

3Play Webinars | Intro to Audio Description

REBECCA KLEIN: Hi, everyone and thank you for joining me today for Intro to Audio Description with 3Play Media. My name is Rebecca, and I work on our marketing team, here at 3Play. I'm joined today by my colleague, Ryan, who is a part of our customer solutions team. He'll help answer questions at the end. And just so you all know, I stutter, so when you hear those pauses that's all that's happening.

We have a simple agenda today. I'll start out by covering what audio description is at a high level so that you have a solid understanding of the basics. This overview will include how to publish audio description, the benefits of audio description, and some accessibility laws related to AD. And then, I'll briefly cover who 3Play Media is and what we do. And we'll end with a Q&A session.

Let's start with the basics of audio description. What is it? Audio description is an accommodation for blind and low-vision viewers. It's a secondary audio track that plays in addition to the main audio track and is often represented by a small AD icon similar to the CC icon for closed captions.

On the next slide, I'll show an example of audio description in a trailer for the first *Frozen* movie by Disney. Pay close attention to any dialogue or contextual clues from the characters or the lack of contextual clues and how the AD supplements what is lacking in the dialogue. If you're interested in watching more examples of audio description, we can drop a link in the chat to our website.

So for this video, you can try watching without looking at the screen. So you can close your eyes or just look away and see if you can figure out what is happening in the scene based on the audio alone.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

- From the creators of *Tangled* and *Wreck-It Ralph*. Disney. A carrot-nosed, coal-eyed snowman shuffles up to a purple flower peeping out of deep snow.

- Hello.

[SNIFFS]

- He takes a deep sniff.

[EXHALES]

[STARTS TO SNEEZE]

[SNEEZES]

His nose lands on a frozen pond. A reindeer looks up and pants like a dog.

[SNOWMAN GASPS]

Seeing the reindeer slip on the ice, the snowman smiles and moves towards him. Though, actually, he's running on the spot. The reindeer falls on his chin. The snowman uses his--

[END PLAYBACK]

REBECCA KLEIN:

OK. I'm going to pause that now. So as many of you may have noticed, there is not real dialogue in the scene to provide context. Really, all that we have to go off of are some verbal expressions and the musical track. So the audio description track makes up for this lack of dialogue. And without it, it would be nearly impossible to know what's happening in the scene.

So the audio description does a great job of visually bringing these fictional characters to life. And it paints a great picture of a whimsical scene. It's creative, it's accurate, and it fits the nature of the scene perfectly. So I hope that this gives you a better idea of what audio description is and why it's important.

Next, we'll talk about the two types of audio description, standard and extended. So the *Frozen* example was standard AD. The audio description snippets were able to fit in the natural pauses within the video. And since there was no dialogue, there was a lot of space to insert the descriptions without interrupting the flow of the scene.

Extended audio description allows you to add pauses to the video to make room for descriptions as needed. So if content is packed with dialogue, extended AD is a great option. It's also useful for more dense and complex content, such as lectures or dialogue-heavy presentations.

So now, let's talk a bit about how to create audio description. The first option is a proactive solution. And you can narrate at the time of the recording. So for example, in a recorded lecture, the professor can describe the visuals on the slides as they present. And this option allows you to eliminate the need to go through and add AD in post-production.

But there are also other solutions. You can create a text-only description, writing down all of the relevant visual information in the video and making this text available to viewers. But it's important to note that this method loses the cinematic effect for the viewer and doesn't truly offer an equitable experience for people who are blind and have low vision.

If you've created a text description and have good recording equipment and video editing software, you can record your own voice descriptions, merge it with your source audio, and output a second video with your description. And then, lastly, there's an option to outsource to a professional description vendor.

When it comes to creating audio description, quality really matters. The Described and Captioned Media Program, or the DCMP for short, provides helpful guidelines and standards to follow for audio description. So from the DCMP, we learn what to describe, when to describe, and how to describe to create great audio descriptions. And so this is a great resource to check out and reference, whether you're making your own descriptions or if you're outsourcing. And we have the link on the slide, but we can also post that in the chat.

