

Language Control in Captioned Films

Written as part of the guidelines for caption writers at Captioned Films for the Deaf summer
caption writing workshops

1977

As educators of the deaf, we are well aware that the major learning handicap of the deaf lies in the restrictions deafness places on the normal acquisition of language. Hearing children are immersed in a world of sound and language as they grow up, but prelingually deaf children are deprived of natural language exposure. Only with extraordinary educational intervention do they acquire language fluency. Usually they enter school and begin to learn to read without the background advantage of an advanced linguistic base. It is common to find that their reading skills develop more slowly than those of hearing children. Most of them never do catch up. The actual grade level of school enrollment for deaf children is usually widely disparate from their language development level and their reading ability. Standardized testing shows that on the average, hearing impaired 19-year-olds in the 1980s read at below a fourth grade reading level. The reading material they will encounter in their daily lives will be difficult for them to completely understand because of their inability to deal with sophisticated syntax, high vocabulary, use of idioms, and inferential language.

It becomes our task as caption writers to constantly increase our personal and professional knowledge of the linguistic skills of hearing-impaired viewers at various developmental stages. We must apply that knowledge as we write captions. To adequately convey the audio content of a film while observing the many technical restrictions of the captioning process is a challenge. The process of creating captions which are truly readable by deaf viewers, whose understanding of syntax is limited, becomes a science. The creation of captions, which are also literary and not stilted, becomes an art.

Researchers in the field of child language development and captioning have made great progress in developing guidelines for those who wish to write syntactically controlled language for deaf children at particular stages of language development. The following guidelines are based on our experience as caption writers and on the research of such groups as the National Captioning Institute, National Technical Institute for the Deaf, and WGBH-TV in Boston. We follow these guidelines in captioning films/videos for the Educational Captioned Films for the Deaf project.

THE SCARCITY OF PRIMARY LEVEL FILMS

Our evaluation teams find very few titles that are appropriate for use with primary-aged deaf children. Language development follows a continuum. Any particular child will move along that continuum at his own pace with jumps ahead and backtracking as he masters new vocabulary and syntactical complexities. But fast-paced dialogue, complex organization, or high vocabulary and inference levels present reading challenges for any deaf child. Because of readability problems, titles that may be appropriate for young hearing children are sometimes targeted for deaf children who are three years older. To offset some of these limitations, captioners are especially careful to caption titles designated for grade levels, preschool through four, in a manner that will maximize accessibility for the young new readers in this age group of deaf children.

Of course, those of us who teach deaf children in this age group on a regular basis are most able to observe the reading and language needs of these children. We tend to be the best captioners for titles at this level. Those of us who teach at the junior and senior high school level customarily caption titles targeted for the older students.

SPECIAL NEEDS FORMS

The Special Needs Form, developed for each title to be captioned, summarizes all the information gathered and decisions made regarding the title, up to the point in time when the workshops begin. Sources for this information include film company personnel and printed literature, field and national evaluators who are educators of the deaf, captioning evaluators, Department of Education personnel, and contractor staff. The Special Needs Form presents the approach to be taken in captioning and lesson guide production for the specific title in question.

The three differing meanings of the common term “grade level” are given on the Special Needs Form are: (1) “Grade Level”; (2) “Captioning Level”; and (3) “Key Audience.”

“Grade Level” on the Special Needs Form indicates the grades at which viewers will be interested in the film. This range of grades is later listed in the catalog for teachers’ guidance in booking films.

“Key Audience,” as given on the Special Needs Form, indicates the type of audience most likely to frequently use and benefit from the title. Caption script and lesson guide writers focus their thinking on use by the “Key Audience” age group, even though there may be younger or older groups who will also use the film.

The Special Needs Form also indicates a “Captioning Level” for each film. This is an indication of the level of language complexity to be observed in writing the caption script. One of three letters (Captioning Level A, B, or C) is assigned to each title.

One of the most basic purposes of the Captioned Films for the Deaf project is to adapt media so that it can be appropriately used in the education of the deaf. To meet this goal, it is essential to control the complexity of the language presented so that it matches the language proficiency of a deaf viewer at a particular developmental language level.

