

# VITAC

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## ***Audio Description 101***

*An introduction to audio description's benefits,  
style, creation, and regulations*

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Who We Are

# Trust the Experts

For more than three decades, **VITAC** has worked with a wide variety of clients – including those in the media and entertainment, education, government, corporate, and sport venue and event center sectors – to provide federally mandated and legally required accessibility services for those in the blind, low-vision, deaf, and hard-of-hearing communities.

We are a full-service provider of audio descriptive services, realtime captioning for live events, and offline captioning for pre-recorded video content.

We also provide a host of multi-language services, including captions and subtitles created by expert translators in more than 50 languages, including, but not limited to, English, Spanish, French, Italian, German, Portuguese, Chinese,

Arabic, Japanese, and Russian, Polish, and Hebrew.

As the largest and most trusted provider of media and communications accessibility services in North America, we have seen – and played a role in – lots of changes in the past 35 years, and we've always grown and adapted with industry and consumer needs, enhancing and expanding our service offerings, and investing in our people, process, and technology.

We certify that our audio description offerings meet the standards set by the American Council of the Blind as well as those for educational description outlined in the American Foundation for the Blind/Described and Captioned Media Program's Description Key guidelines.



# What is Audio Description?

According to a recent National Health Interview Survey, a growing number (more than 32 million) of American adults age 18 and older reported that they have trouble seeing, even when wearing glasses or contact lenses. As the number of people who are blind or with low-vision grows, so, too, does the need to make visual content more accessible.

Audio description narration, which describes a video's visual elements, is one way to do this.

Audio description makes video content more accessible by inserting narrated descriptions of a program's key visual elements during natural pauses in the program's dialogue, ensuring that individuals who are blind or with low vision can better understand and appreciate a program.

The service is growing in popularity, and is available on many television and streaming media programs, in theaters and cinemas, and in museums, galleries, national parks, and travel tours. On televisions, the description track can be found on a secondary audio channel available on most sets and accessible through the television's menu.

## Types of Audio Description

VITAC provides audio description to a variety of national networks and video producers. All of our audio described scripts are written by professionally trained scriptwriters (real, creative individuals – not automated software) with decades of industry experience. We choose our voice artists based on each individual video, and make sure the narration is consistent throughout a series.

Our descriptions are mixed by a team of professional audio engineers and quality checked by both sighted and blind professionals for completeness and clarity.

Traditionally, highly trained human voice actors have been used to narrate audio described programs. Lately, however, some in the industry have moved to synthetic narration, where a computer-generated voice reads the script created by a writer.



Synthetic voice audio description employs a computer-generated voice to read aloud the descriptive narration track. The synthetic voices are available in a range of female and male accents that can be selected based on what best fits the specific program or project.

Proponents of this approach say that synthetic voice does as well as human speakers but at a cheaper cost and with less turnaround time. Opponents say the computer-generated narration lacks emotion and tone, and can produce some oddly pronounced words.

In either case, it's important that producers ultimately consider an audience's preference when determining whether a human or computer-generated voice is appropriate for their content.

# The Ins and Outs of Audio Description

Audio description informs individuals who are blind or who have low vision about visual content essential for comprehension. It features narration added to a program or video's soundtrack that describes important visual details that cannot be understood from the main soundtrack alone.

VITAC provides audio description for a variety of customers, including:

- TV networks
- Producers of online content
- Corporations

## How is Audio Description Used?

Like captions, which now are used by people who are hearing and deaf alike, the popularity of audio description has continued to grow beyond its original audience.

The feature now caters to a world of multi-tasking TV watchers who want to understand action on TV without focusing solely on the video.

Audio description, however, often cannot convey all of the visual information included in each scene of a video program; therefore, content creators and audio describers make choices to prioritize the information ultimately included in the description.

## What is Described?

These are just some of the visual elements that are described as part of audio description:

- Facial expressions
- Body language and gestures, including nudity
- Visual comedy and sight gags
- Dance or other movements
- Visual actions, including sexual acts, violence, etc.
- Clothing
- Multi-media effects and lighting
- Settings and scene changes
- Individual characteristics as relevant to the content (such as skin color, height, age, disability, etc.)
- Text or on-screen graphics, including titles, credits, and captioned and/or subtitled translations of a foreign language
- Time of day, period of history, or location

## Where Can You Find Audio Description?

Both the United States and Canada have regulations in place to promote accessibility, and have set requirements for broadcasters to air specific quotas of programming containing audio described content (*see Page 5 for more details*).

On television networks, audio description is accessed by navigating to the Secondary Audio Program (SAP) channel, usually in the accessibility settings of a set-top box. On streaming platforms, such as HBO Max, Netflix, AppleTV, Disney+, or Hulu, audio description can be chosen as a separate audio language.

Audio description also can be found in some theaters and other live performances, with the audio description track often relayed to an earpiece or earphones, and movies theaters, where the description has been prerecorded and synced to the movie soundtrack.

## Additional Resources

Because not all content is described, it's sometimes hard to find out just what is available. Resources to find audio described content include:

- The Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) audio description page links to network guides for audio description: <https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/audio-description>.
- The Audio Description Project, an Initiative of the American Council of the Blind, maintains a searchable list of audio described content: <https://acb.org/adp/masterad.html>.

## Interesting in Learning More?

Audio description was the recent focus of the FCC's Disability Advisory Committee, which developed a summary of the various elements to consider in the development of high-quality audio description. Click [here](#) to read the committee's guidance.

# How is Audio Description Created?

VITAC works only with the most experienced describers, voice talent, and engineers. Our audio description process involves four areas of production: writing, voicing, audio editing, and quality control.

