Audio Description Style Guide

[Updated Sep 2025]

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> **Audio Description (AD)** is a vital accessibility feature that opens up visual media by providing verbal descriptions of what's happening on screen. During natural pauses in dialogue and essential sound elements, a trained narrator describes important visual information such as facial expressions, costumes, settings, actions, and text on screen. AD should seamlessly integrate with the original content to create a complete experience for viewers who might otherwise miss crucial visual elements that advance the story.

1. Fundamentals

AD written in the present tense is preferred. This form tends to give movement to the description as it follows the action on-screen. Future and past tenses are to be avoided.

- How the words that a writer crafts will sound when spoken by the voice talent is important to the listener.

AD should always be written in the third person. AD should not try to be another character in the program. The one exception is when a character breaks the 4th wall and addresses the audience. The AD would then note this by saying, "John looks at us."

1.1 Characters

Be as detailed as you can with character description as time allows. Focus on essential physical descriptions, especially if the person's name is not yet known. While best practice is to not name a character until they are named in the production, there are exceptions to this rule and content and best judgment will dictate how to approach:

 The person is a well-known public figure (actor, singer) and appears as himself/herself/themselves. There are several key characters and there could be confusion if they are not named. It's the second season of a series and the character was introduced in the first season. It's a sequel to a movie, and the character(s) has been introduced in the original feature. It's a well-known movie now being turned into a series spin-off or vice-versa.

1.2 Age

It's best not to be specific (unless age is plot-relevant and revealed in the program). i.e., "A 28-year-old woman." Better to say, "A woman in her twenties."

1.3 Dress, Hair, Height

Details such as how a person dresses/or is dressed; hair texture, color, and style can be included to help describe a person. Height can also be helpful, as it can indicate how a person carries themselves or any other physical attribute that will help create a thorough visual image.

1.4 Gender

If the gender of a character is not known, use "they/them." A supplied line or production script should offer this information. If the character is non-binary, use the same guidelines to describe their physical characteristics as detailed above.

"In a dark room, a figure moves off the bed. They approach the door." Once certain of the gender, then be more specific. "The door opens and a man with blond hair looks right and left as he steps into the hallway." If the character is non-binary, use the same guidelines to describe their physical characteristics as detailed above: "A person in their 30s sits stiffly in a chair. Their eyes dart and their lips are pressed together as they run a hand through their hair."

Be aware: If you say, "They get up and leave," while referring to the character, that can also mean everyone in that scene leaves. In this instance, it's important to write the description more clearly.

If you are still having issues with identifying a character's gender, consult your Amazon representative.

1.5 Movement

How does the character stand or walk? Do they move in a way that suggests confidence? Do they stand tall or hunch their shoulders

1.6 Disability Language

Use "person first" language "a person who uses a wheelchair" never "a wheelchair-bound person" or a "cripple." This document from the National Center on Disability and Journalism is helpful for descriptions. https://ncdj.org/style-guide/

1.7 Race or Ethnicity

The point of AD is to be in service to the listener and to the artform being described. Blind people of color are very vocal about their right to know when someone who looks like them is on-screen. However, unless it's stipulated in the show, refrain from

using "African American," "Caribbean," "Hispanic." If using color to describe race, use "Black" or "Brown" (always capitalized) and "white" (always lowercase).

If describing race and/or skin color, it is important to do this for all characters and not just one or two. If you are not sure, do not guess or assume racial or ethnic identity.

1.8 Music & Lyrics

Background soundtrack and songs contribute to a program's overall ambiance and context. Lyrics can have as much impact as dialogue, so it's important to let a story-point song play without describing over it. If description is necessary, try to add over repeated lyrics or chorus.

2. Show, Don't Tell: Grammar & Vocabulary

Audio Description is written to capture the intent and essence of the content. Therefore, the words used should be vibrant, visual, and provide a thorough and enjoyable experience-- always with the audience in mind. Descriptions should be concise, yet conversational. Descriptions should not be verbose or complex and should allow space for ambient sounds, key sound effects and dialogue. Proper grammar is essential for readability with the narrator and context. A misplaced comma can change the meaning of a sentence and affect the narrator's delivery.

Using appropriate vocabulary in the AD script is important. It should match the tone/language of the program itself. Children's programming should use vocabulary that is appropriate to the primary audience. Another example of tone/language might be slang, such as hooker versus prostitute. If the program script says "hooker" throughout the show, the AD script should say "hooker." Similarly, in an R-rated program, using "derriere" rather than "butt" or "rear" will sound out of place and be odd because it will take the listener outside the program.

