

Writing Verbal Description Audio Tours

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If you work for a museum, then you know that recorded audio tours are a growing feature of art, history, and science museums for in-gallery exhibitions and for virtual exhibitions on web sites. And museums have discovered that writing tours with the technique of **Verbal Description** can make exhibitions accessible to people who are blind or have low vision.



Verbal Description is a way of using words to represent the visual world, of helping people form mental images of what they cannot see. Some museums have discovered the unexpected consequence that Verbal Description can also provide a new perspective for people with sight.

The technology for delivering audio tours, whether verbally described or not, is constantly evolving. I will offer a limited overview of the current possibilities, but most of this article is about writing Verbal Description for audio tours and for web sites.

A Very Brief History of Verbal Description

Dr. Margaret Pfanstiehl, founder and president of The Metropolitan Washington Ear Inc. and her husband Cody, developed the art and technique of audio description in 1981. They saw it as a tool for 1) navigating a visitor through a museum, 2) orienting a listener to a work of art, or 3) providing access to the visual aspects of a live or recorded performance.



Different organizations use different terms for the process of using words to describe visual phenomenon. Some, like Dr. Pfanstiehl, continue to use the term audio description. Others use the terms verbal description, or verbal imaging, or audio imaging. Art Beyond Sight uses the term verbal description to describe recorded or live presentation of information about art and other exhibitions. For description of films, videos, or theater Art Beyond uses the term audio description.

For many years, museums and advocates for blind visitors thought that if a museum had an audio tour for its sighted audience, then it needed a separate verbal description tour. Today, museums still produce such verbal description tours and they are successful with visitors. But in recent years, some museums and organizations, like Art Beyond Sight, have begun advocating tours that work successfully for both sighted and blind audiences. More on this later.

How Long is Too Long?

There are guidelines for writing for Verbal Description audio, and I'll define those. First, I'll address a common question from museum staff: how long should the stops be in a verbal description audio tour? To answer that question you must consider the length of traditional audio tour stops, how and where people will hear your audio tour, and the nature of your audience.

Traditional Tours. Companies that produce audio tours for sighted visitors try to keep their stops at around **ninety seconds**, and rarely go over **two minutes**. Of course, these stops do not include verbal description. So a stop that includes verbal description will be longer, but not necessarily dramatically longer.

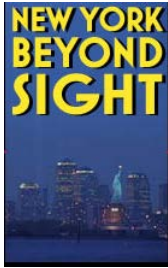
In-Museum Tours. In a museum, people may easily spend an hour standing and walking through an exhibition. So physical fatigue is a factor. Boredom can also be a factor. Put yourself in the shoes of a visitor and ask how long you would feel comfortable and stay interested while standing in one location. It's subjective, but a factor to consider.

As an example, in 2013, in conjunction with Art Beyond Sight I wrote and produced a verbal description audio tour of paintings at the New York Historical Society's "Armory Show at 100" exhibit. The stops ranged from two and a half to three and a half minutes long and the scripts wove art historical context for each work with the verbal description. Here's one stop from the tour, a painting by John Sloan titled [Sunday Morning, Women Drying Their Hair](#). It's 2:45.

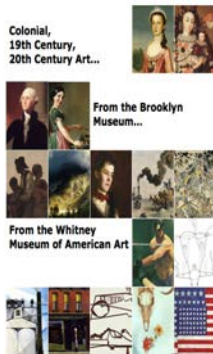


Virtual tours. If your museum web site offers a selection of works from your permanent collection, audio tour stops can be longer than in-museum tour stops. Visitors will listen to your verbal descriptions at their leisure, probably sitting down. So they will be more inclined to listen to longer stops.

I took this into account when writing verbal description for two Art Beyond Sight web sites, [New York Beyond Sight \(NYBS\)](#) and [American Art](#).



NYBS has prominent New Yorkers reading verbal descriptions of the city's visual culture, including architecture and public art works. The "stops" on this site range from 3 ½ to 6 minutes long, with most in the 4 -5 minute range.



American Art features art from the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Brooklyn Museum. The verbal description audio recordings range from 3 to 6 minutes, with most in the 4-5 minute range.

