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 Thank you.

**To cue up before presentation:**

1. PP with images
2. Video of “The Hunger Games” (note: get through the ad first.)
3. Video of “Getting to Know Drawing Media”
4. Stephanie’s image description video from Composing Access (move ahead to about 1:45)
5. Brittany’s video
6. Anthony’s video

[Cover slide] Audio / Visual Description: Rhetorically, Again.

Presentation on Description for DMAC (May 14, 2016)

**Access invocation. Please do what you need to ensure this space is as accessible as possible for you. If you wish to access this presentation in written form, it is posted to my website (URL is on cover slide).**

**Describe image on cover slide: This is a screen capture of my phone just after I’ve uploaded an image. The image is of my dogs, Murray and Ivy, located in my kitchen just in front of my feet. Ivy is lying down obediently, waiting for a treat, and Murray is trying hard to do it, but has managed only to sink onto his forequarters. A blue clickable pop-up reads, “Describe this image for the visually impaired.”**

Before I talk about audio/visual description and how interesting it is rhetorically, I want to start with an interactive exercise designed by Georgina Kleege and Scott Wallin.

**Kleege and Wallin’s description exercise**

1. First, I need some volunteers to offer to stand up and turn around, so that you’re not looking toward the screen. While you’re thinking about whether to volunteer, I want to offer a couple of clarifying points. First, everyone will get to see the image at the end. So if you volunteer to turn around, that won’t mean you never get to see this image. Second, the point of this exercise is not to pretend that some of us are blind. Rather, the people turned away from the screen are purposefully turning their attention to the descriptions that will be offered by other people in the audience. So, this is not a simulation exercise. (A terrific article by Kleege on the relationship between blindness and visual culture, which argues that there are many ways to see and many ways to be blind, is in the “Resources” section of this talk.) If there are blind or low-vision folks here, they can be volunteers to turn, or describers, as they wish.
2. Volunteers? Who is ready to turn around and listen to others’ descriptions?
3. Now, I’m going to put an image on the screen, and the job of those oriented toward the screen is to describe the image. It’s not important to come up with a perfect or objective description. It’s also not important to describe the whole image at once—you can talk about any part of it you want.
4. Put image up. [Slide]
5. So, I’m going to start the describers off with this question: Where does your eye go first?
6. If needed—other questions that could be used: What’s one small, concrete thing you can describe about this image? What’s one overall, general description you might offer of this image? If you were on the phone with a good friend and you happened to run across this image and tell them what you’d just run across, what would you say?]
7. Now, I’m going to temporarily hide the image. [Hide image.] Everyone turn back toward the screen. Those who were not looking toward the screen—what kind of image would you say was on the screen, based on the descriptions you received? What did you *notice* from the descriptions?
8. [Put image back up.] Any further thoughts?

**Description: Some Grounding Examples**

So today I’m talking about description, which is defined by The Description Key as “the verbal depiction of key visual elements in media and live productions.” I’m going to start by showing a few quick examples, just to make sure we all have a general sense of what description is and what it entails.

* [Slide of FB picture of Ivy.] Here’s one of my own described images from Facebook: *On cue, Ivy the brown chihuahua lies down in front of a row of newly potted herbs. Behind the herbs is a bright yellow plant stand with two half-circle shelves.* In recent years, it’s become common practice for rhetoric and disability-studies scholars to describe their own images; you can see people like Jay Dolmage, Dale Katherine Ireland, and Melanie Yergeau doing this routinely.
* [Hunger Games clip from Media Access Australia] Videos can also be described. This is a clip of the movie The Hunger Games with audio description. <https://youtu.be/B8BD9txkGL4> [NOTE: Don’t show the whole thing—it’s pretty long.]

Now, that particular clip shows audio description in a situation where there’s no dialogue or voice-over. When there is speech or music in the video, description designers have to make choices about when to fit the description in. Next is an example showing this sort of audio-weaving technique.

