



Descriptive directions and information for blind or partially sighted visitors to arts venues

While many people will visit an arts venue with a friend or family, it is important to give people access to the information they need so that they can travel to and navigate around the venue independently.

VocalEyes produces scripts for each of the theatres where we provide audio description services, and we can provide this service at a reasonable cost.

Alternatively, follow the steps and guidelines in this document and produce your own.

10 steps

- 1) Read and listen to some of the examples listed in the Appendix.
- 2) Walk the routes to your venue, making notes.
- 3) Write a first draft.
- 4) Walk the route with a colleague and read it aloud as you walk.
- 5) Revise and prepare a second draft.
- 6) Invite two people to test – ideally one blind person and one partially-sighted person, who should have each have a different take on it. Send them your draft and ask for their feedback.
- 7) Incorporate their feedback; produce your final version.
- 8) Put it on your venue's website's access information page, ideally in 3 formats, but at least the first two:
 - i. as text on the webpage;
 - ii. as a downloadable Word document (Arial font 16 pt);
 - iii. recorded as a downloadable mp3 audio file.
- 9) Many people don't use the internet, so share the information with all Front of House / Visitor Services / Box office staff and whoever answers visitor enquiries via phone, email or social media.
- 10) Let VocalEyes know (enquiries@vocaleyes.co.uk) and we'll add them to your venue page on our website.

6 rules

1. **Be accurate**. Test and check for typos before finalising. A mistake could be significant. e.g. there's a big difference between 'Turn right after 7 metres', and '70 metres'.
2. **Be concise**. Give enough information to assist someone to travel to the venue, get a sense of the space, its atmosphere and sufficient information to navigate and use the venue. But stop there. For example, don't give them a history lesson about the building or organisation: that can be done elsewhere on your website.
3. **Be comprehensive**. There's no point having information for only part of the journey, and expect someone to know where the entrance is. Go inside, to the front desk and beyond.
4. **Be honest**. Don't gloss over barriers to access because you are concerned about complaints. If access is difficult to a particular part of the venue, or lighting is low, a surface uneven, then be open about it. Also, don't assume that means it is inaccessible. Let people know what the potential barriers to access are, and let them decide.
5. **Be unambiguous**. Test your script with several people, including blind and partially sighted visitors. You may know the venue or town well and take something for granted, and assume that everyone names things the same way.
6. **Be up-to-date**. Review the script regularly, as things change: for example, a town centre redevelopment might have resulted in different routes, changes to bus stops, pedestrian crossings etc.

We've divided the guidelines into 4 sections. We recommend subdividing your information into sections to help people use it more easily.

1. Getting there

- Provide **venue address / postcode**
- **Embed a Google map.** While many blind and partially sighted people use smartphones and voiceover, and map apps, many do not. Additionally, Google Maps has its limitations: It often doesn't use street names, using street number (e.g. A237 or B453) even in towns.
- You would ideally also provide a **high contrast large graphic map** showing key routes.
- Detail all **public transport links**: bus and tram stops, train and underground stations – and which lines or services stop at each.
- For train and underground stations, include which **exit** (name and number if relevant) to take.
- If the venue is some distance from a station, provide information on how to get a **taxi** (either from rank, or provide numbers to local services.)
- If the venue is close to a station, provide **walking directions and information**
 - Details of **distance** of each stage (use metres, rather than time, as people walk at different speeds);
 - Information about inclines and steps;

- Information about road crossings: note how many lanes of traffic, whether there is an island in the middle and if the second crossing is opposite the first or to the right or left. Also, for pedestrian crossings, note if there is a cone on the underside of the crossing box. [[BBC Ouch blog article on pedestrian crossings](#)]. Try to avoid zebra crossings, as their safe usage can be difficult.
- **Different surfaces underfoot** – e.g. cobbles, gravel.
- **Landmarks**. This is particularly useful for people with some sight, who may not be able to read a street sign, particularly if high on a wall), but can see a public sculpture, clock, for example.
- **Audio / olfactory**: For example, mention if somewhere that is passed has a distinctive sound (school, factory, river) or smell (restaurant, bakery), and on which side.
- **Traffic**. Note if a road is particularly busy and loud.
- If there are **alternative routes**, pick one that is least crowded, and one that has the fewest tables and chairs on the pavement (outside cafes, restaurants and bars). If unavoidable, warn in the description if these exist (either temporary during warmer months, or permanent). You may also want to describe routes from multiple stations: in London certainly, there are often several underground stations within walking distance of a venue. This gives people choice, and gives coverage if there are service problems due to station or line closures.

