Module 1

Unit 7: Audio description guidelines

Core video transcript

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Transcript

Slide 1

Hello. I'm Nina Reviers, from the University of Antwerp, and in this ADLAB PRO video I will discuss Audio Description guidelines. This is Unit 7 in Module 1 (AD: General Introduction).

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In this video I will addresses the following questions:

What types of AD guidelines exist?

Why are AD guidelines important?

What topcis do AD guidelines cover?

What are the differences between AD guidelines?

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A guideline is a document that includes a recommended course of action for a product or service. AD guidelines, more in particular, aim to streamline the creation processes of an audio described product and offer advise on AD scripting strategies based on sound practice or research.

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There exist different types of AD guidelines, depending on three factors. First, the country in and for which they were developed. Most countries or regions that offer AD, have some kind of local

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guideline in the local language. Second, the type of AD they cover. Most guidelines have been developed for film, but some countries als have guidelines for theatre AD, museum or web accessibility). Finally, the purpose and scope of AD guidelines differs. Some guidelines have been developed by broadcasters or companies to be used as a style guide for employees and freelancers (think of Netflix, for instance). Some guidelines have been developed by non-profit organisations, such as the US Description Key or in collaboration with research institutions, such as the ADLAB guidelines.

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But why are guidelines important? Guidelines support good quality. They set a standard that helps students and professionals to develop their skills and that provides production companies and user organisations with tools for training and quality assessment.
AD guidelines are rarely binding, but in some countries they are officially recognised by public or regulatory bodies and linked to laws and regulations, which increases their impact.

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Most AD guidelines focus on AD scripting and cover topics, such as the following:

What to describe: How to select and prioritise information?

When to describe: audio description should make effective use of the space available, but at the same time leave enough room for the film's atmosphere to shine through; how to find a balance?

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How to describe in terms of linguistic choices - lexis, syntax, tense and cohesion.

How to describe in terms of voicing - intonation, narration speed and voice type.

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In addition, guidelines discuss specifically thorny issues such as: subjectivity, film techniques, the use of colour and describing ethnicity, and how to deal with sounds and text on screen.

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Let's look at two examples.

In 2014, the EU-funded project ADLAB published the first European-wide guidelines for Audio Description. The aim of the project was to develop guidelines for AD scriptwriting that had a sound scientific grounding and that were not prescriptive, but offered strategies, described their effects in different contexts and provided insights into when they are appropriate.

The ADLAB guidelines are freely available online on the project website adlabproject.eu.

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Another widely used AD guideline was published in 2000 by Ofcom, the UK's communications regulator. They are entitled "Guidance

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On Standards for Audio Description". Even though this guidelines was developed for the provision of AD in the UK, the Ofcom guidelines were and to some extent still are a standard for Europe.

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While most guidelines, such as the two examples we just discussed, cover similar topics, there are differences among guidelines in terms of the general approach (for instance prescriptive or strategic) or in terms of the proposed strategies to deal with specific issues. One such thorny issue, by way of example, is that of subjectivity.

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The guidelines of the American Council for the Blind, for instance, advise to describe what you see in an objective way and, in relation to gestures and movements in particular, they say to "resist any temptation to convey what you may feel is inferred by them, such as an emotional state."

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Ofcom's "Guidance On Standards for Audio Description" adopts a similar approach: "A few well-chosen words can enhance a scene considerably, but they must not reflect the personal view of the describer."

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The ADLAB guidelines, on the other hand, try to offer a more nuanced approach that acknowledges the benefit of more subjective strategies for certain contexts. They say: "There are a range of possible strategies for describing a narrative event with different gradations in the explicitness of description (...) . Generally speaking (...) they imply a choice between "objectively" describing what you see on screen (a strategy located at one end of the scale), naming what can be seen more accurately (located somewhere in the middle of the scale) or explaining what the visual element means (located at the other end of the scale). They provide the following example:

"A flashback" versus "Back in 1930"
"Her eyes open wide" versus "She is amazed"
Or a combination of these:
"Her eyes open wide in amazement."

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Audio Description is an innovative field that is continuously evolving; as a result guidelines and best practices keep evolving as well. It is therefore important as a describer to keep up to date with the newest developments!

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