

# Guidelines for SUBTITLING

in Denmark



This is a translation of the Danish document  
“Retningslinjer for undertekstning i Danmark.”

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**FBO** |

FORUM FOR BILLEDMEDIEOVERSÆTTERE

# Guidelines for Subtitling in Denmark

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Subtitles are a written, often condensed rendition of the speech in video material. The subtitles are divided into captions displayed at the bottom of the screen for 2-7 seconds that follow dialogue and scene cuts.

The subtitles may contain a translation from another language, such as subtitles in Danish for speech in English. Or they may contain subtitles in Danish for speech in Danish as a help for the deaf and hard of hearing.

Subtitling is a highly specialised and time-consuming task. It is estimated that an experienced subtitler is able to subtitle approximately 25 minutes of running time in a full work day.

These guidelines define the standard for good subtitling in Denmark. They have been compiled by Forum for Billedmedieoversættere, the Danish subtitlers' association within The Danish Union of Journalists, in dialogue with The Danish Language Council. The guidelines describe best practice and apply exclusively to subtitles.

They consolidate the Danish tradition of subtitling, and they are relevant for new as well as old actors within the subtitling market who want to ensure that they are subtitling in the way that Danish viewers are used to and will recognize as good subtitling.

The guidelines and more info can be found at [undertekstning.dk](http://undertekstning.dk).

*Forum for Billedmedieoversættere, 11th January 2019*

## **The Guidelines for Subtitling in Denmark are endorsed by:**

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# Formal requirements for subtitles

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## Workflow

Subtitles are always created based on video material with audio and preferably a manuscript or time-coded subtitles in the source language. The final subtitles should be checked by a pair of fresh eyes who watches the programme and provides the subtitler with feedback. After the subtitler has proof-read the subtitles, the subtitles should be checked by a proofreader.

## Credits

The subtitler is entitled to be credited by name as per Danish law (Ophavsretsloven § 3). The credit is usually placed after the programme during the closing credits, stating the name of the subtitler and the commissioning agency. Subtitlers cannot waive their moral rights to the work, and hence it is not allowed to make changes to the subtitles without consulting the subtitler.

## Appearance

According to Danish tradition, subtitles are written in white letters, typically on a semi-transparent black backdrop or in letters with a dark outline.

## Number of lines and characters

A subtitle has one or two lines. Typically, each line has a limit of 38-40 characters due to space constraints or the play-out system. This is decided by the client.

## Text alignment

Subtitles are usually center-aligned. Some channels and programmes use left alignment for technical or graphical reasons, but subtitled graphics are still centred. If there are 3D elements on-screen it may be necessary to adjust the subtitles accordingly.

As a rule, subtitles are placed at the bottom of the screen. In the case of graphics with names or other information, the subtitles can be raised to allow for the graphics to be read. This requires that the client's play-out system supports this feature. When the graphics disappear, the subtitles are placed at the bottom of the screen again to avoid unnecessarily "floating" subtitles.

## Italics

Italics are used to denote electronic sound (from television or phones), for voice-over (internal monologue and narration), and to emphasize single words (foreign words or accentuated words).

Italics can also be used when song lyrics are so relevant to the storyline that they need to be subtitled. In that case, continuation dashes are omitted.

## Ellipsis

Three dots can be used to mark hesitation or as a substitute for an em dash (which is not used in subtitling). They can also be used to mark that a word or parts of a word have been omitted.

## Other characters

Characters such as dots and exclamation marks should be used sparingly, and characters such as semicolon, parenthesis and em dash should not be used at all.

## Signs

Signs can be physical signs in the picture (such as road signs) or graphics (such as participants' names). Signs are only subtitled if they are important to the storyline. If the translation is identical to the original ("Paris" or "1925"), they are not subtitled. The subtitle should stay on screen for as long as the sign is visible, giving the viewer time enough read it. If speech coincides with a sign being visible, the speech takes precedence. Signs are typically written in capital letters to indicate that they are not a part of the dialogue.

## Hyphens

Use of hyphens to divide words at a line break is usually not allowed, as dashes already have other functions. To avoid using them, it may be necessary to rephrase or condensate.

Not like this:

Hun skal hente sine masse-  
ødelæggelsesvåben med det samme.

*She has to pick up her weapons of  
mass destruction right away.*

("Weapons of mass destruction" is written in one word in Danish.)

But like this (in which "med det samme" ["right away"] has been replaced with the shorter "nu" ["now"], allowing the long word to fit in one line):

Hun skal hente sine  
masseødelæggelsesvåben nu.

*She has to pick up her  
weapons of mass destruction now.*

## Line break

Line breaks in subtitles should be placed before collocations or before words such as "and", "or", "but", "because" and "that". The placement of the line break can make the subtitle easier to read, and hence it must be placed with care and not just when there is no more room on the line.