2. Arrival

- **Description of the building exterior.** This helps people with some sight know that they have arrived.
- **Parking facilities.** Important for people arriving by car, and particularly information about parking spaces reserved for Blue Badge holders, or other schemes.
- **Taxi drop-off points**
- **Front entrance description.** It's important that people know in advance how a door works, particularly if the entrance is busy. This is particularly true in West End, where it's easy to walk into wrong theatre by mistake: the show hoarding may not be visible to the user.
- Include information about steps, ramps to the door, and door type (automatic, revolving, push or pull to open), weight (i.e. if heavy) and material (glass, wood, etc.).

3. Inside the venue

- Warn if steps or stairs (and whether up or down) soon inside the entrance
- Description of the **foyer / entrance hall**
- **Lifts, stairs and wheelchair access** within the venue
- Location and description of the **Information desk / Box office**
- Let visitors know where they will be able to find **front of house/visitor staff**, and how to identify them (T-shirts, other uniform, badges)
- **What time do the doors open?** Theatres can get very busy before their evening performances, and some blind or partially sighted patrons like to arrive early before the rush, get their bearings.
- Provide information about **toilets**, including accessible toilets
- Describe public spaces, such as **an auditorium**, for practical reasons (how many levels, how to access different levels) and to give a sense of space (materials, lighting) or a **gallery space**.
- Location and information about **refreshment facilities** (cafés, restaurants)
- Information for **assistance/guide dog** owners (water bowls, spending area, sitting service if relevant).
- **Lighting levels.** Note any marked changes in light levels as you go between different spaces (outside/inside and between internal spaces) and identify where light source is if

strong (e.g. from a glass roof, or wall). Many people who have a visual impairment are affected by changes in light level and need more time to adjust than those who don't.

- **Sound / Noise / Music.** A foyer may be multi-use, with box office and bar both in the space, and noise levels of conversation raised over the background music can together be quite overwhelming. Warn people about different sources of noise, and if this is high at particular times (e.g. during performance intervals, or peak visiting times)

4. Further information and contact numbers

- For Theatres: we recommend including information specifically for patrons using the audio description service. For example:

‘At the Example Theatre guide dogs are welcome, although the theatre does not have any facilities for looking after guide dogs during performances. Guide dogs may stay with their owners in the auditorium. If you are bringing a guide dog and have not already informed the theatre, or if you require any further information before your visit, please call 020 7111 2222 between the hours of 10am and 8pm.’
- Provide **telephone number and email address for access contacts at the venue.**
- Link to your venue page on [DisabledGo.com](https://www.disabledgo.com) or [Euan's Guide](https://www.euan.org.uk)
- Create a [Visit England / Visit Scotland Accessibility Guide](https://www.visitengland.com/visit-scotland-accessibility-guide)

Appendix: Sample descriptive directions

Almeida Theatre

vocaleyes.co.uk/venues/almeida-theatre/

Harold Pinter Theatre

vocaleyes.co.uk/venues/harold-pinter-theatre/

Noel Coward Theatre

vocaleyes.co.uk/venues/noel-coward-theatre/

The Other Palace

vocaleyes.co.uk/venues/st-james-theatre/

Royal Court

vocaleyes.co.uk/venues/royal-court-theatre/

Shakespeare's Birthplace

shakespeare.org.uk/visit/plan-your-visit/access/access-bp/

Venues shortlisted for Art Fund Museum of the Year

vocaleyes.co.uk/audio/audio-archive/?audioType=museums&search=Art+Fund

This Large Print resource was developed by VocalEyes with the help of our User Panel of blind and partially sighted arts lovers, and VocalEyes describer, Dr Louise Fryer.