity, efficiency of description—and how the use of descriptive language can build more sophisticated literacy for all. I look forward to research in this area; compared to subtitling or captioning, there's much research to be done with respect to Audio Description. I look forward to hearing from you.