Not like this:

De rejseglade turister tog en tur til Storbritanniens  
hovedstad.

*The enthusiastic tourists took a trip to Great Britain's  
capital.*

But like this:

De rejseglade turister tog en tur  
til Storbritanniens hovedstad.

*The enthusiastic tourists took a trip  
to Great Britain's capital.*

## Dialogue dashes

A dash (hyphen) is required at the beginning of every line when there are two speakers in one subtitle. Each speaker always has a separate line.

Not like this:

- Tror du, han kommer? - Jeg ved det  
ikke.

*- Do you think he'll show up? - I don't  
know.*

But like this (in which the second speaker is moved to the bottom line):

- Tror du, han kommer?  
- Jeg ved det ikke.

*- Do you think he'll show up?  
- I don't know.*

A space is inserted between the dialogue dash and the text, as per the practice of the Danish Language Council (Retskrivningsordbogens § 59).

## Continuation dashes

Continuation dashes (hyphens) are used to mark the end and the beginning of a sentence which is divided between subtitles.

Han sagde,  
at han ville være her om lidt -

*He said  
that he'd be here in a moment -*

- så han er sikkert på vej.

*- so he's probably on his way.*

A space is inserted between the continuation dash and the text, as per the practice of the Danish Language Council (Retskrivningsordbogens § 59).

More than three or four continuous subtitles should be avoided so as to not make the viewer lose their way. Instead, the dialogue should be divided into independent clauses ending with a full stop.

## Draft

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

Not like this:

**- så han er sikkert på vej.  
- Okay, det er i orden.**

*- so he's probably on his way.  
- Okay, that's all right.*

Nor like this:

**- Okay, det er i orden.  
- Vi kan begynde at spise nu -**

*- Okay, that's all right.  
- We can start eating now -*

But like this (rephrased into independent clauses):

**- Han er sikkert på vej.  
- Okay, det er i orden.**

*- He's probably on his way.  
- Okay, that's all right.*

Or like this (rephrased into independent clauses):

**- Okay, det er i orden.  
- Vi kan begynde at spise nu.**

*- Okay, that's all right.  
- We can start eating now.*

# Linguistic requirements for subtitles

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## Grammar and spelling

Subtitles must comply with the regulations of the Danish Language Council in regard to commas, spelling etc. Compound nouns are written as one word (“brandbil”, not “brand bil”, and “interessegruppe”, not “interesse gruppe”), and spelling must comply with Retskrivningsordbogen. If a word is not found in that dictionary, Den Danske Ordbog can be used to indicate whether a word is common enough to be used in subtitling. At [www.sproget.dk](http://www.sproget.dk), one can search across several Danish dictionaries and find answers to questions about language use.

When more than one spelling of a word is allowed, the spelling must be consistent throughout the subtitling project. For instance, use either “ressource” or “resurse”, not both. Some clients have house rules for punctuation (startkomma) and choice of spelling.

## Abbreviations

Traditionally, abbreviations are avoided when subtitling fiction in order for the subtitles to correspond as closely to speech as possible. However, when subtitling news and documentaries abbreviations are used, primarily for easily recognisable units such as ”kr.”, ”km” and ”kg”.

## 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.

## Translation

The subtitles must contain a precise Danish translation of what is being said on screen. This does not necessarily entail a translation of what is being said, but rather what is meant. The aim is to give Danish viewers the same experience as the audience of the original language.

Thus, the translation does not have to be verbatim, but must render the meaning.

Not like this:

**Det koster en arm og et ben.**

*It costs an arm and a leg. → It costs an arm and a leg.*  
(Non-existent idiom in Danish).

But like this (in which the idiom has been translated into a Danish idiom with a similar meaning):

**Det koster en bondegård.**

*It costs an arm and a leg → It costs a farm.*  
(Established idiom in Danish).

The translation must render the style and tone. Think, “How would they have put this in Danish?”

Not like this (in which the stylistic level is lower than that of the original):

**Tag en slapper, søster lystig!**

*Take it easy → Chill out, sister Cheerful.*

And not like this (in which the stylistic level is higher than that of the original):

**Vær venlig at tage det roligt.**

*Take it easy → Please, do be calm.*

But for instance like this (in which the stylistic level matches that of the original):

**Slap af.**

*Take it easy → Take it easy.*

## Idiomatic language

Subtitles must be rendered in good, idiomatic Danish, adjusted to the style and target audience of the programme. The language of the subtitles must maintain the same level of complexity as the original. Technical jargon must be translated into technical jargon, and the level of precision must be maintained. The best translation of “It’s about 200 miles away” into Danish is rarely [back translation:] “It’s 321.869 kilometres away”, but rather [back translation:] “It’s about 300 kilometres away”.

