Original Content QA Lab: Subtitling Guidelines
EN-EN

Last Revision
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Table of Contents

Reading Speed

17 characters per second for most programming.
13 characters per second for programming intended for children 6 and under.

Duration

Minimum duration for subtitles is 20 frames.*
Maximum duration for subtitles is 7 seconds.

*Reading speed should always be considered. Avoid reading-speed violations whenever possible.

Intervals

A minimum of 2-frame intervals should be used between continuous subtitles.

Character Limitations

42 characters per line.

Timing + Duration

Text should be timed closely to the beginning and end of audio when possible. However, it's acceptable for subtitles to stay on-screen for up to a second after audio ends to meet reading-speed requirements.

Avoid subtitles that:
• Are not in sync with the audio
• Start well in advance of the corresponding audio (approximately 7 frames or more)
• Stay on-screen for too long (more than a second after dialogue ends or more than 7 seconds total)
• Flash on-screen too briefly to read

Line Treatment

Subtitles should occupy 2 lines maximum.

Positioning

Standard positioning is center-justified, at the bottom of screen.

If subtitles obscure pertinent text that appears in the lower third of the screen, or if overlapping with lower-third text will cause subtitles to become illegible, then they should be moved to the top of the screen.

Titling Dialogue

Dialogue should be subtitled as faithfully as possible within the limits of reading speed.

- When reading speed is exceeded, dialogue should be truncated without sacrificing or altering its intended meaning.
- Non-essential dialogue should generally be truncated first (verbal hedgers such as "Well," or "You know," for example).
- Conversely, subtitles should not add or rewrite dialogue for clarity.
- Do not title stand-alone utterances/exclamations such as oh, whoa, or wow. These can be titled when part of a larger sentence.

Dual Speakers

Use a hyphen to indicate two speakers in the same subtitle. No space should appear between hyphens and dialogue.

EXAMPLE:

-I think we should take a vote.
-Again? We already did that.

Continuity

Do not use ellipses when an ongoing sentence is split between two or more continuous subtitles. Commas should be used as usual when appropriate.

CORRECT:

SUB 1: I'd say you could tag along,

SUB 2: but I don't think
Mom and Dad would approve.

INCORRECT:

SUB 1: I'd say you could tag along…

SUB 2: …but I don't think
Mom and Dad would approve.

Use an ellipsis to indicate:
• Dialogue that trails off
• Dialogue that begins mid-sentence
• A significant pause (one second or more)
• If dialogue continues in the next subtitle after a significant pause, ellipses should be used at both the end of the first subtitle and at the beginning of the second subtitle.

EXAMPLE:

SUB 1: Wait, did you eat…
SUB 2: …literally all of it?

Use two hyphens (--) to indicate an abrupt interruption.

EXAMPLE:

-I think you forgot to close--
-I closed it!

On-screen Text

English templates:

English subtitle streams that are being created as translation templates for other languages should include all plot-pertinent on-screen text.

This includes narrative text (text that is part of principal photography) and burn-in text (text that has been added in post-production).

Subtitles should generally match the case of the on-screen text.

English deliverables:

English subtitle streams that will be live for viewers in Apple Music or iTunes should not include any redundant on-screen text.

If an English template is converted into an English deliverable, dialogue subtitles should be re-timed to close any gaps that are created when narrative and burn-in subtitles are removed.

Note: onscreen text and dialogue should be on different subtitles.

Glossaries

Keep a glossary of recurring terms and names to ensure consistency across episodes and seasons.

Glossaries should also include templates for recurring opening- and end-credits sequences when necessary.

Spelling & Research

Spelling:
Refer to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as the primary source for spelling.
https://www.merriam-webster.com/

Titles and names:
When confirming the names of songs, albums, cast & crew, movies/TV shows, or apps, please remain consistent with how they appear in Apple Music and iTunes.

Slang:
Slang spellings should be confirmed with reputable sources whenever possible.

Expletives

Match the audio. Do not censor at will. If the expletive is audible, title the word.

If the expletive is bleeped, muted, or censored in any way, title the first letter of the word and represent the rest of the word with asterisks.

EXAMPLE:
<div align="center">That's f****** brilliant.</div>

Foreign Dialogue

Foreign dialogue should only be translated if it is plot-pertinent and meant to be understood by the viewer.

Non-essential foreign dialogue should not be titled if it stands alone. If non-essential foreign dialogue is part of a larger English sentence, then it can be titled.

EXAMPLE:
<div align="center">I'm saying *arrivederci* to sweets for a while.</div>

Italics

Italics should be used for
- Voice-over dialogue (examples: narration or a character's internal thoughts)
- Dialogue from an entirely different location (such as pre-lap dialogue from the next scene)
- Dialogue transmitted over phone, radio, TV, or other electronic device
- Song lyrics
- Foreign language
- Titles of books, albums and movies. (Song titles should appear in quotation marks.)
- Genus and species names (examples: E. coli, Triceratops)

Numerals

Numbers one to ten should be spelled out. Numbers 11 and up should be represented numerically.

Numbers between 1000 and 9999 do not require a comma. Numbers 10,000 and up should be written with a comma.

Exceptions:
- Addresses should always be written numerically: 5 Primrose Lane
- Numbers that begin a sentence should generally be spelled out.

Currency

If a unit of currency is spoken in dialogue it should be spelled out or represented with the appropriate symbol.

EXAMPLE 1:

I'd sell the app for 99 cents or $1.29.

If a unit of currency is not spoken in dialogue, the number should be written without it.

EXAMPLE 2:

That'll cost you 129 or 199
depending on the model.

Punctuation

Follow standard official rules.

Some notes:
- Quotation marks should be used for dialogue and written text that is quoted, recited from memory, or read.
- Question marks and exclamation points should be placed outside of the quotation marks unless they are part of the quoted material. Periods and commas are always placed inside of the quotation marks.
- If quoted text continues over several subtitles, quotation marks should only be used at the very beginning and very end of the quote. (Not at the beginning of each subtitle within the quote.)
- Use single quotes for a quote within a quote.
- Colons can be used when appropriate. Semicolons should not be used.

Songs

Song lyrics should generally not be titled unless they are actuated on-screen and plot-pertinent. Plot-pertinent doesn't simply mean thematically relevant—it means that the lyrics convey information that is necessary for a viewer's understanding of the plot.

No end punctuation should be used when titling lyrics, except for question marks or exclamation points when appropriate.

Commas should be used as usual within lyrics, but not at the end of a line.

The first letter in each line should be capitalized.

CORRECT:

You thought I took a spill
But I didn't

INCORRECT:

You thought I took a spill,
but I didn't

There is a bit more leniency with casual/slang spelling in song lyrics than in spoken dialogue. For example, dropping the "g" from "ing" words—as in ridin'—is acceptable when the audio calls for it.

Songs in which the lyrics have been altered or parodied for comedic effect can generally be titled.

Translation Credits

There should not be a subtitle for a translation/translator credit.