

Closed Captioning - Frequently Asked Questions

What does it really mean to create an “equal” viewing experience with captioning?

Equal access requires that the meaning and intention of the material is completely preserved. That’s everything from making sure that you caption the sound effects and the dialogue, accents, the grammatical errors, etc. The goal here is to convey exactly what’s being communicated.

In addition, there are times when you must edit the dialogue. This could be because somebody is speaking rapidly and there’s just not enough time to get all the words on the screen.

Most video production teams have a policy where we edit dialogue to be shorter and simpler. We don’t want to edit out important vocabulary. We don’t want to change concepts. It needs to be an equal representation.

What font and size are best for closed captions?

For closed captioning on most video players like YouTube, the player itself is going to dictate the settings, so you’re not going to have control over that. The caption display is customizable by the viewer, and can be affected by screen resolution and even what browser they’re using to watch your video.

But for standard-definition videos with open captions, we use Arial (a sans-serif font) and a font size of 22. For the high-definition stuff where the resolution is greater, we bump that up to 44.

As a rule, you should consider 32 characters per line as a good rule of thumb when captioning.

How would I create closed captions on YouTube?

If your videos are hosted on YouTube, there are a number of ways to create your own captions directly in the YouTube editing interface. There are three possibilities for creating captions by leveraging YouTube’s offerings:

Download and Edit YouTube’s Automatic Captions

YouTube’s automatic captions provide a good basis for captioning, but are far too inaccurate to be used on their own. Not only do the automatic captions provide error-ridden captions that hurt video accessibility, but YouTube and Google will not index the auto captions (this means they don’t help with your SEO). Here is how you can leverage the auto captions to create accurate captions for your YouTube videos:

1. From the Video Manager, select your video and click **Edit > Subtitles and CC**. Click **English (Automatic)** to pull up the automatic captions, then click **Actions > Download .srt**. Note that Google and YouTube will not index your captions if you edit the automatic captions in the YouTube interface.
2. Open your .srt file with a plain text editor. Edit the captions while playing back your video to make sure the captions are accurate. When you are happy with your caption file, make sure you save it with the .srt extension.
3. Upload your edited captions to YouTube by going back into the **Subtitles and CC** editor. Click **Add subtitles or CC** and select **English**, then click **Upload a File** and choose **Subtitles file**. Upload your .srt file; you can edit timing, if necessary, after the file has uploaded.

Create a Transcript in YouTube

If you don't want to use YouTube's automatic captions as a starting point, you can create a transcript and sync it with the video directly in YouTube:

1. From the Video Manager, select your video and click **Edit > Subtitles and CC**. Select **Add subtitles or CC** and choose your language.
2. Select **Transcribe and Set Timings** and, in the space provided, type the transcript of your video. YouTube will automatically pause the video as you type so you can transcribe the video quickly and more accurately.
3. When you are satisfied with your transcript, select **Set Timings**. This will sync your transcript with the video. You can always edit timing once the captions are published.

Create a Transcript File to Upload

If you would rather transcribe your video on your own, or if you already have a script for your video, you can upload the file to YouTube to create captions.

1. First, create a transcript of your video if you do not already have a script. Keep in mind YouTube's recommendations for formatting.
2. Navigate to the Video Manager in YouTube and click **Edit > Subtitles and CC** next to your video. Select **Add Subtitles or CC** and choose your language.
3. Choose **Upload a File**, select **Transcript** and choose your .txt file for upload.
4. When your transcript has uploaded, select **Set Timings** to sync your transcript with the video. You can always edit timing once the captions are published.

What if the speaker makes a grammatical error? Should we caption based on the speaker or based on incorrect grammar?

You basically want to follow what the speaker is saying. Certainly if a speaker is doing false starts, a lot of Ums and Ahs, those can be edited, particularly when you're faced with rapid dialogue and captions appearing too quickly on screen.

But obviously, hearing individuals are able to hear how a speaker is speaking — whether they have an accent or they're making grammatical errors. Those details can give insight into the character. We want to make sure that's conveyed to the viewers of captions as well.

How should you handle foreign languages being spoken in a mostly English video?

Production companies will often caption foreign-translated dialogue in yellow. There's just a little bit of a difference in colour so that it's very clear that it's translated. This is possible because we use open captions, which circumvent some of the formatting limitations of closed caption display.

If that's not an option, then, much like you would for a sound effect, you would add an ID that it was translated dialogue.

How do you handle profanity or inflammatory language?

To preserve the University's reputation and high standards we would avoid content that has profanity.

The strict interpretation of equal access is, if hearing folks are going to hear profanity, it should be captioned.

How do you handle a person who speaks with an accent or dialect?

When it is significant to the character, setting, or story, you can include a descriptor for a character who speaks in an accent. Within reason, you can type out the word phonetically.

For example, you could type “y’all” instead of “you all” if you’re captioning a speaker from the USA. You might type “guv’nor” instead of “governor” if you’re captioning a speaker with a thick cockney accent.

Should you caption sound effects that are not integral to the plot?

As the captioner, that is up to you.

If you would have to sacrifice other dialogue in order to fit them in, certainly omit them. But in the spirit of equal access, if you’ve got time, they should be included.

Captioning music lyrics may present a copyright problem. How do we manage that?

The best rule of thumb to avoid legal issues down the line is, if you are concerned about captioning lyrics, then don’t. Instead you can simply use the descriptor **[music]**.

When music is used to set a mood, would we want to describe the music as ‘ominous’ or ‘happy’ to show how the music and visuals relate, or would that be considered subjective?

Yes, that would be subjective but you definitely want to convey the meaning of the scene. Ideally you would not use an adjective that might be your own personal opinion. Objective descriptors of music like “fast” or “soft” would be acceptable.

Is there a format for closed captioning that supports caption placement?

SCC, STL, WebVTT, DFXP, and SMPTE Timed Text are the caption formats that support placement.

When uploading files to YouTube, you can use SCC files

Is there a minimum time that a caption frame should remain on screen?

The old analogue closed-caption decoders used to have a minimum load time that the captions had to be displayed in order for them to realize the caption needed to be displayed. Nowadays, we keep them up for a second or two.

It’s really going to come down to readability. If you’ve got a very short caption – somebody saying, “Yes” – obviously it needs a much shorter time than a multi-word caption.

How do you handle speakers talking over each other?

The best option would be to do a hyphen followed by the dialogue on top of each other just to denote that they are two different speakers. But it gets difficult if it’s not clear which of the speakers is saying which of the statements.

This information has been sourced from: Jason Stark and Cindy Camp, closed captioning experts; UK Government Guidelines; and W3C Accessibility Guidelines.

For more information about Accessibility at the University of Aberdeen, please contact our Assistive Technology team by email: atech@abdn.ac.uk