

Art Beyond Sight

Bringing Art & Culture to All

Verbal Description and Visual Language

Constructing Effective and Memorable Mental Images

What is verbal description?

Verbal description is the practice of creating a mental image for someone who cannot see an artwork, object, space, or event. The describer translates visual information into language. This gives the hearer, often someone who is blind or has low vision, the opportunity to form a mental picture of what is being described. With that mental picture, the hearer can better form opinions, understand story or context, and participate meaningfully in discussions about the described object or event.

Types of Description

- Live and in person, describing an object or space
- Supplementing a touch tour, tactile graphic, or other multi-sensory element
- Recorded for a website, audio guide, or app
- Live or recorded, describing a performance
- Describing a film or video

Some Guidelines for Creating Effective In-Person Descriptions of Artwork

- These are only guidelines, NOT a template!
- Prepare ahead of time but don't create a script to memorize or read. More often than not, you'll want to expect the unexpected and be ready for the on-the-fly
- Include essential information. What is it? How big is it?
- Go from the general to the specific.
- Try thinking of a system or strategy - and share that approach with your visitor(s).
- Use specific and precise language for location and orientation.
- If you use a technical or art term, define it.
- Remember, art is more than what it depicts or expresses. Find ways to describe the style or technique.
- Use thoughtful analogies.

- Adjust your choices based on your audience
- Describe what you see, not what you know or feel or think.
- Be the eyes, not the brain!

Describing Space and Scale

- Real units of measurement can be interesting, but do not always convey a real idea of scale.
- Brainstorm analogies to things a visitor might have experienced (not SEEN!) in daily life, such as their own height or average city blocks.
- Pacing off size of an object can be helpful in communicating scale.
- Use all of your senses to experience a space – its sound, its smell, its temperature – and make references to these in your descriptions.

Beyond Verbal Description: Descriptive and Visual Language for All Visitors

- Useful in mixed groups, large groups, or groups when you do not know if someone is visually impaired
- Add extra visual phrases to what you usually say
- Embrace the adjective!
- Include specific directions, points of orientation, locations, quantities, etc.
- If you point or gesture, also articulate verbally what you are indicating with your hands
- Encourage members of your group to be descriptive and specific when they ask questions or make comments
- Those who don't need this extra information will not object, but those who DO will have a richer experience
- Providing a more directed looking experience benefits many audiences, especially those who are new to looking at art

What else can you do?

- Consider adding tactile elements to your descriptions and tours.
- Explore and engage all the senses – everyone learns differently.
- Collaborate with your visitors to build a meaningful museum experience. Don't be afraid to use inquiry and discussion, even with visitors who are blind.