

What do great theatre captions look like? And why...

Stagetext has been working with deaf audiences for over 20 years to develop the most accessible ways to display captions, so that deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people can enjoy theatre performances alongside everyone else. Using this knowledge, we developed a specialised training course to qualify captioners, and ensure they provide accessible captions. All Stagetext captioners hold a formal qualification provided after having undergone the rigorous 6-month training and examinations.

The performance you've worked so hard to put on won't be fully understood or appreciated by deaf audience members if the captions aren't top quality. We encourage liaising with deaf, deafened and hard of hearing theatregoers to ensure you are providing the access they need throughout their entire journey, from seeing a trailer through to watching your show.

People rely on subtitles for a variety of reasons, and everyone uses them in different ways. Great captions make performances truly accessible. Not-so-great captions can mean deaf audiences struggle to follow what is going on, and have a lesser experience than other members of the audience.

Not-so-great captions mean deaf audience members have to work out the difference between what the captions say, and what they can lipread or guess from the action onstage. This results in fatigue, detracting from enjoying the performance. That's the reason why, for some people, bad captions are worse than no captions at all.

Stagetext are sharing the principles of theatre captioning so that theatres can recognise great quality captioning when they see it.

Please note, these principles apply to captions prepared for scripted live theatre performances. The conventions for live subtitling of unscripted or improvised theatre, and for the digital subtitling of pre-recorded videos, are slightly different.

There are some key principles that apply to all live theatre captions, whether displayed on a caption unit, a tablet or phone, or online.

- 1. Great captions are verbatim**
- 2. Great captions include all the information**
- 3. Great captions are in time**
- 4. Great captions are legible**

I thought so...
Yes, yes, I thought
so. I'll tell him now.

Great captions are
verbatim

**ALISTAIR: I thought so...
Yes, yes, I thought so.
I'll tell him now.**

Great captions match what's being said on stage, word for word. They give the audience access to a show exactly as it is performed.

Every performance is unique: lines change from what's scripted, and are delivered differently. But every word of a play is carefully chosen – every word counts. That's why captioners prepare captions that are tailored to the performance, using scripts and videos of the production, and checking the script against live performances ahead of a captioned show.

For one-off performances, productions with a short run which would make caption preparation difficult, or performances with a lot of improvisation, we may suggest using live speech-to-text transcription rather than theatre captions. These subtitles still require information in advance, but not at the same level.

Character names should be included every time someone starts speaking. This is because deaf audience members may not be able to tell who is speaking based solely on aural cues. We recommend keeping the colour of the captions the same, rather than changing colour for different speakers, as this may not be accessible for everyone.

Great captions include brief, factual descriptions of music and sounds. We caption all offstage sounds, and any onstage sounds that are not caused by a visible action. For example, we wouldn't caption the sound of a character smashing a glass, because that sound is implied by the action, but we would caption a phone ringing. We avoid using descriptions that are subjective or lead the audience to form a particular opinion. This is so deaf audience members have the same information as everyone else, and can make their own interpretation of events.



Great captions include **all the information**

DOORBELL RINGS



Great captions are
in time
with the performance

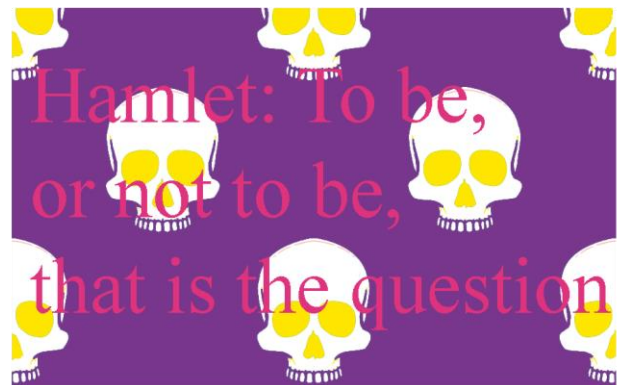
Captions should appear onscreen line by line, perfectly in time with the performance. They should not anticipate what is about to be said, or fall behind the action onstage. This supports lipreading, and allows deaf audience members to enjoy the performance at the same time as everyone else.

When captions are being delivered to multiple different types of screen, for example, in a hybrid performance, there should be no time delay between captions appearing on different devices. For online captions, we recommend that captions are displayed within 15 frames of when they are cued.

The audience need to be able to see the captions and be able to read them comfortably while taking in the performance. What's legible is different in different scenarios, so we've set out how we do things based on what deaf audiences have told us.

As a general rule, we recommend Arial text in either white or yellow, on a black background, displayed using high contrast, because this is easiest to read. Captions can be aligned left, centred, or right, but the alignment needs to be consistent throughout. Deaf audiences have told us that these are the most clear and comfortable combinations for reading captions for a long stretch of time.

For in-person captions, we use three lines of text, scrolling upwards. In early testing of Stagetext captions, deaf audience members found this to be the most comfortable way to take in captions over a long time, and allows caption users to refer back a few lines if needed. For online captions, the convention is to show two lines of text at a time.



Great captions are
legible

**HAMLET: To be,
or not to be,
that is the question.**

Displaying Captions Legibly

Caption units

Caption users switch their gaze between the stage and a caption unit or tablet continuously throughout a performance. They need to be seated in a place where they have the best sightlines of both, so they don't have to keep moving their heads to read the captions. The caption unit should have dynamic brightness to respond to changes in lighting on stage.

Tablets

When using tablets, we recommend supplying adjustable holders that can be fixed in place. This means that the caption user doesn't have to hold the tablet for the duration of the performance, and can put it in the most appropriate place to avoid having to continuously look up and down. Captions should be switched on as standard on all the devices you supply to your users.

We recommend a maximum of 42 characters in a single row. Keeping to this length will make the captions much easier to read. The font and colour of captions can be customisable, but the default display should be easily legible and comfortable to read for a long stretch of time. The tablet screen should have dynamic brightness to respond to changes in lighting on stage.

Creative captions

If you are using creative captions – captions projected onto the stage in an artistic way – legibility is especially important. If you're planning for the captions to move around or appear in different places, please include visual cues that make it clear where to look. Members of your deaf audience are unlikely to pick up on aural cues on who is speaking.

When using creative captions, it is important to build in accessibility right from the start. We recommend engaging with a deaf consultant at the start of the project to ensure anything produced has the end user in mind.

Online

For online captions, the standard line length is a maximum of 32 characters in a single row. Open captions, which are always turned on, shouldn't get in the way of the action onscreen, or be covered up by what's onscreen. We recommend embedding captions in the centre at the bottom of the screen, though if a lot of action takes place in this area, they can be placed at the centre at the top of the screen.

For closed captions, which can be toggled on or off, the font, colour and position of captions can be customised by the user, and the size of the captions should adapt to the type of screen chosen by the user. For livestreaming, whether this is possible will depend on the platform or software being used.