* [Video from Described and Captioned Media Project] This is one of a series of videos produced by the Described and Captioned Media Project. This one, for children, talks about different tools for drawing. We’ll just watch about a minute and a half of it. <https://youtu.be/jsmiOLaqyUk>

Now, Brenda has already given a wonderful presentation about the reasons why captioning is deeply rhetorical. I won’t rehearse all her arguments here, because the same rationales are true for description. Issues of audience, style, invention, exigency, power, privilege—these are all embedded in description as well. [SLIDE] As Georgina Kleege and Scott Wallin have written, “the act of describing is itself an aesthetic performance that generates its own meanings.” I also want to refuse the assumption that description is “for” blind people, just as I also refuse the assumption that captioning is “for” deaf people. As Brenda helped us understand, these kinds of technologies, once understood as “assistive,” are in fact generative, creative, and applicable to all kinds of audiences, for all kinds of reasons.

So I’m going to start from the assumption that we all get that audio/visual description is not just a mechanical “add on” for disabled people, and I’m going to jump right into talking about some of the ways that it’s rhetorically interesting. I’ll also talk about ideas for teaching.

**Rhetorical Possibilities when Audio Describing (An Optimistic Analysis)**

I’m going to offer a list of rhetorical considerations for designing descriptions. These can be understood as a counterpart to Sean Zdenek’s list from his article “Which Sounds Are Significant?” In that article, after giving a thorough overview and critique of laws and guidelines for captioning, Zdenek, as Brenda did, comes at the question rhetorically, and he offers a five-part heuristic for thinking about ***significance*** in captioning:

[Slide]

* Captions should support the emotional arc of a text.
* A sound is significant if it contributes to the purpose of scene.
* Caption space is precious. It should never be wasted on superfluous sounds that may confuse viewers or diminish their sense of identification with the protagonist(s).
* Sounds in the background do not necessarily need to be captioned, even if they are loud.
* Every caption should honor and respect the narrative. While the narrative does not have one correct reading, it does have a sequence and arc that must be nourished.

As I offer my own list of rhetorical considerations for audio/visual description, I am going to try to engage a similar question about the rhetorical nature of description, and how that rhetorical awareness should drive our choices about how and when we describe. The five items on my list are:

1. Timing
2. Thickness
3. Contextual and playful elements
4. Embedded assumptions
5. Arrangement
6. Tools

First, timing.

*Timing*

As you saw with the video about drawing tools, describers sometimes need to make difficult choices about when to include description versus when to let the soundtrack of the video take center stage. If you go to the Audio Description Project online, you can access a wide variety of samples of descriptio, and you’ll see all kinds of interesting choices made. For example, in a video of a very complex animation of the play “Hamlet,” the person doing the audio description simply stops talking when the characters are conversing quickly, even though the camera is still moving from place to place, and visually, different things are happening.

Still images offer a different kind of time frame, but it’s still complex. For example, while an image on a PowerPoint can be described in the context of your presentation, the issue of timing is still relevant. Note what happens when Stephanie Kerschbaum puts up an image during a presentation at MLA. [http://composingaccess.net/during-the-presentation/--go forward to 1:45.]

[SLIDE] Stephanie points out in the text accompanying her short video on the “Composing Access” website, “I didn’t describe the image immediately after changing the slide, but after a minute or two, when I had written the description into my presentation script. However, upon reflection later, it occurred to me that I probably should have described the image immediately after changing the slide, because sighted audience members laughed at the image on the slide, a funny moment that wouldn’t have been communicated to anyone who couldn’t see the image or read it very clearly from the back of the room.”

This doesn’t necessarily mean that an image can always described the instant it appears. The videos from my students, which we’ll view a bit later, demonstrate that those choices are almost always complex, not just when you’re trying to narrate a fast-moving, dialogue-filled movie. The important thing is to be aware of the ways that timing governs how descriptions reach different audiences.

*Thickness*

Even when you have unlimited space to describe an image, as is the case with images you post to Facebook, you still have to make choices about how detailed, how thick, your description is going to be (for more on “thick description,” see Geertz). Often, image description is taught in two modes: short and long. [SLIDE] But at times, approaches to description are rhetorically richer, as in this tutorial from the Web Accessibility Project about how to figure out what kind of description to append to what kind of image. [Describe categories briefly.]

