Captioning Style Guide

Please treat this document as a guide: we must observe correct spelling and grammar, but accuracy of meaning and being clear is more important than style.

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# **Captioning Aims & Introduction.**

Syncing captions with audio

* Captions should, wherever possible, appear exactly when the words are spoken, but also need to stay on-screen long enough to be read.
* A good rule of thumb is to organise the subtitles such that they appear for a minimum of two seconds on-screen to allow the viewer enough time to read them.

Caption verbatim (word for word)

* Caption all words regardless of language, dialect, slang, foul language or slurs. It is not the editor’s responsibility to censor any content. Editors must ensure that every word is transcribed exactly as is spoken.

With automatically generated transcripts, there will usually be no need to:

* Adjust timings
* Adjust the place at which the caption is split (e.g. punctuation)
* Change the number of characters per caption, as these will usually be within acceptable parameters

There may, however, be occasions when you feel it is necessary to do one of these and we include broad guidelines on caption limits and line breaks.

## **Style Guide: Presentation, Punctuation & Numbers.**

**Caption limits**

* Have a maximum of two lines and 70 characters of caption on screen at any one time. This is roughly estimated at around 10–15 words at a time on screen, but use your discretion.

Line breaks

* Avoid ending one sentence and begin a new sentence on the same line, unless the second sentence is very short.
* Have subtitle lines end at natural linguistic breaks, ideally at a clause or phrase boundary or a pause.
* Keep in mind the lines are automatically resized to fit playback devices, so do not add line breaks artificially.

Please refer to the specific guidance for Media Hopper Create ([Both\_Requesting and editing automtic subtitles](https://edwebcontent.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/atoms/files/qrc_requesting_and_editing_automtic_subtitles.pdf)) and Media Hopper Replay ([Quick Reference Card for editing captions in Media Hopper Replay.pdf](https://information-services.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-01/Quick%20Reference%20Card%20for%20editing%20captions%20in%20Media%20Hopper%20Replay.pdf)) on how to make these adjustments. If you are using other systems or software, please refer to their guidance.

Breaking up sentence lines

* Two short sentences and a third sentence.

|  |
| --- |
| So. Here we go. What do sustainable materials have to do with trees? |

*Should be:*

|  |
| --- |
| So.  Here we go. |
| What do sustainable materials have to do with trees? |

* One short sentence and part of a second sentence

|  |
| --- |
| Anyone can do it. If you're trying to impress a guest with |

*Should be:*

|  |
| --- |
| Anyone can do it. |
| If you’re trying to impress a guest with |

* Part of a sentence ending, and part of a second sentence (two partial sentences)

|  |
| --- |
| few people in education in |
| Scotland talked about blended learning. It was niche at that point |

*Should be:*

|  |
| --- |
| few people in education in Scotland talked about blended learning. |
| It was niche at that point |

* Part of a sentence ending and a second complete sentence

|  |
| --- |
| so, for example, use of PPE when it comes to |
| transport. Are we using outdoor spaces or indoor spaces or both? |

*Should be:*

|  |
| --- |
| so, for example, use of PPE when it comes to transport. |
| Are we using outdoor spaces or indoor spaces or both? |

Punctuation

* Question marks (?) and exclamation points (!) should be used to indicate a question or emphasis, respectively. Full stops (.) and ellipses (...) have similar functions. These will break subtitle lines.
* Use em dashes and ellipses to convey natural speech patterns. If there are pauses between the sentences, use an em dash (—) to indicate a speaker’s sentence revision, hesitation or confusion. An ellipsis (...) also indicates a speaker’s hesitation, but are better suited for long pauses between words: **I thought that… never mind.** Hyphens should *not* be used for this purpose (That is-I suppose that’s true.)
* Use a single space after commas, colons, semicolons, before opening brackets, and after closing brackets. Em dashes, however, do not require spaces, as they are used to indicate new sentence direction and can be used as parentheses: **The three sorbets—cherry, apple and lemon—were delicious.**
* Be consistent when hyphenating words (either ‘sub-standard’ or ‘substandard’, not both). Do not use full stops between abbreviated initials or titles (‘BSc’, ‘Dr’, ‘Prof’, ‘Mrs’, ‘EUSA’, ‘USA’). Decades do not need an apostrophe (‘1780s’) nor do acronyms (‘URLs’).
* Use inverted commas to indicate speech, reported speech or reported thoughts. (‘XXXX’ instead of “XXXX”) (I.e., **and I thought to myself ‘why am I doing this’, or as the author used to say, ‘things are the way they are meant to be’**).

