A PICTURE IS WORTH 300 WORDS: WRITING VISUAL DESCRIPTIONS FOR AN ART MUSEUM WEB SITE

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Abstract

A recent collaboration between The Dayton Art Institute and Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, resulted in the development of a Virtual Museum Tour on the World Wide Web. Because this Tour was designed to be as accessible as possible to people with disabilities, it provides a visual description for every piece of artwork presented. This paper summarizes the techniques employed in that process, and presents a list of guidelines for others to follow when creating visual descriptions.

Rationale for Visual Descriptions

Numerous design techniques must be utilized to make a World Wide Web site accessible to people with visual disabilities. Perhaps the most common is the use of the "alt" statement to provide a brief text alternative for an image. While this technique is appropriate for simple graphics such as menu buttons, it is inadequate for images that are too complex to be described in a short phrase. In such cases, a visual description should also be provided to give users an understanding of what the image looks like. Visual descriptions are short paragraphs that verbally describe the appearance of images for the benefit of Web visitors who are unable to see them. They serve the same role in the visual arts as audio descriptions do for the performing arts, since both provide participants with a verbal impression of things they cannot perceive visually.

As is frequently the case with accommodations for people with disabilities, visual descriptions are also beneficial for the general public. They are helpful for people who are unable to access images because of computer hardware or software limitations. And as indicated by positive responses from museum patrons, visual descriptions are appreciated even by people with normal eyesight as they look at works of art. This may be because the descriptions point out details that they might not have noticed, or because people often welcome the perspectives of others on topics such as art.

Usage of Visual Descriptions

Although referred to in various Web accessibility guidelines, there is currently no standard practice for incorporating visual descriptions into Web pages. The "longdesc" attribute is not supported in current browsers, and other techniques (such as the "D- link") vary widely in their implementation. In The Dayton Art Institute's Virtual Museum Tour, visual descriptions are used to supplement rather than replace the standard "alt" statement for images. The "alt" statement contains the title of a work, while the visual description is used to describe its appearance. Links to visual descriptions are prominently placed on a navigation menu alongside links leading to other sources of information about the artwork, thereby presenting them as simply another resource for everyone, not just people with disabilities.

Guidelines for Visual Descriptions

Developing quality visual descriptions is a time-consuming task that should be done thoughtfully by individuals with excellent writing and editing skills. No instructions for doing so were available during the creation of the Virtual Museum Tour, but in the course of preparing approximately 100 visual descriptions, several guidelines were developed. Though they may need to be adapted for different applications, these guidelines are suitable for describing visual art.

First Guideline: Be objective

The sole function of a visual description is to describe the appearance of a work of art. In brief, simply answer the question, "What does the object look like?" Descriptions should avoid analytical interpretations or emotional responses. In other words, do not explore questions like, "What does it mean?" or "How does it make you feel?" Descriptions help visitors to visualize an object, thereby providing a context for other information found elsewhere, such as historical background, the artist's style, or critical commentary. By combining this factual information with an objective description, Web visitors are sufficiently informed to make their own analysis or emotional response.

Objectivity should also be exercised when referring to characters portrayed in a painting or other work of art. Though it is appropriate to describe their appearance, clothing and actions, visual descriptions should not attempt to explain their motivations or feelings, even if these are implied by gestures or context. If the emotions of the characters are obvious in the artwork, then they will likely be apparent in the visual description as well.

Artistic taste varies according to individual, so visual descriptions should not contain value judgements on the quality of the art object, or the skill of the artist that created it.

Second Guideline: Be brief

Although length will vary according to the piece of artwork being described, visual descriptions should be as brief as possible. In some settings, visual descriptions are presented as audio recordings read by a narrator. Other times they are provided as text that visitors have to read by themselves, or with a screen reader. In either case, extremely

long descriptions are tiresome, so they should be limited to 250 to 300 words. Depending on the context, visual descriptions may be accompanied by catalogue data about the artwork (such as the artist's name and life span, title, medium and dimensions). If so, this information should not be included in the overall word count.

For better word economy, avoid redundant phrases such as "rectangular in shape" or "blue in color," simply using "rectangular" or "blue" instead. Likewise, avoid obvious statements like "she wears a necklace around the neck" or "gloves on her hands."

Third Guideline: Be descriptive

Visual descriptions should utilize a broad vocabulary of vivid terminology to describe various features of art objects. Some common terms are categorized below.

