

Guidelines for subtitling in Sweden

**Compiled by Medietextarna, a part of the Swedish
Union of Journalists, in collaboration with:**

The Language Council of Sweden

SVT Language & Accessibility

TV4

Svensk Medietext AB

VSI Ordkedjan

SDI Media

BTI Studios

Plint

Jan Pedersen, Institute for Interpreting and Translation Studies,
Stockholm University



Introduction

The purpose of subtitles is to reproduce the content of an original work that would otherwise have been in some way inaccessible or incomprehensible to a given audience.

Subtitles consist of a series of text blocks, each displayed for a certain number of seconds. They may be a translation of a foreign language or a same-language caption – which in these guidelines means Swedish subtitles on Swedish speech.

This document offers general guidelines for subtitling according to the Swedish standard. They are based on the Swedish subtitling tradition and should be viewed as an overview of the established solutions and best-practice principles. They are meant as guidance and intended to serve as a basic foundation for both old and new players on the market.

By compiling these guidelines, we aim to create a shared point of reference that not only makes it easier for subtitlers and agencies to communicate the Swedish approach to their customers, but also benefits viewers by establishing a consistent standard that facilitates understanding.

1. Layout and special markers in Swedish subtitles

1.1 Appearance

The colour and background (if any) should be designed for the best possible legibility – for example, white text on a black, semi-transparent background.

1.2 Position

The subtitle should be at the bottom of the screen, either left-justified or centred. Any raising of the subtitle must be highly motivated, and if the text is raised up, it should be placed so as to block as little as possible of the image.

This example shows
a left-aligned subtitle.

This is a centred subtitle.
The left edge is not justified.

1.3 Number of lines

A subtitle consists of one or two lines of text. In certain circumstances, using three or four lines for graphics may be called for.

1.4 Splitting subtitles

Sentences that are too long to fit in a single text block can be split into more than one subtitle. If they immediately follow each other, they are linked together with hyphens or dashes (- or –) to mark continuation.

Continuation dashes are placed at the end of the first and beginning of the following text block, without a space. When splitting subtitles, grammatical and semantic units should, as far as possible, be kept together.

Like this:

We must get out
of this cave–

–before the rain
makes it flood.

Not like this:

We must get out of this

cave before the–

–rain comes and

makes it flood.

If the speaker pauses, hesitates or if the text blocks do not immediately follow on each other, the continuation can be marked with ellipses:

Why didn't you tell me...

...about the vampire in the bath?

As in other writing, ellipses can be used when a speaker is interrupted or trails off, or to indicate hesitation. To save space, we do not use a space before or after an ellipsis. However, if a new sentence begins after the ellipsis, there should be a space and a capital letter.

–But...you love him.

–Yes... But what does that matter?

1.5 Dialogue

When two people speak in the same text block, dialogue dashes are used at the beginning of each line. There is normally no space after the dialogue dash in Swedish subtitling. A new speaker must always be on a new line:

–Hi, how are you?

–Fine, thanks, can't complain.

If possible, it is better to end with a full stop than to have a sentence continue over multiple blocks. If a subtitled sentence in the dialogue does continue in the next block, this is indicated with an ellipsis, which also occurs in the next block:

–Hi, what are you doing?

–I'm just trying to understand...

...how this stupid electric bike works.

1.6 Focus-change dash

When a speaker addresses more than one person in the same text block, you can use a dash to indicate that they have switched their focus to someone else. Note that, unlike the dialogue dash, the focus-change dash normally does not have spaces around it:

Hi, Julius!

– And hello to you, Gustav.

1.7 Line breaks

Line breaks affect reading comprehension within a text block as well as between them. The guiding principle, as usual, is that semantic units should be kept together wherever possible. It is ideal to place a line break before a subordinate clause (that, which, for, because, etc.) or conjunctions (and, but, or).

Once this requirement is met, if possible the top line should be shorter than the bottom.

Like this:

I'm cooking

and mentally composing a letter.

Not like this:

I'm cooking and mentally

composing a letter.

1.8 Italics

Italics are usually used in the following cases:

- For commentator or narrator voices.
- To indicate a mechanical distortion, such as when the voice comes through a phone or television set.
- To show that a voice comes from a person who is not in the scene; for example in dream sequences, memories and so on.
- To emphasise individual words.

Italics are not used when a speaker simply moves on and off camera or from one room to another. Songs and poems are italicised according to the same rules as regular speech.

