

Guidelines for SDH SUBTITLING

in Denmark



This is a translation of the Danish document
"Retningslinjer TH-tekstning i Danmark."

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FORUM FOR BILLEDMEDIEOVERSÆTTERE

Guidelines for SDH subtitling

Subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing – referred to in these guidelines as SDH subtitling – is a collective term for subtitles written in the same language as the spoken dialogue. This type of subtitling is freely referred to as TTV subtitles, intralingual subtitles, closed subtitles, same-language subtitles, subtitles for the deaf, live subtitles, CC subtitles (Closed Captioning), HOH subtitles (Hard of Hearing), and SDH subtitles (Subtitles for the Deaf and Hard of hearing), and each type has more or less fixed definitions. In these guidelines, we lump them all together and propose one unified standard.

The main purpose of the SDH subtitles is to be a supplement to the spoken dialogue of a programme. In some countries, it is normal to also include subtitles for sounds and descriptive cues, placing the text in round or square brackets. As a general rule, we do not do this here in Denmark, but these guidelines nevertheless outline a few of the available options.

The target audience for SDH subtitles is very broad, and it is often a balancing act to accommodate all groups. The subtitles are clearly intended for viewers with hearing loss, but also for individuals in environments with either a lot of noise (making it difficult to hear the dialogue) or deliberate silence (such as in a library). Finally, SDH subtitles are also intended for people who do not speak Danish as their first language and therefore use the subtitles as an aid.

These guidelines are a supplement to "Guidelines for Subtitling in Denmark", published in 2019, which primarily focus on translated subtitles. The two types of subtitling share the same underlying principles, and the two documents therefore complement each other well.

The guidelines and further information can be found at undertekstning.dk.

Forum for Billedmedieoversættere, 27th November 2025

The Guidelines for Subtitling in Denmark are endorsed by:

AVTE - AudioVisual Translators Europe
Danmarks Radio
Dansk Forfatterforening
Dansk Journalistforbund
Dansk Oversætterforbund
Dansk Sprognævn
Dansk Video Tekst
DM Kommunikation
Henrik Gottlieb, Lektor emeritus, ph.d. & dr.phil, Københavns Universitet
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Subline
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TV 2
Ældre Sagen

Formal Requirements for SDH subtitles

Credit

Although SDH subtitles are not translations, the finished product is still considered a work protected by copyright, and the subtitler is therefore entitled to be credited by name as per Danish law (Ophavsretsloven § 3). The credit is usually placed at the end of the programme, during the closing credits. As with translations, the subtitler cannot waive their moral rights to the work, which means that others may not alter the subtitles without consulting the original author

Appearance

SDH subtitles share the same ideals as translated subtitles. As such, they are usually displayed in white text, typically on a semi-transparent black background or with a dark outline around the letters.

Each subtitle consists of one or two lines, with a typical character limit of 37 per line. This restriction is particularly relevant for teletext (TTV in Danish) subtitles. For other media, line length is more a matter of aesthetics, but for the sake of readability, lines should ideally be kept under 42 characters.

Like other subtitles, SDH subtitles are centred at the bottom of the screen. If lower-third graphics (such as names or titles) appear in that area, the subtitles should be raised enough to avoid covering them. Note, however, that not all play-out systems support raised subtitles.

Live subtitles

Live subtitles are SDH subtitles produced for live broadcasts, where there is no time to prepare text blocks in advance. The ideal is still for the subtitles to resemble regular SDH subtitles, but to maintain synchronicity, it may be necessary for the words to appear one at a time on the screen.

Live subtitles are either typed manually or generated through automatic speech recognition from the audio or a respeaker repeating the dialogue. These subtitles are left-aligned so that each new word does not cause the entire line to re-centre. Instead, the sentence grows from left to right.

Live subtitling may use different colours to indicate who is speaking. This can be particularly helpful if a delay is unavoidable. Apart from this, different colours are not normally used in Danish SDH subtitling.

Italics

Not all play-out systems support italics in SDH subtitles. However, where italics can be used, they follow the same conventions as in translated subtitles: they are used for lines from electronic sources (such as TV or telephone audio), for voice-over (including inner monologues and narration), and to highlight individual words (such as foreign words or words with added emphasis). Individual words are not highlighted using CAPITAL LETTERS, as these are reserved for signage.

Characters

The character set supported by the play-out system is often limited. This applies especially to teletext, but even the chosen font may lack certain special characters. Particular care should be taken with characters from other languages, as well as symbols such as #, ß, € and @. The en dash (–) may also cause issues, so most subtitlers use the shorter hyphen (-) instead.

