



# Difference Engine – Captioning Tips

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## **Thanks**

To Stagertext for making their captioning training available, anyone looking to expand their understanding of captioning would do well to start with Stagertext.

And to those who have worked on or trialled the Difference Engine to make it a viable captioning service.

## **Introduction**

Please note, this is a work in progress intended to help first timers take steps into captioning, while the tips included are what I understand to be Best Practice, it should not be taken as definitive or conclusive. It is written based on my understanding at the time of writing and with the aim of keeping your captioning internally consistent. I would advise anyone who has the time and resources to make use of some of the training and further reading available at the end of this document.

The first thing you should be aware about when captioning- don't leave it until the last minute! If you can organise who is writing them and who will be running them during performance, you will save a lot of stress later. Although captioning is not necessarily difficult, it can be time consuming and when questions pop up it's a lot easier to find the answers if you don't have an impending deadline.

Something that is often forgotten about is making your audience aware that captions are available. Many organisations will make sure that their performance is accompanied by signs on the day of the performance. Although this is good to have, if somebody needs captions to be able to enjoy a performance and the only advertising is on the day and in the building, the chances are good that they will have already decided not to come. Make sure that the following information is easily accessible (preferably on all of marketing you put out) - Which performances are captioned and how they are captioned. For the Difference Engine, it's a good idea to let them know that they should download the app *in advance*.

If you have the capacity, a great step you can take is to have someone available to speak to audiences before the performance. This is true for any different way of working for any access, it may be that this is a person's first visit to the theatre or their first time experiencing the Difference Engine, for example. Having someone to talk them through it, what it does and anything they need to do allows them to relax and enjoy the experience.

As long as you are able to facilitate it, the Difference Engine enables you to caption every show without any disruption to audience members, if you can, it's quite a statement to a production's commitment to access, to be able to say that every performance is captioned.

One final thing to be aware of is that Captions are not a replacement for a British Sign Language Interpreter. Many people who talk using Sign Language would consider it to be their first language and may find reading captions similar to having to translate the text in their head. Essentially, they serve different access needs, so if you are able to have a BSL Interpreted show as well as captioned performances, you should do so.

## **Formatting**

### **Length of captions**

It's better to have two short lines rather than one long one. Bear in mind that to look at a caption, you have to stop looking at the stage - the longer the caption, the more likely it is something will be missed. Although don't go too far the other way with loads of half sentences!

### **Sound effects**

Use square brackets to denote sound effects - [ ]

Using upper case for descriptions of sound differentiates it from speech.

When describing sounds start with the subject then the active finite verb in present tense. E.g. [DOOR SLAMMING]

### **Music**

Use square brackets and uppercase letters as you would for a sound effect.

Use music notes ♪ as you would quotation marks around the description.

Insert a description of the music, like the instruments, tempo and style. Ideally include lyrics if they are important/relevant or if it's a famous song you can label the song name followed by the artist name - [♪ SONG NAME - ARTIST ♪]

You should also label important moments of music e.g. [♪ DRUMS CRESCENDO ♪].

If the music is just background and not important you can use - [♪ INCIDENTAL MUSIC ♪]. However, outside of this description, you should try to avoid the word music as it's very generic and doesn't really add any description.

### **Sarcasm**

As it can be difficult to infer sarcasm from text alone, you can use an exclamation point in round brackets (!) at the end of the sentence to make it clear. e.g.

Sure, I believe you (!)

## **Stage Directions**

You don't need to include stage directions in captions.

## **Best Practice**

This section covers some decisions that you will have to make while captioning, unfortunately there are not necessarily hard and fast rules to follow, so you will have to make a judgement call. However, something you can use to help you make the decision is to remember this - captions are not there to interpret the performance. If you're not sure about something ask yourself "Is this a factual reflection of what's happening or an interpretation of what *I* think is happening?" If it's the latter, rethink your wording.

E.g.

