



# Subtitling Concepts

## What is subtitling?

Subtitling is a process by which lines of text (called subtitles or captions) are added to video material and timed to match the spoken dialogue. This subtitle text may either be the same language as, or be a translation of, the spoken dialogue of the video material.

## Why are subtitles important?

Translation based subtitles are generally provided to overcome the language problems associated with distributing video material across differing geographical areas. Subtitling as a translation technique is usually easier to produce and cheaper than providing an alternative language audio track - a process known as dubbing.

Same-language subtitles are generally provided as an in-country service for the benefit of viewers who are hearing impaired. It is now common for governments or regulatory authorities to legislate that this type of subtitling is provided.

There are many different broadcast technologies and video distribution methods now available, and as a consequence, many new subtitling technologies and techniques have been developed. However, the basic concept behind subtitling is to provide on-screen text that enhances but doesn't interfere with the viewer's enjoyment of the programme.

## What makes a "good" subtitle?

As we assimilate spoken words a lot faster than we read them, the written content of a subtitle may need to vary from a direct transcript of the spoken dialogue (usually when the spoken passages are short), to a shortened paraphrased version. However, good subtitling will ensure that the viewer is aware of all the important points found in the dialogue, even if the subtitles themselves differ somewhat from the actual script.

In addition to any limitations imposed by the timing of the dialogue, subtitles should not interfere with the background video material by being too prominent or too large and obscuring important on-screen activity. Therefore, most subtitles will be either one or two lines (or rows) high with the occasional three line subtitle occurring only when absolutely necessary.



Another important aspect of subtitle presentation is the styling and size of the chosen font, with simple uncluttered characters being favoured over elaborate or highly stylised fonts. The choice of font attributes such as colour, outline, drop-shadow and boxing should also be carefully considered to ensure the subtitles do not become too intrusive and draw the viewer's attention away from the video material.

When choosing the subtitle presentation style an understanding of the target audience is also required. In general subtitles provided for children, who have a lower reading speed, will stay on screen slightly longer and be bolder than for an adult audience.

## **Open or closed subtitling?**

Open subtitling refers to subtitles that appear permanently on screen and cannot be 'switched off' by the viewer. The viewer has no control over the style or visibility of the subtitles. Open subtitles are most commonly used for language translation subtitles.

Closed subtitles are those that the viewer can choose to see or not. Often the viewer can choose from more than one language and may have some control over presentation style. Closed subtitles are used for hard of hearing subtitles or captions (in the same language as the dialogue) and/or for translation subtitles where there is more than one language available.