

Why Captions Provide Equal Access

Overview

Captions provide essential access for the more than 30 million Americans with a hearing loss.¹ They also benefit emerging readers, visual learners, non-native 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.

Are there other accommodations that can be used instead of captions? -

While some accommodations provide limited access to video content, 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 is not 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 gaze between the interpreter and screen, thus missing information. And of course some people who need the captions do not use sign language.

Providing speech-to-text services for a video 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 by providing offline captioning.

Providing a paper transcript is not equivalent access. With this accommodation the individual is asked to try and read along while watching the video. It is impossible to read a transcript and watch a video at the same time. The individual must choose whether to read the content or watch the visuals; either tool alone is not full access. In addition, the viewer has no way of knowing which part of the transcript goes along with which part of the video.

Are there standards for captions?

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

The Described and Captioned Media Program (DCMP) has developed the only in-depth, research-based guidelines for captions. They can be found in their Captioning Key at: www.captioningkey.org

What are the various types of captioning?

A wide array of captioning options exist. Some structures or methods are more effective than others. Below are the most common in use today.

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

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

Speech-to-text is an umbrella term used to describe an accommodation where 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 are captions which are part of the video image and are always present. They cannot be turned off.

Closed captions are captions which 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. They 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 that is occasionally used to refer to captions. When this terminology is used, however, it is best that the media be checked to ensure that captions are present, rather than subtitles.

Roll-up captions are captions which begin at the bottom of the screen and scroll up two to three lines at a time. When the top caption 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 are captions which appear on the screen one to two lines at a time then are replaced with the next caption. This is the preferred method of captioning since it is easier to read.

Additional 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.

References

¹ National Institute Deafness and Other Communication Disorders. Retrieved from
www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/statistics/pages/quick.aspx



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