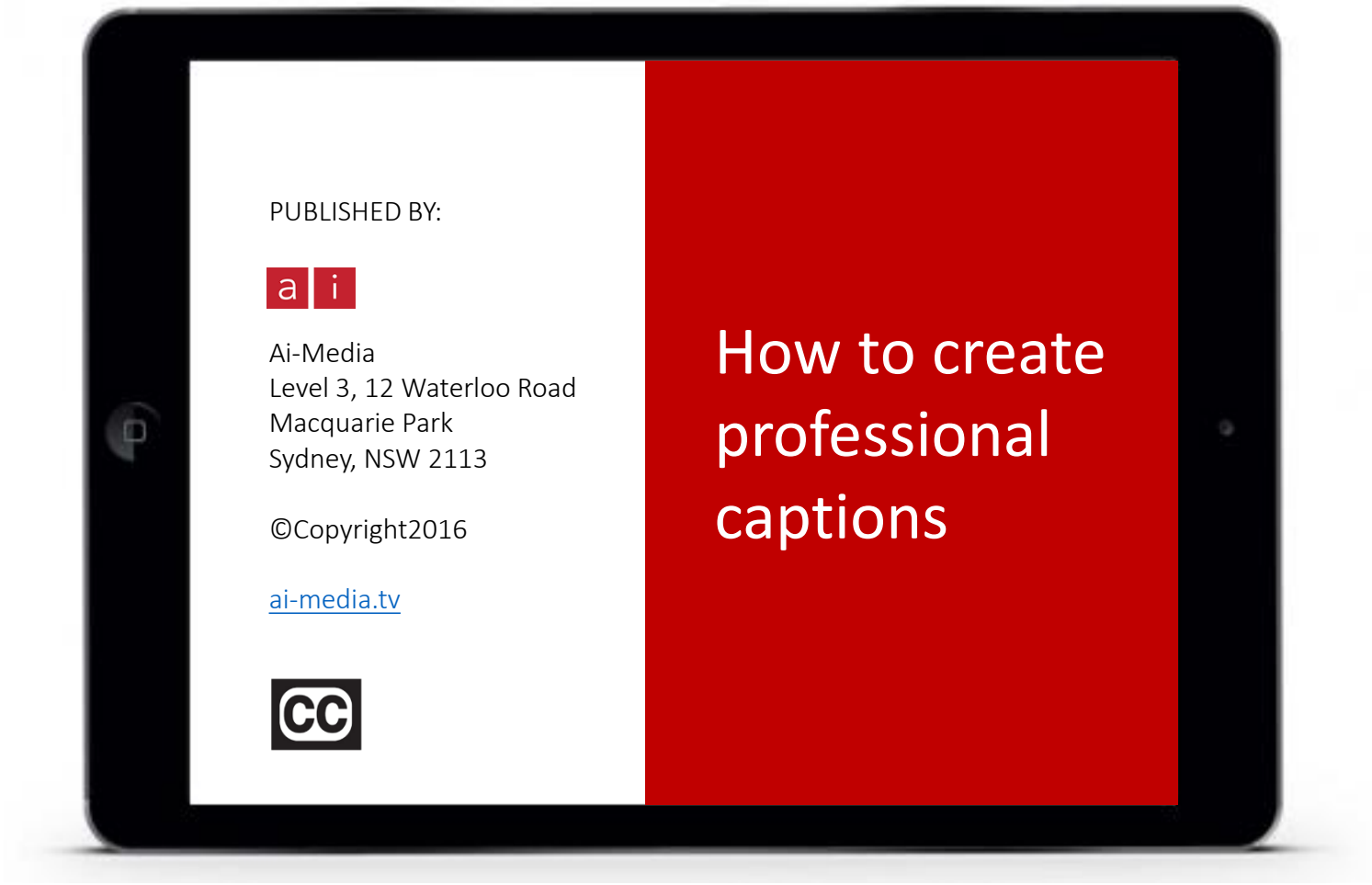
How to create professional captions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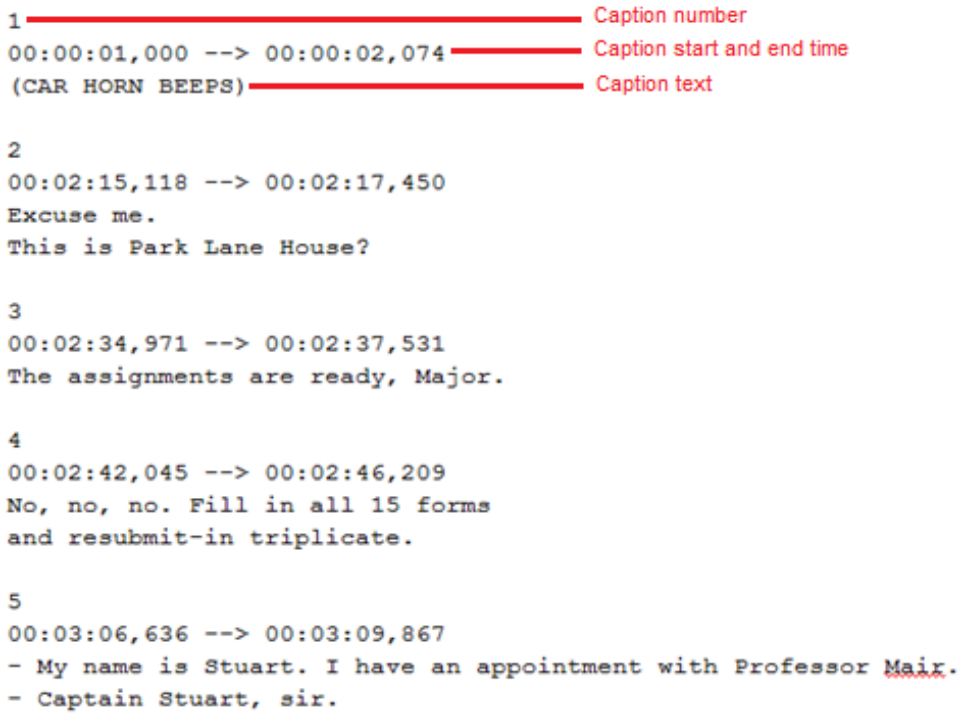
How to create professional captions