So the DCMF has five main measures for quality. And these five measures are that a quality description is accurate, meaning there must be no errors in word selection, pronunciation, diction, or enunciation. It must be prioritized, meaning that the description should narrate what is essential to the intended learning and enjoyment outcomes. It must be equal. And to create an equal viewing experience, the meaning and intention of the program must be well conveyed.

It must be appropriate, meaning that the description should consider the intended audience, be objective, and seek simplicity. And it must be consistent, meaning both the description and the voicing of the AD should match the style, tone, and pace of the program. So a great example of consistency is the *Frozen* example that I showed earlier where the audio description really matched the whimsical nature of the scene.

So once you have your descriptions created, how can you publish them? The first option is to upload the audio description mp4 track to your host video platform if it supports it. This is one of the more user friendly ways to publish AD since it allows viewers to toggle the description on and off. However, there's limited player compatibility for in-player audio description tracks, so this option is not always possible.

If your player doesn't support in-player AD, you can publish one video without the description and one with the description burned into the track. So this is like the *Frozen* example that I showed earlier. And a helpful comparison for this is closed versus open captions where open captions are burned into a video. The third option is to have the mp4 file on hand and to provide it when someone requests it or to host it directly on your website for viewers to access.

And with 3Play, there's also a fourth option. And it's called a 3Play plugin, which is a keyboard and screen-reader accessible audio description plugin. It allows your description to play with a video player without having to republish the video. So by using the plugin, you can host the video with a description track directly on your site.

So what's the benefit of audio description? And why should it be a priority for video content? The most important benefit of audio description is that it provides equal access for blind and low-vision viewers. In 2018, the National Health Interview Survey found that 32.2 million adult Americans, about 13% of the population, have trouble seeing even with corrective lenses. So audio description is a critical accommodation for these viewers to have access to video content, entertainment, and really information in general.

Besides accessibility, there are also other benefits to audio description. AD provides flexibility to view videos in eyes-free environments or in situations where someone is unable to look at the screen 100% of the time. Audio description also helps to increase focus for viewers, as we all tend to miss important visual cues when looking at screens for extended periods of time. And audio description helps to bring attention to these often missed visuals.

And then, audio description can also improve brand image. Prioritizing accessibility and inclusive design does not go unnoticed by consumers. In fact, a 2018 study showed that 2/3 of consumers prefer to purchase from brands that stand for something important, such as equal access. And finally, you may be required by law to provide audio description, which I will talk about in the next slide.

In terms of legal compliance, there are multiple laws in the United States that impact audio description. It's important to note that many of these don't explicitly mention video accessibility since they were created years before today's technological advancements. However, case law has shown that these laws have strong backing for requiring audio description.

So first, we have the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which was the first legislation to address equal access for people with disabilities. And Section 504 of the Rehab Act applies to federal programs and federally-funded programs, which must make their content accessible to people with disabilities. So this might include providing audio description. And then, Section 508 of the Rehab Act applies to federal programs and can be applied on a state level. 508 also references WCAG 2.0 Level AA, which requires AD for video and media content.

And then, we have the Americans with Disabilities Act, which prohibits disability discrimination and requires auxiliary aids for effective communication, which means providing services like audio description and closed captions. And there are two relevant titles here. Title II covers government entities and the services, activities, and programs they provide. So their content and materials must be accessible and may include described video content.

And then, Title III covers places of public accommodation, like restaurants, schools, and theaters. And under Title III, some precedent has been set that the ADA applies to websites as well as physical locations. And a case example of this for audio description is the *American Council of the Blind versus Netflix*, which required Netflix to provide audio description to many of its programs. And they now offer AD for nearly all of their titles.

And the third major accessibility law in the US is the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act, or the CVAA. And the CVAA makes sure that accessibility laws that are enacted in the 1980s and the '90s are brought up to date with 21st century technology.

So the CVAA started phasing in audio description requirements in 2010 for some of the largest television markets and, as of 2020, they provided the Federal Communications Commission with the authority to expand its AD requirements through 2024. So you can expect more audio description requirements to come.

