POWER OF BABEL
DUBBING • SUBTITLING • TRANSLATION

The filmmaker's subtitle primer

How to do your film justice when getting it out into the world

For an audience that doesn't understand the language spoken in your film, **the subtitles are just as important as the sound mix.**

And yet, for many filmmakers and producers, the subtitling process remains a mystery.

So, let's demystify it, and help you get the kind of excellent subtitles your film deserves.

Let's start with the basics: what makes good subtitles?

1. Subtitles should be concise and easy to read, so that they distract as little as possible from the images, and the audience has time to absorb the text while also watching the action on screen.

2. They should capture not just the literal meaning of the words, but the flavour of the dialogue – the cultural references, jokes and various quirks of unrehearsed speech.



How do we get there?

Here's a quick summary of the professional subtitling process:

1. **We take the video and transcript** (or English CC file), and load it into subtitling software (e.g. EZTitles or Subtitle Edit).

2. **The subtitler breaks up the transcript** into short, precisely timed segments, following the rhythm of the dialogue and avoiding clashing with shot changes.

3. **The subtitler then translates the dialogue segment by segment,** adjusting the segmentation as needed for the new language, and condensing the text.

4. **A reviewer goes over the subtitles,** checking against the original language, making sure the translations are accurate and well-written, and checking for typos. The subtitler and reviewer often discuss translation choices to come up with the best solution.

5. **Finally, we export the subtitles** in any format required — SRT, VTT, TTML, etc.

Subtitles are almost never a word-for-word translation of the dialogue. *They're a condensed version because they have to fit the time and space available. Otherwise, the viewer will struggle to keep up with the text and will miss the action on screen.*

Subtitles vs. Captions: What's the difference?

Subtitles are a translation of the dialogue only, for hearing people. Closed captions (AKA SDH – Subtitles for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing) also include descriptions of "atmospherics" (i.e. sound effects, music and other non-verbal audio), and speaker tags when it's not visually clear who is speaking. Broadcasters and streamers often want both, as separate files.

How NOT to do it

1. Do not separate translation and timing

Producers often ask: "We have a translation. How much to turn it into subtitles?" or "Could you quote on translation and subtitling separately."

We tell them this is not how subtitles are created. We don't translate the text and then create subtitles from it. The timing, segmentation and translation are interrelated, and part of the same process.

Why? Because translating for subtitles is not the same as just translating a video transcript. Subtitles are timed to the duration and rhythm of the dialogue, and they have to take into account what's happening on screen. They require adaptation and condensing. Proper audiovisual translation can't be done without constant reference to the video.

When a pro subtitler is asked to work from an existing text translation, they often spend almost as much time adapting it as they would translating from scratch. That means you're paying twice — and often spending more than you intended to get quality subtitles.

2. Do not "create" subtitles in the edit suite using the text tool in Premiere, AVID, etc.

Subtitling is done in professional software designed for that purpose, and then imported into your video project.

Why tie up an expensive edit suite and get non-standard subtitles, created by someone you hired for an entirely different set of skills?

A subtitler does it faster, with more precision, following international subtitling standards. You get a frame-accurate subtitle file that imports smoothly into your system.

And best of all, you get subtitles that are easy to read and understand.

Rules and Style Guides

Why do we care so much about the rules and standards of subtitling?

They are based on decades of research on how people watch films. This research is the basis of everything from the number of characters per line (no more than 42, often less), to rules about reading speed, measured in characters per second (i.e. how much text the viewer can comfortably read in the time the subtitle is on screen).

Netflix is the world's largest commissioner of subtitles, so its Timed Text Style Guide is hugely influential. Many European broadcasters also have subtitling guidelines – e.g. Britain's Channel 4. Unfortunately, most North American broadcasters don't have subtitling style guides of their own — only technical delivery specs.

The Elephant in the Room

"Hey, Alexa! Subtitle this in French."

Is AI translation good enough for subtitles? Not if you care about your film, or about the experience you're giving your audience. Not today, and probably not ever.

No doubt, AI will continue its takeover of many industries and occupations. But translating film and television should not be one of them. There are a few reasons for this:

1. **Visual context.**
   So much of audiovisual translation depends on the visual context and other factors that aren't obvious from the text – for example, gender. Unlike English, many languages are highly gendered, and unlike English, many languages distinguish between the singular and plural "you." AI has no way of following the visual context, so it makes assumptions based on whatever information it's been fed in the past. Often that means defaulting to the singular masculine, no matter what's happening on screen.

2. **Register (i.e. the level of formality) and choice of vocabulary.**
   AI is only capable of middle-of-the-road translation that at best can capture the formal meaning, but not the tone and flavour of the dialogue. In addition, it doesn't consider the myriad ways that people address each other and talk about each other in different cultures. (The obvious example is the distinction between the informal "tu" and the formal "vous" in French and many other languages.)

3. **Cultural context.**
   A good subtitler doesn't just translate the words, but interprets the subtleties of the speaker's choice of words, the cultural references, etc. A farmer and a history professor may tell the same story using completely different vocabulary and shades of meaning. A human translator will understand the context and put it in the subtitles; AI will not.

4. **Research.**
   A good subtitler will spend time researching the correct terminology and looking up obscure references, to get the translation just right. By contrast, AI will pick the simplest, most obvious translation, often just the word-for-word literal version.

5. **Mistakes and quirks of syntax and vocabulary.**
   This is particularly true in documentaries and other unscripted content. People don't speak like machines—they misspeak, they make grammatical mistakes, they may use the wrong word, etc. The human brain is extraordinarily good at getting past that. AI... not so much.

6. **Jokes.**
   Translating humour, wordplay and innuendo is extraordinarily difficult, and requires creative solutions that no AI is ever likely to even approximate.

Yes, it's true that AI is getting better all the time, and we don't know where it will be in a few years. But for the foreseeable future, using AI for subtitles just guarantees a bad product, and frustration for the audience.

Subtitles by Power of Babel

Power of Babel is a language company built by filmmakers and production veterans to serve the production community. We love films, and we care as much about the quality of our work as your re-recording mixer and colourist do about theirs. We seek out the best freelancers around the world, we rigorously check their work, and we stand behind everything we deliver to our clients.

Our documentary clients include the National Film Board of Canada, and top producers such as Sphinx Productions, Hungry Eyes Media, White Pine Pictures, 52 Media, HitPlay Productions, etc. We've subtitled dozens of documentaries and indie dramas into French, as well as Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, etc.

We have particularly strong expertise in Black cinema. We've created French subtitles for films such as Jennifer Holness's ***Subjects of Desire***, Laurie Townshend's ***A Mother Apart***, Graeme Mathieson's ***Play It Loud,*** the history series ***Black Life: Untold Stories***, and others. (And yes, our team has lived experience.)

Need to reach an immigrant audience? We do that too. For example, we subtitled Vancouver producer Alex Sangha's ***Emergence: Out of the Shadows*** in Hindi and Punjabi.

In addition to subtitles, we provide:

- Dubbing in French, Spanish and other languages
- Translation of releases and other contracts, as well as study guides, etc.
- Transcription-translation of documentary rushes
- Closed Captioning
- Audio Description

For more information and a free quote, please reach out anytime.

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DUBBING • SUBTITLING • TRANSLATION

Language services for the audiovisual production industry.