

DOES THIS VIDEO NEED AUDIO DESCRIPTION?

Audio description provides spoken narration of important visual information for students and members of the public who are accessing a service, program, or activity, and cannot see the screen.

Under WCAG 2.1 Level AA, prerecorded videos must include audio description **when essential visual information is not already communicated through narration.**

In many cases, videos already meet this requirement because the speaker or narrator naturally explains what is happening on screen. Or, closed captions help satisfy certain requirements.

It is important to note that description **does not have to occur at the exact moment a visual appears.** As long as the information conveyed visually is explained somewhere in the narration, separate audio description may not be required. In other words, the timing of the description does not need to perfectly match the shot. What matters is that a viewer who cannot see the screen can still understand the information conveyed in the video.

Audio description also **does not require describing every visual detail.** The goal is to ensure that viewers who cannot see the screen receive the same meaningful information that sighted viewers receive.

What Counts as Important Visual Information?

Important visual information is anything a viewer must understand in order to follow the message of the video.

This typically includes:

- Dates or deadlines
- Names of buildings or locations
- Program names or titles
- Statistics or charts
- Instructions or calls to action
- Labels identifying people or speakers
- Demonstrations of procedures
- On-screen text containing key information

Visual details that are decorative or atmospheric usually do not require description.

Examples of decorative visuals:

- Scenic campus footage
- Crowd shots at events
- Students walking through campus
- Background imagery supporting narration

Note About Speaker Identification

If speaker identity is important to the story, and is only conveyed visually (e.g., a lower-third name graphic), it must also be available in audio or captions, depending on the accessibility need.

Step 1: Does the Video Contain Important Visual Information?

Ask yourself:

If someone could only hear the video and could not see the screen, would they miss important information?

No
Audio description is not required.

Yes
Continue to the next step.

Step 2: Is That Visual Information Already Spoken?

Audio description is not required if narration already communicates the information shown on screen.

Examples of integrated description include:

- The speaker reads slide content aloud
- Charts and statistics are explained verbally
- On-screen text is spoken
- Demonstrations are described during the presentation

If narration already conveys the information, the video includes integrated audio description.

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Step 3: Check for Common Audio Description Needs

If any of the following appear in the video and are not spoken, audio description or integrated narration may be required.

- On-screen text not spoken aloud
- Charts or graphs shown without explanation
- Visual demonstrations without narration
- Important actions happening silently
- Text overlays with dates, deadlines, or instructions
- Graphics that communicate meaning

EXAMPLES

PowerPoint Presentation

Scenario

A faculty member records a lecture using slides.

Not Accessible

The speaker says:
“As you can see here.”

The slide displays:

- Enrollment statistics
- Bullet points
- A quotation

None of the slide content is read aloud.

Result: Audio description or integrated narration is required.

Accessible Version

The speaker explains:
“This chart shows enrollment increased from 1,200 students in 2022 to 1,500 students in 2025.”
The bullet points and quote are also read aloud.

Result: Separate audio description is not required.

Student Life Reel or TikTok

Scenario

A video shows students studying, attending events, and walking across campus with music.

Accessible Example

Caption or narration states:
“Student life at UMB.”

The visuals are atmospheric and contain no critical information.

Result: Audio description is not required.

Example Requiring Description

Text overlays appear:
“Apply by March 1”
“New residence hall opening Fall 2026”

If this information is not spoken, narration should include it.

Videos Using Stock B-Roll or Images

Scenario

A video includes stock footage of hospitals, classrooms, and labs while a narrator speaks.

Accessible Example

Narration says:

“At UMB, students gain hands-on clinical experience working with patients and researchers.”
The visuals support the narration but do not add new information.

Result: Audio description is not required.

Example Requiring Description

A statistic appears on screen:
“95% Residency Match Rate”

If the narrator does not mention the statistic, it must be spoken.

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Visit the UMB Accessibility Website for More Tips

umaryland.edu/accessibility

Montage Videos

Scenario

A montage shows several campus scenes with music.

Accessible Example

Caption reads:

“Highlights from the School of Dentistry White Coat Ceremony.”

No essential information appears visually.

Result: Audio description is not required.

Example Requiring Description

The montage includes text identifying:

- Event titles
- Speaker names
- Dates
- Calls to action

If the narration does not mention these items, description is required.

Video Graphics (Opening or Bumper)

Scenario

A video begins with an animated graphic.

Accessible Example

Text appears:

“University of Maryland, Baltimore”

If the narrator says:

“Welcome to the University of Maryland, Baltimore.”

Result: Audio description is not required.

Example Requiring Description

A graphic displays:

“Breakthroughs Can’t Wait”

If the narration never mentions this phrase, it should be spoken.

Campus Tour Videos

Tour videos often show locations across campus.

Audio description is not required if the narration identifies the location at some point in the video.

Accessible Example

Narration says:

“We are now standing outside the Health Sciences and Human Services Library.”

Even if the building appears earlier or later in the video, the information is communicated.

Result: Separate audio description is not required.

Example Requiring Description

A tour video shows several buildings but never identifies them verbally.

Result: Viewers who cannot see the screen would miss important information.

Integrated narration or description is required.

Drone and Aerial Footage

Drone footage often shows sweeping views of campus.

Accessible Example

Narration says:

“This aerial view shows the University of Maryland Medical Center and the surrounding health sciences campus.”

The location is identified.

Result: Audio description is not required.

Example Requiring Description

Aerial footage focuses on a specific building while music plays.

The building is never identified in narration.

Result: The location should be described through narration.

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Note About Using Closed Captions to Help Satisfy Accessibility

When a speaker is identified visually through a lower-third graphic, their name and title should also appear in the closed captions when they first speak so viewers who cannot hear the audio can identify who is talking.

This is especially important in news-style videos where speakers often do not introduce themselves verbally.

Including speaker identification in captions can also help satisfy WCAG 2.1 AA requirements when the identity of the speaker is conveyed visually but not spoken aloud, ensuring that critical information is still communicated in an accessible format.

While captions help students and members of the public who are deaf or hard of hearing, they do not replace audio description for viewers who cannot see the screen; when possible, speakers should still identify themselves verbally.

Be aware that YouTube may strip or ignore speaker labels in SRT caption files, which can remove the identification you intended to include.

If this occurs, consider using a different video player that preserves speaker labels, manually inserting the speaker's name into the caption text for each line, or using an AI captioning tool to convert the SRT file into a format that remains compliant when uploaded to YouTube.

Video Types That Often Require Audio Description

The following types of videos frequently contain visual information that must be described.

- Admissions or recruitment videos
- Research explainers with charts or statistics
- Student services tutorials
- Enrollment or financial aid instructions
- Demonstrations of equipment or procedures

Video Types That Rarely Require Audio Description

These videos typically communicate information through speech.

- Talking-head interviews
- Panel discussions
- Recorded podcast conversations
- Lectures where slide content is fully read aloud

Social Media Platform Limitations

Some platforms, including Instagram and TikTok, do not support secondary audio description tracks.

If audio description is required and cannot be integrated:

- Upload an accessible version to YouTube
- Link to the accessible version in the caption or bio

Quick Accessibility Check

Before publishing a video, confirm:

- Important text appearing on screen is spoken aloud
- Charts or statistics are explained verbally
- Demonstrations are described
- A listener could understand the video without seeing the screen
- Speakers are identified through narration or closed captions

If the answer to any of these questions is no, the video likely needs audio description.