Vocabulary should fit the audience, genre, and the show's tone. Avoid using words or phrasing that could take a viewer out of the program/experience.

2.1 American English vs. British English

Use vocabulary that reflects the predominant language of the content. Try to use relatively common terms that can be understood by a global audience and avoid slang. If it makes sense for a particular program, some additional description could be helpful.

2.2 Descriptive Verbs

If a character is walking slowly, instead of saying, "Jack walks slowly," consider writing "Jack strolls down street." Or is he "trudging"? "Sneaking"? "Ambling"? This phrasing is more accurate and provides better descriptive storytelling. Likewise, instead of saying, "She walks quickly," why not say, "She marches" or "She strides."

2.3 Adverbs

Adverbs are helpful - They can be used to better characterize a movement: "She hesitantly turns her head toward the sound." "He shakes his head from side to side" is informative, but "He shakes his head vigorously from side to side," or "He haltingly shakes his head from side to side" gives more context.

2.4 Sentence Structure

Short sentences are okay, if needed - Timing can dictate sentence length, but try to avoid numerous short sentences if they can be rewritten to flow better. "He gets out of the car. He goes to the front door. A woman opens the door." Instead, "He gets out of the car and walks to the front door. A woman opens the door."

2.5 Articles: Definite or Indefinite

Articles are important in AD as they will indicate a specific or non-specific noun that might be plot-pertinent. For example: A character picks up "a" package and then sets it down. But if they go back to that package per story point, best practice is to now say "the" package. Using the right article can be essential to a story. If a character in Ep. 101 of a series notices a man sitting on a bench, if he reappears in Ep. 103, by saying, "the man from the bench" indicates he has been seen before.

2.6 Noting Sizes and Shapes

Use well-known, globally relevant objects or places to help with description or comparisons, e.g. "As tall as the Eiffel Tower or Mount Everest." Or "Smaller than a mouse."

2.7 Emotion

"John's eyes light up, and a smile stretches across his face." Or "Tears stream down her cheeks." Is she happy because she is getting married? Is she sad because her boyfriend broke up with her? Trust that the dialogue, context, even music cues will help inform the characters' emotion or reaction. Description of facial expressions and physical actions can usually relay the information, e.g. clenched fists, slumped

shoulders. However, sometimes more description is necessary to truly capture the event, i.e. "a tight smile" or "a forced smile" can relay more information than just saying, "He smiles."

2.8 Editorializing

Avoid editorializing and suggesting the character's intentions. "He leaves a note on the table, so she won't worry," or "She looks surprised because it was unexpected."

3. Locations/Scene & Time Changes

Locations are essential and can play a key role in a story. Sometimes there will be burn-in (narrative titles) that note the location. Or there could be an iconic landmark that confirms the location, i.e., the Hollywood Sign in Los Angeles, the Eiffel Tower in Paris or the Statue of Liberty in New York. Or the location could be in a suburban neighborhood, a bustling city, a run-down neighborhood, etc.

Equally important are scene changes and time of day as they help guide the story timeline and activity.

3.1 Where Are We?

It is important to note scene changes as this propels the story and can be confusing to the viewer if not noted.

Example of noting scene changes "At home, John goes into the kitchen and opens the refrigerator. He takes out a bottle of milk. Lucy looks at herself in a bathroom mirror and fixes her makeup." **Is Lucy in John's house? She's not, so this can be confusing**. Better to say, "At home, John goes into the kitchen and opens the refrigerator. He takes out a bottle of milk." **In her apartment**, Lucy looks at herself in a bathroom mirror and fixes her makeup." **Not sure where Lucy is?** Then say, "Elsewhere, Lucy looks at herself in a bathroom mirror and fixes her makeup."

3.2 Day/Night/Afternoon/Morning

Knowing the time of day helps the timeline and if not noted, could be confusing. If a scene starts in someone's home or office or anywhere, when the location/scene changes is it later that same day? The next day? A few days later? Morning? Afternoon? Night? Etc.

3.3 Weather

Weather, if there's time, can also help set the mood. Is it raining? Snowing? Cloudy? Sunny? These are details that enhance a description.

3.4 Camera Movements and Filmic Terms

If stylistic choices are made by the director that affect understanding of the content, they can be included. Some terms are widely known and can be used as needed, e.g. "bird's eye or aerial view," "close-up."

4. Main Title/On-Screen Text/Narrative Titles

4.1 Main Title

For feature titles and episodes, say, "Title" then read the title. If there is any special artwork or design with or around the title, and there is time, it can be described.

