

# SUBSIGN

## Subtitling Sign Languages

### Guidelines | Version 2.0 2025

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#### 1. Introduction

SUBSIGN Guidelines are a comprehensive set of professional recommendations for subtitling content in sign languages, developed within the Erasmus+ SUBSIGN project [00]. They are intended for use by professionals across the fields of audiovisual translation, sign language mediation, and accessibility. By establishing common standards for this emerging practice, the SUBSIGN Guidelines support consistent, inclusive, and high-quality subtitling of sign language content [00]. For more information on the guidelines and the project, please visit [www.sub-sign.eu](http://www.sub-sign.eu) or email [subsignproject@gmail.com](mailto:subsignproject@gmail.com)

#### 2. Synchronisation

The in-time and out-time of each subtitle should be synchronised with the signed discourse, rather than with the spoken dialogue, and should comply with the following criteria:

- Minimum duration: 1 second. For very short subtitles (e.g. “Yes.”, “No.”), a minimum duration of 5/6 of a second is acceptable, provided that the subtitle remains fully readable and does not disappear abruptly.
- Maximum duration: 9 seconds.
- Gap between subtitles: the gap between two consecutive subtitles is 2 frames (if the distance between them is less than 6 frames, reduce it to 2 frames).
- Reading speed: 13 CPS (characters per second) including spaces and punctuation, up to a maximum of 17 CPS (including spaces and punctuation) if necessary.

When fingerspelling – either names or long numbers – subtitles may have a lower reading speed, as it takes more time to fingerspell than to read the word or number; this is acceptable, but always ensure that the minimum and maximum duration limits are respected.

### 3. Formatting

- Export format: SubRip .srt
- Encoding: UTF-8
- Lines per subtitle: maximum 2.
- Characters per line: maximum 46, including spaces and punctuation, if the video is in landscape mode; maximum 25 if the video is in portrait mode.
- Position: bottom, centre.
- Justification: centre.
- Font: Arial (or another sans serif font, such as Verdana). For landscape videos, use size 40 as a reference value (standard HD/1080p output). If the resolution or layout requires it (e.g. 4K videos, different aspect ratios, embedded graphics or safe-area constraints), adjust the font size accordingly, ensuring consistent legibility across the entire video. In portrait mode, reduce the font size proportionally.
- Background: whenever possible, use a black box or background behind the subtitles to improve legibility.

### 4. Style

Although sign language syntax often differs from written language syntax, subtitles should always follow written language syntax. This is particularly relevant to the order of the elements in a sentence, including the position of the verb and any negation. Avoid breaking up syntactic units such as article + noun, preposition + noun, adjective + noun, subject + verb, auxiliary + verb, or qualifier + proper name, unless strictly unavoidable.

- Line breaks: if possible, keep the top line shorter than the bottom line.
- Dual Speakers: use one hyphen per speaker followed by a single space

- How are you, Luke?  
- Fine, thank you. And you?

- Titles of books, works of art, albums, movies, TV shows, etc: capitalise the first and last words and all nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs

in a title, but lowercase articles, coordinating conjunctions, and short prepositions unless they appear at the beginning or at the end.

Have you seen The Girl on the Train?

- On-screen text: for brief on-screen text (NO SMOKING / STOP / Paris, 1889) use upper and/or lower case as per the original, without full stops at the end. For longer on-screen text, such as prologues or epilogues, use upper and/or lower case, with the necessary punctuation.
- Acronyms: acronyms should be written in upper case (AI, USA, BBC, UNESCO). If new or unfamiliar, add full stops (I.S. = Inclusive Subtitles).
- Abbreviations: shortened words, units and time markers (e.g. mph, min, km, a.m., p.m.) should follow standard written conventions and remain consistent throughout the subtitles.
- Numbers: numbers from 1 to 12 should be written in letters, from 13 upwards in digits. If the subtitle begins with a number, it should be written in letters, except for numbers that are too long and/or with decimals

- How old are you?  
- Eighty-four years old.

- How far is the Earth from the Moon?  
- 384,400 km more or less.

- Percentages: use the % sign to indicate precise numbers and the word 'percent' with expressions, such as "I am one hundred percent sure"

20% of employees will be fired.

- Cardinal numbers: use a comma to separate thousands and a full stop to separate decimals (1,340,560.89 = one million three hundred and forty thousand five hundred and sixty point eight nine). Use letters with expressions, such as "I told you a thousand times".
- Ordinal numbers: use the suffixes -st, -nd, -rd, -th. Use letters in expressions, such as "I am the second son"

He finished 104th in the marathon.

I'll tell you again, for the 30th time.