What are closed captions?

Captions are the text version of a video's audio content with additional timing information which allows them to appear on screen in time with the video.

SRT files are the most common caption file used by online video players such as YouTube and Vimeo. They are considered the most basic of all caption file formats. They are essentially a text file with very specific formatting, allowing them to be opened and edited by most programs.

Because of their basic structure, SRT files do not support any colouring or positioning – meaning captions appear as all white text at the bottom of the screen.



What makes good captions?

Good captions are easy to read, accurate and easy to understand. A good grasp of English grammar and punctuation rules are essential to making good captions. Here are some quick tips:

- ✓ Captions should accurately reflect the audio.
- ✓ The timing of captions should coincide with the audio.
- ✓ Captions should break at natural linguistic breaks.
- ✓ It should be clear from the captions exactly who is talking.
- ✓ Sound effects should be adequately described.

[Proper formatting of captions]

Caption breaks

The readability of captions is improved when the caption lines end at natural linguistic breaks and reflect the natural flow and punctuation of a sentence. As a general rule, keeping chunks of meaning together improves readability. Each caption should form an understandable segment.

- Keep subjects and phrases together within the same caption.
- Split ‘around’ verbs - verbs are often the best place to start or end a caption or line break.
- If words in a caption can fit on one line, they should.

Example

- As this sentence could fit within one caption, it is best practice to do so.
- Splitting after “should” with the following words being “not do” can be confusing, as the following caption will contradict or clash with the first.

Speaker labelling

Clearly labelling speakers provides the viewer with the information to understand who said what.

1. When a new speaker starts speaking, always use a dash before the text.

2. If two people are speaking within the same caption, insert a line break so each speaker appears on its own line and ensure you add a dash in front of each speaker.

   E.g. In a scene where a mother speaks to her son.
   - Where are you going?
   - I'm walking to school.

3. If the person speaking is not on screen, identify the speaker with a dash and [Voiceover].
   I.e. - [Voiceover]. If you've seen the person on screen previously and they are speaking without their face being visible, you should identify them by their name. E.g. - [Greg]

Timing

The timing of captions is important to the viewer experience. Out-of-sync captions will lead to a confusing viewer experience.

- The appearance of captions should coincide with the onset of the audio – i.e. the captions reflect what is being said during that caption's time on screen.
- Each caption should not appear on screen for longer than 7 seconds.
- The minimum recommended caption duration is 1 second.
- Where possible, it is best to end a caption on a shot change in the video. Captions that overhang on shot-changes can look out of place and confusing to viewers.

Music and sound effects

- Describe sounds that are audible, but not visible e.g. (KNOCK AT DOOR), (GUNFIRE)

- Describe character sound effects if they are meaningful, such as:
  - Tone of voice, e.g. (SARCASTICALLY) You look fantastic.
  - Strong accent (on first hearing only), e.g. (HEAVY SLAVIC ACCENT) Me no go to your house.
  - Silent words, e.g. (MOUTHS) I love you.

