

CAPTIONING QUALITY CODE OF PRACTICE

From the Deafness Forum of Australia Web site

Preamble

This document outlines the quality standards that should be met in the production and presentation of captions. The document specifies visual outcomes, not production techniques. It is up to the caption provider to decide the most appropriate method to deliver the caption to the viewer--as long as it is clear, easy to read and informative.

Australians who are Deaf and Hearing Impaired agree that American-style captions can be used on American-produced TV programs and for movies for screening in cinemas. Likewise, British-style captions can be used on British-produced TV programs. With Australian-produced programs, however, the standards outlined in this document should be the accepted norm.

Basic Issues

Captions are primarily a form of communication and they are a substitute or supplement for hearing the soundtrack of a program. For that reason the following must be taken into account when creating captions:

1. Television, movies, DVDs, videos, etc. provide information in a visual medium. Captions must be able to be read whilst the viewer is simultaneously watching the on-screen visuals.
2. Television and public movie screenings do not allow the viewer to look back over something they haven't understood. Therefore the captions must be able to convey the information in one reading.
3. The pace of a television program, movie, DVD or video sometimes means that it would be impractical to include every word or sound effect in caption form on the screen. This needs to be balanced against the captioning audience's desire to receive as much as possible of the information available to the hearing audience.
4. An entire program/bulletin, movie, DVD, video, etc. must be captioned. The purpose of a caption is to recreate the soundtrack, not just segments of it or those that are easiest to produce.

Priorities

The priorities for effective captioning are:

1. Firstly, a caption should be as faithful as possible to the original wording.
2. Adequate time should be allowed for a caption to be read.
3. The soundtrack should be recreated as closely as possible by:
 - Attempting to match what is actually said in meaning and complexity.
 - Including all obvious speech and sound effects in captions.
 - Positioning and timing captions appropriately.

The Standards

General Grammar and Presentation

1. Punctuation should make captions as easy as possible for viewers to read.
2. Punctuation should follow normal style and conventions (such as the Commonwealth Government style manual).
3. Punctuation should also convey, as much as possible, the way speech is delivered.
4. Sentence case should be used.
5. Spelling should be accurate (using the Macquarie Dictionary as the standard reference).
6. Proper nouns (such as names, places, etc.) should be verified.
7. It is not necessary to repeat, in caption form, any information that is already on the screen (such as the name of a presenter or temperatures read out in a weather report), assuming that such information is not obscured by inappropriately positioned captions (see Positioning below).
8. Pop-up captions, not scrolling captions, should be transmitted wherever possible

Timing and Editing

1. The ideal caption coincides exactly with the relevant soundtrack, so that the relation between sound and visuals is preserved for the caption viewer.
2. Captions should be synchronised with a scene change unless speech continues across a change.
3. A caption should stay as close as possible to the original wording while allowing the viewer enough time to absorb the caption's contents and still watch the action of the program.
4. Programs should be captioned at an appropriate reading speed for the intended audience. For adults this is 180 words per minute (i.e. 3 words per second).
5. Where time allows, a caption should be verbatim (word for word).
6. The essence of reduction is remaining faithful to the script. Vocabulary and sentence structure should be preserved as much as possible.
7. Line breaks and caption breaks should reflect the natural flow of the sentence and its punctuation.
8. Captions should never be more than three lines in length. The preference is for one-line or two-line captions to be used.

Colouring

1. Different colours should be used to help identify different speakers.
2. White captions should be used as much as possible as they are the easiest to read.
3. Sound effects should be identified using a different (but consistent colour).

4. A black background box should be used to aid readability.

Positioning

1. Positioning should be used to identify who is speaking, especially when there are several speakers in the scene.
2. Positioning should locate the direction that off-screen speech or sound is coming from.
3. When positioning captions it is important, where possible, to avoid obscuring important information on the screen, e.g. supers, graphics or activities, or the speaker's lips. For example, it is clearly important that captions not obscure scores in sports broadcasts.

Sound Effects

1. Any noise or music that enhances the visuals contributes to characterisation or adds atmosphere should be captioned.
2. A caption viewer should not receive any more information than a hearing viewer would get.

Children's Programs

1. Children's programs should be captioned at 120 words per minute, unless they are primarily for younger audiences. In this case they should be captioned at 90 or 60 words per minute, as appropriate.
2. In a children's program, substitute words or phrases should never be more complicated than the original wording.

Error Rates

Attempting to define acceptable error rates would imply that some level of errors is acceptable when really that is not the case. While errors are not acceptable, it is acknowledged that they do happen. With pre-captioned material any errors should be corrected prior to broadcast, screening or sale of the material. Certainly the error rate for captioning should not be higher than the error rate for the sound or the image. The likelihood of errors inevitably will be greater with live captioning, but every attempt should be made to minimise it. The impact of an error can vary and what is considered an error might vary from viewer to viewer.

Problems with transmission, or with the receiving equipment, can mean that perfectly captioned material does not appear on the screen without errors. However, as a matter of principle, the aim should be to deliver all captioning error free. Any individual viewer who considers particular captioning to have an unacceptable error rate must be able to use the available processes to complain, knowing they have the right to expect perfect captioning. Some viewers will accept more errors than others, taking the view that it is acceptable so long as they can clearly understand what was intended. Others may take a different view.

Many caption users (children and others still learning English) need them because of their low English literacy levels and that is why accuracy is of critical importance.

Live Captioning

The challenge of captioning live-to-air programs is to supply accurate captions that are not too far behind the on-screen speaker. In some cases this can require a simplification of the standards that

apply to pre-recorded programs, particularly in terms of editing and colouring. However, where possible, captions following normal captioning standards (as above) should be provided. In addition:

1. In the case of television news bulletins, captions should essentially be a verbatim transcription of what is being said (even though this may make the reading rate higher than 180 words per minute). It is also necessary to caption significant non-verbal sounds.
2. All items in a television news bulletin should be captioned.
3. Captioning must include the key facts (or “idea units”) presented in the soundtrack. In news programs the critical element is the information being conveyed to hearing viewers. Most news bulletins cannot be edited down since they are all key facts; that is, the entire point of a news bulletin.

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