Now, this guide, as well as some others they have up, can get reductive. But that’s inevitable for a guideline or a map; the purpose of such compositions is to make information more usable through compression. And this guide is one I appreciate, both because it’s more contextually attuned than most guides you’ll find online, and because this tutorial itself can become the basis for an exercise in the classroom. Any time you try to follow a guideline like this one, you’ll run into confusions and exceptions, and that’s, of course, when things get interesting.

*Contextual and Playful Elements*

Amanda Cachia, Georgina Kleege, Brenda Brueggemann, Sean Zdenek, and others, have written about the *aesthetic* and *rhetorical nature* of captioning and description. Their work has helped move us beyond the notion that technology is supposed to “help” disabled people. [SLIDE.] In Melanie Yergeau et al., “Multimodality in Motion,” Melanie offers a concise criticism of the problem of assuming that technology is “helpful” to disenfranchised users. [READ ALOUD and explain the image.]

Instead, digital technology should be a means toward creative forms of production, by disabled and nondisabled designers. Here’s an example of an image I posted to Facebook, in which I used the “Description” space to expand both aesthetically and playfully on the context of the image. [SLIDE: winged hot dog earrings. Read description: “These are flying hot dog earrings. Their facial expressions are concerned yet optimistic. Mary Martone, herself a birthday girl today, really knows how to rock a birthday. Thank you to everyone for your greetings and well wishes”.]

In this description, I am writing explicitly from my own standpoint. Rather than trying to achieve an objective description—the “view from nowhere,” as the philosopher Thomas Nagel has called it—I’m deliberately including my own voice, experience and knowledge as an author. In this case, this is an image I took myself, so I am the “owner” of both the image and the description. (Side note: Facebook can still use my image in any way they want.)

Here’s another example of a contextually rich description, completed for a more professional purpose. [SLIDE] This image is part of an album I created on Flickr when I was serving as the Access Liaison for the CCCC conference in 2011 in Atlanta. When I put this album together, I included both literal and contextual descriptions with each photo, on the assumption that some users would click through the photo album but would not read the Accessibility Guide that I had also written—so I made some of the information redundant. The description in this case states,

“There are four features that characterize the Marriott: escalators, visually busy carpeting, heights, and large, flat open spaces. This photo shows all four. It should be noted that the central elevator bank will require some figuring out. It is spiral-shaped (not unlike something Temple Grandin might have designed in order to keep cattle calm), and has various elevators going to various sets of floors (e.g. 5-20, 21-40). Those who do not like heights, or rapid movement, should note that the elevators going to the higher floors are glass-walled. Rooms on lower floors can be requested.”

There are a million reasons why you might create a thick description for an image you’re sharing with some audience. As far as I’m concerned, there are few rules *except* the rule not to assume that all your audience members will have the same needs, the same abilities, and the same concerns.

[SLIDE: Back to list of six considerations] *Embedded Assumptions*

Every description is necessarily grounded in the standpoint of the designer of that description. For example, when my students describe images in our class, sometimes they mark the apparent race or gender of the people in photos, and sometimes they omit making those kinds of assessments. Sometimes, that decision is easy; you may be describing a photo of a close friend, and you know their identity with regard to race, gender, pronouns, etc.; or you may choose, for aesthetic or other reasons, simply to give their name, or tag them, without including further description. (A tag is itself a form of description that I haven’t given much attention to today, but that I’d like to think about more.)

Choices around our own embedded assumptions are always complicated, and if we pay attention not only to the way we write our descriptions, but also to the way they circulate among our audiences, we may find that the process of description is emergent. Here’s an example.

A good friend of mine, several years ago, posted an image of me and three other people to Facebook. In her description of the photo, which included details about where we were and what we were wearing, she also stated that this was a photo of “four white women.” I wrote her privately and explained that, although I’m usually taken for a woman, that’s not actually my identification. I identify as genderqueer. My friend edited her description so that it just referred to “white people” rather than “white women.” This example offers a number of opportunities for rhetorical thoughtfulness. For example, in most cases, those of us who are described in images won’t be able to converse directly with those designing the descriptions. What does that mean? In addition, notice that when my friend altered her description to incorporate my identification, some knowledge was lost. No longer was the information available that three of the people in the image are women, and—by implication—that all four of us, in addition to being white, pretty much give the appearance of being normatively cisgendered. It’s not that that information was crucial to anyone interacting with that photo on Facebook; it’s more that I want to point that, as always, design involves an ongoing and emerging set of choices which always impact the nature and the amount of information that will circulate among various audiences.