## 1. Writing for Audio Description

The audio described script is first written by a highly trained professional who specializes in translating visual information into description.

The describer analyzes the video to determine the importance of visual aspects, and creates a script that fits within pauses in dialogue and music.

Audio description often cannot convey all of the visual information included in each scene of a video program. Therefore, the writer, often with the help of the content creator, makes choices to ultimately create the best possible description.

Describers strive to be clear, concise, conversational, and use familiar terms in a manner that is consistent with the content and vocabulary of the program.

## 2. Voicing for Audio Description

Once a script is finalized, a professional voice artist records the narration.

The voicer speaks clearly, at a rate that can be understood, while conveying energy and volume without competing with the actors onscreen.



Voice artists are well-trained describers with years of experience and use age-appropriate vocabularies. They are chosen to match the nature and tone of the video content, and will remain constant throughout a series.

## 3. Audio Editing

Using the recorded voiceover, a mixing specialist combines the show audio with the audio description recording, “dipping” or lowering the volume of the background noise or music to accommodate the narration.

The editor makes sure that the voiceover, whenever possible, does not overlap the dialogue of the show. In addition, the editor can speed up bits of description so that a show with lots of dialogue can accommodate easy-to-hear descriptions.

The mixer can even modify the pitch of the voiceover so that a

description sped up to fit a two-second gap, for example, will not suffer from the “Alvin and the Chipmunks” effect.

## 4. Quality Control

Finally, the quality control expert reviews the final file with voiceover to make sure that everything from script accuracy to final mixing is correct. After this review, the file is exported in one of a variety of formats, including WAV, MP3, and AIF.

## Live Audio Description

The above describes the process for prerecorded audio content. Lately, more and more producers are asking for audio description for live television broadcasts. It can be done in a highly controlled environment where the writer and voicer are the same, and the mix is performed by the network. We are proud to provide this service via partnerships with the most talented describers in the industry.

# Audio Description in the U.S. and Canada

The United States and Canada have established standards regarding the number of hours of audio described content and the types of programs required to carry audio description. These standards are reviewed periodically and updated to reflect changes in viewing habits and community need.

For example, in October 2020, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) OK'd an order expanding audio description requirements to an additional 40 designated market areas over the next four years.

A designated market area (DMA) is a region of the United States that is used to define television and radio markets. There are 210 DMAs – a mix of metropolitan areas and the rural communities around them – across the U.S.

The FCC had required certain broadcast stations in the top 60 DMAs to provide access to audio described programming. The new requirements, which will phase in an additional 10 DMAs each year for four years, began this January.

In 2023, the commission will determine whether to continue expanding audio description requirements to additional DMAs beyond the top 100.

In the U.S., the FCC requires 87.5 hours per quarter of audio described content on primetime or children's programming on the major broadcast networks (ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox) and the top five cable networks that broadcast a significant amount of prerecorded content.

The FCC updates its top five non-broadcast networks – cable and satellite channels – every three years to account for changes in ratings. Beginning July 2021, the top five national non-broadcast networks, based on Nielsen ratings, will be TLC, HGTV, Hallmark, History, and TBS. The non-broadcast networks currently subject to the audio description requirements are USA, HGTV, TBS, Discovery, and History.

(Fox News, MSNBC, CNN, and ESPN actually rank higher in terms of Nielsen ratings than the networks mentioned above, but these networks typically file for an exemption from the FCC's audio described rules as they provide less than 50 hours per calendar quarter of prime time programming that is not live or near-live.)

Audio described services also are available on original streaming content on many platforms, including HBO Max, Netflix, Disney+, and Hulu.

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# Audio Description in the U.S. and Canada

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In Canada, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) has rules in place for audio description and described video on TV programs, making them accessible for people who are blind or with low vision. There are subtle differences between the two.

Canadian regulations note that audio description relies on a program host or announcer to provide a voice-over by reading aloud or describing key elements of programming, such as text and graphics that appear on the screen. It is often used for information-based programming, including newscasts, weather reports, sports scores, and financial data. Most broadcasters are required to provide audio description.

Described video, or video description, is a narrated description of a program's main visual elements, such as settings, costumes, and body language. The description is added during pauses in dialogue, and enables viewers to form a mental picture of what is happening in the program. Described video typically uses a separate audio track.

The CRTC requires that broadcasters provide audio description for all in-house productions

related to information-based programs, and that all conventional broadcasters (as well as certain French and English pay and specialty broadcasters) offer four hours of described video per week, and are encouraged to make described programming available online.

More recently, the CRTC's "Let's Talk TV" initiative further increased the amount of described video provided by broadcasters, with tiered requirements geared to the broadcaster's size and resources.

As a result, certain broadcasters are required to provide described video for all suitable programming broadcast between 7 and 11 PM, seven days a week, while all other non-exempt broadcasters are required to provide four hours of programming with described video per week.

Programming that is not well suited for described video, including newscasts and sports, will continue to be exempt from these requirements.

Additionally, broadcasting distributors are required to make accessible hardware and remote controls available to subscribers, provided these are available and are compatible with distribution systems.



# Ready to Add Audio Description to Your Project?

Since 1986, VITAC has been the leader in media and communications accessibility, featuring the most professional, highly skilled employees, 24/7 client support, and a secure, technically sophisticated infrastructure.

When you choose VITAC's services, you can be assured that you will receive the highest quality product with unmatched customer service. Whether you need audio description, live or prerecorded captioning, translation, subtitling, or all of the above, you can count on us for all your accessibility solutions.

Talk To Us



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