Your Audience. You probably can identify people who are blind or have low vision and who visit your museum frequently. They may desire longer, more detailed verbal description than casual museum visitors. So for both in-museum and virtual online tours, know your audience and write accordingly. If your goal is to satisfy a mixed audience, you must try to find a happy length that will satisfy both.

Alert Your Listeners. I've found that listeners appreciate knowing how long audio stops will be. You can add a line in the tour introduction so listeners know how long they can expect to stand in one place.

Writing Audio Tours for Some — Or for All

The first verbal description audio tours I wrote were specifically for people who are blind or have low vision. Today, whenever possible I write audio tours that serve sighted and blind audiences together. This saves money for a museum, and has the added bonus of creating an inclusive experience with blind and sighted people enjoying an exhibition together.

My thinking began to evolve when I noticed that sighted people would sometimes pick up an audio tour player and listen to the verbal description tour. My first reaction was to stop them, thinking they would object to having art works and historical objects that they could easily see described for them. But I never stopped anyone, and to my surprise no visitor ever complained.

This first happened at a verbal description tour I wrote for VSA exhibit in the Smithsonian International Gallery in Washington. I stood with an artist watching sighted people listening and voiced my surprise. Her response: "People don't like to read." Which I believe is correct for many visitors.

But I also began to realize that there's more to it. Having a voice describe what you're looking at mimics the experience of most television watching in the U.S, especially local and national news programs. Sighted people have come to expect descriptions of what their eyes can easily see.

That's when I began attempting audio tours that combined traditional content for a sighted audience with a level of verbal description for those with sight loss. Again, no one with vision ever questioned the writing.

Actually, one person did question me. The curator of a show on historical silver objects read my first draft script and asked, "Why do we have to tell people this teapot is twelve inches tall? They can see it." My answer had two parts. First, I reminded her that the tour was for both sighted and blind audiences. And second, I told her my experience is that such details help sighted visitors confirm their perceptions. Rather than resenting the verbal description they appreciate it. The best thing any audio tour can do is to help someone look more closely and carefully. An audio tour can focus attention, making for a richer experience, especially if a sighted visitor chooses to not read wall labels,

A sighted museum docent inadvertently confirmed the value of my writing approach. At a museum where I produced an audio tour of paintings and sculptures for both sighted and blind visitors, the docent told me she listened to the audio tour and gleaned new **visual** insights that she could use in her group tours of the exhibit with sighted visitors.

So now I advocate audio tours that address both audiences. The challenge is coming up with the correct balance of artistic or historical context and verbal description, in a length that won't bore the visitor. I must decide how much verbal description is adequate for person who can't see the painting or artifact, and how to weave it with the other information.

If there is a downside to this approach, it is that some blind people want more detailed verbal description, and that is valid criticism. But in most cases I feel the verbal description tours provide experiences that can be shared by both audiences, whether in a museum or on a web site.

Writing Successful Verbal Description — The Content

Writing Begins With Research

Before you begin writing verbal description of a work of art, you must gather information on the artist, the style or school of art, whether the artist has written or spoken about his or her work, what critics have written, and how the public has reacted. The point is that the verbal description **should not be about your opinions**. You must filter all the information you find and synthesize it into your verbal description.

If you're able to interview and record an artist, you can weave an audio clip into your verbal description. Even a recorded telephone conversation is usable. I have recorded short phone interviews with artists and included excerpts in the audio tour stops about their works. Artists have talked about their inspiration, their technique, or how they hope the viewer will react. I've even asked artists how they would describe their work to someone who cannot see it. Hearing the voice of the artist makes a compelling connection for listeners, whether sighted or blind.

What to Say First

For artworks, start simply and directly with basic information: the title of the work, the artist's name, the medium, maybe the year it was done, maybe where it can be seen. The client you write for will determine what you include.

How would you judge this opening sentence in a verbal description of this painting?



Early Sunday Morning is an oil painting on canvas by Edward Hopper in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Seems like efficient, succinct writing, direct and straightforward, no? It is, for a reader. But it contains four bits of important information that fly by the ear. Easy to read and reread. Not as easy to hear and retain. It's better to deliver the facts individually, in sequence, starting with the most important facts.

The title of the painting is Early Sunday Morning. The artist is Edward Hopper. It's an oil painting on canvas. It's in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Then Offer Dimensions

For paintings and sculpture, give listeners the dimensions of the work. Be specific if you know the dimensions or tell listeners if you are approximating.