Hyphen

The hyphen serves many purposes in subtitling and is therefore rarely used for splitting words. Instead, it is used as a dialogue dash when multiple speakers appear in the same subtitle and as a continuation dash when a sentence continues from one subtitle to the next. Strictly speaking, the slightly longer en dash should be used, but en dashes cause issues in many play-out systems.

Dialogue Dash

A dialogue dash (hyphen) is used at the beginning of each line when there are two speakers within the same subtitle. Each speaker's line of dialogue begins on a new line. There should be a space between the dash and the text, as described in section 59 of the dictionary of standard Danish orthography (Retskrivningsordbogen). Note that a dialogue dash is not used when there is only one speaker in the subtitle.

So not like this:

– Tror du, julemanden kommer
i aften? – Jeg ved det ikke.

*- Do you think Santa is coming
tonight? - I don't know.*

But like this:

– Do you think Santa is coming tonight?
– I don't know.

*- Do you think Santa is coming tonight?
- I don't know.*

Continuation Dash

A continuation dash (hyphen) is used to indicate the end and beginning of a sentence that runs across multiple subtitles. There should be a space between the dash and the text, as described in section 59 of the dictionary of standard Danish orthography (Retskrivningsordbogen).

Slangetæmmeren sagde,
at hun ville være her om lidt –

*The snake charmer said
she would be here soon -*

– så hun er sikkert på vej.

- so she's probably on her way.

To ensure readability, one should avoid more than three or four consecutive subtitles forming a continuous string. Instead, subtitles should be divided into complete sentences with full stops.

Decisions about where to break a sentence across subtitle blocks should be based on syntactic cohesion. The same principle applies when deciding where to insert a line break within a single subtitle.

Not like this:

De rejseglade ølentusiaster tog til –

The travelling beer enthusiasts went to -

– Tjekkiets hovedstad, Prag,
og tjekkede ind på et fint hotel.

*- the capital of the Czech Republic, Prague,
and checked into a nice hotel.*

But like this:

De rejseglade ølentusiaster
tog til Tjekkiets hovedstad, Prag –

*The travelling beer enthusiasts
went to the capital of the Czech Republic, Prague -*

– og tjekkede ind på et fint hotel.

- and checked into a nice hotel.

Line break

In a two-line subtitle, the line break should preferably be placed before collocations or words such as “and”, “or”, “but”, “because” and “that”, or after a comma or full stop. The placement of the line break can make the subtitle easier to read, and hence the line break must be placed with care and not just when there is no more room on the line.

Not like this:

De rejseglade ølentusiaster tog en
tur til Tjekkiets hovedstad.

*The travelling beer enthusiasts took a
trip to the capital of the Czech Republic.*

But like this:

De rejseglade ølentusiaster
tog en tur til Tjekkiets hovedstad.

*The travelling beer enthusiasts
took a trip to the capital of the Czech Republic.*

And care should always be taken to avoid splitting a preposition from its complement. Not like this:

Ølentusiasterne tjekkede ind på
et fint hotel i Prag.

*The beer enthusiasts checked in to
a nice hotel in Prague.*

But like this:

Ølentusiasterne tjekkede ind
på et fint hotel i Prag.

*The beer enthusiasts checked in
to a nice hotel in Prague.*

Draft

Dialogue dashes and continuation dashes are not allowed in the same subtitle (so-called “draft”), where both the end of one divided sentence and the beginning of a new are shown together.

Not like this:

Hun har fået fri
for halvanden time siden –

*She got off work
an hour and a half ago -*

– så hun er sikkert på vej.
– Okay, det er i orden.

*- so she's probably on her way.
- Okay. That's fine.*

Not like this either:

– Okay, det er i orden.
– Vi kan begynde at spille –

*- Okay. That's fine.
- We can start playing -*

– mens vi venter på hende.

- while we wait for her.

But like this:

Hun har fået fri
for halvanden time siden.

*She got off work
an hour and a half ago.*

– Hun er sikkert på vej.
– Okay, det er i orden.

*- She's probably on her way.
- Okay. That's fine.*

Or like this:

Okay, det er i orden.

Okay. That's fine.

Vi kan begynde at spille,
mens vi venter på hende.

*We can start playing
while we wait for her.*

Linguistic requirements for SDH subtitles

Grammar and spelling

Subtitles must comply with the rules defined by the Danish Language Council (Dansk Sprognævn). This means that compound nouns must be written as one word (“interessegruppe”, not “interesse gruppe”), and spelling must follow the dictionary of standard Danish orthography (Retskrivningsordbogen). If a word is not listed there, Den Danske Ordbog (www.ordnet.dk/ddo) may be used as a guideline for spelling. At www.sproget.dk, one can search across several Danish dictionaries and find answers to questions about language usage.

