



Section One: Narratives about Genre

Describing Torches Along Our Beach at Night: What I Learned about Writing Audio Descriptions

By Patrick Donlan

Editor's Note: While Sarah Lushia's article "Making Pictures Talk: The Journey of Learning a New Genre" narrates genre research from the perspective of someone teaching the genre of audio descriptions to others, Patrick Donlan's article is a narrative of how he learned about the genre and was able to publish his work.

As a student in English 101, the first-year writing class at Illinois State University, I had an instructor who was adamant about assigning projects that allowed us, as students to be independent and to make creative choices. Throughout the course of the semester, we were assigned four different projects, plus portfolio revisions that were used to help us craft our writing to its most superior. Project topics and rhetorical situations allowed us to broaden our writing's horizon and put our words into forums that challenged our intellect and creativity. However, it was in project three that I was introduced to a completely new type of writing style: an audio description. An audio description is exactly what it sounds like, a description of an image.



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Narratives About Genre

The assignment was to choose an image from a number of photograph search engines such as Flickr, Yahoo! images, etc. and then describe it. If we desired to get published, we could choose to describe an image from Illinois State's International Collection of Child Art (ICCA). If we wrote about an image from the ICCA, there was the possibility that we could record the audio description and have it put on Illinois State's ICCA website for the visually impaired. The program is offered so that the visually impaired could have the option to appreciate and visualize the art. Since ICCA has very few recordings to go with its many collections of child art, the possibilities for an audio description to be recorded was likely. The library would ultimately decide if an audio description could be recorded.

Since this type of writing was new, probably to every student, the learning process had to be clear and detailed so that we could do our best writing for the project. My instructor told us from the beginning that writing this project would require creativity, clarity, and descriptiveness; we should be able to visualize the image in our heads just by reading the description. We were told that not every part of the image needed to be described, but that awkward sentence structures and choppy sentences should be avoided so that the descriptions would flow well. For the first draft, the first thing I had to do was to choose an image that caught my eye and that I would like to describe. The second part was to write the description. The rough draft of the project was written in four sections: introduction, overview, details, and publication notes.

My first draft was turned in to the instructor so that I, as well as the rest of the class, could get a clear idea of what I needed to do to fix my project and all remaining drafts. In my first draft, my opening paragraph, which was used to introduce the picture's artist, lacked conciseness. Here is an example of one my early drafts.

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This piece of art is a water-based painting done by an eleven year old male from Honolulu, Hawaii. The title of the artwork is *Torches Along Our Beach at Night*.

Work forward making this scene more concise

dark sentence

The painting depicts the shore of a beach during the night while people on the beach prepare for a trip on the water. The center of the painting is mostly ocean. In the middle of the water, the reflection of the yellow moonlight shimmers on the surface of the ocean. The dark colored water takes up most of the bottom right side of the picture. On the beach, there are pairs of black torches in an X-shape lined up along the shore with red and orange flames. The torches spread

nice

This is about confessions when you can see the image?

Image copyright © International Collection of Child Art, Milner Library, Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois

I was able to make my next drafts more concise by researching the state where my artist was from in order to get a better understanding of why my artist decided to paint what he did. In my case, I had to research Hawaiian art. I discovered that it was a custom for art from the state of Hawaii to encompass an aspect of oceanic and shoreline influence. The rest of my first draft was loaded with organizational issues and poor sentence structure. I had attempted to pay extra attention to detail, but that extra effort took away from my ability to construct a coherent sentence. I also let my habit of creative writing take over in this project. One thing my instructor did not want us to do was to draw a conclusion or sum up the image at the end. It was not my job to create a story to go along with the image, just simply describe the details of the art that was present in the picture. Revisions for the second draft involved polishing the piece

to make it sound professional and clear, and to make it descriptive and easy to read.

Peer response for the article was imperative because extra eyes were needed to point out flaws. The first round of peer response was traditional Q & A. For Q & A peer response, I had to generate questions about my draft that I found needed attention. Members of my peer response group read my draft, and then answered my questions to help me improve. For the second round of peer response, I needed to read the image aloud to my partner, and then they would insert comments into my word document. This peer response was extremely beneficial for improving my overall final project and made revisions easy.

Since I had described an image from the ICCA, I could get published. I recorded my image at the Milner Library in the sound booths on the sixth floor. At first, I thought it would be no big challenge; however, I learned that there is a certain way to read the words, punch certain syllables, and make my volume loud enough to be heard. It took about two practices and four recordings before I was able to record the audio description perfectly. I learned that it helped to make hand movements as I spoke to get the words out. Recording the description was probably one of the coolest things I have done for school so far. Here is the final version of my audio description, but you can view the image and hear my description by going to the International Collection of Child Art website (http://tempest.lib.ilstu.edu/index_icca.php) and searching for the painting entitled *Torches Along Our Beach at Night*.

This artwork titled *Torches Along Our Beach at Night* was painted by an eleven year old boy from Honolulu, Hawaii. The painting depicts a nighttime beach scene with torches along a moonlit shore. The dark blue ocean fills most of the center and bottom right side of the image. Just off shore, the reflection of the full yellow moon shimmers on the surface of the ocean. Small huts line the curving shoreline and almost blend in with the sand. Scattered between them are green palm trees. Pairs of flaming black torches stand sentry next to each hut. Arching along the curve of the golden shore, their red and orange flames are reflected in the water. The huts and torches diminish in size as the shoreline meets the horizon. In the lower left foreground, two figures prepare to take a trip on the water in a small boat. The figures are simply painted in bright blue with small faces and red hats. In the background, a large brown mountain towers over the beach. Above the mountain is a black sky that is light with bright stars and a yellow moon that illuminates the entire scene. This image is published by Milner Library at Illinois State University as part of the International Collection of Child Art.