We have explored the application of standard readability formulas to captioned media and found it to be virtually impossible to apply them accurately. Reading from a book and reading from a moving, projected picture are fundamentally different. We have found that it is possible, however, to apply principles of language development and linguistic analysis to captioned scripts. So this is the approach that we have established in adapting a script for the deaf viewer: we control the overall speed of caption presentation by following a word-per-minute scale, and we control the level of language complexity by following a defined captioning level.

Captioning Level A roughly reflects the very basic language complexities mastered by the deaf viewer (of any age) who is a beginning reader. Captioning Level B reflects a midrange level of language complexity. Captioning Level C reflects a more advanced level of language complexity. For materials to be used strictly by adult professionals, we sometimes use a nearly “Verbatim Captioning” style, in which language complexity is not restricted.

Because we are experienced educators of the deaf, our writers are familiar with the language needs of a deaf viewer. The following language complexity guidelines assist us in matching the level of language complexity used in rewriting a script to the assigned captioning level on a particular title. The guidelines supplement our own professional knowledge.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF LANGUAGE CONTROL IN CAPTIONING

STAND ALONE CAPTIONS

One of the most basic principles of caption writing is that each caption should stand alone as a complete grammatical unit. The use of split captions is avoided at all captioning levels. Displaying only part of a caption on screen increases the reader's task in reading analysis dramatically. Avoiding split captions is very achievable on syncap films. Finding an alternative wording or an alternative division of the scene to allow a complete caption to appear at once is a basic syncap writing technique.

On nonsyncap films, the goal of stand-alone captions is more difficult to achieve and is occasionally impossible. But it is usually possible to free a nonsyncap script from split captions with only minor changes of one or two words. It often requires very little revision for a "fragment" to become a stand-alone, independent caption. For example, two segments from a spotting list read: "Sometimes they're tired or busy or have some problems to think about . . ."

". . . and can't always give you their attention." Rather than write two dependent captions that cannot stand alone, we might revise this to become two independent captions: "Sometimes they are tired or busy." "They can't always give you their attention." Our nonsyncap specialists become experts at this kind of adjustment.

CAPTION LENGTH

Caption length, of course, determines the reading speed on any given caption. The given mathematics of scene footages and the caption scale form the basis for determining the amount of time available for any given caption to stay on screen. Captions are not allowed to cross over into a new scene and, thus, must come off whenever a scene changes. Longer scenes, however, give us more options as to the length of time a caption could stay on screen. A longer scene may allow for various configurations of the same language. For example, five short sentences in a long scene could be split up into five captions with one sentence in each caption. Or it might be split up into three captions with two sentences in caption #1, one sentence in caption #2, and two sentences in caption #3. Several arrangements are possible as long as each caption stands alone as a grammatical unit.

A good basic principle that we keep in mind is that short one-line captions are easier to read than longer two-line captions. Having fewer words on the screen at any given moment is better than having many. If there is sufficient footage within a scene, we break one long caption into two shorter captions. For example, if enough footage is allowed for: "Everyone in our class wrote him a note to cheer him up," a simpler alternative is also possible. The same amount of footage would allow for two separate and simpler captions: "Our class wrote notes." "We cheered him up."

Presenting only one concept per sentence also increases readability.

VOCABULARY

Vocabulary used in a film can be controlled fairly well in both syncap and nonsyncap films. We start with the vocabulary given in the audio (spotting list). But this precise vocabulary needs to be kept only to the extent that it will serve the purposes of readers in the key targeted audience. Vocabulary words not commonly found in basal readers appropriate for the targeted audience can be eliminated or more

appropriate synonyms can be substituted. Even high school-aged deaf viewers typically have not mastered vocabulary beyond a fourth grade basal reader with complete comprehension.

Any specialized vocabulary which would typically be taught as new vocabulary in the learning experience provided by the film is considered for retention whether it is typical vocabulary for the captioning level assigned or not. For example, in a film on pioneers with a captioning level of “A” and key audience of grade 3, we may wish to retain the important concept term “covered wagon”, even though it would be new vocabulary to the deaf viewers. On the other hand, a film on basic life skills for a key audience of “10th graders who function at a very low level” might also be assigned a captioning level of “A”. In this case, the captioner might determine that the phrase “scouring the cast iron deep fat fryer” would be more readable at the “A” level by substituting “washing the pan” or something similar.