- Time: the exact time is indicated using a colon “See you at 11:15”. With a specific hour, use numbers “See you at 9 / The meeting is at 12”. Use the 12-hour clock system unless the characters say otherwise.
- Date: day, month and year can be spelled out or separated by a slash.

The contract expires on 28 July 2021.

The contract expires on 28/07/2021.

- Decades: decades are followed by an -s “The Glorious 20s”.
- Centuries: centuries are indicated using the suffixes -st, -nd, -rd, -th after the number.

She lived  
between the 3rd and the 4th century BC.

- Currency: the currency symbols (£, €, \$) should be placed after the digit, followed by a space “This coffee costs 1.50 €”. Use the nouns in instances, such as “The euro is a young currency”. For less known or ambiguous currencies, write them in full.

That house costs 350,000 Canadian dollars.

In Thailand,  
I changed all my money into baht.

## 5. Signer Identification

In signed discourse, it is uncommon for signers to be off-screen, making source identification generally clear. However, if a signer is not visible, identification is required and should be placed in square brackets [ ]. Use the character’s name whenever possible, even if it is revealed later in the video, to avoid overusing generic tags such as [Man] or [Woman]. Always capitalise the first letter.

[Luke] I want to go to the concert.

- [Mary] Don't tell anyone.  
- I won't say anything.

- [Professor] Did you do your homework?  
- [Student] No, I'm sorry.

## 6. Extra-dialogue elements

When a sound effect is pivotal to the comprehension of the video, add a sound effect subtitle in square brackets, following the same logic used for speaker identification.

[Gunshot]

Use the single musical note symbol (♪), placing it at the beginning and end of the music cue. If the symbol is not available on your keyboard, copy and paste it from a search engine. Use italics for lyrics, whenever necessary.

♪ The Fate Of Ophelia  
by Taylor Swift ♪

## 7. Punctuation

- Punctuation should be used in accordance with the rules of the English language.
- Full stop: use full stops only at the end of sentences, not at the end of every subtitle.
- Comma: commas should be used to separate sentences, after “yes” and “no”, in lists, etc.
- Exclamation and question marks: exclamation and question marks should be used to facilitate understanding of the speaker's tone. Avoid excessive use of exclamation marks.
- Interrobang: you can use the combined punctuation (?! ) or (!? ) to emphasise a tone that is both questioning and exclamatory, for example to express excitement, disbelief or confusion in the form of a question, or in rhetorical questions.

Do you really think I'm stupid?!

- Colon: the colon is used to introduce direct speech or a list.
- Quotation marks: use quotation marks for direct speech and quotations. Open them in the first subtitle and in any subsequent subtitle, and close them only at the end of the last subtitle. They are preceded by a colon and a space. The first letter of the quotation is in upper case.

John texted me: "How are you?"

“I’ve heard that you are moving  
to another city,

“which is sad,  
but exciting at the same time.

If you need anything,  
just let me know.”

And I replied: “Thank you for your text.”

- Full stops and commas go inside the quotation marks, as in the example above, whereas exclamation and question marks go outside the quotation marks, as in the examples below:

Why did he say “I love you”?

- Ellipsis: use ellipsis dots to indicate intentional pauses or change of subject. After the three dots, the word is in lower case if it is a continuation of the previous sentence, and in upper case if it is a new sentence. Make sure that the ellipsis dots are formatted as three individual characters, not as a single symbol.

I tried... to help him.

The truth is... That’s the truth.

- The underscore sign ( \_ ) is allowed for e-mail addresses or websites, which never end with a full stop, not even at the end of a sentence.

My e-mail is info@sub-sign.com  
Drop me a line whenever you want.

- Semicolon: the semicolon is generally not needed in subtitles, although it is possible to use it.
- Other symbols: the following symbols are permitted: \* # @ x - + / =

It’s easy.

7 x 8 = 56 and you find the result.

## 8. Language

- Foul language: do not censor or soften slang or offensive expressions; subtitles should reflect the original register of the discourse.
- Inclusive language: whenever possible - and always in cases of uncertainty - use inclusive language that acknowledges gender diversity. This is especially important in gendered languages (e.g. Romance languages), where the male/female dichotomy affects articles, adjectives, nouns, verbs, and other parts of speech, and a neutral form is not readily available.
- Inclusive language: whenever possible and always in cases of uncertainty, use inclusive language that acknowledges gender diversity: use gender-neutral terms (e.g. “police officer” instead of “policeman”, “chair” or “chairperson” instead of “chairman”); avoid the generic masculine and using singular they when appropriate (e.g. “Someone left their bag”); use neutral forms of address when gender is unknown or irrelevant (e.g. “everyone”, “people”, “folks”); respect the wording used by the signer.



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