The sculpture is 18 inches tall. It stands upon a pedestal about 3 feet tall.

The painting is a rectangle about 3 feet wide and 2 feet high.

And Give the Big Picture

It's best to then quickly give a summary of the content and style of the painting or sculpture before delving into the details. To continue using Hopper's painting as an example:

It shows a block of three attached buildings, all two stories tall, with shops on the street level and apartments above them. The buildings extend horizontally across the painting from the left edge to the right edge.

Establish a Point of View

For a representational painting, describe the point of view the artist given the viewer, who is now your listener. Are we seated across a table from the subject or are we across a field? Are we looking down on or up at the subject? Again using the Hopper painting:

You see the buildings as if you're standing across the street from them.

Also, when you use phrases like "to the left" or "on the right," explain whether you're referring to your point of view as viewer of the painting, or the point of view of the subject in the painting.

For describing architecture or sculpture, it's equally important to establish a point of view for the listener. Where are you standing as you describe? Across the street from it? At the base of it looking up? Maybe you're sitting on a park bench in front of it.

For a sculpture, explain if you are viewing it from one point of view, or tell the listener if you will describe it from various points around it.

As the verbal description continues, remember that you are incrementally building up an image in the mind of the listener. Each line should add to that image in an order and in sequence. And you should first tell the listener what that order will be.

I will describe the mansion by beginning at the ground floor and moving up to the roofline.

The painting is primarily made up of three horizontal sections. I will begin with the upper third of the painting.

Relate to Listener Experiences and Find Analogies

When describing sculptures, or objects and figures within paintings, make comparisons in human terms. Are they life size? Twice life size? The width of your hand?

Sometimes the best way to verbally describe something is with an analogy to something in life the listener might know or have experienced.

It's as big as [a car, an elephant, a soccer ball].

The wrought iron railing is waist high.

The nave of the church is like a long rectangular box.

The body of the mandolin has the shape of pear.

The bell tower's three sections look like boxes piled one atop another.

For descriptions of architecture, research to find exact dimensions like height and width of buildings, towers, windows, etc. If you can't find that information, estimate using your body. Use your own height to estimate building height. Pace off the length of a façade and count your steps. Then multiply by the length of your pace and approximate. If there is a stairway, count the steps and include the number in your description.

Direct the Listener's Pose

Sometimes you can suggest that a listener use his or her body to feel a certain shape, or to understand the pose of a figure in a painting or sculpture.



Along the top edge of the roof is a line of carved wooden shapes. The shape is kind of like a large leaf. Hold your hand out flat and spread your fingers wide and you'll have an idea of the shape.



The sculpture consists of the model's head and face, a chignon or knot of hair at the back of her head, and her hands and forearms. To understand the pose, try this. Place your palms together in a prayer pose, and also try to put your forearms together so they touch. Now keeping your arms together, place your joined hands on the left side of our chin and tilt your head down a bit. That's the sculpture.



To understand Lincoln's pose in Brady's photograph try this. Stand up straight and imagine the camera is directly in front of you. Keep your head facing forward, while turning your shoulders to the right about 45 degrees. Your right hand hangs straight down; your left hand rests on a pile of books on a short wooden column.

Color

Don't hesitate to include color in your verbal descriptions. Often blind people had vision earlier in life and recall the world in color. Even congenitally blind know the cultural associations with various colors. Today there are smart phone apps that can tell a blind person what color something is.

Refer to technique

When possible, make reference to the style and technique **AND** how that technique affects a viewer's experience. For example, is the paint applied thickly and roughly or with a fine delicate line? Describe how the technique serves the artist's creativity and the affect on the viewer. This type of information should reflect your research into the views of critics and the public. Here's an example I wrote in a verbal description stop for a painting by Cezanne.



Cezanne was not interested in painting realistic views of his subjects. We can tell the hillside surrounding the mission is thick with nature. But he does not paint realistic trees. Instead he used small parallel brush strokes with many colors to build up the impression of a lush woodland. And in some places he has deliberately let the off white canvas peek through, becoming an element of the landscape.

Use Touch

If you have tactile diagrams to accompany the works you describe, by all means use them. Some museums use tactiles before or after listening to verbal description; some museums have visitors touch while listening.