Repetition can be used to good effect with difficult vocabulary. We word captions in such a way that the context explains and re-explains new words. If there is no reason or opportunity to use a difficult term more than once, it may be a clue that retaining the term really is not essential to the content of the film.

Experience has shown us that applying these principles will keep our vocabulary choices on track fairly well. Problems with inappropriate vocabulary choices in the past have usually been traced to a situation in which a writer is unfamiliar with the subject content of the title being captioned or has no teaching experience with deaf viewers at the key audience level. If this happens, the workshop administration may reassign the title to a more appropriate writer or assign a collaborative effort.

IDIOMS

We are wary about the use of idioms. In general, idioms that are more literal than abstract are more easily understood by the deaf viewer. For example, “Come out here” is more literal and, therefore, easier to read than “Get out here.” “Hurry” is more literal and easier to understand than “Shake a leg.” We also realize that if the reader cannot read the individual words within the idiom, it is certainly too difficult for him to understand as an idiomatic unit. For example, “None of your business” becomes impossibly complex for any deaf child who hasn’t learned to read the word “business” at all, and furthermore, can’t apply the multiple meaning implied.

MULTIPLE MEANINGS

We strive to use words with multiple meanings in the way that would be expected by the targeted audience at the captioning level indicated. “Fire,” for example, will be better understood at Captioning Level A as a noun meaning “burning” than as a verb meaning “to lose a job.” “Divorce” will be more easily understood at Captioning Level C as meaning “a marriage splitting up” than when used to mean “moving philosophically” (as in “He divorced himself from the idea that shooting the horse was an act of kindness.”).

GUIDELINES FOR LANGUAGE USE AT SPECIFIC CAPTIONING LEVELS

Captioning Level A

I. SENTENCE STRUCTURE AT CAPTIONING LEVEL A

A. Acceptable

Simple sentence patterns following subject-verb-object word order.

B. Avoid

Compound sentences. Compound subjects (John AND Mary ate dinner.) and compound objects (John ate meat AND potatoes.) will be understood, but conjoined sentences (John ate potatoes BUT Mary ate meat.) will be difficult.

C. Not Acceptable

1. Split captions; if you feel compelled to split a caption, you probably have an overly complicated sentence for this level.
2. Complex sentences patterns; dependent clauses.
3. Complex subjects and objects.
4. Use of “both...and.”
5. Use of “there” insertion. (“There are . . .” types of sentences can be improved by simply dropping “there” and moving the verb. For example, “There are fifteen apples left” can easily become “Fifteen apples are left.”)
6. Conjoined verbs and prepositions. Deletion of any keyword in a longer sentence complicates language greatly. (Examples: “The men were drilling and sawing lumber” is far more difficult than “The men were drilling. The men were sawing lumber.” Also: “The cat ran into the house AND under the bed.” is far more difficult than “The cat ran into the house. The cat ran under the bed.”)

II. VERB TENSES AT CAPTIONING LEVEL A

A. Acceptable

1. Simple past, present and future tenses. (John eats, John ate, John will eat)
2. Past and present progressives. (John is eating. Mary was eating.)

B. Not Acceptable

Passive voice. Contrary to active voice in which the noun in the subject position performs the action, in passive voice, the noun in the object position does the action. (Examples of passive voice: “The Queen was persuaded by Columbus.” “They were lured by the gold.” “Thoughts of home were forgotten.” “Bad news was reported.”)

III. VERB MODALS AT CAPTIONING LEVEL A

A. Acceptable

Can, may, do, does, did, will, want to, try to.

- B. Avoid
 - Would, must, need to, should, could.
- C. Not Acceptable
 - Be able to, going to (use “will”), might, ought to, be about to, had better, had best, have to (try substituting “will” or possibly “must” or “should”), be unable to, shall, supposed to, had better be, used to.

IV. PRONOUNS AT CAPTIONING LEVEL A

- A. Acceptable
 - 1. Most personal pronouns used as nouns.
 - 2. Possessive pronouns: mine.
- B. Avoid
 - 1. Indefinite pronouns such as: anybody, anyone, everyone, someone, no one, nobody, nothing, something.
 - 2. Possessive pronouns other than “mine.”
 - 3. Use of “It was . . .” and “It is . . .” constructions where “it” lacks a clear referent.
 - 4. Objective pronouns (them, him, her).
- C. Not Acceptable
 - Continued use of a pronoun without renaming the referent. (For example, if “he” refers to John in three or four successive captions, the word “John” should be substituted for one of more of them. This is a critical consideration in captioning because as a film continues the reader has no opportunity to look back a few captions to see who “he” was.)

