

Why Captions Provide Equal Access

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Tip Sheet

Overview

Captions provide essential access for the more than 30 million Americans with hearing loss.¹ They also benefit emerging readers, visual learners, nonnative speakers, and many others. Captions are the textual representation of audio content in a video format. They communicate spoken dialogue, sound effects, and speaker identification.

Can other accommodations be used instead of captions?

Other accommodations can be used, but only time-synced, verbatim captions provide full and equitable access to video content. Replacing captions with another accommodation, such as interpreting, real-time captioning, or a transcript, will not provide complete access.

Interpreting media does not provide equivalent access because the interpreter and video cannot be viewed at the same time. Even if the interpreter is next to the screen the viewer must still shift their gaze between the interpreter and the screen, thus missing information. And of course some people who need captions do not use sign language.

Offering speech-to-text services, such as real-time captioning, does not provide equivalent access. Viewers must divide their attention between the captioning screen to read the dialogue and the TV screen to see the corresponding action. As a result, information is missed. In addition, real-time captioning is likely to include errors that are eliminated with offline captioning.

Supplying a paper transcript does not provide equivalent access. With this accommodation the viewer is asked to read along while watching the video. However, it is impossible to read a transcript and watch a video at the same time, so the viewer must choose whether to read the content or watch the visuals. The viewer also has no way of knowing which part of the transcript goes with which part of the video.

Are there standards for captions?

On February 20, 2014, the FCC set forth quality standards for closed captioning on television. The new regulations require the captions to be accurate, synchronous, complete, and properly placed. The standards can be found at www.fcc.gov/guides/closed-captioning

In addition, The Described and Captioned Media Program (DCMP) has developed in-depth, research-based guidelines for captions. They can be found at www.captioningkey.org

What are the various types of captioning?

A wide array of captioning types exist. Some types are more effective than others. The following types are most commonly used today.

Offline captioning refers to captions that are added in the postproduction process. Offline captioning allows for the most accurate captioning possible.



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Real-time captioning refers to captions that are created in real-time while an event is taking place. Due to the nature of some events, such as emergencies or breaking news stories, some captions must be produced live. This type of captioning has a higher rate of errors and should be used only when offline captioning is not possible.

Speech-to-text is an umbrella term used to describe an accommodation in which spoken communication and other auditory information are translated into text in real-time. A service provider types what is heard and the text appears on a screen for the consumer to read.

Open captions refers to captions that are part of the video image. They are always present and cannot be turned off.

Closed captions refers to captions that are encoded in the video signal. They can be turned on or off.

Subtitles are designed for hearing individuals who do not speak the language on the video. Subtitles translate the dialogue into another language for the viewer. They do not include cues to audible sounds, such as music or a doorbell ringing.

Subtitles for Deaf and Hard of Hearing is a phrase occasionally used to refer to captions. When this terminology is used, it is best to check that captions, rather than subtitles, are present.

Roll-up captions begin at the bottom of the screen and scroll up two to three lines at a time. When the top line scrolls off the screen, a new line is added to the bottom. The scrolling motion can be difficult to read for extended periods of time.

Pop-on captions appear on the screen one to two lines at a time. This type is preferred because it is easier to read.

Related Resources

- Creating Offline Captions: www.nationaldeafcenter.org/offlinecaptions
- DCMP's Captioning Key: www.captioningkey.org
- DCMP's Caption it Yourself: www.dcmp.org/ciy

Additional resources on this subject may be available at www.nationaldeafcenter.org/resources

Reference

- ¹ National Institute Deafness and Other Communication Disorders. (2016, December 15). Quick statistics about hearing. Retrieved from www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/statistics/pages/quick.aspx



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Additional resources can be found at www.nationaldeafcenter.org