If you have access to artists in an exhibit, ask if they would provide a small tactile sample of their artwork for blind visitors to touch. Of course, the venue hosting the exhibit must be open to allowing such a possibility.

In verbal descriptions of architecture or public sculpture, look for opportunities to invite listeners to touch the sculpture itself, or the texture of walls or other architectural details.

To Learn More. The Art Beyond Sight Institute web site offers an excellent PPT titled [Verbal Description Training](#) that was developed for staff/educator/docent training and self-study. The Training focuses on how to use Verbal Description during group tours and how to integrate it into the interactive nature of live presentation with blind or visually impaired museum visitors.

Writing Successful Verbal Description — Language for the Ear

Your Audience — Listeners

Always remember that you are writing for a **listener**, not a reader. A reader can re-read a word, a sentence, a paragraph. A listener does not know what's coming next, and can't go back and review what they just heard.

If listeners don't get it the first time, if they don't understand each line clearly and immediately, then they may not hear the next line you write because their mind is still deciphering the previous line. The point is to never leave doubt about what you mean.

Take your ego out of it. Don't try to impress with clever writing, complex sentence structure, and exuberant vocabulary. Put yourself in the listener's place. He/she wants the basic information in unflowery prose. Listeners should forget about your presence and only remember the image you leave in their minds.

Keep It Simple

Verbal Description writing is writing for the ear instead of the eye, and it has basic principles that writers use when writing for any presentation that uses the spoken word — radio, newscasts on radio or TV, film and video narration, PowerPoint presentations — whenever information is conveyed with the spoken word.

1. Use simple sentences. They're direct and each holds a thought or image.

The sky is blue.

Sometimes a compound sentence is ok.

The sky is blue and the sea below it is green.

But never, or almost never, use a complex sentence, that is, one with a subjunctive clause. These clauses begin with words like which, that, who, while, when.

The sky, which extends across the entire top of the painting, is blue.

The problem is that a complex sentence asks your listener to hold the first fact in mind — while hearing about another fact until the end of the sentence — which makes a connection to the first fact. A complex sentence unnecessarily asks the brain to decipher your writing. Use two simple sentences instead.

The sky is blue. It extends across the entire top of the painting.

2. Use active verbs

The passive voice is weak writing whether for the eye or the ear, but it's especially troublesome for a listener. For example, *The boy was hit by the car* uses the passive voice. Who did what? The car hit the boy. That's active.

The passive voice can bring doubt to a listener's mind. It asks the listener's ear (and brain) to figure out who did what to whom by mentally inverting the information it hears. The worst examples of the passive voice use forms of the verb to be. In this example, both verbs are in the passive voice.

Having been influenced by Cubism, the young artist's work was reflective of its principles.

Better to write something like this:

*Cubism **influenced** the young artist, and his work **reflected** its principles.*

3. Write like you talk

First, that means it's ok to use contractions. People talk with them, don't they?

Second, keep the vocabulary simple. Beware of the long word that is no better than the short word. An artist doesn't "utilize" paint. She uses it. Her style isn't "referred to" as Impressionism. It's called Impressionism. Don't "be cognizant" of these long words. Watch for them.

Third, use proper terms from art history and for techniques when appropriate. But when you do, define or explain the term simply in the next sentence.

There are pilasters on the sides of the windows. A pilaster looks like a free standing column, but it's a decorative element attached to the building.

Undefined jargon can put off listeners and make you sound formal and distant. You should be talking to someone, not giving a lecture or reading a book.

The best way to find out how you sound is to read your words aloud and listen. Are you talking to someone or reading to him or her? It helps to use words like "you" and "yours" and not the stuffy and impersonal "one" or "one's." Read these out loud to hear the difference.

The red flowers draw one's attention to the lower right.

The red flowers draw your attention to the lower right

Writing Successful Verbal Description — With Sound

When a sighted person has experienced a work of art, they are often left with a mental image of the work and with a sense memory of the experience. For people with vision loss, Verbal Description can help do the same, but I have found that adding sound — music, sound effect, ambiences, dialogue — offers even more compelling ways to create those images and memories.

Creative use of sound in an audio tour can help listeners have a richer sensory experience that can help them both understand how a work looks and leave them with a visceral sense memory of the art. You may find it useful to write verbal description with sound, using in-house staff or an outside producer. Here are some ways I've combined sound with verbal description.