V. NEGATIVES AND CONTRACTIONS AT CAPTIONING LEVEL A

- A. Acceptable
 - Can’t, don’t, doesn’t, didn’t, isn’t, wasn’t, won’t.
- B. Avoid
 - Wouldn’t, I’m, he’s, they’re, you’ll, we’ll.
- C. Not Acceptable
 - 1. Not yet, won’t, couldn’t and shouldn’t, haven’t.
 - 2. Neither, no longer.
 - 3. Pronouns contracted with “would or “have” (I’d, he’d, I’ve, she’s, they’ve).
 - 4. Invented contractions (“mightn’t’ve been”) and nonwords (gonna, usta, woulda).
 - 5. Use of nonwords to reflect dialect. (Avoid dialect entirely at Level A if at all possible.)
 - 6. Use of contractions to “save a word or two.” (Deaf children often can read and comprehend the two words written out more readily than the contraction.)
 - 7. Use of nonwords (gonna, usta, woulda).

Captioning Level B

I. SENTENCE STRUCTURE AT CAPTIONING LEVEL B

A. Acceptable

1. Simple sentence patterns following subject-verb-object word order.
2. Compound subjects and compound objects.
3. Compound sentences: use only if the subjects, verbs, and objects in each clause are simple. (Don't use phrases as subjects or objects.)

B. Avoid

1. Split captions.
2. Complex sentence patterns; subordinate clauses.
3. "If . . . then" and "so" as conjoiners.

C. Not Acceptable

1. Complex subjects and objects.
2. Use of "both ...and."
3. Conjoined verbs and prepositions. Deletion of any keyword in a longer sentence complicates language greatly. (Examples: "The men were drilling and sawing lumber" is far more difficult than "The men were drilling. The men were sawing lumber." Also: "The cat ran into the house AND under the bed." is far more difficult than "The cat ran into the house. The cat ran under the bed.")
4. Use of "there" insertion. ("There are . . ." types of sentences can be improved by simply dropping "there" and moving the verb. For example, "There are fifteen apples left." can easily become "Fifteen apples are left.")

II. VERB TENSES AT CAPTIONING LEVEL B

A. Not Acceptable

Passive voice. Contrary to active voice in which the noun in the subject does the action, in passive voice, the noun in the object position does the action. (Examples of passive voice: "The Queen was persuaded by Columbus." "They were lured by the gold." "Thoughts of home were forgotten." "Bad weather was reported.")

III. VERB MODALS AT CAPTIONING LEVEL B

A. Acceptable

1. Can, may, do, does, did, will, want to, try to.
2. Would, must, need to, should, could.

B. Avoid

Might, going to (use "will"), be able to, used to.

C. Not Acceptable

Out to, be about to, had better, had best, have to (use "must" or "should"), be unable to, shall, supposed to, had better be.

IV. PRONOUNS AT CAPTIONING LEVEL B

A. Acceptable

1. Personal pronouns.
2. Possessive pronouns.
3. Indefinite pronouns such as anybody, anyone, everyone, someone, no one, nobody, nothing, something.
4. Objective pronouns (them, him, her).

B. Avoid

Use of “It was . . .” and “It is . . .” constructions where “it” lacks a clear referent.

C. Not Acceptable

Continued use of a pronoun without renaming the referent. (For example, if “he” refers to John in three or four successive captions, the word “John” should be substituted for one or more of them. This is a critical consideration in captioning because as a film continues the reader has no opportunity to look back a few captions to see who “he” was.)

V. NEGATIVES AND CONTRACTIONS AT CAPTIONING LEVEL B

A. Acceptable

1. Can’t, don’t, doesn’t, didn’t, isn’t, wasn’t, won’t.
2. Wouldn’t, I’m, he’s, they’re, you’ll, we’ll.

B. Avoid

Use of contractions or nonwords to reflect dialect. If retention of dialect is essential, use of nonstandard word order and incorrect grammar (tenses, etc.) is easier to read than nonwords and contracted words. (Example: “He ain’t got no more money.” rather than “He ain’ got hisself no mo’ money, he ain’.”) Prior approval of Workshop Administration must be sought in reflecting dialect.