Shapes can be described as: square, cubed, rectangular, flat, straight, circular, spherical, cylindrical, curved, rounded, triangular, conical, pyramidal, angular, irregular, jagged, sloped, diagonal, horizontal and vertical. These words can be used not only to identify the overall shape of the object, but also to describe geometric patterns within it. Avoid the use of words that imply action (unless the object actually does move). For instance, use "curved" instead of "curving." Also avoid imprecise colloquial terms such as "squiggle" or "zigzag."

Size can be described as: small, tiny, short, miniature, large, tall, monumental, thick, thin, narrow, wide, life-size, true to size, large scale and small scale. The object's dimensions, provided with the catalogue data, will inform visitors of its actual size.

Texture can be described as: smooth, glossy, coarse, grainy, rough, worn, weathered, scratched, cracked, broken, rippled, grooved, patterned, striped, dotted and perforated.

Color can be described as: intense, vivid, bright, light, dark, dull, pale, faint, solid or blended. Do not avoid references to color on the assumption that they will be meaningless to visitors who are blind. First of all, descriptions will be used by people without visual disabilities. Second, many people who are now blind were able to see in the past and are able to recall colors. Third, colors sometimes have symbolic meaning in works of art. However, avoid interpretive phrases like "warm gold" or "angry red."

Composition (or the arrangement of elements in a work) can be described as: low, high, above, below, parallel, perpendicular, in the foreground (or background), to the left (or right). When referring to relative locations, describe objects from the viewer's perspective, unless referring to the left or right of a character portrayed in the work.

Artistic technique can be described as: realistic, abstract, unnatural, simplified, detailed, precise, imprecise, sharply defined, blurred, splashed, brushed or stroked.

Fourth Guideline: Be logical

In order to be easily understood, visual descriptions must describe objects according to a logical sequence. Descriptions should begin with a general overview of what the object is

and what it portrays. Depending upon what type of object it is, it may be appropriate at the outset to mention its color and surface texture, and perhaps its construction. Following the overview, the various portions of the object should be described in detail, in some orderly fashion such as left to right or top to bottom. After one portion of the work has been described, an explicit transition should be used to identify the next area and its spatial relationship to the last. If part of the object is extremely complex, describe each segment separately, perhaps in a numbered sequence.

Depending on their design, sculptures or other three-dimensional works will likely need to be described from more than one angle. Use a logical sequence when doing so, as if the viewer was moving in a circle around the object.

When using descriptive words such as adjectives, place them after the word they modify, so visitors know what the thing is before they are told what it looks like. For example, use "his fingers are long and thin" instead of "long, thin fingers."

Fifth Guideline: Be accurate

Visual descriptions are part of the overall learning experience of art patrons, so they should be factual and consistent with other sources of information about the artwork. Background research may be necessary to correctly identify historical figures, religious personalities, geographical locations, types of clothing, breeds of animals, architectural elements and so on. However, avoid jargon or specialized terminology that may be unfamiliar to most visitors. For example, the stylistic terms "abstract" and "realistic" are likely to be understood, but "Geometric Astractionist" and "French Academic" are not.

It is strongly recommended that a describer look at the actual object when making initial notes, because color and other details are most accurately observed in person. When these notes are refined into the actual description, slides or photographs may be used as a reminder of the object's appearance and composition.

Sixth Guideline: Miscellaneous

Because visitors on a virtual tour may access works of art in any order, do not assume that they have followed a particular sequence. Do not refer to other pieces of art within the visual description, even works by the same artist or from the same gallery.

For the benefit of screen readers, use verbal numbers rather than numerals. For example, use "nineteenth century" instead of "19th century" and "two and a half" instead of "2 1/2".

Do not assign gender to animals, such as "the dog stands on his hind legs".

When describing the clothing of characters in a work, avoid redundancy by alternating between phrases like "dressed in," "is wearing" and "has on."

Have several people (including people with visual disabilities) review the visual descriptions and provide suggestions for improvement. As a final check, take the descriptions into the gallery and compare them to the actual works of art they describe.

Acknowledgements

Resources

The Dayton Art Institute
http://www.daytonartinstitute.org/

Recommendation on the use of "longdesc"

Guideline 1 from the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0

http://www.w3.org/TR/1999/WAI-WEBCONTENT-19990505/#gl-provide-equivalents

Recommendation on the use of "D-link"

Guideline 13 from CAST/Bobby

http://www.cast.org/bobby/html/gls/g13.html