- When instrumental music plays (i.e. no lyrics), give the title and name of artist (where known). E.g. ('SURFING WITH THE ALIEN' BY JOE SATRIANI PLAYS)

- Where the lyrics are audible, they must be captioned. Each new caption block containing lyrics should start with a hash #. The final caption block of the audible lyrics should end with a full stop followed by a hash. E.g.

  # For all the times that you rain on my parade
  And all the clubs you get in using my name

  # You think you broke my heart
  Oh, girl, for goodness' sake. #

[Content Accuracy]

Word accuracy

Good captions accurately capture what is said.

- ✗ Do not correct speaker's words.
- ✗ Don't add, delete or rearrange words.
- ✗ Don't paraphrase.

- ✓ Use correct spelling.
- ✓ OK to remove "ums", "ahs" and false starts. If in doubt, leave it in.
- ✓ Swear words should be left in. If it's in the audio, it's in the captions.
- ✓ If a full stop (period) works, it is best to use one. Short, clear sentences make the best captions.
- ✓ Localize spelling for your audience – e.g. 'color' for the US vs 'colour' for the UK.

Let’s talk punctuation…

’	**THE APOSTROPHE**	**Not for plurals. Use for possessive. E.g.** Mike’s cat is cute. The cat showed its tail.
,	**THE COMMA**	**BEFORE:** ‘though’ and ‘however’. **AFTER:** ‘thanks’ ‘oh’ ‘well’ Thanks, Paul. Oh, I was expecting that, however I am not interested.
–	**THE DASH**	Use for an additional comment or sudden change of thought. E.g. I had a great day today – then I saw you! Or: How to use a dash – correctly!
“ ”	**THE DOUBLE QUOTE**	She said, “Use double quotes when quoting prose, a poem or conversation.”
‘ ’	**THE SINGLE QUOTE**	The answer is ‘A’.
…	**THE ELIPSES**	Use within a single caption with no space afterwards. Use to indicate a pause to think. E.g. She wasn’t angry…she was just tired. Also for interruptions by another speaker or trailing off. E.g. - I think that… - Well, maybe…we should.

Contractions

Slang contractions should be spelt as they are spoken, as long as readability is not compromised.

I'ma	*I'ma whoop yo' ass!*
y'all, y'all all	*Y'all all can (BLEEP) off.*
ya	*I hear ya.*
youse	*Hey, youse over there!*
lemme	*Lemme at 'im.*
gimme	*Just gimme a sec.*
what up	*What up, homie.*
wassup	*Wassup, bro.*
talkin', thinkin', walkin' etc.	*I'm talkin' about a revolution, baby.*
gonna, wanna, kinda	*I wanna ride with you.*

The do’s and don'ts of capitalization

- Do not capitalize ‘royal’, unless part of a proper noun (“The royal family finished their royal tour”, “The Royal Beach Palace Hotel”).
- Capitalize political titles when current and American, or when used as part of a full title and name, but not when former or foreign.

✓	✗
Current ministers (Vice President, Secretary of State, Attorney General, etc.)	General political terms (“the minister said...”, “the parties joined...”)
Political parties (Republican Party, the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, Independent, etc.)	Terms like ‘commission’ and ‘inquiry’, unless as part of an official title (“a state commission into abuse”, but “The Commission of Audit”)
Opposition Leader and the Opposition (for current title holders only)	Police, unless using full official title (“the police arrived on scene”, “the matter was referred to Los Angeles Police Department”)
The Government, when talking about the currently sitting party of government	News reporters’ titles (“state political reporter John Smith”, “US bureau chief Bela Lugosi”)
Federal, but usually only when paired with another capitalized word, or as part of a title (“the Federal Government”, “a federal initiative”)	Business titles (“managing director Boris Karloff”)
Mom and Dad, when used as titles (“I said to Mom”, but “I said to my mom”)	
Military titles, only when used as a personal title (“Colonel Lon Chaney”, but “the colonel spoke”)	

Ellipsis…

An ellipsis is used to indicate:

- A pause to think, e.g. She wasn't angry…she was just tired.
- An interruption by another speaker, e.g. - I was walking along the road and I…
  - No, you weren't!
- Trailing off, e.g. If only she had…Oh, it doesn't matter now.
- A stutter/hesitation, e.g. I wasn't really…well, what I mean…see, the thing is…I didn't mean it.

Hyphens

Hyphens are used in compound adjectives and adjective/adverb/noun + participle combinations when they precede a noun:

- e.g. 74-year-old father-of-two Tom Jones

No hyphens when adjectives follow noun:

- e.g. Tom Jones is 74 years old and a father of two

Number rules

- Numbers with four digits or longer should have a comma every three digits from the right. (‘1,000’, ‘20,000’), except for years (‘the year 2014’)
- For fractions, change to decimals. “four and a half years old” = ‘4.5 years old’, “travelled half a kilometre” = ‘travelled 0.5km’
- Time

  ✓ 9:00 or 9pm
  ✗ 9 o’clock, 9, ‘nine’, 9p.m.