*Arrangement*

The arrangement of descriptions is a fascinating consideration when you start to think about how description works in different interfaces and situations. A key question, especially when moving between different platforms, is **where** the description will be located vis-à-vis the image. For example, when describing my images on Facebook, I have the choice of describing an image in the post itself; in a comment accompanying the image; or in the rarely-used box titled simply “Description.”

Both Facebook and Twitter have recently announced initiatives that will better enable description of images. Facebook’s is an auto-reading artificial intelligence application, somewhat analogous to the facial recognition software it already uses. Similar apps already exist; for example, when I heard about the app TapTapSee, which allows you to use your phone camera to “look at” objects and receive a description, I asked my friend Ryan Parrey-Munger to test it. He reported back that he had tried it on some objects around his house and that it had accurately identified (this is true) a duck in a wheelchair. [Slide; this is the stuffed duck in a wheelchair that Ryan and his wife Kelly have in their house.]

Twitter’s initiative, less ambitiously but perhaps more sensibly, simply creates an option for users to add their own descriptions of images while posting them. This is an exciting development; those of us who routinely describe our images have been somewhat stymied by Twitter’s 140-character limit, although I will say that limit, similar to the “Concept in 60” time limit, does tend to fuel creativity. [Slide: This is an image of my CCCC conference badge from 2015. The description I’ve written is “My #4c15 selfie: Idaho Spud from #CWPA folks, a presentation handout, & interaction badge, bedecked with sparklepony.”] I’ve left out information such as that the handout has Tara Wood’s business card from Rockford University clipped to it, that my interaction badge is turned to green and is housed in a double badge holder, that my sparklepony is orange with purple feathers, and that the “Idaho Spud” I’ve referred to is actually an empty candy bar wrapper. It amuses me to notice that, although I was counting characters with tremendous care, I still felt it was necessary to include an Oxford comma.

[Slide] The new feature for Twitter image description is controlled by the menu shown on the screen now, which includes “Compose Image Descriptions” as its final item, with an on-off switch. The switch is off by default; users must navigate to this menu and turn it on to use it. Thinking of arrangement, it’s important to notice the fact that the feature is turned ***off*** by default, and requires users to 1) know about it and 2) figure out how to navigate to it, is itself a design decision about arrangement made by Twitter developers. Moreover, when I was experimenting with this feature, the first thing I discovered is that you can’t turn it on from a laptop interface; you have to be using a phone or tablet. I tweeted at Twitter Support to ask about these decisions—I sent a couple of tweets (with the ingratiating lead “Love the new feature!”) but received no replies.

*Tools*

The last rhetorical consideration I want to suggest is tools. One tool to be aware of when writing descriptions is the screen reader. A screen reader is a piece of software that is designed to read aloud the verbal content of a digital page. It usually has a mechanized voice, and it also reads aloud characters and some punctuation. If you’ve ever seen people include the note “smile” after a smile emoticon composed of a colon and a parenthesis, it may be because they are thinking of what a screen reader would make of that colon and parenthesis.

If your audience includes people who access your descriptions via a screen reader, this means they may get the information on a digital page at a different speed, or in a different order, than a person who is scanning that page visually. A notorious example about screen readers is that they are often used to read only the hyperlinks on a web page. This is, of course, an important shortcut; imagine going to a website wanting only to click the button labeled “Contact,” but having to wait for someone to read the entire page out loud before they read off the links at the bottom. So often, a person using a screen reader will only be listening to the titles of the links read aloud. More information about this is available from the excellent website Web Accessibility in Mind, which has a section titled “Designing for Screen Reader Compatibility.”

Unfortunately, since it’s unusual for designers to realize that many readers are using screen readers, they often create links like this:

[Slide] “If you’re interested in finding good bi bim bap in Columbus, you might want to check out this place.”