Capitalisation

* Capitalise the first word of a sentence and any word usually given a capital letter in UK English (proper nouns etc).
* Do not capitalise a whole word to give emphasis.
* Capitalise names, book titles, films, project titles, paintings, brand names and art pieces etc. Example: Jeanette Winterson recently wrote ‘Written on the Body’.
* Differentiate between proper nouns and common nouns. For instance, capitalise for medicine brands, but not the type of medicine. Example: **Winterson took cetirizine to cope with the bout of allergy she had while writing. She used Zodac for this purpose.**
* Capitalise University branded places or spaces and always capitalise University when referring specifically to the University of Edinburgh. Example:

**She never thought university study would be something for her. After completing the Access Programme at the Centre for Open Learning, she started her undergraduate study at the University. She is not too keen on her commute to the BioQuarter so she often studies in the Main Library or meets her study group in the Edinburgh Futures Institute café.**

Numbers

* Spell numbers from one to ten (one, two, three, four...).
* Use numerals for:
  + numbers larger than ten (11, 100, 1000)
  + those in a technical or athletic context (‘3.5 metres’, ‘5 goals’, ‘4K resolution’)
  + time (‘4:30 pm’)
  + date (‘June 21st’).
* For big numbers like 7,000,000, use ‘7 million’ instead: keep captions easily legible.

Refer to the **Annex: Captioning Mathematical Content** at the end of this document for more information.

Phonetic words and phrases

* When a phrase is spoken phonetically, caption it as it would be written.
  + Spoken: ‘www dot E D dot A C dot UK’; caption: ‘[www.ed.ac.uk’](http://www.ed.ac.uk/).
  + Spoken: ‘two and a half thousand’; caption: ‘2500’.

## **Style Guide: Audio, Speakers & Language.**

Laughter or music in the background

* If captioning laughter or music is necessary to make sense of the media clip or explain a gap, add a label. Below are some examples:
  + for background laughter, add the label [background laughter].
  + if it is the speaker laughing, add the label [laughs].
  + where laughter or clapping renders speech inaudible, add the label [laughter drowns speech].

Poor sound quality/low volume

* Where this renders the speech impossible to hear, add the label [inaudible].
* [Unintelligible] can also be used when you can’t understand speech, though try and use context cues to where possible.

Multiple speakers

* **Multiple speakers should be differentiated and marked according to their order of speaking (SPEAKER 1: Hello. / SPEAKER 2: Hello.)**
  + Marking of speakers should be consistent throughout. **‘SPEAKER 1’ should appear as ‘SPEAKER 1’ consistently to the end of the video.**
  + When speakers interrupt or talk over each other, alternative ways to label speakers could make it easier for the viewer to follow the captions:

|  |
| --- |
| INTERVIEWER: And that was your idea? |
| ANA: It wasn’t my idea. |
| ANIKA: It was her idea. |

* When chatter renders speech indistinguishable, [Speakers overlap] can be used, but you should always try to caption as much as possible.
* Speaker gender should not be indicated.

Different language

* We do not translate foreign languages to English. It is *verboten* to translate foreign languages as we might lose the *je ne sais quoi* of the speaker’s phrasing.
* If the speaker is speaking French, for example, ‘[speaking French]’ will suffice. If the language is unknown, then ‘[foreign language]’.

Hesitation

* Indicate hesitation, only if important.
* If a speaker hesitates, **do not edit out ‘um’ and ‘uh’ *if* they are important for characterisation or plot.** However, **if the hesitation is incidental and the ‘ums’ slow the reading process, then edit them out.** (This is most likely to be the case in factual content, and too many ‘um’s can make the captions tedious.)

***The goal of our captioning approach is to create an inclusive and accessible learning experience for all audiences. Captions should not only provide accurate transcriptions of the spoken content, but also convey essential non-verbal elements, such as sound effects, music and speaker identification. By doing so, we aim to ensure that regardless of audio availability, all members of the audience receive a comprehensive and equivalent learning experience.***

## **Unintelligible & Unclear Words and Sentences.**

You may encounter situations where a word or sentence is difficult to understand or unclear. It's essential to handle these challenges effectively to ensure the accuracy and quality of the captions.