[♪ HAUNTING INSTRUMENTS BUILD TO EMPHASISE THE HEARTBREAK OF SAL ♪]

is interpreting the action for the audience, it might be the intended effect, but a hearing audience wouldn't be told that, so it shouldn't be included in the captions. It would be better to simply put

[♪ VIOLINS CRESCENDO ♪]

## **Sound Effects**

You don't need to include a sound in the caption if the sound is onstage and expected. For example, if you can see that someone is knocking on the door, you wouldn't need to caption it. However, if someone rang a doorbell and it made a wacky noise, you would include that in the caption. If the noise is unexpected, not inferred by the action, or coming from off-stage, then you should still include it.

## **Name Labels**

It's up to you if you want to include name labels throughout the captions. Use uppercase letters to differentiate from speech. If you don't include name labels and more than one person is talking, you can use a dash (-) to indicate a new person is talking. However, if you're not sure or it's not obvious who is talking, you definitely

should include a name label, for example if they're off-stage, and potentially a description of where the sound is coming from e.g.

ALI: [FROM THE HALLWAY] Can I come in?

## **Characters talking at the same time**

If they're saying the same thing-

CHRIS: We finish each other's-  
CHRIS AND SAM: [TOGETHER] -sentences.

Short bits of different speech at the same time-

CHRIS: I hate it when -  
SAM: I just really wanted-  
CHRIS: -you talk over me.  
SAM: -to say something first.

Longer lines that would be difficult to follow if broken up-

[OVERLAPPING]  
CHRIS: I hate it when you talk over me. It's really irritating and you're so annoying!  
SAM: I just really wanted to say something first. You never let me speak.

If what they're saying is not supposed to be made out by the audience and it's obvious who is talking e.g. if everyone onstage is talking over each other or you can clearly see who is and is not talking, you don't need to be specific-

[OVERLAPPING CHATTER]

## **Tone Labels**

You can include tone labelling i.e. [EXCITEDLY], but you don't need to tone label everything and it's best not to if you can avoid it. The performers will usually express the tone with body language and facials, so only include it if it's not clear from that, e.g. if it's coming from offstage

## **Foreign Languages**

Ideally, just include the exact words used, because even saying that they're speaking French (for example) is interpreting information rather than presenting it. Definitely don't translate the text, unless that is the point of the captions.

## **Grammar and Punctuation**

Grammar, punctuation and spelling do matter and can affect the enjoyment of the performance. Make sure that you proof-read all of your captions and amend any mistakes.

## **Quick Reference**

### Definitions

Closed Captions - Captions that are only visible to the person who needs them, the Difference Engine is an example of this.

Open Captions - Captions that are visible to everyone in the theatre, I.E. Sur/Subtitles.

### Caption Usage

Speech - Use normal capitalisation and punctuation

Sound effects - use [ ] and UPPERCASE to differentiate from speech

Music - [♪ SONG NAME - ARTIST ♪] or [♪ VIOLINS CRESCENDO ♪]

Sarcasm - (!)

## Other Resources

Accessing Access - Tips, Advice and Lessons from a Journey into Access by Paul O'Donnell, - <https://www.podonnell2.co.uk/accessing-access>

Basics of Marketing Captioning - <https://www.culturehive.co.uk/resources/a-guide-to-theatre-access-marketing-for-captioning/>

Difference Engine website - <https://differenceengineaccess.wordpress.com>

Guide to Theatre Access - <http://www.accessibletheatre.org.uk>

Leaders in the Open Captions (visible to all) field - <http://www.stage-text.org> they often have captioning training available.

Training resources and theatre company with interesting use of captioning - <https://graeae.org/>

## Further reading

Articles about the Difference Engine and innovative use of captioning

Difference Engine Stories: Kate Webster's *Car Wash* Creation Process -

<https://birdmail.wordpress.com/2022/05/23/creating-car-wash/>

Complicite's *Encounter* with the Difference Engine -

<https://birdmail.wordpress.com/2015/10/12/reflections-on-an-encounter-with-the-difference-engine/>

Eugene by Ingenious Fools -

<https://ingeniousfools.co.uk/liveonline/eugene/>

Shakespeare's Birthplace article on the Difference Engine -

<https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/blogs/accessibility-with-a-difference/>