As a blog reader, I’ve noticed that this is sometimes a stylistic move; the writer will make an assertion, and then support that assertion by saying something like, “If you want more information on that, you can look here, here and here,” with each “here” leading to a separate hyperlink. Unfortunately, a link titled only “here” is what Vincent Flanders calls a “mystery meat” link—and if the reader has only the titles of the links to work from, the meat gets very mysterious indeed.

Again, there are no hard-and-fast rules for how to create descriptions, alt tags, and other descriptive elements when designing for the digital page. I will also say I am far from being an expert on all the ins and outs of this. But it’s worth just thinking about how your descriptions might fit with the rest of a text rhetorically—in other words, paying attention to and thinking creatively about arrangement.

Now, before I move on to the last part of this presentation, which has to do with classroom work, I want to address the crucial topic of labor.

**Labor**

There are certain kinds of professional academic labor that we think of as normal and natural. For example, we carefully read others’ work, we ensure that we are responsibly building on others’ ideas, and we cite or credit them appropriately. That's difficult, it takes time, and it requires rhetorical judgment—and we do it because we understand it to be integral to our profession.

Another kind of professional labor is the work of joining and building communities. For example, when you come into a new department, there's an enormous amount of labor involved--figuring out who people are, what their allegiances are, how your work and your personal style meshes with theirs, where the potential pitfalls may like, what histories are unwritten along with any written histories that may be available to you. Unlike reading and citing, this sort of community-building work is rarely an explicit part of our job descriptions, except occasionally in vague references to "collegiality" or "fit." This work too is difficult, takes time, and requires rhetorical judgment--and we do it because building and being part of communities is important. We value it. Once again, we see it as a normal and natural part of the work we do.

[Mention my students at Spelman and the meaning of "extra."] The labor of access is often positioned rhetorically as an "extra," as in "extra labor" that someone must do, or "extra" money that must be spent. This "extra" often works to signal not just an add-on, but also a kind of outlandishness in concert with the way my students used to say "extra."

Disability studies scholars, especially those in rhetoric/comp, have been working for a long time to dismantle this notion of "extra." Melanie Yergeau, Jay Dolmage, Cynthia Selfe, Elizabeth Brewer, and others have written eloquently on retrofit, universal design, and accessibility. Also, it should be noted that disability, labor, and class can never be separated when we think about digital media. Disabled people are far more likely to live in poverty than nondisabled people (Fessler). Thus, it is not a surprise that **open-source** tools for access, such as YouTube's captioning tool, are often designed by disabled people, while expensive "assistive" technologies are often designed with only pro-forma involvement of disabled people. Or no involvement.

I could offer you a number of justifications for why it's important to think about description in your multimodal work. For instance, I could point out that it will make you savvier in rhetoric and the uses of technology (cf. "The Art of Alt.") I could also point out that if you avoid this labor, you are essentially saying that you would prefer it fall on the backs of disabled people. I could also make the universal-design argument, pointing that accessible media benefit everyone. I could even argue for diversity as a commodity, saying, as the guidelines for the American Psychological Association do, that if you do not make your work accessible, you are depriving academia of the diversity of disabled people, who form a "valuable resource pool."

But I am going to offer you a different justification, which is this: Access is an *optimistic* way of thinking about digital media. I am getting this idea of digital optimism from Scott DeWitt, who has written:

[Slide] “How do students imagine and generate expectations for the future when they think about writing and writing instruction? And, more importantly, what might student writing and writing instruction look like if we met students’ optimism—their imaginations and expectations of the future—in our pedagogies and curricula?”

So when I talk about audio description today, I am not talking about something you could "add" to an already crowded class on first-year composition, or digital media, or professional writing, or visual culture. I am talking about something that is *already* part of that class; that will refigure the way you think about what it means to consider an image or a text rhetorically; and that is fundamentally optimistic in the way it considers the tremendous variety of possibilities for who might be a composer, and what we might compose.

