

Captioning Tip Sheet

Visit www.captioningkey.org to view the Captioning Key.

CAPTION PLACEMENT

- Placement must not interfere with existing visuals/graphics.
- Captions must be left-aligned.
- No more than two lines per caption.
- Place all captions within the safe zone (or safe area).
- In the case where essential sound effects are used simultaneously with dialogue that is captioned, the captions that identify the sound effects should be placed at the top of the screen.
- When a person is thinking or dreaming, place the italicized caption(s) above the speaker's head and add a description in brackets, such as the word "thinking," above the captioned thoughts.

LINE DIVISION

- Do not break a modifier from the word it modifies.
- Do not break a prepositional phrase.
- Do not break a person's name nor a title from the name with which it is associated.
- Do not break a line after a conjunction.
- Do not break an auxiliary verb from the word it modifies.
- Do not end one sentence and begin a new one on the same line.

FONT

- Characters need to be a font similar to Helvetica medium, easily readable, include upper- and lowercase letters with descenders that drop below the baseline, and have a spacing technique that does not allow overlap with other characters.
- The use of a translucent box is preferred.

EDITING

- Editing is performed only when a caption exceeds a specified presentation rate limit. Proper editing should maintain both the original meaning, content, essential vocabulary, and meet presentation rate requirements.
- Redundant and nonessential information can be removed.
- Caption the following verbatim: when a person is quoted, a well-known or famous person is speaking onscreen, poems and other published works are quoted, and/or song lyrics are sung.
- Do not caption the same, or nearly the same, information that is already shown onscreen.

SPELLING

- To check spelling and capitalization, use Merriam-Webster Online as a primary source. Do not use British spellings or punctuation.
- Do not emphasize a word using all capital letters except to indicate screaming.
- Be consistent in the spelling of words throughout the media.

MUSIC

- When captioning music, use objective descriptions that indicate the mood. Avoid subjective words, such as "delightful," "beautiful," or "melodic."
- If music contains lyrics, caption the lyrics verbatim. The lyrics should be introduced with the name of the vocalist/vocal group, the title (in brackets) if known/significant, and if the presentation rate permits.
- Caption lyrics with music icons (♪). Use one music icon at the beginning and end of each caption within a song, but use two music icons at the end of the last line of a song.
- For background music that is not important to the content of the program, place a music icon in the upper right corner of the screen.

GRAMMAR

- Nonessential information that needs special emphasis should be conveyed by double hyphens or a single long dash.
- When a speaker is interrupted and another speaker finishes the sentence, the interruption should be conveyed by double hyphens or a single long dash.
- When a speaker stutters, caption what is said.
- Use an ellipsis when there is a significant pause within a caption.
- Use an ellipsis to lead into or out of audio relating to an onscreen graphic.
- Use quotation marks for onscreen readings from a poem, book, play, journal, or letter. Italicize offscreen readings or voice-overs.
- Beginning quotation marks should be used for each caption of quoted material except for the last caption. The last caption should have only the ending quotation mark.
- Use italics to indicate the following: an offscreen voice-over reading, when a person is dreaming, thinking, or reminiscing, when there is background audio that is essential to the plot, the first time a new word is being defined, offscreen dialogue, narrator (but only if there is more than one person speaking in a production), sound effects, or music (this includes background music).

SOUND EFFECTS

- A description of sound effects, in brackets, should include the source of the sound, but eliminate description if the source of the sound is visible onscreen.
- Include onomatopoeia when possible.
- Place the description of the sound effect as close as possible to the sound source.
- Use punctuation to indicate speed or pace of sound.
- Caption background sound effects only when they're essential to the plot.
- Use specific rather than vague, general terms to describe sounds.

SPEAKER IDENTIFICATION

- When possible, identify the speaker by placing the caption under the speaker.
- When a speaker cannot be identified by placement and his/her name is known, the speaker's name should be in parentheses. Also, the speaker's name needs to be on a line of its own, separate from the captions.
- When a speaker cannot be identified by placement and his/her name is unknown, identify the speaker using the same information a hearing viewer has (e.g., "female #1," "male narrator").
- If there is only one narrator, identify as (male narrator) or (female narrator) at the beginning of the media. (It is not necessary to identify gender for each caption thereafter.)
- When an actor is portraying another person or character, identify the actor as the person being portrayed.

SLANG

- Caption the actual foreign words. If it is not possible to caption the words, use a description (e.g., [speaking French]). Never translate into English.
- Use accent marks, diacritical marks, and other indicators.
- Indicate regional accent at the beginning of the first caption.
- Keep the flavor of dialect and the speaker's language.
- When a word is spoken phonetically, caption it the way it is commonly written.

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