4.2 On-Screen Text

Describe on-screen text if it's relevant to the understanding of a scene, e.g., text on a phone, time on a clock, a sign, book title.

4.3 Narrative Titles

These can be locations, text, or timelines and can be handled in a few ways: The Narrator reads the title verbatim: "Text Appears 1929. Downtown Los Angeles." The title is incorporated in the description: "Downtown Los Angeles, 1929. John drives down a narrow street."

4.4 Opening Credits

For credits at the beginning of any program, say "Opening Credits" before reading as listed on-screen.

5. Subtitles

5.1 Subtitles

Reading subtitles is very important, and whenever possible, we believe they should be narrated by another voice talent to separate the character from the subtitle text of another character, and to keep it clear that it is subtitled text.

Introduce subtitles the first time they appear on screen by saying "Subtitle" (if there's time) and again if considerable time has passed since that character(s) has been on-screen. If there are just a few subtitles (under ten) the narrator can read all of them, although they should adjust the delivery (but don't disguise your voice or take on a character). If there are more than 10-20 subtitles or if there are multiple speakers, another voice might be needed to prevent confusion. Please contact your Amazon MGM Representative.

5.2 Subtitles for Difficult to Understand Dialogue

Include in the description only when the audio is unintelligible (and a subtitle is provided). Avoid describing over lines that can be understood from the original version.

6. Credits/Logos

6.1 Keep Credits in Order

Credits should be described in the order they are presented on screen. Do not add any words like "Starring" or "Presenting" unless written on-screen. If there's not enough time to read all the credits prioritize, director, producers, writers, creator, main cast, director of photography, editor, music.***

***Note: This is a preferred guideline, however, there will be instances when a show's opening doesn't allow all or most of the opening credits, especially episodics. You can push to the end and say, "Remaining Opening Credits," and maybe read the main opening and on ends--with space for logos and AD credit.

6.2 Opening Credits

For credits at the beginning of any program, say "Opening Credits" before reading as listed on-screen. Try to avoid squeezing descriptions in between credits unless they are spread out.

6.3 End Credits

For end credits, read any cards, then say, "Credits continue to roll" (if they're rolling). Include legal disclaimers and copyright info, as well as any special notes, like "In memory of." If animals are present in the program, read the animal welfare disclaimer.

6.4 AD Credit

The AD Credit <u>must always</u> be included. It should name the post house, Audio Description Writer, and Narrator. The actual AD credit should be read after reading main end credits, but before the end crawl.

"Audio Description produced by _____ for Prime Video. Descriptions by _____ and voiced by _____"

For Text-to-Speech AD, use "Audio Description produced by _____ for Prime Video. Descriptions by _____ and voiced by Amazon Text-to-Speech Audio Description"

Note - For Text-to-Speech AD, avoid scripting after the screen or visuals go to black.

6.5 Logos

When time allows, Opening and Closing Logos should be described in detail as opposed to just saying the name of the studio/company. Use the description below for the opening logo for MGM/Amazon features:

"*Golden light emanates behind a ring of film tape as the words 'Art for art's sake' transform to 'Ars Gratia Artis.' A lion's head emerges in the center.*" (allow time for one roar if possible)

[BRISK] "Metro Goldwyn Mayer appears above. An Amazon Company below."

MGM Centennial logo: *"Light glows behind a ring of film tape as the words 'Art for art's sake' transform to 'Ars Gratia Artis.' '100' in gold letters dissolves into a lion's head. Metro Goldwyn Mayer appears above. 100 years of entertainment. Below, an Amazon Company."*

Opening Prime Logo Description: *"Blue sonic ripples surround a curved arrow then disappear into a black background 'Prime.'"*

7. Voice Selection & Vocal Approach

The narrator is a vital part of the overall AD package, therefore keep in mind the below when choosing a narrator (or, if needed, a second voice or third voice for subtitles). The narrator's voice must be distinguishable from other voices in the content, but it should not be distracting.

 The narrator must be culturally appropriate. The narrator must be gender appropriate. The narrator's voice must be readily distinguishable from all character

voices. Narration delivery must match the tone of the material. The narrator's timbre, accent, or voice quality must not distract from the material.

When a title is widely appealing, please consider narrators from all backgrounds, regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, LGBTQ+ and disability.

8. Deliverable Notes

1. For the length of the deliverables, use the full, exact length of the final video.
2. Loudness and other specs: ***Please refer to the Prime Video delivery specification requirements in Slate.***
3. All AD should be mixed to blend conversationally with the program. No "automatic ducking" or unmixed deliverables are acceptable.
4. AD audio should match the audio of the program itself.