# Guidelines for digital accessibility: film

Museums and theatres often use film to engage with audiences, whether trailing a new show or exhibition, or revealing behind-the-scenes activity, such as conservation, archaeology, rehearsals, or interviews with artists and actors.

## Practical steps

While film shown in cinema and on TV has the technical facility for a secondary audio track for **audio description (AD)**, most arts and heritage venues will use [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/) or [Vimeo](https://vimeo.com/) as a platform, and embed the player within their website. Neither of these has a secondary audio track facility.[[1]](#footnote-1)

There are 3 options:

**OPTION 1: Inclusive**

Following the steps and tips below, use accessible design from the start, to ensure people with a visual impairment can reach your content.

**OPTION 2: AD track**

Commission audio description from an agency (see list at end of this document), who will script, record and provide a new version of the film with the AD track incorporated. This can then be uploaded to YouTube or Vimeo as a replacement, or additional to the original film. Companies that provide film and TV AD services are not charitable organisations, and therefore their fees may exceed your available budget. The preparation, recording and mixing of an audio description requires expertise and specialised equipment, so a minimum fee is always charged, even though your film may only be two minutes long.

**OPTION 3: Text alternative**

Create an enhanced, described transcript in text format, which can then be provided alongside the film for a blind or partially sighted person to read during, after, or instead of the film. Here are two examples of these enhanced transcripts, produced by VocalEyes’ describers:

**Disability Arts International:** [Disabled Leaders in Dance (video)](http://www.disabilityartsinternational.org/films/) | [Disabled Leaders in Dance (audio-described script)](http://www.disabilityartsinternational.org/films/disabled-leaders-in-dance-ad/)

**National Trust Felbrigg Hall:** [The Unfinished Portrait (video)](https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/felbrigg-hall-gardens-and-estate/features/stephen-fry-reveals-previously-untold-lgbtq-history) | [The Unfinished Portrait (audio-described script)](https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/felbrigg-hall-gardens-and-estate/documents/audio-descriptive-script.pdf)

## Making your film accessible to blind and partially sighted audiences from the start

By thinking about it in advance, it is possible to minimise the need for AD. In some cases, you may be able to do without AD altogether. Here are some steps you might consider:

Any text on screen – speakers, locations, dates - needs to be voiced. Ask all speakers **to identify themselves** by name (and job title if relevant) at the start of the interview. For example:

‘I’m Tristram Hunt and I’m the director of the V & A.’

Alternatively, a well-prepared interviewer can fill in visual details by **setting up the location** as well as giving a full introduction to the speaker to allow for variation of format. For example:

‘David Bellwood is Access Officer at Shakespeare’s Globe and I join him outside the reconstructed Tudor building on the south bank of London’s River Thames.’

The interviewer can also **explain unexpected noises** if necessary:

‘…thanks David and to the helicopter pilot who chose that moment to fly overhead’

(while **reinforcing the guest’s name** during the interview).

They can also **link to the next interview/location**. For example:

‘You’ve kindly agreed to take us on a tour of the New Sam Wanamaker Theatre: What makes it special?’

They can also **amplify the response** if the interviewee doesn’t give much visual detail:

‘I’m struck by the mellow light emitted by the flickering beeswax candles, illuminating the light oak frame and by just how close the audience seats are to the stage’

**Tip 1: ask the interviewer to imagine it’s a radio interview.**

A good interviewer asks questions to which he or she should know the answers, so it cannot be stressed enough that an interviewer must be well prepared. Equally, the interviewee should be well briefed about the need to include visual description, especially if the interview is conducted over visual content. For example, a choreographer will talk about a dance piece at the same time as it is being shown on screen.

**Tip 2. Watch other arts documentaries to assess how accessible they are.**

If you intend your documentary to have off-screen narration/voiceover, it may be easier to add descriptive information at this stage, especially if the sequence of interviews is only determined after they have been recorded. For example:

‘Hintze Hall was designed by a young architect, Alfred Waterhouse, who modelled it on a Romanesque Cathedral. It has recently been refurbished and this large, airy space is dominated by a huge skeleton of a blue whale, suspended from the ceiling in an animated pose – it measures some 25m from the front of its giant jaw bones, or mandibles, to the tip of its tail.’

Just as sports commentators are trained to add extra visual information to their commentaries, so the narration of a documentary can do the same. If well- crafted, this can serve as an audio description in itself.

**Tip 3. Before you record your narration, read it out loud with the visuals, to identify any information gaps.**

## Editing

Use visuals that illustrate the interview content, not ones that add supplementary information from which blind people are excluded.

## Sound editing

Opt for ambient sound that allows the location to be established and maintained rather than superimposing music that masks ambient sound.

Music can mask vital auditory clues that can give a strong sense of place, ambience and context which blind people can use. A film about a musician or musical piece will obviously use relevant music to illustrate the subject, but background music for its own sake should be avoided.

**Tip 4. When you embark on a film, consult a visually impaired person. Who better to help you get it right?**

## Companies that provide film/TV Audio Description services

BTI Studios ([www.btistudios.com](http://www.btistudios.com))

Matinee ([matinee.co.uk](https://www.matinee.co.uk/))

Ericsson / Red Bee Media ([redbeemedia.com](http://www.redbeemedia.com/))

VocalEyes does not provide a recorded AD service for film (Option 2), but we are happy to advise on making your film inclusive to blind or partially sighted audiences (Option 1), and we also provide enhanced, audio-descriptive transcripts (Option 3) for films produced by theatres, museums and other arts organisations.

Please contact enquiries@vocaleyes.co.uk to get a quote.

Remember also, to be accessible, your web videos should have captions for people who are d/Deaf, deafened and hard of hearing. These can be added using either YouTube or Vimeo. Our colleagues at Stagetext ([stagetext.org](http://www.stagetext.org/)) can help you with all your captioning needs.

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1. There is a website service called YouDescribe ([youdescribe.org](https://youdescribe.org/)) which is built using YouTube. This allows someone to add an AD track directly via a microphone to any YouTube video. However, the videos are then restricted to the YouDescribe website. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)