



**Access
2Arts**

Making disability
and art work

Access2Arts Guidelines

Delivering Audio Description
services for the blind and
low-vision community

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About the Guidelines

How were these guidelines created?

These have been formulated by Access2Arts in consultation with the Audio Description User Group, which in 2024 consisted of Trevor Northway, Simon Wong, Salina Shrestha, and Ellen Fraser-Barbour.

The aim of this group was to create a set of guidelines for the promotion and facilitation of audio description events, to make them more inclusive and accessible; and thereby increase the uptake in audio description events by patrons.

The group prioritises the voices of those living with blindness or low vision.

This document is also informed by research conducted by Access2Arts with Katrina Lancaster-Maggs on general accessible audience development, including community surveys.

Audio Description will be referred to as AD throughout this document.

Who are these guidelines for?

This document is for artists, arts workers and arts organisations, including galleries, museums, theatres, libraries and studios.

These Guidelines do not focus on how to write or record audio descriptions, but rather what to do with the descriptions once you have them, and how to engage audio description audiences.

What is covered in these guidelines?

The Guidelines answer questions like:

- How do you reach out to and engage the audio description community?
- How do you get audiences to attend an audio described event?
- How do you share recorded audio descriptions?
- What is the best way to publish and store audio descriptions?
- How do you make sure that patrons can easily access audio descriptions for an exhibition or live event?
- What other access needs should be considered when asking people to attend AD events?
- What other key access services need to be included for an event to be accessible to audio description patrons?

What is not in the guidelines?

These guidelines do not cover how to write and perform audio description, or how to engage audio describers. For more information on this, please contact Access2Arts.

Glossary

Words and terms used include:

- Disability
- Audio Description
- People who are blind or have low vision
- Vision Impairment

Areas of Focus

Due to the difference in needs for different art forms and audio descriptions, we have divided the guidelines into four key areas of focus: visual arts, theatre and live events, tactile tours and video.

Visual Arts

Visual arts descriptions can be for physical exhibitions of paintings, sculpture, moving image or other works; or for online or print publication of artworks, essentially this can be used for any visual artworks you might find.

Live Visual Arts Tour

A live visual arts tour typically involves one or two describers guiding AD users through an exhibition, either individually or as a group.

Consider the following:

- Wayfinding is supported by describer
- Book tours for best describer/user availability
- Often two describers may be needed
- This method is best for building long-term relationships with individuals and community groups

Pre-recorded

Pre-recorded audio description could be available in a variety of ways – as individual descriptions available for each artwork, or as a complete audio tour of a gallery.

Consider the following:

- Some patrons may require support with wayfinding.
- A podcast or a good audio guide can work well.
- There is the potential to use digital tools such as QR codes and [Bindimaps](#).
- Can the speed of the recordings be altered (by the user) without loss or change of pitch?
- Pre-recorded audio can mean skipping social interactions – better for some people, but worse for others.

Example: [SA Museum 20 Years of Australian Geographic Nature Photographer of the Year](#)

Description Content

Artists can provide great context and support for descriptions of their work, but consistent descriptions by trained describers will provide the best user experience.

Printed wall labels placed near the artwork, such as artist statements, gallery text with information on the artwork or an image description should be screen reader friendly; patrons may use their own devices to read these wall labels.

Ensuring they are in larger print with high colour contrast and having them in consistent locations in relation to the artwork around the gallery is highly recommended.

Wayfinding

AD users need to be able to identify which work is being described. Ideally, they will be standing in front of the corresponding artwork when they access the description.

Consider the following:

- Ways to identify the artwork and activate recorded descriptions
- Audio guides to orient the user
- The accessibility of thoroughfares
- Navigation and orientation instructions (e.g. clockface, left to right)
- Physical orientation strategies
 - Wayfinding railing
 - [Tactile Ground Surface Indicators](#)
 - Braille or other touch matching

Accessing recordings

AD users need to be able to easily access recordings.

- Will you host the recordings, online or on physical devices in the gallery?
- Will patrons need to use their own device? Consider that some users may not have a mobile phone or high digital literacy.

Some possible methods:

- Hosted through a website (make this screen reader friendly, clearly labelled, and easy to navigate)
- Bindimaps – purpose-built wayfinding software <https://bindimaps.com/>
- Bluetooth or NFT tap & go capabilities
- Physical speaker/button to activate for each work

Theatre and Live Events

AD is an essential service for blind and low vision people, allowing them to receive the visual information that provides context for the on-stage action.

Booking options

It is worth considering how you will make Audio Description tickets available through your booking system, including;

- Is your online booking page accessible to screen readers?
- Can you have a phone number available for bookings and assistance?
- Can you have an allocation of specific AD tickets available?
- Can you offer a discount to AD users?
- Do you offer Companion Card tickets (you should)?

Access2Arts can work with you to review your booking processes for accessibility.

Pre-show notes

For some shows the describers will make pre-show notes available for AD Users prior to the performance.

These can be hosted on your website and emailed to AD bookings, and can also be hosted on the Access2Arts website.

Describers will usually read these pre-show notes to AD users at the event, commencing approximately 15 minutes before the performance begins, so it is helpful if AD users are able to take their seats slightly earlier than other patrons.

Orientation for Theatre

Consider the following:

- Dropoff and entrance location (consider physical access, stairs, ramps, doorways)
- Finding/identifying the Audio Describers
 - Audio describers to meet users at earliest possible point (ie main entrance or drop off point)
 - Use vests, flags, lanyards or other methods to easily visually identify audio describers for low-vision patrons or companions.
 - Pre-communicate the meeting place and how to identify audio describers or venue staff
- Ticketing access (box office and digital)

Technical considerations for Audio Description delivery

Timing of the show?