When more than one spelling of a word is permitted, the same form must be used consistently, rather than for instance alternating between ”ressource” and ”resurse”. Some clients may have internal rules regarding comma style (e.g. startkomma) and spelling.

Abbreviations

It is standard practice to avoid abbreviations in fiction programmes in order to keep the language as close to natural speech as possible. In news broadcasts and factual programmes, however, abbreviations are more commonly used especially for recognisable units such as “kr.”, “km” and “km/t”.

Fact Checking

All facts must be checked against reliable sources. This applies to the correct spelling of names, use of Danish titles, transcription of other alphabets, measurements, weight, numbers etc. One authoritative source could be Lex – Denmark’s National Encyclopaedia.

Quality Check

Before publication, subtitles should be spellchecked and proofread by the subtitler. In addition, they should be reviewed by a second pair of eyes to catch any errors or awkward phrasings the subtitler may have missed.

The Characteristic of Subtitles

Sounds and Descriptive Cues

The target audience for SDH subtitles is broad, and most viewers have either normal hearing or some residual hearing. For this reason, descriptions of sound and the use of descriptive cues are avoided unless strictly necessary. While it may be relevant to know that a phone is ringing, this is often clear from the visuals, and explanatory subtitles should therefore be used sparingly. One could argue that it is the responsibility of the programme's director or editor to ensure that the visual content supports the audio to such an extent that it is not necessary to describe sound in the subtitles.

However, some clients may have their own standards for subtitling sound. If a descriptive cue is used, it should be kept as brief as possible and enclosed in parentheses:

(phone ringing)

(gunshot)

Speakers are not identified by name followed by a colon, as this takes up too much space and time. Background music is not described either, as that would draw too much attention. However, song lyrics are normally subtitled especially if they are relevant to the plot. If the lyrics are in a foreign language but widely known, they should be subtitled without translation.

Condensation

Usually, there is a great difference between how fast people speak and how fast people are able to read. This is why an inherent part of subtitling is condensation. That is, to write fewer words in the subtitle than is being said. This is not necessarily done by omitting whole sentences, but often just by shortening the phrasing. This can usually be done with little or no meaning being lost. In return, the viewer is able to read the subtitles while following the action on-screen. It is usually necessary to condense 30 percent or even more in order for the reading speed to be appropriate.

When condensing, the subtitler is often helped by the fact that subtitling is a transfer from spoken to written language that mimics speech. This means that filler words, repetitions and general disfluency can often be left out in the subtitles.

Not like this:

Jamen hun sagde jo, at altså, du ved,
at hun var vild med, øh, flodsvin.

*Well, she said, that, I mean, you know,
that she loves, uhm, capybaras.*

But like this, where superfluous words are left out:

Hun sagde,
at hun var vild med flodsvin.

*She said
that she loves capybaras.*

If a sentence contains common knowledge and superfluous information ...

**De rejseglade ølentusiaster tog en tur
til Tjekkiets hovedstad, Prag.**

*The travelling beer enthusiasts took a trip
to the capital of the Czech Republic, Prague.*

... it can be condensed:

Ølentusiasterne tog til Prag.

The beer enthusiasts went to Prague.

And if it is known that we are dealing with beer enthusiasts, it is enough to write “They went to Prague.”

A cleft sentence ...

Der er nogen, der har hugget gullet.

There is someone who has stolen the gold.

... can be reunited:

Nogen har hugget gullet.

Someone has stolen the gold.

A knot sentence (also known as fronting) ...

Det synes jeg egentlig ikke gør noget.

*That I actually don't think matters.
(An ordinary construction in Danish)*

... can be untied:

Det gør ikke noget.

That doesn't matter.

But do not condense at all costs. If there is plenty of time, there is no reason to shorten more than necessary. It is also important that sentences still flow naturally. Subtitling is a continuous balancing of readability, idiomatic language and level of detail.

Colloquial Language

The subtitles should retain a certain degree of spoken-language features, as long as this does not compromise readability. Subtitlers should refrain from needlessly correcting the speakers and making them appear unnaturally polished.

If there is sufficient reading time, one should therefore write:

**Mig og sprogforskeren gik en tur forleden,
og vi så sgu et flodsvin.**

*Me and the linguist went for a walk the other day,
and we saw a damn capybara.*

... instead of being pedantic:

**Sprogforskeren og jeg gik en tur forleden,
og vi så et flodsvin.**

*The linguist and I went for a walk the other day,
and we saw a capybara.*

In general, preference edits should be avoided. If a speaker says, “Vi har snakket om det” (We talked about it), this should not automatically be changed to “Vi har talt om det” (We have spoken about it), unless there is a real need to save those three characters. It is always a matter of judgement when spoken-language features begin to affect readability. A fresh pair of eyes on the subtitles can help assess this.