English words (such as “motherfucker”, “awesomesauce” and “self-tracking”) are more difficult to understand in writing than when spoken, so they should only be used after careful consideration and possibly be given longer duration to compensate for this. The same goes for words that have not yet been added to the dictionaries.

The language of subtitles should be comprehensible to everyone, unless it is supposed to be puzzling or technical.

# Features of subtitles

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## Text 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 sufficiently low.

Readability is more important than to translate everything. It is more important that the subtitle is displayed for a long enough time than that absolutely everything is rendered in the translation. The subtitler is often helped by the fact that subtitling is not only translation from one language into another but also from spoken language into a written language simulating spoken language. As a result, many “uhm”s, repetitions and linguistic muddles can be left out of the subtitles.

Not like this:

**Hun sagde, at, øh, du ved,  
at hun ville spise.**

*She said, that, uhm, you know,  
that she wanted to eat.*

But like this (omitting the superfluous words):

**Hun sagde, at hun ville spise.**

*She said that she wanted to eat.*

If a sentence contains already known or superfluous information ...

**De rejseglade turister tog en tur  
til Storbritanniens hovedstad, London.**

*The enthusiastic tourists took a trip  
to Great Britain's capital, London.*

... it can be reduced:

**Turisterne tog til London.**

*The tourists went to London.*

And if it is already known that they are tourists, it may be sufficient to write, “They went to London.”

A cleft sentence ...

**Der er nogen, der har røbet planen.**

*There is someone who has revealed the plan.*

... can be reunited:

**Nogen har røbet planen.**

*Someone revealed the plan.*

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 straightened out:

**Det gør ikke noget.**

*It 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 sound natural and not staccato. Subtitling is a continuous balancing of readability, idiomaticity and level of detail.

### 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. 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 can usually be entered into 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.

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 childrens' 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.

If a subtitle contains difficult subject matter or simultaneous signs, this should be compensated for by longer subtitle duration. Not only mathematical formulas and loan words make a subtitle hard to read. Cumbersome language can be difficult too:

**Mindre end halvdelen af jer holder jeg  
ikke halvt så meget af, som I fortjener.**

*I like less than half of you  
half as well as you deserve.*

## The feedback effect

The subtitler should take the feedback effect into account, meaning that most of the viewers are able to hear and to some degree understand the original language 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.

Not like this (in which the viewer hears the word “Yes”, but simultaneously reads the translation “No”):

**- Kom du noget til?**

**- Nej.**

- *Were you harmed?*

- *No.*

But like this (which has been rephrased to make sound and image correspond):

**- Alt i orden?**

**- Ja.**

- *Everything okay?*

- *Yes.*

The feedback effect can also manifest visually. If the idiom “it costs an arm and a leg” is illustrated with an actual arm and a leg, a translation into a different idiom, albeit with a similar meaning, can be confusing and ruin a visual gag.

## Division of subtitles

Each subtitle should, if at all possible, form a natural and semantic unit. If a sentence continues over several subtitles it must be divided where it makes sense rhythmically or grammatically.

Not like this:

**De rejseglade turister tog en tur  
til Storbritanniens –**

*The enthusiastic tourists took a trip  
to Great Britain's -*

**- hovedstad.**

- *capital.*

But like this:

**De rejseglade turister  
tog en tur –**

*The enthusiastic tourists  
took a trip -*

**- til Storbritanniens hovedstad.**

- *to Great Britain's capital.*

## Distribution of dialogue

When splitting the dialogue into subtitles, questions and answers should be kept in the same subtitle, if possible.

Like this:

**- Siger du snart, hvem der vinder?**

**- Ja!**

*- Will you tell us who's won?*

*- Yes!*

An exception is when the answer is a punchline or another kind of surprising answer which in that case would be revealed too early.

Not like this (in which the viewer is able to read the name of the winner in the second subtitle, as soon as the question is asked):

**- Siger du snart, hvem der vinder?**

**- Ja!**

*- Will you tell us who's won?*

*- Yes!*

**- Hvem vinder konkurrencen?**

**- Det gør Børge!**

*- Who's the winner of the competition?*

*- Børge is!*

**Fantastisk!**

*Brilliant!*

But like this (in which that is avoided by dividing the dialogue differently):

**Siger du snart, hvem der vinder?**

*Will you tell us who's won?*

**- Ja!**

**- Hvem vinder konkurrencen?**

*- Yes!*

*- Who's the winner of the competition?*

**- Det gør Børge!**

**- Fantastisk!**

*- Børge is!*

*- Brilliant!*

# Thank you!

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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, and they open a world of foreign language programmes and movies for everyone.

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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11th January 2019