It is best to schedule the AD performances toward the end of the run of your show, as the Describers may need to see the show several times to develop their scripts and rehearse. Describers will also ask for footage of previous performances or rehearsals and the script.

For users, late night performances are not usually preferred.

Where will the describers work from?

The describers will require space to use a microphone and transmitter to deliver their script. Preference is to be located within the bio box or side of stage as it is vital that Describers can view the live theatre performance to enable them to deliver their description script between the dialogue on stage, react to the audience and account for any surprise changes during the performance.

Another less ideal option is to set up a live feed on a large screen in a room or area away from the stage within transmitter range of the patrons. It is vital there is no delay with the feed as the timing of script delivery must align with what is happening on stage.

Does the theatre have the equipment to deliver the description to patrons?

If the venue has an inhouse system these will consist of kit of rechargeable receivers and a transmitter. Patrons are issued individual receivers with individual volume control that can often be clipped to clothing or a belt or worn with a lanyard. The patrons listen in to live description using headsets or earpieces (their own or provided) via a transmitter using radio frequency. This is the least disruptive method

to other patrons within the theatre where the sound is contained to the receiver. If the theatre doesn't supply audio description equipment, organisations like Access2Arts have portable kits for hire.

Alternatively, a microphone and speaker system that is audible to entire audience is preferable for an exclusive blind or low vision audience.

We generally do not recommend in-person description without amplification (i.e. Describers sitting next the AD user in the audience), especially in mixed audiences where this can be disruptive.

Tactile Tours

AD users can benefit immensely from the inclusion of tactile elements in the AD experience.

Visual Arts Tactile Experiences

In visual arts, this may be models of artworks, examples of painting textures or sculptural elements.

An example of this was the recent Chihuly in the Botanic Garden AD tour where examples of the primary glass shapes used within the artworks were handed around to participants to feel prior to the commencement of the tour, providing a deeper sensory understanding of the works.

Live Performance Tactile Experiences

In live performance it is best practice to offer a tactile tour prior to the described performance. This can incorporate a range of elements, including (but not limited to)

- Artist introductions, where key performers discuss their characters, costumes and demonstrate their voices to patrons. This is very helpful in allowing patrons to identify who is speaking during the performance.
- A stage tour, visiting the set and navigating to different key set pieces to get a sense of the space and dimensions of the stage. Sometimes a diorama of the set can also be provided for AD users to touch.
- Props and costume examples, where key props (or copies) and costumes or fabric samples can be given to users to feel.

A live performance tactile tour is usually scheduled approximately an hour before the performance commences, giving time for the users and describers to then have a

short break between this and the commencement of the reading of the pre-show notes.

Video

Audio Description is becoming increasingly common in film and television, as well as in advertising and informational videos.

Publishing Audio Described Videos

Videos can have “hardwired” AD (video always plays with AD) or be embedded with AD (accessed as an alternate audio track).

Most common video editing software has AD embedding capabilities at the export stage, or you can use a web plugin to embed the AD at the online publishing stage.

When creating videos to be Audio Described it is important to consider creating additional spaces in the audio track to allow for the description to not overlap dialogue. If this is not possible additional time may be added at the top and/or tail of the video to allow for description to be added.

Promoting Audio Description

Awareness is one of the challenges when providing AD.

Developing an understanding of user behaviour and community contact points will help to navigate this.

- Give advance notice on AD sessions to “break through” to communities/users
 - Spread the word to support workers and agencies – consider that many users will get their event info through support workers
- Building relationships:
 - Consider building relationships with [See Differently](#), [Blind Citizens Australia](#), [Guide Dogs](#), [Beyond Blindness](#), [Vision Australia](#)
 - With/as arts organisations – this is particularly valuable for increasing awareness of what AD is, who uses it, and how it is used
 - Access2Arts has a strong relationship with the AD user community and can help to promote your event [Promote your Event | Access2Arts](#)

Preferred terminology

Every AD user will have different self-identifying preferences for terminology. When talking to an individual, always use the terminology they prefer.

When talking about the wider blind/low vision community, some terminology you may hear and can use:

- People who are blind or have low vision (BLV)
- Legally blind
- Low vision
- Partially sighted
- Vision impaired
- People who are blind or vision impaired (BVI)

User questions

Some common questions AD users raise:

- Where can I find information about audio described events?
- How can I get additional assistance to attend an event?
- Where can I find more information on an event?
- How do I download/stream/access pre-recorded descriptions?

Resource Glossary

Bindimaps: [Wayfinding & Digital Maps | Accessible & Inclusive Spaces | BindiMaps](#)

Relevant Orgs: [See Differently](#), [Blind Citizens Aus](#), [Guide Dogs](#), [Beyond Blindness](#), [Vision Australia Radio Adelaide](#)

Tactile Ground Surface Indicators: [Australian Standards - TGSI Application](#)

Website Access Information: [W3.org](#)

Website Accessibility and User Testing: [Access2Arts](#)

Additional Note: The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) is an internationally recognised standard created by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). The latest W3C standard is WCAG 2.2 as of December 2024 and the soon to be updated Disability Discrimination Act will be recommending/requiring all organisations to have websites that meet W3C standards of 2.2 or later.

Web Content Accessibility Guideline 2.2: [WCAG 2.2](#)

These guidelines were developed by Access2Arts under the advice of Audio Description users. To provide feedback on this document, please contact us:



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