Subtitle Cueing

The subtitles must appear on the screen at the same time as the speech, and they must be divided into individual subtitles keeping a steady rhythm. A subtitle must stay on the screen until the next utterance begins, until the next scene cut, or until the needed duration has been achieved. There is no need to remove the subtitle as soon as the person stops speaking. Leave it on screen for a few seconds if there is time.

It may be necessary to let short subtitles stay on screen across a scene cut to achieve a sufficient duration, but in that case they should remain on screen for a full second after the scene cut. Subtitles should not remain on screen across a change in location.

There must be a short pause between two linked subtitles for the viewer to register the change of subtitles. Traditionally, this pause is three or four frames. This is usually a setting you can make in the subtitling software.

Subtitle Duration

The viewer is supposed to watch the programme, not read it. Hence, the subtitle must remain on screen long enough for the viewer to be able to read it while following the action with ease.

As a rule of thumb, a subtitle of one full line must remain on screen for 3-4 seconds, while a subtitle of two full lines must remain on screen for 5-6 seconds. The minimum duration for short subtitles is 2 seconds, in rare cases 1½ second. The upper limit should be around 8 seconds, depending on the content. However, cueing must always serve coherence. Sentences should not be chopped into small fragments just to stay under the magic 8 seconds.

The reading speed can be converted into characters per second (CPS), and this number can usually be entered into the subtitling software. This will indicate whether the subtitles comply with the reading speed. Traditionally in Denmark, the reading speed is 10-15 CPS.

In news programmes the reading speed can be higher, while it can be lower in children’s programmes, leaving the subtitles on screen for a longer time. Traditionally, subtitles for the cinema have a slightly shorter duration because the viewer is assumed to concentrate more and be less distracted.

Live subtitling using automatic speech recognition typically runs about 50 percent too fast, since all words are transcribed without any condensation. In this case, it is especially important that the subtitles are synchronised, so that each word appears on screen no later than one second after it is spoken. We also encourage the use of systems that perform real-time condensation.

The Feedback Effect

The subtitler should take the feedback effect into account, meaning that most of the viewers are able to hear what is being said and are thus able to compare the original to the subtitles. It may confuse the viewer or diminish their trust in the subtitles if subtitles differ significantly from what is being said.

As the feedback effect is particularly strong in SDH subtitles, it is important that any condensation of content is done as carefully as possible. This means including as much of the dialogue as possible. The unattainable ideal is to include everything, but there is rarely enough time or space, so some things must be cut. When doing so, try to preserve the speaker’s vocabulary and syntax. Only remove words that are entirely unnecessary, and ideally avoid adding words that were not spoken.

Web Subtitling

Web subtitling refers to subtitling of shorter video clips for social media. The same general guidelines apply, but the technical constraints may differ, and it is often advisable to increase the text size to improve legibility on mobile phones.

Some web clips use on-screen text banners that wholly or partly reproduce the dialogue. In such cases, subtitles and banners must work in tandem. It would not only be redundant to repeat in a subtitle what is already conveyed in a dialogue banner, it would also be overwhelming for the viewer to process two sets of text simultaneously. The subtitles should therefore lead into the dialogue banner and then give way to it, just as if the banner were a subtitle. The subtitles then resume when the banner disappears. As a rule, subtitles and dialogue banners should not appear on screen at the same time.

This means the content producer must pay close attention to the timing of dialogue banners. They should only remain on screen for as long as the corresponding dialogue is spoken. Dialogue banners must not take time away from subsequent lines that need to be subtitled. At the same time, the cleanest result is achieved if banners are either aligned precisely with a shot change or kept at least one second away from one. This mirrors the timing used for subtitles and contributes to a calmer appearance.

For the interplay between dialogue banners and subtitles to work properly, the banners must form syntactic units, meaning complete sentences, exclamations or similar segments that carry meaning on their own.

Thank you!

Thank you for your attention. Subtitles are one of the most widely read types of text in Denmark. They help children and immigrants learn how to read, write and understand Danish, they enable the deaf and hard of hearing to watch television and movies on an equal basis with the hearing.

Thus, subtitling is a big responsibility. By following these guidelines, you take a large step closer to carrying out that responsibility in the best possible way.

On behalf of Forum for Billedmedieoversættere

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