

## Recommended Quality Criteria for Subtitling

The following quality criteria have been compiled with the aim of establishing a single basic set of European standards for interlingual subtitling. They are aimed at stakeholders in the film, broadcast, and VOD industry, as well as any video creator wishing to subtitle their content. The quality criteria contain guidance to help them reach their audiences by giving them the best possible viewing experience.

These criteria are based on widely recognised academic references as well as the consolidated professional expertise of Subtle's membership. They shall serve as a general common code that neither undermines nor annuls but complements the already established conventions within the various countries (please see their list at the end of this document).

### 1. THE PURPOSE OF SUBTITLING

Subtitles must convey the content and intent of an original work that would otherwise be inaccessible or incomprehensible to a given audience.

*The general practice of the production [...] of [TV] subtitles should be guided by the aim to provide maximum appreciation and comprehension of the target film as a whole by maximising the legibility and readability of the inserted subtitled text.*

Fotios Karamitroglou,  
A Proposed Set of Subtitling Standards in Europe, 1998.

### 2. THE ELEMENTS OF SUBTITLING

Subtitles are defined as lines of written text reproducing language content in films and other types of audiovisual media. Due to the multimodality of these media, the message is expressed by means of verbal and nonverbal signs and via two different channels of communication – audio and visual. Therefore, the process of subtitling involves interpreting the combination of these different modes while also requiring full awareness of the following three key elements:

- *Time*
- *Space*
- *Content*

The timing, brevity, and content of the subtitles are factors that need to be accounted for to convey the intent of the original work. If any of these aspects are compromised, the viewer's enjoyment of the production will be jeopardised. Successful subtitling enhances the overall experience for the target audience. To achieve that, it must strike the right balance between well-synced timing and precise dialogue editing, while taking care that subtitles are displayed for long enough for viewers to read them and that their presence on the screen maintains an even rhythm.

### **3. CRITERIA DETAILS**

A lot of creative input, work, and money goes into all aspects of producing a film, series, TV programme or other types of audiovisual product. Subtitles are an added element and, consequently, certain rules must be observed in order to ensure that they blend in with the original work as much as possible.

#### **3.1 Time**

The viewer must be given enough time to take in the image, sound, and subtitle as part of the flow of viewing.

##### Time-cueing guidelines

Subtitles should be timed to be in sync with the dialogue, avoid crossing shot changes whenever possible, and adhere to the overall rhythm of the original.

- In-time: on or within 2-3 frames of the onset of speech. If the speech starts within a few frames before/after a shot change, it's preferable to cue in the subtitle on the shot change.
- Out-time: with the end of the speech or a few frames (up to 1 sec if necessary) thereafter, but not before. If speech ends within a few frames before/after a shot change, the subtitle should preferably be cued out before the shot change.

- In order to stay in sync with the speech and/or to enhance readability, subtitles may be displayed over a shot change if this is within the same scene but must be cued out before a scene change. In exceptional cases, e.g., when a sound bridge is present, subtitles can also cross scene changes. Respecting the filmmaker's choices should be prioritised whenever possible.
- Apart from time-cueing subtitles with regard to editing, other cinematography aspects must also be considered. Subtitles should be appropriately timed to focus pulls, camera tilts and pans, etc.

#### Minimum gap between subtitles

Consecutive subtitles must be cued using a fixed interval to create a clear distinction between them and to promote an even rhythm and pace. This interval can be set to a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 6 frames depending on the frame rate (recommended: 3-4 frames) and must be consistent throughout the entire subtitle file. It is recommended to use the fixed interval if the pause between two subtitles is less than 0.5 seconds unless any cuts occur during this time.

#### Subtitle duration/reading speed

Context, target language, audio, and visual editing all have a bearing on the amount of text one subtitle may or should contain. These factors should guide the decision of how concise the subtitle should be and for how long it should be on-screen for a comfortable reading speed.

Subtitles with a duration of less than 1 second should be avoided wherever possible. The maximum duration of a subtitle should not exceed 6 seconds. Exceptions may apply, e.g. to subtitled song lyrics and on-screen text.

