

# Describing Description

by Debbie P. Risk

---

Making digital media accessible to those of us who are blind or visually impaired.

---

**M**y family recently moved from Colorado back to Utah, and along with the move was my company, [DP Captioning & Multimedia Solutions](#). As is inevitable when meeting new neighbors, the question always seems to come up, “What do you do?” And I find myself saying to them, “Well, it’s hard to describe.” How ironic is that? I find it difficult to describe what I do in describing. So for this article, I want to describe my work with description.



Language arts is just that . . . an art . . . the art of telling a story through words. Think of reading a book. The words that the author uses help make their story come alive in your mind as you visualize the characters and the settings where they find themselves. Your imagination carries the story further into your world. To be successful at description is to immerse yourself in the story being told and the meaning of what is being relayed to the viewers. And that story needs to be even more visually described for those of us who are blind or visually impaired.

Bill Stark, Director of the [Described and Captioned Media Program](#) (DCMP), expressed the need to get information “out there” about description: “So many people don’t even know what description is—and that includes teachers of the blind and visually impaired (BVI), the BVI community itself, media producers/distributors, businesses, agencies, etc. There is a big job remaining to get the word out!”

The DCMP is part of the [Description Leadership Network](#) (DLN)—in conjunction with the new [Video Description Research and Development Center](#) (VDRDC). The priority of the Center is to advance the research and development of video description to improve the accessibility of educational program content delivered via the Internet or through other technological devices

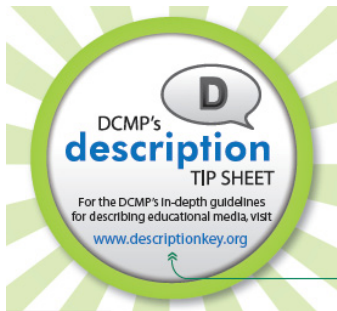
(other than television) for students who are blind or visually impaired—to ensure that they have access to all educational program content. Description also benefits students who are NOT blind or visually impaired. Using narration to describe visuals enhances comprehension and retention (see [ListeningIsLearning.org](#)).



Equal access  
to communication  
and learning.

I regard the DCMP with high esteem, value their guidance, and adhere to their maxim, “Captioning, subtitling, and description is the key to opening up a world of information for persons who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind, visually impaired, blind, or use English as a Second Language (ESL).” As a service vendor for the DCMP, my company follows quality standards and preferred styles for captioning and description that have been researched and established by the DCMP. These guidelines aid in the readability and enjoyment of media to improve the lives of these individuals.

DP had the privilege to provide input in the early development stages of the [Captioning Key: Guidelines and Preferred Techniques](#) and [Description Key: Guidelines for the Description of Educational Media](#). These Keys are **invaluable** resource tools to captioning/description service providers in performing this important service of providing accessibility to millions of viewers who rely on this accessibility to understand the message being conveyed. There is nothing like these Keys out there for captioning/description companies to help guide them. One of the many features of the [Description Key](#) that I find beneficial while describing is watching the video demonstrations. Being able to see and listen to how description is performed is an indispensable tool. This can only be accomplished with an online resource like the [Description Key](#)—not just a printed guideline.



Another feature is the [Description Tip Sheet](#). This condensed, one-page resource is very helpful in keeping the rules of description uppermost in your mind as you are in the actual process of describing a program. It helps a describer stay focused on what is useful information for the blind or

visually impaired when they are listening to a program being described. Needless to say, these tools are essential resources for any description vendor taking on the important mission of making digital media accessible to the millions of individuals that can benefit from their work. What great tools!

**First step in describing:** Write the script. Before beginning, I read—and then reread—the description tips from the DCMP’s Description Tip Sheet. Following is a condensed list of these tips:

- Rule #1: Describe what you see.
- Use vivid language.
- Do not try to fill every pause. Allow atmosphere and background sound to come through.
- Use complete sentences, if possible.
- Use present tense, active voice—avoid verbs ending in “ing.” It’s helpful to remember that “ing” usually doesn’t belong in description, and that every instance should probably be reviewed to ensure that **present tense, active voice** is used whenever possible. **Example:** Men, women, and girl **playing** basketball on a sunny day.
- Don’t interpret emotion or reasoning. **Example:** The two drivers get out of their vehicles, **looking angry** both scowling.
- Prioritize description—start generally; then move to details.

**The challenge:** Do all this with sometimes only as little as a 5-second pause in the narrative of a program.

**My mission:** To put into words what I see for those of us who cannot. **The reward:** Let me describe description this way. Someone I love who is blind is with me as we relax on a beach, and **I** watch the sun as it slowly sets into the turquoise-blue ocean. Or we take a walk by a mountain stream on a warm autumn day, and **I** watch a deer gracefully meander through the red and gold trees. My loved one says, “Tell me what you see.” As I describe the beauty of the world around us, we begin to more fully enjoy these special moments together. That is the magnitude of description.



The author is the owner of DP Captioning & Multimedia Solutions. Ms. Risk has been working exclusively in the digital media field since 1990 and has been performing the essential service of captioning and description since 1992. DP is an “Approved Captioning and Description Service Vendor” for the Described and Captioned Media Program in cooperative agreement with the National Association of the Deaf and U.S. Department of Education. DP is also qualified by DCMP as a YouTube-Ready Caption Vendor.



**Described moments:** Below are still frames from *Death—A Personal Understanding* (distributed by Annenberg Media) and descriptions I created for the DCMP.



**Description:** A graveyard at dusk. A misty fog settles around the tombstones. One tombstone towers above the others with a tall cross on top.



**Description:** The sun sets in the horizon. It’s luminous rays spread out over puffy white clouds. The hillside is shadowy in the twilight of the day’s end. A tree’s branches sway in a gentle breeze.

Really . . . the most essential and ultimate goal is to make it possible for everyone to enjoy artistic creations, and I feel privileged to have the opportunity to help make digital media accessible to everyone.