Words or numbers?

- Numbers one to ten - write as words (including when used adjectivally e.g. a two-year-old baby)
- Numbers over ten – use digits (Exceptions with numbers over a million e.g. ‘1 million’, ‘3 billion’, ‘2.5 trillion’)

Currency, dates & events

- Currency should always follow the above rules regarding digits and decimals, with a $ symbol in front (‘$24’, ‘$24 million’). Foreign currency, if dollars, should be written as AU $24.

- 20 grand/bucks/quid should be captioned as heard.

Dates and events should be written in the order spoken, but simplified.

Examples:

- the second of June twenty-fourteen = 2 June 2014.
- June the second = June 2.
- the second world war would = the Second World War.
- world war two = World War II.

Helpful resources

grammarly - A grammar nerd's best friend. Find the answers to any grammar problems you might encounter.

GrammarBook.com - Grammar rules, punctuation rules and more!

Dictionary.com - Did you hear that word right? Check that it is a real word and fits the context!

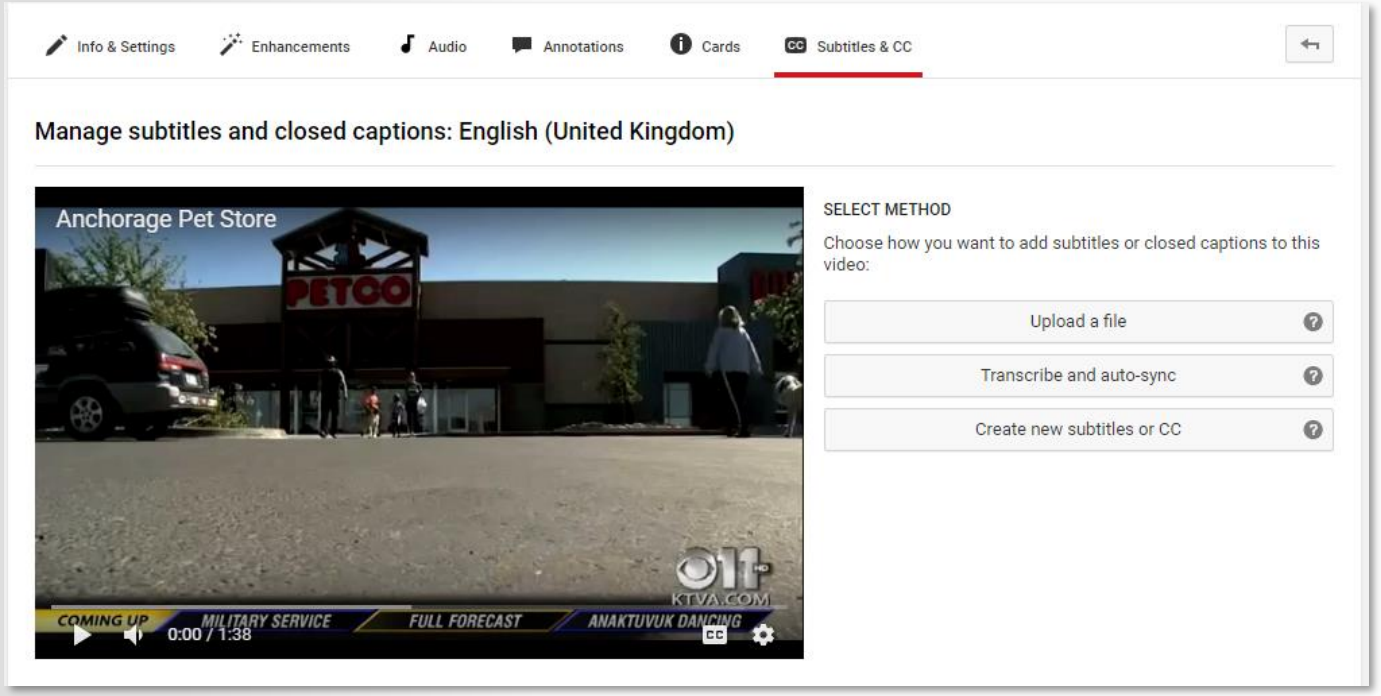
How to create your own captions?

