

Technology Guidance for Audio Description (AD)

What is Audio Description?

Audio description (AD) is a secondary narration track added to a video that describes key visual details for viewers who are blind or have low vision. Think of it like a voiceover narrator filling in the blanks during natural pauses in dialogue—describing onscreen text and significant actions necessary to understand the video. AD requirements apply to prerecorded videos. Live streams (such as public meetings) require real-time captions under WCAG 2.1 AA, but generally do not require live audio description.

Do all videos need AD?

No. If your video's existing audio already tells the full story, you don't need audio description.

A video does not need AD if:

- Everything is spoken aloud: The main speaker or voiceover already mentions all important onscreen details, text, and graphics.
- Visuals are purely decorative: The visual elements don't add any essential information needed to understand the content (e.g., background b-roll that doesn't convey critical info).

A video needs AD if:

- Videos contain important visual-only information
- On-screen text, charts, or graphs are shown but not read aloud.
- Actions or visual demonstrations are not narrated.
- Scene changes or visual context affects understanding.

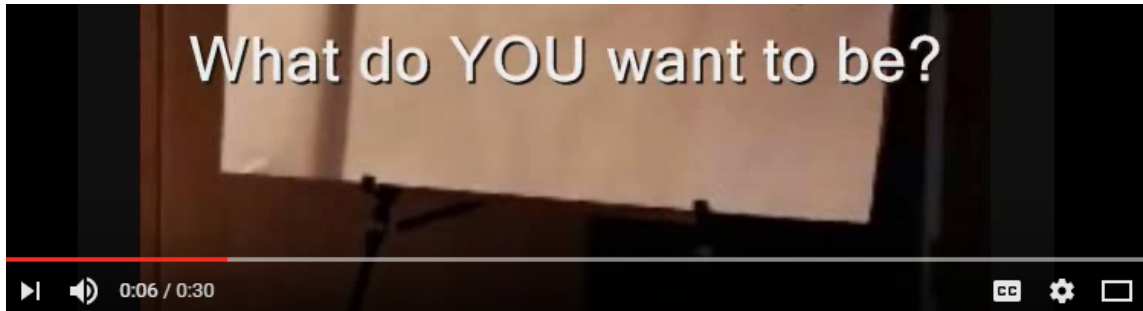
How can I tell if AD is needed on my Video?

To test your video, follow this 3-step audit:

1. Watch your video normally and write down any important visual content—like onscreen text, speaker names, scene changes, or actions—that isn't explained in the audio track.
2. Close your eyes or turn off your monitor, and listen to the video from start to finish.
3. Compare what you heard against your Step 1 list. Was any essential detail unmentioned or unclear in the audio? If yes, **your video needs Audio Description.**

Common examples of videos that fail:

- **Silent Onscreen Text:** Questions, instructions, or titles appear on screen as text, but the speaker jumps straight into the answer without reading the text aloud.



- **Vague Call-to-Actions:** The narrator says, "Visit our website or check out our social media," while important URLs, email addresses, or handles appear only on screen.



Quick Checklist: Watch Out for These!

Be sure to evaluate the beginning and end of the video; this is where most videos contain textual information

- **Intros & Outros:** Check the beginning and end of your video—this is where vital text (title cards, credits, contact info) is usually hidden.
- **Speaker IDs:** Ensure names, job titles, and locations shown on screen are spoken aloud (e.g., "John Doe, President of ACME Motors").
- **Visual Verbal Cues:** Pay close attention whenever a speaker says phrases like "As you can see here..." or "Look at this graph."
- **Silent B-Roll & Sequences:** Check long montages or visual demonstrations that have background music but no spoken narration.

Can I put AD in the Captions?

No. Captions convert audio into text on screen for viewers who are deaf or hard of hearing. Because audio description is meant for viewers who are blind or have low vision, putting descriptions in text captions defeats the purpose—they won't be able to see them!

Are there any examples of videos with AD I can find?

- [Web Accessibility Perspectives: Video Captions - Audio Described Version](#)
- [Web Accessibility Perspectives: Colors with Good Contrast - Audio Described Version](#)

Is AD covered in ADA Title II?

Yes. Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guarantees individuals with disabilities equal access to the services, programs, and activities of state and local government entities. To enforce this, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) explicitly adopted **WCAG 2.1 Level AA** as the mandatory technical standard for digital content. For AD, it is specifically called out in [WCAG 2.1 1.2.5](#) Audio Description (Prerecorded): Audio description is provided for all prerecorded video content in synchronized media. (Level AA)

While the DOJ granted an administrative deadline extension for public entities to achieve full technical compliance, this extension only shifts the timeline and does not alter the underlying legal obligation to provide effective communication and accessible media.

Can I just provide a transcript?

No, providing a transcript only covers [WCAG 2.1 1.2.3](#) Audio Description or Media Alternative (Prerecorded) (Level A). Since your video only meets the Level A guidelines and not the Level AA, it is not compliant with ADA title II.

Best Practice: Provide both! An audio description track keeps your video compliant with Level AA, and linking a descriptive transcript alongside your video provides a fantastic extra resource for users who are deaf, blind or prefer reading.

How can I plan my video so it does not need AD?

The easiest and most cost-effective way to handle Audio Description is to design your video so it doesn't need a separate AD track in the first place! This is called integrated description, and it starts during the scripting phase.

When writing your script, write both the spoken dialogue and the visual actions/text together. Then, review it with your eyes off the page: if a scene relies purely on visuals to convey important information, tweak the dialogue to speak that information aloud.

Real-World Script Fixes

Requires AD	Does Not Require AD
A title card appears on screen reading "John Doe, President of ACME Motors."	The speaker opens with, "Hi, I'm John Doe, President of ACME Motors."
Onscreen text asks "What's your favorite feature?" and the guest answers, "I love the speed."	The interviewer asks aloud, "What's your favorite feature?" before the guest replies.
A host points to a pie chart on a slide and says, "As you can see in this section right here, the numbers speak for themselves."	The host points to a pie chart on a slide and says, "As you can see in this blue section, our online sales made up 65% of total revenue this quarter—the numbers speak for themselves."
Onscreen text shows Maryland.gov while upbeat background music plays.	The narrator says, "To sign up, visit us at example.com."

Pro Tip for Video Creators: Integrating visual details right into your main audio track doesn't just make your video accessible—it also makes it better for people listening to your video like a podcast while driving, cooking, or working out!

Guidance if your video does need AD:

Decide on how to implement

Acceptable techniques stated in WCAG 2.1 are as follows:

- Option 1 - [General Technique #78](#) - Providing a second, user-selectable, audio track that includes audio descriptions
- Option 2 - [General Technique #173](#) - Providing a version of a movie with audio descriptions
- Option 3 - [General Technique #203](#) - Using a static text alternative to describe a talking head video (**Note – This only applies if there is a single speaker; if multiple speakers are included in the video, this may NOT be used**)

If implementing 2 versions (Option 2)

- Put the link to the Audio Described version of the video adjacent to the original version of the video
- Indicate in the link text that the version is audio described and the title of the video, for example "Audio Described Version of Maryland Reimagined"

DoIT Accessibility Team

If you have further questions or need additional guidance or a video review, please reach out to the accessibility team via doit.intake@maryland.gov, we're here to help!



Wes Moore | Governor
Aruna Miller | Lt. Governor
Katie Savage | Secretary

Additional Resources:

- [Webaim Audio Descriptions](#)
- [What is Audio Description Video](#)