1.9 Graphics and other text on screen

Graphics and text on screen are only subtitled if they are relevant to the action. If the translation is identical in the source and target languages – such as place names that are the same in both languages – the graphic does not need to be subtitled. In cases where it is impossible to subtitle both graphics and speech, speech has priority.

Graphics and other text on screen that need to be translated should be centred to distinguish them from other subtitles, if the other subtitles are left-justified. It is also common to use all caps when translating graphics. This alternative is often preferable in translations where all text is centred. The duration of a subtitle should correspond to the time the graphic is on screen.

1.10 Song lyrics

Song lyrics are translated or same-language subtitled only if they are significant to the action. The convention is to skip both continuation dashes and full stops, to indicate that this is a song, and to only use a capital in connection with a new sentence in the song, not in each new text block. Question and exclamation marks can, however, be used. In subtitles, songs are italicised according to the same rules as regular speech.

No storm can shake

my inmost calm

while to that rock I'm clinging

Since love is lord

of heaven and earth

how can I keep from singing?

2. Linguistic requirements

2.1 Grammar and spelling

Subtitles should be in grammatical Swedish. The guidelines here are the Swedish Academy's glossary and the Swedish writing rules from the Language Council of Sweden. To save space, some exceptions can be made to punctuation and spacing norms in subtitles; see "Splitting subtitles". Because subtitling reflects spoken language, vernacular short forms of words can be used if the stylistic register permits.

2.2 Translation

Subtitles should convey the content of the source language in idiomatic Swedish, in a register that matches the programme's style and tone. A good translation should strive to convey speech in a way that sounds natural in the target language – not reproduce the source language word for word.

Because the viewer has limited time to read the subtitle, extra care should be taken regarding words that take longer to read. This includes foreign words, slang expressions and complex scientific terms. To the degree that these are used, they can be compensated with a longer duration.

Correct terms should be used in programmes with specialist terminology. Recurring expressions in programme series should be coordinated so that they are used consistently. All data should be checked, including the correct spelling of names, use of titles, transliteration from foreign alphabets, correct measures, weights, figures and so on.

3. The craft of subtitling

3.1 Duration

The text should be on screen long enough for the viewer to be able to read it while following the events on screen. A rule of thumb is that one full line of text should last at least 3 seconds, while a block consisting of two full lines should last 5–6 seconds. For children’s programming, the reading speed should be a bit lower.

The recommended minimum length for short blocks is 1.5–2 seconds. The maximum should be around 7–8 seconds, depending on the target audience.

3.2 Cueing

The main rule is that subtitles are cued in when speech starts and cued out a few frames – or up to a couple of seconds – after the speech stops, unless another line or scene change comes in that space. Consecutive text blocks should have 2–4 frames between them; otherwise they seem to “flicker” in the viewer’s eyes.

If the space between two text blocks is fewer than 20 frames, the outcue of the first one should be adjusted to the minimum interval (2 or 4, depending on the client’s standard). If a break between subtitles occurs near a shot change, their timing should be adjusted to match the shot change. This also prevents the perception of the subtitles “flickering”. Wherever possible, text blocks should be cued out on scene changes.

3.3 Condensing and editing

There is a significant difference between how quickly someone speaks and how quickly a viewer can read. To give viewers the time to take in what is happening on screen as well, it is important to condense the content rather than reflect the speech verbatim. For example, repetitions and filler words can easily be left out. The same principle can be applied when converting spoken language to easily readable written language that imitates speech.

For example, a line like:

Well, I don’t know, I... He never...

I mean, he never told me.

can easily be condensed to:

I don’t know, he never told me.

When it is not possible to condense the text without leaving out information, the subtitler must select the information that is most relevant and significant in the context.

4. Credit and copyright

The person who created the subtitles has the right to be credited with their name in the subtitles. According to Sweden's Copyright Act (1960:729), the originator cannot be denied the intellectual copyright to their text, which includes the right to be credited by name. However, the originator can choose not to be credited for their text.

The convention is that the translator includes a credit text at the end of the translation. The credit might be formulated as:

Translation: First name Surname

Company name

In closing...

Subtitles are among the most widely read text material in Sweden. They are crucial for people with hearing impairments to gain full access to moving images.

They also play a major role in children's language acquisition, in helping Swedish speakers to learn foreign languages and also in helping non-Swedish speakers to learn Swedish.

With Sweden's Act on Access to Digital Public Service (Lag (2018:1937) om tillgänglighet till digital offentlig service), which went into effect on 1 January 2019, the amount of material with Swedish subtitles will increase significantly, which further emphasises the need for professionally created subtitles that follow the accepted Swedish norm.