

Twelve principles for describing human characteristics in an Audio Introduction

Some of these principles will already be regularly practised by audio describers. Each can be followed to a lesser or greater degree, and some may be more or less relevant depending on the production.

- 1) Start with a broad-brush description of the cast – but remember, ‘diverse’, or ‘multi-ethnic’ are not helpful descriptive words: this should be followed up by clear and unambiguous description of the individual main characters.
- 2) Don’t presume a default, or let it be presumed, simply because it saves time: establish the default explicitly for each production.
- 3) Describe the characters – but remember, the actor is the real person on stage, and could be affected by your words.
- 4) Describe equitably – for characters of equal importance to the production, give equal weight in your description; similarly, for actors of colour / White actors, disabled / non-disabled actors. Don’t over or under-describe.
- 5) Avoid judgements and micro-aggressions, e.g. contrasting or comparing features with an ‘acceptable’ norm. Many describers adopt the tone of the original production for their description, and slip into judgements that the production suggests (attitudes to women, disabled people for example). If this is a deliberate strategy, then be explicit and address it up front in your ‘describer’s strategy’.
- 6) Use privileged information to name the actor’s ethnicity, disability, gender or other identity if you can, and with their input: it will help reduce ambiguity and avoid erasure.

“When you are used to white being the default, black isn’t black unless it is clearly pointed out as so.”¹

- 7) Name Whiteness, not just Blackness. If the cast is all-White, say so, and then there is no need to repeat for individuals. If some of the cast are White, then name the individuals as White.

- 8) Filter the inputs you use: as the eyes of the audience, you need to be selective and consider information overload.
- 9) Consider and acknowledge your own position: you will never be objective.
- 10) If in doubt, something will almost always be relevant to someone in the audience.
- 11) Be transparent about your position, your strategy, and your sources of information; consider including a 'describer's preface' or 'describer's note' to explain your decision-making processes.
- 12) Learn about what you don't know: talk to others, do some reading, follow new people on social media.

This is an extract of the report:

Describing Diversity: An exploration of the description of human characteristics and appearance within the practice of theatre audio description.

[VocalEyes.co.uk/about/research/describing-diversity](https://vocaleyes.co.uk/about/research/describing-diversity)

Contact VocalEyes at enquiries@vocaleyes.co.uk

i Renni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (2018), p. 137.