Online captioning tools

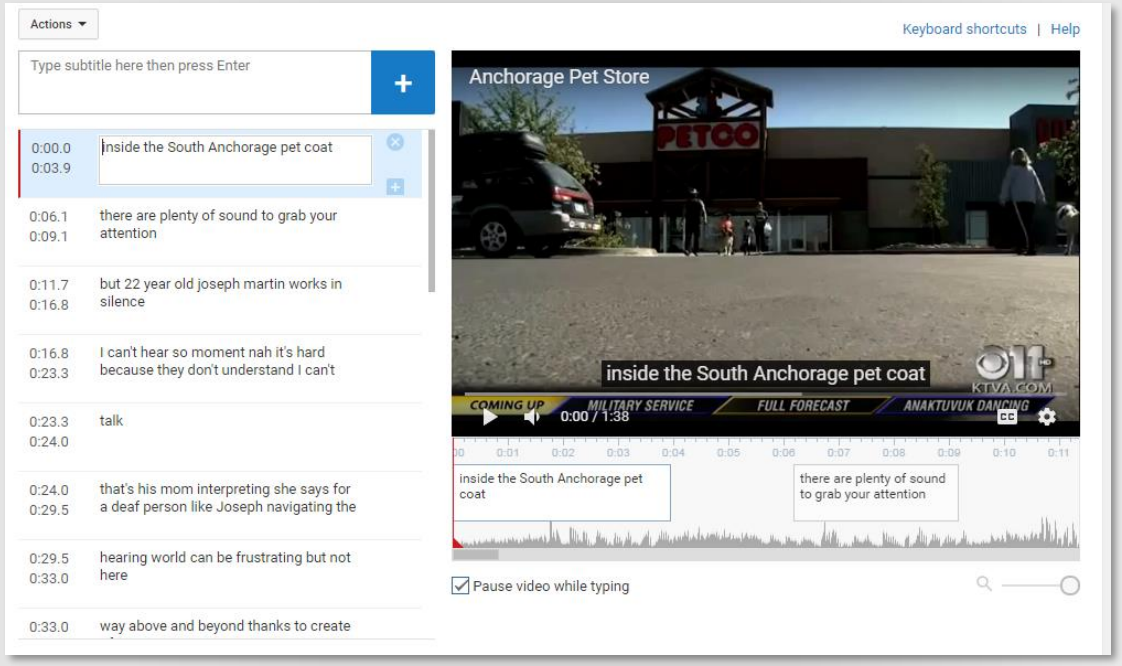
There are several free tools available online which can be used to create captions.

YouTube currently has three facilities that will allow you to create closed captions for videos uploaded to the platform:

- Automatic captions
- Transcribe and auto-sync
- Create new captions



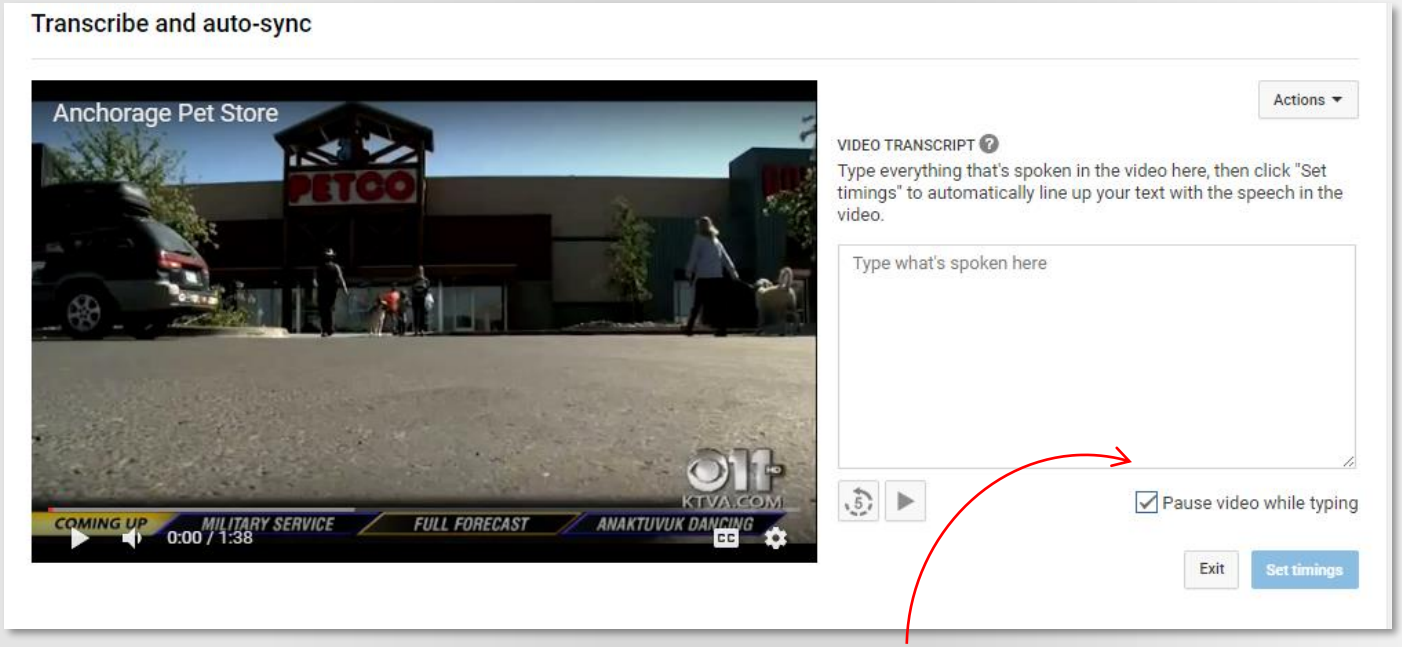
Above: Upload a an existing caption file, transcribe and auto-sync or create a new closed caption file.



