



Introduction to subtitling for Deaf and hard of hearing

For many people who rely on subtitles (or closed captions in US terminology), English will be their second language, with British Sign Language (BSL) being their first.) This is especially so for younger viewers who are more likely to have been born with hearing loss rather than age-related hearing loss. Therefore, it's really important that the subtitles give the user every opportunity to read and understand the meaning behind the words being displayed on the screen.

The following are just a few of the techniques that professional SDH (subtitles for Deaf and hard of hearing) subtitlers use.

Timings

Remember that the viewer will be trying to watch the visuals while following the subtitles, so you need to make sure that you leave each subtitle the maximum amount of time on screen, whilst keeping it in synch with the voiceover. There are standard industry timing guidelines of at least two seconds for one line of text and at least 3.5 seconds per two lines of text. You can go down to one second as an absolute minimum for a couple of words or a recognisable phrase such as "Good morning" or "How are you?" Below a second, there's little chance of the viewer processing the subtitle.

You can maximise your time by using two lines instead of single lines, if the sentence is running over them both. If there is, say, half a second pause at the end of a sentence, you can leave your subtitle on to give the viewer a little longer. Also, if it's very fast, you can lightly edit extraneous words, making sure to leave the exact meaning intact.

Subtitle groupings

It's important to keep a natural grammatical structure to the subtitles, so the viewer can understand each in its entirety before it disappears and they have to move on to the next. So, as far as possible, they should be split up into grammatical clauses, keeping pronoun and verb/article and noun together in meaningful groups.

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"It's understood that the supplier of the"

"goods Unilver wants the supermarket to"

"pay an extra 10% because of a"

“fall in the value of the pound.”

Would be much easier to read and understand as...

“It’s understood
the supplier of the goods, Unilver,”

“wants the supermarket to pay an extra 10%
because of a fall in the value of the pound.”

You also carry this idea over to line endings within subtitles.

So, avoid...

“It’s understood the
supplier of the goods, Unilver,”

in favour of...

“It’s understood
the supplier of the goods, Unilver,”

This is all aimed at giving the Deaf and hard of hearing viewer every opportunity to gain equal access to the soundtrack as someone who is hearing the words

Style

In the First News Today videos, I wouldn’t repeat the headline in caps. Leave the headline graphic clear to read, then start the subtitles when the VO starts the story. Also, in SDH subtitling convention, caps are usually used either for emphasis or for sound effect labels, usually in brackets.

Ie “Don’t you DARE call me that!”
(GUNFIRE)

Numbers – one to ten in words, then 11, 12 etc. Unless it’s time – ie 3 o’clock or other widely used conventions, ie Number 10.

Use common symbols £1.5 million, 10% etc, as it’s much quicker to understand.

I generally use 42 characters per line, with a maximum of 44 if needed to avoid awkward subtitle breaks or very fast subtitles.

If you can, try to fit your subtitles in the shots. If the subtitles come in and out on shot-changes, it halves what’s happening on the screen and means there’s less distracting “flashing” for the viewer, making it that little bit easier to follow.