*Listen Carefully and Use Context:*

First, listen to the word or sentence carefully several times to see if you can discern the intended meaning. Pay attention to the surrounding context as it may provide clues that can help you understand the unclear part. This includes checking supporting materials, presentation slides, reading the description of the video.

*Make an Educated Guess:*

If you are still unsure after listening multiple times, try making an educated guess based on the subject matter, the lecturer's speech patterns, and any available context. Ensure that your guess aligns with the topic and maintains coherence with the rest of the lecture.

*Use Parentheses or Notation:*

When you have to make an assumption about a word or phrase, you can use parentheses or other notation to indicate uncertainty. For example, you might add ‘[Unintelligible]’ to signify that the content is not fully comprehensible or ‘[Inaudible]’ for poor sound quality.

*Collaborate with Colleagues:*

Don't hesitate to reach out to your colleagues or team lead if you encounter challenging sections in the media. They might have more experience with the subject area, the vocabulary, idioms, or the speaker’s accent.

*Seek Clarification from the Speaker (if possible):*

If you are unable to caption large portions of the media, it is reasonable to contact the media owner for clarification, so do not hesitate to report to your supervisor.

Captioning improves the learning experience for students with hearing impairments or for whom English isn’t their first language and benefits the entire student community. Your dedication and attention to detail will have a positive impact on their educational journey. It makes the University of Edinburgh content accessible to a wide audience and contributes to our brand and promise of quality.

## **Annex: Captioning Mathematical Material.**

**Non-Latin symbols**

* Non-Latin characters can be transcribed as words rather than inserting symbols in the captions.

|  |
| --- |
| Developers have released a beta version of the app for testing. |

This can also be applied to technical contexts such as mathematical equations:

|  |
| --- |
| The value of alpha is less than 0. |

However, if media contains equation-heavy language, inserting symbols may be preferred to improve legibility.

|  |
| --- |
| The value of α is less than 0. |

Or in cases where the audience is familiar with the notations, even:

|  |
| --- |
| The value of α is < 0. |

* Whichever method of captioning you choose, maintain consistency.
* Symbols can be found on Greek language keyboards, pre-set as hotkey combinations or web search.

**Mathematical operators**

* Operators should be spelled out to avoid confusion (i.e. between ‘dash’ and ‘minus’, between ‘x’ and ‘times’) and captions should appear in one line (i.e. no fractions or super/sub script).
* Do not use symbols for: radical, subset, is in/belongs to, sum, integral, sine, cosine, tangent, etc. Either spell the whole word or use abbreviations if known: sin, cos, tan, etc.

Example: The equation is spoken: ‘K equals one sum to n.’

Caption:

|  |
| --- |
| **k equals 1 sum to n.** |

Example: the equation =2 is spoken: ‘The square root of four is two.’

Caption:

|  |
| --- |
| **The square root of 4 is 2.** |

Example: in a video, the equation is spoken: ‘Two thirds plus x squared plus three, parenthesis to the power of three over two.’

Caption:

|  |
| --- |
| **2 thirds plus (x squared plus 3) to the power of 3 over 2.** |

Caption what is spoken, verbatim, as much as possible. Do not caption the beginning of this sentence as ‘2 over 3’, ‘2 divided by 3’ or ‘2/3’.

**Negative numbers**

* Can be captioned as spoken in general contexts.

|  |
| --- |
| It is sometimes negative 10 degrees in winter in Scotland. |

* May be represented by the “-” symbol to improve legibility. Whichever you choose, maintain consistency.

|  |
| --- |
| It is sometimes -10 degrees in winter in Scotland. |

* In the context of equations, opt for improved legibility.

Example: the equation 5-(-3)=8 is spoken: ‘Five minus minus three equals eight.’

Caption:

|  |
| --- |
| 5 minus -3 equals 8. |

Written by Ellie Kerr, Calum Rodger, Ursula Doyle and revised by the Captioning Service.

*Resources:*

*University of Edinburgh Website Editorial Style Guide:* [*Editorial style guide | Editorial Style Guide*](https://editorial-style.ed.ac.uk/)

*Oxford Dictionaries https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/*

*BBC Subtitling Guidelines* [*http://bbc.github.io/subtitle-guidelines/*](http://bbc.github.io/subtitle-guidelines/)

*Channel 4 Subtitling Guidelines*

[*https://www.channel4.com/media/documents/corporate/foi-docs/SG\_FLP.pdf*](https://www.channel4.com/media/documents/corporate/foi-docs/SG_FLP.pdf)