Above: YouTube's caption editor. Note the lack of punctuation in the captions on the left-hand side.

Automatic Captions

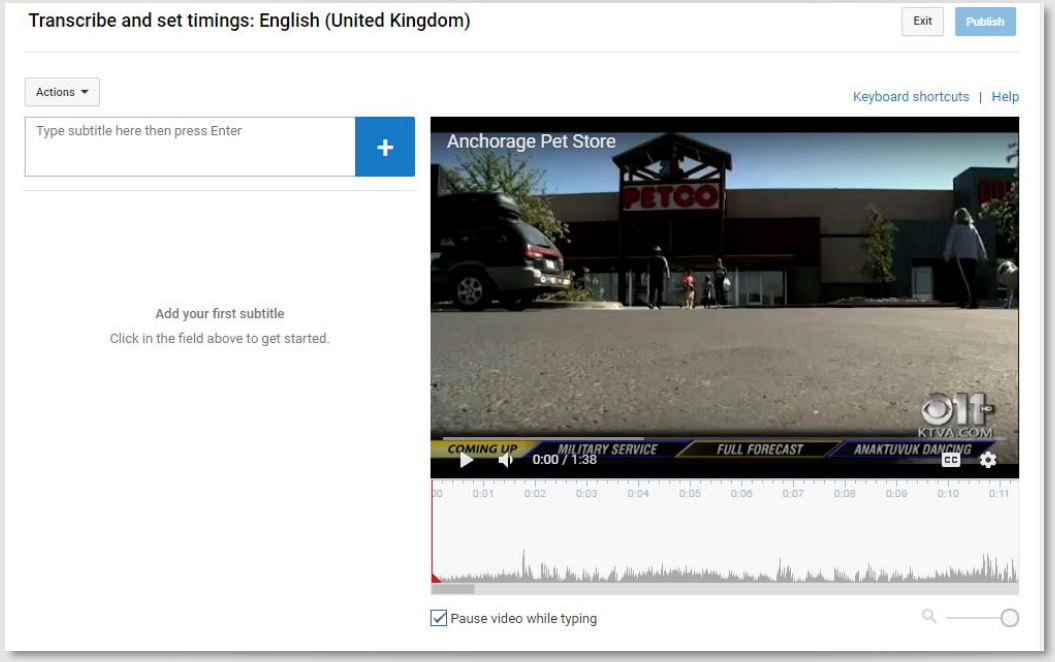
- YouTube can automatically add captions to your video through use of Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) software.
- You will then need to edit the captions, adding punctuation.
- Be aware that ASR is far from perfect. Many words may have been misrecognised and will need correcting.



Select this option to pause your video whilst you're typing. It automatically plays again one second after you stop typing.

Transcribe and Auto-Sync

- Select this option to type out the words from the video – you will need to transcribe everything spoken and include punctuation.
- YouTube then attempts to align those words with the audio from the video.
- Further editing may then be needed to ensure the captions are properly in sync and that the caption breaks are correct.



Above: YouTube's caption editor. Create your captions from scratch by typing in the box on the left.

Create new captions

You can also create captions from scratch in YouTube. In this mode, you need to transcribe the audio into caption boxes on the left and then edit the timecodes so that the captions are in sync.