Creating Context. Sometimes I begin an audio tour stop by using sound with narration or dialogue to set the historical or cultural setting for the creation of a work of art. I use the techniques of storytelling to set the context for the work. Then I add traditional verbal description to create the visual image of the work. You can hear examples of this with the works on the [American Art](#) web site.



Here is another example about a 17th century painting, **Still Life with Parrots** by [Jan Davidzon de Heem](#), that I produced as part of a tour for the Ringling Museum in Sarasota, Florida.

Sometimes you can create context by simply adding an ambience background that supports the content of a painting: birds in a forest setting, restaurant ambience, horses trotting by, a church bell tolling in the distance. Let the content of the painting or sculpture and your imagination suggest the ambience.

Creating Audio Analogues. Sometimes I have created sound analogues for visual images or techniques.



You can hear one example of a sound analogue in this audio tour stop for Marcel Duchamp's painting **Nude Descending a Staircase**. It's 3 minutes long.

Methods for Delivering Audio Tours

Here's a brief summary, as of 2013, of the options for having sighted or blind listeners hear an audio tour in a museum: buying or renting audio players, cell phones, smart phone/pad apps, and do-it-yourself solutions.



Museums & Mobile

To keep up with the evolving world of technology for delivering museum tours for general audiences and people with disabilities, visit the [Museums & Mobile](#) web site. Museums & Mobile is a research and professional development initiative focused on the effective use of mobile technologies within the cultural sector. It sponsors online conferences and conducts annual surveys of the field.

Audio Players. Major audio tour producers like [Acoustiguide](#), [Antenna Audio](#), and [Orpheo](#) have a variety of players to sell or rent. Some are audio only, some also contain screens to show images or play video. Blind visitors can easily use the players because navigation is via a touchpad just like a phone. Users enter a tour stop number and listen, with options for adjusting the volume and pausing or replaying the audio. This method of delivery requires a sighted companion or museum staff to tell the blind listeners the stop numbers to enter. Some museums choose to install infrared systems to automatically trigger audio stops, giving the blind visitor greater independence but less control over the listening experience.

Cell Phones. There are companies like [Guide by Cell](#) and [OnCell](#) that make it possible for sighted or blind visitors to use their own cell phones to dial a number and listen to audio tour stops. Listeners use their keypad to control volume and playback, and there is often a feature for leaving feedback for the museum on individual stops or the entire tour, like leaving a voicemail message. Companies who provide cell phone audio tours can produce and upload the audio for a museum, or provide the museum with software and instructions for doing it in house. This makes it easy for a museum to easily change the content of a tour if necessary.

A potential limit to cell phone audio tours is that some listeners prefer not to use their calling plan's minutes, or do not want to use their phone's battery life on a tour.

Smart Phone/Pad Apps. There are a variety of companies that now produce museum tour applications for smart phones and pads. Besides containing audio tours, these applications can contain still images and video, interactive features, links to web pages, and links to social media. People can download the app to their phone at the museum or before visiting.

These apps offer possibilities for designing tours that are accessible to multiple audiences. For blind visitors, the feature VoiceOver in iPhones and TalkBack in Android phones can make on screen text audible to people who are

blind or have low vision. And for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, on screen transcriptions can make audio accessible.

A potential limit to the use of apps is that visitors may not want to use up their phone's data plan. A museum can solve that problem by providing wi-fi access within its walls.

Do-It-Yourself. Some smaller museums and presenting organizations have developed less expensive ways to provide audio tours for sighted and blind audiences. Some write their own verbal description tour (or hire a writer) and then record the tour using inexpensive audio recording equipment, computer editing software. Then they provide the audio to visitors on consumer quality playback products like CD players and iPods. A few museums have adapted blind audio labeling products like [Pen Friend](#) and [Touch Memo](#) to the museum setting.

Speaking of pens, a unique system (not do-it-yourself) that uses a pen is provided by Touch Graphics. The system uses a Talking Tactile Pen that can record and playback audio and that can trigger audio playback when it touches specially designed tactile images. The system is in use to provide a verbal description tour of the Intrepid Sea, Air, and Space Museum in New York. I wrote this tour in consultation with Art Beyond Sight. The pen has also been used in other museum exhibitions, including at the Boston Fine Arts Museum.

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