Amanda Cachia is a disability-studies scholar who has for years been doing groundbreaking work on the notion that accessible multimodal environments do not have to offer reiterations of the same information—for example, captions that encapsulate only words spoken on screen, in the plainest possible type. An optimistic approach to access suggests that the interplay between various versions of a text can be a creative, critical, and emergent space. Cachia, a museum curator, says this:

[SLIDE] Access can move beyond a mere practical conundrum … [to become] a dynamic, critical and creative tool in art-making and curating. An exhibition [or text] can therefore attempt to reveal *process* in conjunction with final objects as *outcome*.7 The curator [or designer] might be challenged by access as the *concept and/or content* of artwork, by focusing on questions such as, can audio description or a sequence of captioning accompanying a film, be a work of art?

[SLIDE] Is American Sign Language a performance? How can sub-titles and audio description work together to create an interesting ‘dialogue’ about access that renders a work of art or a film completely inaccessible for a normative audience? In other words, how can the tables be turned on access, and access for whom or for what? What are the inherent ethical questions and issues of agency stemming from these possibilities?

When she says this, I think Amanda gets at a critical point in the rhetorics of accessible media that doesn’t emerge as strongly in Sean Zdenek’s analysis of captioning. Amanda is emphasizing the ***shifting*** roles of audience and purpose. She asks, “Access for whom or for what?” and in doing this, she refuses the possibility that any single person could definitively identify what Zdenek refers to as “the narrative.” Now, I know that Zdenek is aware of this instability—he acknowledges it—but I appreciate the active way that Amanda pushes back against the notion that we should find “best practices” for making multimodal texts and objects accessible. Her work is insistently local and strongly attuned to the specific artists, spaces, and audiences with whom she works as a curator.

**Pedagogy (again)**

Now, I am a practical person and I understand that we don't all feel like revising our entire approach to teaching all the time, so I want to offer you something that you can fold into your class in small ways at first. That’s the way I did it. I started teaching captioning long before I started working with description—and I’m still really just experimenting with both. So what I'm talking about here is not revamping all your courses right now. I'm talking about *starting* to fold these ideas in, optimistically, creatively, and playfully.

In my Introduction to Disability Studies class this past semester, I asked students to create three-minute videos that incorporated both audio description and captioning. The topics of their videos were based on an earlier assignment, in which each student had brought in some sort of artifact related to disability and led the class in an analytical discussion of it. (We interpreted “artifact” very broadly, so that it could include a narrative, a news story, an object, or an image.) This was the first time I had asked students to do audio description for video work before; previously, I’d always to stuck to still images.

Because they were learning a number of new skills for this project—captioning and description, as well as how to use iMovie and edit photos—I kept the technical parameters for the project very simple. I asked students to create voice-over narrations that would be accompanied by no more than eight carefully selected still images. No moving video, no sound mixing. The simplicity was largely for my own benefit, since I was already dealing with a lot of newness with this assignment, and I mention that because I want to note the value of keeping the parameters of an assignment relatively simple and short so you can really dig into the rhetorical implications of composing choices you’re making.

One thing that was extremely interesting to me is that I ended up having deep conversations with most of my students (and there were forty-five of them) about how they selected their images. Because they had to describe the images as part of the voice-over narration—that was one of my requirements—they had to think hard about whether to incorporate the description into the overall narration; whether to “interrupt” the narration to describe an image; and when an image might be operating at a more figurative level. For example, Brittany and Anthony, whose videos are posted on the DMAC website (with permission), sometimes chose to use graphically rendered text, or images that operated figuratively, and had to make very deliberate choices about when and how their descriptions would become part of the full text.

So, as a final activity, I’d like to show Brittany and Anthony’s videos, back to back, and then talk for a few minutes about what we all notice about their choices as composers. I’m very open to feedback about this assignment, and I am certain it can be improved when I try it in future semesters.

**Activity #2: Examples of Student Work**

Show Brittany and Anthony’s videos; discussion. What moves do you notice Brittany and Anthony making here?

**Resources and Works Cited**

The Accessible Books Initiative. Sponsored by the Society for Disability Studies. <http://www.disstudies.org/Publishing%20Accessible%20Books>

“Accessibility Policy.” Computers and Composition Digital Press. <http://ccdigitalpress.org/about/accessibility-policy>

The Audio Description Project. American Council for the Blind. <http://www.acb.org/adp/index.html> *NOTE:* This organization is hosting a conference in July on the topic of audio description. <http://www.acb.org/adp/conf2016/conference.html>

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