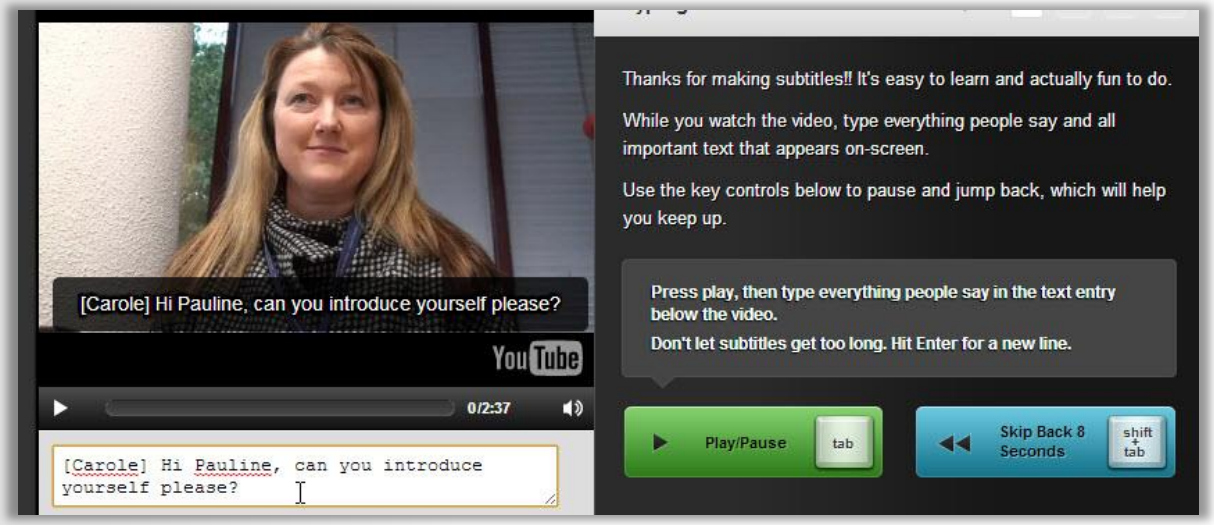
Amara

amara

Amara is a web-based subtitle editor that makes it easy to caption and translate videos that are hosted online.

Simply provide Amara with a video's URL on YouTube, Vimeo or another online video service, and it launches into the transcription interface.

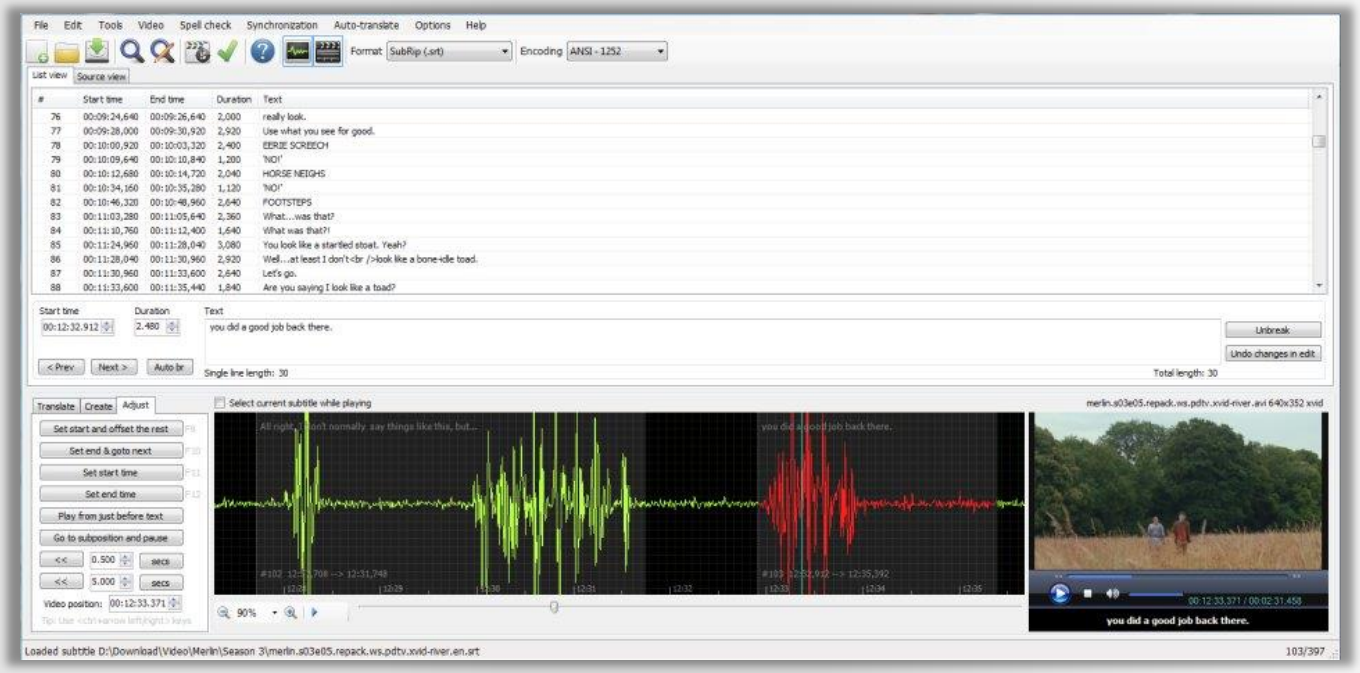
Check out Amara's training videos for more information on how to use this software.