Subtitle display rates are typically measured in characters per second (cps) or words per minute (wpm). Depending on the target audience, language, type of programme and medium, it is recommended to keep the average reading speed to a maximum of 12 to 15 cps or 150-180 wpm, with maximum speeds not exceeding 16-17 cps/190-200 wpm. Extra time should be given to subtitles with very short duration; complex content, syntax, and vocabulary; sudden change of position or format; and low contrast against the image.

## 3.2 Space

### Layout & number of lines

Subtitles consist of 1 or 2 lines of text. In rare cases (e.g. tri-lingual subtitles) 3 lines can be used, but it's generally not recommended to exceed 2 lines.

### Characters per line

The length of each line varies a lot between countries and the medium used. It typically ranges from 34 to 50 characters (incl. spaces).

### Positioning

For languages based on the Latin alphabet, subtitles are generally positioned at the bottom of the screen. The subtitles must be re-positioned or raised to avoid overlapping with on-screen text, signs, the mouth of the speakers, or other relevant imagery. However, rapidly alternating positioning should be avoided.

## 3.3 Content

### Dialogue editing

If the amount of text in the subtitle is too high in relation to its exposure time on the screen, the audience may not have time to read it. Attaining an amount of text that is consistent with the viewers' assumed reading speed (see above) usually requires compressing the dialogue. When editing, special attention must be paid to maintaining coherence and consistency – both at the sentence level and throughout the whole subtitle file.

### Language/register

The translation must recreate the message conveyed in the original work as closely as possible, and the style and register of the target language should be equivalent to those of the source language. The translation of culture-specific terms and expressions requires careful consideration of the source and target cultures.

Translation, style, or grammatical errors, as well as lengthy, convoluted sentences, risk distracting the viewer. Since subtitling is also seen as a language learning tool, accuracy and readability are of utmost importance.

Idiomatic phrases and expressions should usually be used unless a character's unidiomatic language plays an important role.

### Numbers/measurements

Converted measurements and numbers should be rounded to the nearest whole number, unless the exact figure is important in the context.

### Segmentation/line breaks

Each subtitle must be semantically and grammatically self-contained, especially if a sentence goes over two or more subtitles. Likewise, line breaks should preferably occur after a semantic unit. Long chains of short subtitles and sentences spanning three or more subtitles should be avoided whenever possible.

When deciding where to divide the line within one subtitle, closely related logical, syntactic, and semantic units should be kept together. This rule supersedes the aesthetic consideration that favours bottom-heavy subtitles. When multiple equally readable line break options are possible, it is usually recommended to shape a subtitle like a pyramid or a rectangle while avoiding short lines of one or two words.

### Songs

Notwithstanding copyright issues, song lyrics should be subtitled if pertinent to the plot. When possible, the rhyme and accent distribution should be preserved.

### Style guidelines

National subtitling standards for punctuation, formatting (e.g. italicization), text alignment, continuity, dialogue indicators, text/border design, etc. must always be followed.

### Synchrony with source

The subtitle content should not contradict the dialogue, soundtrack, or image (e.g. body language) or pre-empt any pieces of information before they are uttered or are visible on screen.

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The above criteria have been ratified by Subtle – The Subtitlers’ Association in January 2023.

## References:

- [“A proposed Set of Subtitling standards in Europe”](#) (Fotios Karamitroglou: 1998)
- [“Code of Good Subtitling Practice”](#) (Jan Ivarsson & Mary Carroll: 1998)
- [“Subtitling: Concepts and Practices”](#) (Jorge Díaz-Cintas and Aline Remael: 2021)
- [“The Nature of the Audiovisual Text and Its Parameters”](#) (Patrick Zabalbescoa: 2008)
- [“Subtitling Norms for Television”](#) (Jan Pedersen: 2011)
- [“Subtitling: Diagonal Translation”](#) (Henrik Gottlieb: 1994)

## National guidelines:

- [Croatian](#)
- [Danish](#)
- [Dutch](#)
- [French](#)
- [German](#)
- [Norwegian](#)
- [Slovenian](#)
- [Spanish](#)
- [Swedish](#)