

Open and Closed Captions

The use of video has played an important role in training and education for many decades. However, the audio portion of a video presentation is inaccessible to people who are deaf or hard of hearing unless it includes captions. Captions are on-screen text descriptions that display a video's dialogue, identifies speakers, and describes other relevant sounds that are otherwise inaccessible to people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Captions are synchronized with the video image so that viewers have equivalent access to the content that is originally presented in sound, regardless of whether they receive that content via audio or text.

Captions are either open or closed. Open captions always are in view and cannot be turned off, whereas closed captions can be turned on and off by the viewer.

Closed captions appear only when the media viewer player supports them. At least one version of most major media viewer software applications now supports closed captions. Some of these products may support captions in their stand-alone client versions but not in browser-embedded or handheld versions of their products.

Delivering video's with closed captions places responsibility on the user to understand how to turn captions on, in their media viewer software. So that the user isn't faced with this burden, some people argue in favour of delivering video products with open captions. Open-captioning advocates also argue that captioning has benefits for people other than those with hearing impairments (e.g., people whose first language is not English; people in noisy airports, health clubs and other social or community spaces). Also, when the spoken word of all speakers is open-captioned, additional translation for speakers who have speech impairments is not required.

Despite the advantages of open captions, there also are disadvantages. Some disadvantages stem from the fact that open captions are an actual part of the video stream, whereas closed captions exist as a separate text stream. If captions are preserved as text, users potentially can archive and index video content and allow users to search for specific video content within these archives; this ability is lost with open captions. Also, open captions, unlike closed captions, are subject to loss of quality when the encoded video is compressed.


With the mix of advantages and disadvantages of open and closed captioning, it is important for the video producer to evaluate the use of the video product and make an informed decision about what type of captioning to use. For example, if a training video is specifically designed for individuals with disabilities or for large audiences or for use in noisy conference exhibits, open captioning might be a good choice. The most important decision is to choose to caption the product; the choice to make it open-captioned or closed-captioned should occur after consideration of all factors regarding its use.

What's the difference between subtitles and closed captions?

Subtitles generally display only what is spoken by a character. They are intended for viewers who are able to hear, but prefer to have the dialogue of the video displayed.

Closed captions provide a way for those who may not be able to hear the video sounds at all to fully enjoy what is presented. They include dialogue, sound cues (such as "machinery starting up") and simple explanations for those who are unable to compare the actual audio to the subtitles.

Summary

Closed Captions: Video that has closed captions is denoted with a familiar CC icon . Using closed captions is optional. Users can turn them on or off with their video player or other controls. Closed captions for video on the web are read by a media player if it supports closed captions. Not all versions of media players support closed captions. Closed captions are not part of the actual video stream and exist in a separate text stream.ⁱ

Open Captions: Video that is accessed on the web can use open captions to provide on-screen text. Open captions are always displayed because they are part of the video stream. Open captions are not subject to different media player features. Users do not have to know how to turn the captions on. A disadvantage of open captions is that if the video is compressed, there can be a loss of quality and readability. They can also be distracting to some users.

ⁱ Blackboard