C. Not Acceptable

1. Not yet, couldn’t and shouldn’t, haven’t.
2. Neither, no longer.
3. Pronouns contracted with “would or “have” (I’d, he’d, I’ve, she’s, they’ve).
4. Invented contractions (mightnt’ve been”) and nonwords (gonna, usta, woulda).
5. Use of contractions to “save a word or two.” (Two words written out are more readable than the contraction.)
6. Nonwords (gonna, usta, woulda).

Captioning Level C

I. SENTENCE STRUCTURE AT CAPTIONING LEVEL C

A. Acceptable

1. Simple sentence patterns.
2. Compound subjects and compound objects.
3. Compound sentences.

4. Complex sentence patterns, if they contain uncomplicated subjects, verbs and objects.

B. Avoid

1. Split captions.
2. Conjoined verbs and prepositions. Deletion of any keyword in a longer sentence complicates language greatly. (Examples: "The men were drilling and sawing lumber." is far more difficult than "The men were drilling. The men were sawing lumber." Also: "The cat ran into the house AND under the bed." is far more difficult than "The cat ran into the house. The cat ran under the bed.")
3. Use of "both . . . and," "if . . . then," "so" as conjoiners.
4. Complex sentence patterns that could easily be divided into two simple sentences.
5. Use of "there" insertion. ("There are . . ." types of sentences can be improved by simply dropping "there" and moving the verb. For example, "There are fifteen apples left" can easily become "Fifteen apples are left.")

C. Not Acceptable

Complex subjects and objects in which clauses work within clauses. (Example: "The woman who wore the silver hat was walking the dog that bit Mrs. Smith.")

II. VERB TENSES AT CAPTIONING LEVEL C

A. Not Acceptable

Passive voice. Contrary to active voice in which the noun in the subject does the action, in passive voice, the noun in the object position does the action. (Examples of passive voice: "The Queen was persuaded by Columbus." "They were lured by the gold." "Thoughts of home were forgotten." "Bad news was reported.")

III. VERB MODALS AT CAPTIONING LEVEL C

A. Acceptable

1. Can, may, do, does, did, will, want to, try to.
2. Would, might, must, need to, should, could, be able to.

B. Avoid

Have to (use "must" or "should"), going to (use "will"), used to.

C. Not Acceptable

Ought to, be about to, had better, had best, be unable to, shall, supposed to, had better be.

IV. PRONOUNS AT CAPTIONING LEVEL C

A. Acceptable

1. Personal pronouns.
2. Possessive pronouns.
3. Indefinite pronouns such as anybody, anyone, everyone, someone, no one, nobody, nothing, something.

4. Objective pronouns (them, him, her).

B. Avoid

Use of “It was . . .” and “It is . . .” constructions where “it” lacks a clear referent.

C. Not Acceptable

Continued use of a pronoun without renaming the referent. (For example, if “he” refers to John in three or four successive captions, the word “John” should be substituted for one or more of them. This is a critical consideration in captioning because as a film continues the reader has no opportunity to look back a few captions to see who “he” was.)

V. NEGATIVES AND CONTRACTIONS AT CAPTIONING LEVEL C

A. Acceptable

1. Can’t, don’t, doesn’t, didn’t, isn’t, wasn’t, won’t.
2. Wouldn’t, I’m, he’s, they’re, you’ll, we’ll.
3. Not yet, couldn’t and shouldn’t, haven’t.

B. Avoid

Use of contractions or nonwords to reflect dialect. If retention of dialect is essential, use of nonstandard word order and incorrect grammar (tenses, etc.) is easier to read than nonwords and contracted words. (Example: “He ain’t got no more money.” rather than “He ain’ got hissself no mo’ money, he ain’.”) Prior approval of Workshop Administration must be sought in reflecting dialect.

C. Not Acceptable

1. Neither, no longer (difficult at all levels).
2. Pronouns contracted with “would” or “have” (I’d, he’d, I’ve, she’s, they’ve).
3. Invented contractions (“mightnt’ve been”) and nonwords (gonna, usta, woulda).
4. Use of contractions to “save a word or two.” (Two words written out are more readable than the contraction.)
5. Nonwords. (gonna, usta, woulda).