Audio Description Guidance

# Executive Summary

Audio description (AD) is the spoken description of information in a video, theatre production or other art form with visual elements, which is inaccessible to persons with visual impairments. It often may include the physical setting, actions taking place, scene changes, body language, and the clothing worn by actors, among other things, while actors are speaking with each other.

Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 Syracuse University (SU) may be required to provide AD for its showing of films and live performances when requested as an accommodation. It is recommended that an essential criterion for selecting a film should be that it has synchronized AD where trained writers create separate scripts that are then recorded and synchronized with the movie. It is further recommended that when planning a video or live theatrical event, that you plan ahead three to six months in order to provide AD. This document provides guidance on how to offer equal access to video, theatre, and other visual events and you may contact the director of disability access & ADA coordinator at ada@syr.edu or 315-443-6162 for further guidance.

# What is AD and Why is it Necessary?

AD is the spoken description of information in a video, theatre production or other art form with visual elements, which is inaccessible to persons with visual impairments.[[1]](#endnote-1) Common and interchangeable terms for AD include descriptive audio and video description. AD often may include the physical setting, actions taking place, scene changes, body language, and the clothing worn by actors, among other things, while actors are speaking with each other. The American Council of the Blind (ACB) explains that AD “attempts to describe what the sighted person takes for granted.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

AD often provides the essential context in which a conversation or event takes place. In a video or television program AD supplements the audio track during pauses in dialogue. Good AD is concise, objective, and conveys information that is essential for comprehension. According to the American Federation of the Blind, AD requires “specially trained writers to create a separate script that is then recorded and synchronized with the movie ….”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) forbids public and private entities that receive federal financial assistance from excluding qualified individuals with disabilities from participation in or denying the benefits of its programs and activities (29 U.S.C. § 794(a)). This mandate, in part, may require that Syracuse University (SU) provide AD for its showing of films and live performances, when requested as an accommodation. This document, in part, provides guidance, and you may contact the director of disability access & ADA coordinator at ada@syr.edu or 315-443-6162 for further guidance. As with all accommodation requests, there should be an interactive process to determine what reasonable adjustments can be made to provide equal access to the film or performance in question.

# How to Find Films with AD Included

According to the ACB’s [Audio Description Project](http://www.acb.org/adp/tech.html), most new movies have AD. Specific technology including a headset and small receiver should accompany the movie to detect and transmit the AD.[[4]](#endnote-4) To locate movies with AD and movie theatres that have the necessary equipment to detect and transmit AD visit the ACB resource ([“Finding Movies with Audio Description”](https://acb.org/adp/movies.html#finding)).[[5]](#endnote-5)

# Creating AD

When a video is acquired for which there is no AD, which may be the case with specialized films not intended for mainstream audiences (e.g., documentaries, art films), it is recommended that AD be created or otherwise provided. The ACB maintains a current web resource of companies that produce AD primarily for films and television. Some companies listed also produce AD for theatrical performances, including dance. Visit [“USA Audio Description Service Providers”](https://adp.acb.org/services.html?code=L).

# Real-Time AD

When creating AD is not plausible, it is recommended that real-time AD be provided. Real-time AD involves a trained Audio Describer being onsite for the film or event and describing the essential visual information during the gaps in dialogue in real-time. The ACB explains that the “audio describer’s voice is input to the transmitter, the transmitter broadcasts the AD receivers tuned to receive the transmitter's broadcast and the AD is heard by the user wearing an earpiece connected to the receiver.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Transmitters may be installed in venues or be portable devices. Receivers typically are hand-held and have an audio jack for earphones or earbuds. Smart phones may be able to be used as receivers.

When the film (or script of an event) can be made available to the AD Service in advance, the Audio Describer can draft an AD transcript including cues when to describe, so as to not interrupt the film / event’s regular dialogue. Real-time AD services can be found on the [American Council of the Blind website](https://adp.acb.org) and via an [online search](https://adp.acb.org/services.html?code=L).

# Technology Needs

AD generally requires broadcasting and receiving devices for delivery of AD to a patron.[[7]](#endnote-7) There are several technological methods for broadcasting AD, such as infrared, Wi-Fi and FM systems. These systems are available from a variety of manufacturers and suppliers visit: [Transmitters & Receivers for Live Broadcast, Theaters, Museums, Tours, Parks, etc.](http://www.acb.org/adp/tech.html#moremovie)

# Guidance

Plan ahead three to six months for events that will include films or theatrical performances in order to provide AD. In addition, include the associated costs for AD in your initial budget. For films, it is highly recommended that a criterion for selecting a film be that it has synchronized AD. Additionally, it is recommended that whether AD is needed for film or a performance, that the planning budget include expenses for AD (e.g., $1,000 to $3,000) for a live performance as well as for ASL interpreting and CART services (e.g., $100 / hour with a two-hour minimum).

## Films

When an event including a film that has AD is advertised to members of the SU community (students, staff, faculty, visitors), it is recommended that the availability of AD be indicated, and notice be provided of who to contact (and how) to request use of the audio description.

When the film to be presented does not have AD, consult the information above (“Real-Time AD”) to acquire AD for the film.

## Theatrical Performances

When a theatrical performance is planned, consult the information above (“Real-Time AD”) to acquire AD for the event.

# Questions

Contact the director of disability access & ADA coordinator at ada@syr.edu.

1. Audio description means the spoken narration of a movie's key visual elements, such as the action, settings, facial expressions, costumes, and scene changes. Audio description generally requires the use of an audio description device for delivery to a patron.” 28 C.F.R. §36.303(g)(1)(ii) (2020). Visit also Perkins School for the Blind, Fast Facts about Audio Description (June 20, 2018), <https://www.perkinselearning.org/technology/blog/fast-facts-about-audio-description>; 3PlayMedia, The Ultimate Guide to Audio Description, <https://www.3playmedia.com/resources/popular-topics/audio-description/>; The National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled, Audio Description Resource Guide (2018), <https://www.loc.gov/nls/about/services/reference-publications/guides/audio-description-resource-guide/> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. American Council of the Blind, The Audio Description Project, available at <https://acb.org/adp/ad.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The Audio Description Project, supra. “It requires the creation of a separate script that is written by specially-trained writers and recorded on an audiotape or CD that is synchronized with the film as it is projected. The oral delivery of the script is transmitted to the user through infra-red or FM transmission to wireless headsets.” Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability by Public Accommodations--Movie Theaters; Movie Captioning and Audio Description; Proposed Rule, 79(148) Fed Reg 44976, 44981 (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. American Council of the Blind, All About Technology for Audio Description, <http://www.acb.org/adp/tech.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Finding Movies with Audio Description, <https://acb.org/adp/movies.html#finding> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Audio Description Project, supra. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. 28 C.F.R. §36.303(g)(1)(ii) (2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)