

Basic Guidelines for Writing Image Descriptions

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This document is adapted from the *Description Tip Sheet* developed by the Described and Captioned Media Program, which can be found at <https://dcmp.org/learn/227/>, supplemented by information from a variety of other sources.

Because these guidelines are designed for writing image descriptions in local languages, we include information on recording the image descriptions, as Text-to-Speech is not available for such languages.

The most important rule of description is to *describe what you see*.

Preparation

- Review the entire book and consider its purpose and audience. This will influence how you write the descriptions.
- Note the grade levels or ages of the intended audience and write descriptions with that audience in mind.
- If the book is on a particular subject, research the subject and related terminology to ensure accurate definitions and clear descriptions.

What to Describe

- Describe what is most essential for the viewer to follow, understand, and appreciate the book's content.
- Focus on what is the *most significant* and *least obvious* from the narration of the surrounding text. You cannot describe everything, so be sure to describe what the image shows that is significant to the story and that the reader would not know if they cannot see the image.
- Describe shape, size, texture, etc., as appropriate to the comprehension or appreciation of content, but do not describe colors unless the color is important for understanding.
- Consistently identify people and characters by name. If a name is not given, identify the character by some obvious physical attribute (e.g., “the tall man”).
- Describe discernable attributes and expressive gestures, but don't interpret emotion or reasoning. You don't know what the person is thinking; describe what you see.

- If the image contains any text, include that text in the image description exactly as it appears in the image.

What *not* to Describe

- Do not describe any images that are purely decorative and do not communicate any information.
- Do not include in the image description information or details that are already provided to the reader in surrounding text. Only images which convey important information not already described should have a description.
- Do not include details that are not in focus in the book.
- Do not include details that are obvious. For example, you would not need to say, “The man has two eyes, two ears, and a mouth.”
- Do not add your interpretation of the image but only what you see. For example, you may *think* a person is happy, but what you can *see* is that they are smiling.
- Do not add a phrase like, “An image of...” Just describe the image. If you use a different voice for the image descriptions and narration of the text, the reader will be able to distinguish the two. (See **Voicing/Recording**, below.)

How to Describe

- Use plain, simple language.
- Use vocabulary that is meaningful to blind or visually impaired people.
- Use age-appropriate vocabulary and grammar.
- Match vocabulary to the book’s text.
- Wait to use any technical vocabulary until it has been introduced in the book.
- Describe shapes, sizes, and other essential attributes of objects by comparison to objects that are familiar to the intended audience.
- Write descriptions in present tense, active voice, and in third-person narrative style.
- Be sure to include any information that the reader will not otherwise know if they cannot see the picture.
- Describe objectively, without interpretation, censorship, or comment.
- Use vivid language.
- Be succinct. Do not write more text than is needed to adequately describe what is in the image and is also important for the reader to know.

Voicing/Recording

- Choose someone to record the image descriptions whose style and delivery will be similar to but distinguishable from other voices used for narration; be sure that the difference between the voices isn't distracting.
- Practice voicing the description before recording—read it out loud several times, then record. Be sure to review the recording to make sure it is satisfactory. If it isn't, record the text again.
- Read the text clearly and distinctly.
- Speak at a rate that can be understood. Use the existing narration as a guide to how fast to read.