And then, lastly, the Federal Communications Commission enforces and mandates AD requirements for broadcast television and for online video that has previously aired on broadcast television.

And now, let's briefly talk about WCAG, which is the international set of guidelines that helps make digital content accessible. The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines outline best practices for making web content universally perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust. And there are three levels of accessibility standards, A, AA, and AAA, with AAA being the highest level of accessibility and AA being what most organizations aim to achieve.

So audio description is required under WCAG 2.0 Level AA for prerecorded, synchronized video media. For Level A, you can provide an AD track or a full text alternative. And for Level AAA, you must provide extended descriptions as necessary. And please note that WCAG 2.1 is currently the most recent published update and provides the most inclusive and mobile-friendly guidelines.

So that concludes a high-level overview of audio description. I hope that you learned something and found it helpful. Before we wrap up, I quickly want to talk about who 3Play is and what we offer in the media accessibility space. And then, I'll share some free resources, as well.

So, here at the 3Play, we want to help you create compliant, accessible, and engaging media. And we offer a range of services to help you do so, from closed captioning to live captioning, subtitling, translation, and audio description.

Our goal is to provide a future-proof solution to make accessibility easy, flexible, and scalable. Our customers can upgrade their services at any time. So if you come to us only needing captions, but then, down the line, need audio description, you can easily add that on. We also have a dedicated support and account management team who can help you reach your goals, talk about your account strategy, and serve as advisors for your success. And one of the big things about us is that we provide you with flexibility. We work with many different industries and really understand that every company has different needs. So we can help accommodate numerous workflows, turnarounds, and formats.

And we also offer a lot of really great free resources. On our website, you'll find weekly blogs, free ebooks, checklists, and research studies. We also have tons of monthly webinars and a podcast, called *Allied*, which features a different accessibility expert each month and covers a range of topics. And you can listen wherever you get your podcasts or find transcripts on our website.

And we do have a great free upcoming event. Our annual ACCESS Conference is happening on March 29 through April 1. This is a free, virtual conference that focuses on digital accessibility and inclusion. We'll have expert speakers from companies like Microsoft, Comcast, Inclusively, IBM, and more. And you can register at 3PlayMedia.com/access. So I hope to see some of you there.

So thank you all for listening. We now have a little bit of time for Q&A. Great. So-- Great. So the first question is, what should you do if your video player doesn't support audio description?

Great. So as I talked about a bit, you can publish a second version of your video that contains the audio description or extended description. And if you're a 3Play customer, you also have the added option of using the 3Play plugin to add description to any video player.

And then, the next question is, do you need voice talent to record AD?

That's an interesting question. I think, depending if you're recording it yourself versus outsourcing it, I think the people who tend to record AD themselves are trained professionals. So not necessarily. And for example, at 3Play, we use synthesized speech for our descriptions. So if you don't have the talent or the ability to record with your own voice, there are other options.

The next question is, how does 3Play's audio description process work?

I don't know if, Ryan, if you want to chime in with this, but generally our AD process consist of three steps. So we start with the time-coded transcript, which is actually what we use as the first step to create captions. And then, from there, human describers will go in and create time-coded descriptions based on the content. And after that, the description file is time coded and created using synthesized speech, which customers can customize, if they like.

OK. I think we have time for one more question. For content that is formerly live broadcast, like sports broadcasts, what sort of audio descriptions are needed for this type of content? Ryan, do you want to take that one?

RYAN MARTINEZ: Absolutely. So I think generally speaking with audio description, the best way to think about it is that assuming that the viewer who is consuming that is not able to visually see what is happening on screen. There's certainly a fine line between adding so much description that it's distracting and kind of takes away from the key message or the key points that you want folks to understand with the video content. So I think it's really, as a best practice, speakers and presenters can describe more of what is happening and not rely so much on synthesized speech after the fact.

But I do think, generally, the kind of point to consider is, what are the key visual elements that somebody who is blind would not be able to absorb in order to fully understand the content like everybody else? So it can vary from content to content, but that's just a general rule to follow.

REBECCA KLEIN: Great. Thank you so much, Ryan. So I think that that's all that we have time for. Thank you all for being here today.