Above: Amara's Beginner mode lets you play 4-second snippets of video as you transcribe, hitting Tab to play the next snippet when you're ready.

Subtitle Edit

N!kse.dk



Above: Subtitle Edit user interface

Subtitle Edit is free software used to caption videos on your computer.

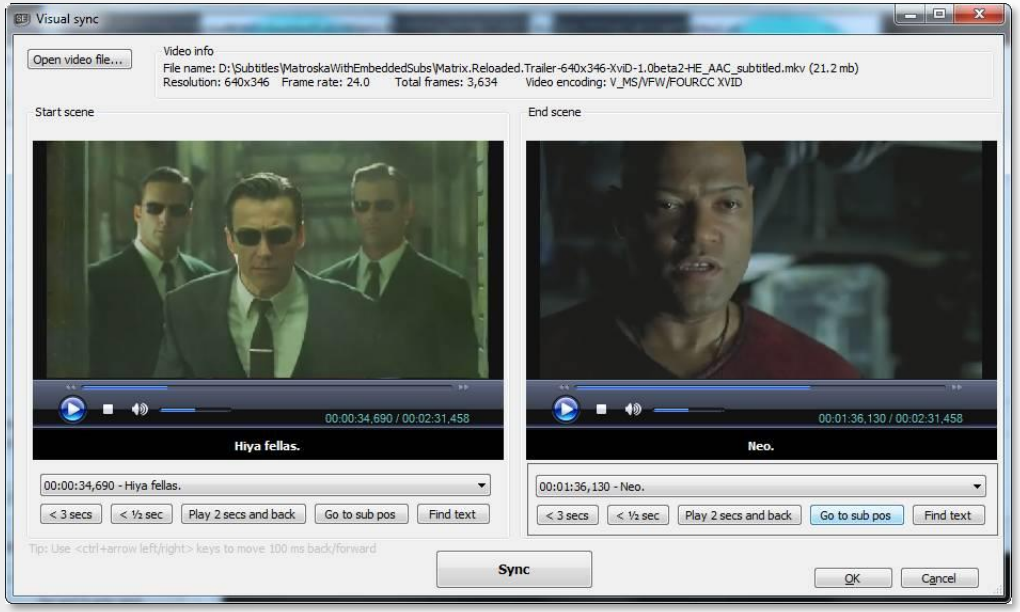
Unlike YouTube and Amara, this option is not web-based and does require installation onto your computer.

Subtitle Edit

- Subtitle Edit allows you create captions, sync and edit them.
- Settings for both beginners and experienced users are available.
- Auto-translate feature allows you to easily translate captions into other languages.

To find out more or to download Subtitle Edit visit the developers website: Nikse.dk

For a tutorial video on Subtitle Edit click here.



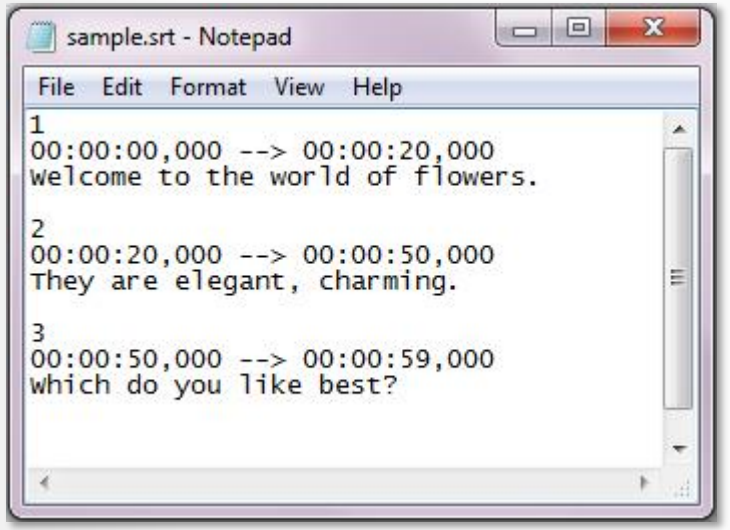
Caption file formatting

The most common file format used for closed captions on online platforms is the SubRip Text (.SRT) format.

SRT caption files are accepted by:

YouTube

vimeo



NB: Facebook currently has a specific naming convention that you will need to follow to ensure captions are visible. Your SRT file must be “filename.**en_US**.srt”.

Our Mission

Global impact, one word at a time.

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Stay connected with us:

Making video accessible is what we do

Live Captioning

Real-time captions delivered to your laptop, tablet or smartphone.

Captioning

Live and offline captions for broadcast, education, corporate and government clients.

Transcripts

Fast, accurate transcripts from your video or audio content.